

Caste, Community and Devotional Inclusivity: A Comparative Analysis of Purandaradasa and Kanakadasa

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Abstract:

The Haridasa movement of Karnataka represents a seminal shift in the socio-religious landscape of medieval India, characterized by a transition from esoteric ritualism to an emancipatory, vernacular-based devotion accessible to all. The Saint-Poets, or ‘servants of Hari,’ utilized the power of music and the Kannada language to bridge the chasm between the divine and the common folk, effectively democratizing spiritual knowledge. This paper investigates the intersection of caste, community, and devotional inclusivity through a comparative analysis of two pre-eminent Saint-Poets, Purandaradasa, and Kanakadasa. The primary objective is to evaluate how their distinct social identities influenced their theological output and critiques of hierarchy, specifically asking how Kanakadasa’s position as a social outsider fostered a more radical subversion of ‘Varnashrama-dharma’ compared to Purandaradasa’s internal reformist approach. By applying a Cultural-Subaltern Hermeneutic alongside a Vernacular-Poetic framework, the paper interprets their compositions as counter-hegemonic texts that leverage the ‘spiritual capital’ of the Kannada language against priestly orthodoxy. Employing a qualitative, comparative methodology rooted in socio-literary analysis of their verses and hagiographies, it maps the transition from Sanskrit-centric exclusion to a more egalitarian tradition. Possible outcomes suggest that while both the Saint-Poets championed inclusivity, their methods diverged—with Purandaradasa focusing on individual moral purification and Kanakadasa challenging systemic exclusion—concluding that their combined legacy provided a foundational blueprint for social justice in Southern India.

Keywords: Egalitarian, Democratising, Haridasa, Inclusivity, Social Identity.

Introduction

The Bhakti movement in India represents a transformative phase in the cultural and spiritual history of the subcontinent. Emerging between the thirteenth and seventeenth centuries, the movement emphasized personal devotion to the divine over ritualistic formalism and hierarchical religious authority. By employing vernacular languages rather than Sanskrit, Bhakti poets made spiritual discourse accessible to ordinary people, thereby expanding the social reach of religious expression. In South India, the Haridasa tradition in Karnataka became one of the most influential streams of Bhakti devotion. Through music and poetry, Haridasa saints articulated ethical reflections, spiritual longing, and social critique. Among the

most prominent figures of this tradition are Purandaradasa and Kanakadasa, whose compositions reveal a nuanced engagement with caste, community identity, and devotional inclusivity.

Purandaradasa (c.1484–1564) occupies a revered position in the Haridasa movement and is often described as the “Father of Carnatic Music.” His numerous *devaranamas* dedicated to Lord Vittala combines musical sophistication with philosophical insight and moral instruction. Composed in accessible Kannada, his verses translate complex theological ideas into everyday imagery drawn from the lives of common people. English translations of well-known compositions *Aadisidalu Yashode Jagadoddharana*, *Bhagyada Lakshmi baramma....* and *Venkatachala Nilayam...* illustrate how devotion is intertwined with reflections on humility and moral responsibility. In a translated line from *Jagadoddharana* Purandaradasa proclaims that, divine child Krishna is the ‘redeemer who lifts the world with effortless grace, emphasizing the universal accessibility of divine compassion (Sharma 52). Such expressions emphasise the belief that spiritual worth is determined not by birth or social privilege but by sincere devotion.

Kanakadasa (c.1509–1609), though part of the same Haridasa tradition, represents a distinctive devotional voice shaped by his social background. Born into the Kuruba (shepherds) community, Kanakadasa experienced the realities of caste discrimination and social marginalization. His compositions articulate an intense critique of exclusion while affirming the spiritual equality of all devotees. His compositions, including *Baagilanu teredu seveyanu... Baro Krishnayya, ninna bhaktara manegeega...* and *Ninnolume nanage saakayya* reveal a devotional voice that questions the legitimacy of social barriers. In *Baagilanu teredu...* the devotee pleads for the opening of the temple door, declaring that ‘the heart that seeks the Lord knows no caste,’ a line that encapsulates Kanakadasa’s challenge to ritual and social restrictions (Rao 118). The well-known narrative associated with the Udupi temple—where the deity is believed to have turned to face Kanakadasa—has also come to symbolize the triumph of devotion over social exclusion.

