



**ACTIVE 15TH  
CENTURY  
VIDYĀPATI  
THĀKURA**

**VIDYĀPATI:  
BANGĪYA  
PADĀBALI;  
SONGS  
OF THE LOVE  
OF RĀDHĀ  
AND KRISHNA**



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# **Vidyāpati: Bangīya padābali; songs of the love of Rādhā and Krishna**

EAN 8596547027089

DigiCat, 2022

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## INTRODUCTION.

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VIDYĀPATI THĀKUR is one of the most renowned of the Vaishnava poets of Hindustān. Before him there had been the great Jāyadeva, with his Gītā Govinda made in Sanskrit; and it is to this tradition Vidyāpati belongs, rather than to that of Rāmānanda, Kabīr, and Tul'si Dās, who sang of Rāma and Sītā. Vidyāpati's fame, though he also wrote in Sanskrit, depends upon the wreath of songs (*pada*) in which he describes the courtship of God and the Soul, under the names of Krishna and Rādhā. These were written in Maithilī, his mother-tongue, a dialect intermediate between Bengālī and Hindī, but nearer to the former. His position as a poet and maker of language is analogous to that of Dante in Italy and Chaucer in England. He did not disdain to use the folk-speech and folk-thought for the expression of the highest matters. Just as Dante was blamed by the classical scholars of Italy, so Vidyāpati was blamed by the pandits: he knew better, however, than they, and has well earned the title of Father of Bengālī literature.

Little is known of Vidyāpati's life<sup>[1]</sup>. Two other great Vaishnava poets, Chandī Dās and Umāpati, were his

contemporaries. His patron Rājā Shivasimha Rūpanārāyana, when heir-apparent, gave the village of Bisapī as a rent-free gift to the poet in the year 1400 A.D. (the original deed is extant). This shows that in 1400 the poet was already a man of distinction. His patron appears to have died in 1449, before which date the songs here translated must have been written. Further, there still exists a manuscript of the Bhāgavata Purāna in the poet's handwriting, dated 1456. It is thus evident that he lived to a good age, for it is hardly likely that he was under twenty in the year 1400. The following is the legend of his death: Feeling his end approaching, he set out to die on the banks of Gangā. But remembering that she was the child of the faithful, he summoned her to himself: and the great river divided herself in three streams, spreading her waters as far as the very place where Vidyāpati sat. There and then he laid himself, it is said down and died. Where his funeral pyre was, sprang up a Shiva lingam, which exists to this day, as well as the marks of the flood. This place is near the town of Bāzītpur, in the district of Darbhanga.

Vidyāpati's Vaishnava *padas* are at once folk and cultivated art—just like the finest of the Pahārī paintings, where every episode of which he sings finds exquisite illustration. The poems are not, like many ballads, of unknown authorship and perhaps the work of many hands, but they are due to the folk in the sense that folk-life is glorified and popular thought is reflected. The songs as we have them are entirely the work of one supreme genius; but this genius did not stand alone, as that of modern poets must—on the contrary, its roots lay deep in the common life

of fields and villages, and above all, in common faiths and superstitions. These were days when peasants yet spoke as elegantly as courtiers, and kings and cultivators shared one faith and a common view of life—conditions where all things are possible to art.

It is little wonder that Vidyāpati's influence on the literature of Eastern Hindustān has been profound, and that his songs became the household poetry of Bengal and Behar. His poems were adopted and constantly sung by the great Hindū lover, Cāitanya, in the sixteenth century, and they have been adapted and handed down in many dialects, above all in Bengālī