The Haridasa tradition itself was shaped by the philosophical influence of the Dvaita Vedanta school of Madhvacharya, yet its devotional compositions extended beyond doctrinal concerns to engage with social realities. By composing in Kannada and addressing ordinary audiences, Haridasa saint-poets created a participatory religious culture in which music and compositions became vehicles of ethical reflection. As A. K. Ramanujan observes in his discussion of Bhakti literature, vernacular compositions transform personal spirituality into, “a critique of social pride and ritual authority” (Ramanujan 139). The compositions of Purandaradasa and Kanakadasa exemplify this tendency by linking devotion with humility, compassion, and moral equality. Within this context, the present paper explores how caste and community identity are negotiated in the devotional compositions of Purandaradasa and Kanakadasa. While both the saint-poets emphasize devotion as the central path to spiritual liberation, their compositions reflect distinct approaches shaped by their respective experiences. Purandaradasa’s verses frequently critique arrogance and material pride, suggesting that worldly status offers no true spiritual merit. In a translated verse from one of his *devaranamas*, he cautions that, “wealth and lineage fade like shadows, but devotion alone leads to the Lord” (Sharma 57). Such reflections indirectly attack social hierarchies by emphasizing the spiritual insignificance of caste privilege.

Kanakadasa’s compositions, by contrast, often articulate a more direct engagement with caste-based exclusion. His compositions give voice to the spiritual aspirations of marginalized communities and assert the right of every individual to participate in devotional life. In a translated line, he affirms that, “the Lord who dwells in every heart sees neither caste nor birth,” reinforcing the idea that divine grace transcends social boundaries (Rao 121). Through metaphor, allegory, and narrative symbolism, Kanakadasa transforms personal devotion into a critique of institutionalized discrimination. Examining these

compositions in English translation enables a broader scholarly engagement with the philosophical and cultural dimensions of the Haridasa tradition. While translation inevitably involves interpretive mediation, it preserves the thematic essence of the original songs and highlights their ethical significance. As scholars of Bhakti literature note, devotional compositions often carries a dual function: it expresses spiritual longing while simultaneously addressing the moral concerns of society (Shulman 86). The translated compositions of Purandaradasa and Kanakadasa thus provide valuable insights into how devotional literature can negotiate both spiritual and social questions.

By placing these two saint-poets within a comparative framework, the paper highlights the multiple ways in which Bhakti poetry engages with caste and community identity. Purandaradasa's compositions tend to emphasize moral introspection and spiritual humility, whereas Kanakadasa's poetry emphasise the experience of exclusion and the quest for spiritual dignity. Yet both voices converge in their affirmation that devotion transcends social divisions. Their compositions suggest that the divine relationship between devotee and deity cannot be constrained by human hierarchies. Through a meticulous examination of translated compositions, historical context, and insights from Bhakti scholarship, the paper argues that the devotional voices of Purandaradasa and Kanakadasa articulate a vision of spiritual inclusivity that challenges rigid social boundaries. Their devotional compositions continue to resonate in contemporary religious and cultural life, reminding audiences that devotional traditions have long served as spaces where questions of equality, dignity, and community could be thoughtfully negotiated.

Discussion

The devotional corpus of Purandaradasa and Kanakadasa offers a compelling lens through which the relationship between caste, community identity, and devotional inclusivity in the Haridasa tradition may be examined. Both the saint-poets operated within the broader framework of the Bhakti movement in Karnataka, where spiritual devotion to Lord Krishna became a powerful medium for articulating ethical reflections and social concerns. Yet their creative strategies differ in tone and emphasis. While Purandaradasa often approached the question of social hierarchy through ethical allegory and moral instruction, Kanakadasa articulated a more experiential critique rooted in the realities of caste exclusion. A comparative examination of selected compositions reveals how both devotional voices negotiate the tension between established social structures and the egalitarian impulse embedded within Bhakti spirituality. Purandaradasa's compositions challenge the cultural prestige associated with lineage, wealth, and ritual authority. Rather than directly confronting caste hierarchy, his compositions undermine its ideological foundations by emphasizing the impermanence of worldly distinctions. In his verse *Tamboori meetidava, bavabdhī daatidava, taalava tattidava, surarolu seridava*..... he reflects on the spiritual discipline required to achieve divine realization, declaring that the 'one who tunes the instrument of the mind to the name of Hari attains true harmony.' This metaphor transforms the musical act of tuning an instrument into a philosophical reflection on inner purification. By highlighting the discipline of devotion rather than inherited privilege, the verse subtly re-orientates the criteria of spiritual worth. As B. N. K. Sharma observes, Purandaradasa's compositions consistently highlight the "ethical transformation of the devotee rather than ritual status" (Sharma 61).

Another composition, *Narajanma bandaga naalige iruvaagomme, Krishna enabaarade, Sri Krishna enabaarade?* illustrates Purandaradasa's ethical critique of social complacency. In the translated lines of this verse, he reminds that human birth is precious because it offers the opportunity for spiritual awakening. The verse suggests that a life consumed by pride or material ambition fails to realize its divine

potential. By declaring that “the chance of human birth must be used to remember the Lord,” Purandaradasa implicitly questions the value placed on caste identity or social prestige (Sharma 64). The philosophical implication is significant: if devotion alone determines spiritual fulfilment, then inherited social distinctions become irrelevant in the moral universe envisioned by the poet. Purandaradasa’s compositional style reinforces this ethical argument through the use of accessible language and vivid imagery. His verses often draw upon domestic scenes, musical metaphors, and everyday experiences that resonate with a broad audience. This stylistic choice reflects a deliberate attempt to democratize devotional knowledge. The use of Kannada vernacular ensures that spiritual teachings reach listeners beyond the limited circle of scholarly elites. As A. K. Ramanujan notes in his reflections on Bhakti poetry, vernacular compositions frequently transform personal devotion into a “critique of social pride and institutional authority” (Ramanujan 142). Purandaradasa’s compositions exemplify this tendency by presenting devotion as an inward moral discipline rather than a privilege determined by caste or ritual expertise.

Kanakadasa’s compositions, by contrast, engage more explicitly with the social consequences of caste discrimination. Emerging from the Kuruba community, Kanakadasa experienced the restrictions imposed by hierarchical social structures, and his poetry often reflects this experiential awareness. In *Kula kulavendu hodedaadidiri, nimma kulada neleyanenadaru ballira, ballira...?* Kanakadasa questions the very basis of caste identity. He asks rhetorically how the notion of caste can claim legitimacy when all human beings share the same physical and spiritual origin. The lines suggest that, “the soul has no caste, yet people quarrel over caste,” thereby exposing the contradiction between spiritual philosophy and social practice (Rao 124). Through this direct interrogation, Kanakadasa challenges the ideological assumptions that sustain caste divisions. Another composition, *Entha Cheluvage* illustrates Kanakadasa’s ability to merge devotional imagery with social reflection. It describes the beauty and compassion of Lord Krishna while simultaneously emphasizing the accessibility of divine grace. The lines portray the deity as one who “listens to the humble and lifts the lowly,” reinforcing the idea that devotion transcends social barriers (Rao 127). Dissimilar to Purandaradasa’s allegorical critique, Kanakadasa’s compositions emphasises the emotional and spiritual aspirations of marginalized devotees. The devotional voice becomes a vehicle for asserting spiritual dignity in the face of exclusion.

The philosophical depth of Kanakadasa’s critique is evident in the composition *Nee mayeyolago.....* In this verse, he reflects on the illusions created by worldly identities, including caste distinctions. The translated verse suggests that human beings become trapped in divisions constructed by ignorance, forgetting the fundamental unity of divine creation. By emphasizing the illusory nature of social hierarchies, the verse invites listeners to reconsider the moral legitimacy of caste-based discrimination. Velcheru Narayana Rao notes that such compositions reveal how Bhakti compositions frequently transform spiritual reflection into a commentary on social inequality. Despite their differences in emphasis, the compositions of Purandaradasa and Kanakadasa converge in their affirmation of devotional inclusivity. Both the saint-poets articulate the belief that sincere devotion establishes a direct relationship between the individual and the divine, bypassing the mediating structures of caste hierarchy. Their verses repeatedly stress that spiritual fulfillment depends on humility, ethical conduct, and unwavering faith rather than on inherited social privilege. This shared emphasis reflects a broader characteristic of the Bhakti movement, which often sought to redefine religious authority through personal devotion and emotional intimacy with the divine.

The use of vernacular language plays a crucial role in this inclusive vision. By composing in Kannada, both the saint-poets ensured that their compositions could be understood and performed by diverse

audiences across social boundaries. The performative dimension of these compositions—sung in temples, devotional gatherings, and musical traditions—amplifies their egalitarian message. As David Shulman observes, devotional compositions often acquire social significance through collective performance, transforming individual expression into communal experience (Shulman 88). The verses of Purandaradasa and Kanakadasa acquire the status of shared cultural resources that encourage reflection on both spiritual and social values. A comparative reading of these compositions reveal the complex ways in which Bhakti verses negotiates caste and community identity. Purandaradasa's compositions emphasize ethical introspection and the spiritual insignificance of worldly distinctions, while Kanakadasa's compositions articulate a more explicit challenge to caste-based exclusion. Yet both poetic voices converge in their affirmation that devotion transcends social hierarchy. By redefining spiritual worth in terms of humility and faith, they construct a devotional framework in which the boundaries of caste gradually lose their moral authority. In this sense, the Haridasa tradition represents not merely a devotional movement but also a cultural space where questions of equality and community could be imaginatively explored. The compositions of Purandaradasa and Kanakadasa are subtle yet profound instruments of social reflection. Through metaphors, allegories, and philosophical inquiries, their songs envision a spiritual community in which devotion dissolves the rigid distinctions of caste and affirms the shared humanity of all devotees.

Conclusion

The comparative examination of the devotional compositions of Purandaradasa and Kanakadasa reveal ethical and social dimensions embedded within the Haridasa tradition of Bhakti literature. Their compositions though primarily devotional in tone, extend beyond spiritual expression to engage with the complex realities of caste, community identity, and the quest for devotional inclusivity. Through poetic language, musical expression, and philosophical reflection, both the composers articulate a vision of spirituality that highlight humility, devotion, and moral equality over inherited social privilege. The analysis demonstrates that Purandaradasa and Kanakadasa approach the question of caste from different experiential locations while converging on a shared devotional ideal. Purandaradasa's compositions undermine the authority of social hierarchies by emphasizing the impermanence of worldly distinctions and the primacy of devotion as the true path to spiritual fulfillment. His compositions encourage introspection and ethical transformation, suggesting that spiritual worth cannot be measured through lineage, wealth, or ritual status. A striking illustration of this perspective appears in his well-known composition where he affirms that, *Maanava janma doddaddu*—human birth is great—rather than proclaiming *Brahmana janma doddaddu*. This distinction is particularly significant because Purandaradasa himself belonged to a Madhva Brahmin community. By celebrating the value of human birth rather than Brahmin birth, he subtly shifts the focus from caste identity to the universal potential for spiritual realization. Such an articulation reflects the inclusive ethos that underlies much of his devotional poetry.

Kanakadasa's compositions, shaped by his experience of marginalization, offer a more explicit engagement with caste-based exclusion. His compositions question the legitimacy of social divisions that deny certain communities access to spiritual spaces and religious participation. Through rhetorical questions, allegorical reflections, and emotionally charged devotional appeals, Kanakadasa challenges the assumption that caste determines spiritual worth. His verses portray devotion as a deeply personal relationship with the divine that transcends the social barriers imposed by human institutions. His compositions becomes both a spiritual testimony and a cultural critique of the structures that sustain

inequality. Despite these differing emphases, the works of both composers reveal a shared commitment to the transformative power of devotion. Their compositions envision a spiritual community where the relationship between the devotee and the divine is defined not by social identity but by sincerity of faith. The use of vernacular Kannada in their compositions strengthens this inclusive vision. By addressing ordinary people in a language familiar to them, Purandaradasa and Kanakadasa made devotional knowledge accessible beyond the restricted circles of religious elites. Their compositions contributed to the democratization of spiritual discourse and created a participatory devotional culture that resonated across diverse communities.

Even within a historical context marked by rigid social stratification, the Haridasa saint-poets articulated a moral imagination that questioned inherited hierarchies and emphasized the dignity of all human beings. Their devotional compositions demonstrate how spirituality can become a space for reflecting on social justice and human equality without abandoning its theological foundations. The voices of Purandaradasa and Kanakadasa reveal that Bhakti literature is not merely an expression of religious sentiment but also a cultural medium through which ideas of community and inclusivity are negotiated. Their compositions continue to resonate in contemporary devotional and musical traditions, reminding that the essence of spirituality lies in humility, compassion, and devotion rather than in the divisions created by caste or social status. A comparative reading of Purandaradasa and Kanakadasa demonstrates how the Haridasa tradition subtly interrogates caste hierarchies through the language of Bhakti. While Purandaradasa emphasizes the universality and ethical value of human birth beyond caste privilege, Kanakadasa more directly exposes the contradictions of social exclusion within devotional practice. Together, their compositions re-imagine devotion as an inclusive spiritual space where humility, moral conduct, and sincere faith outweigh inherited status, thereby envisioning a community grounded in equality before the divine rather than rigid social stratification.

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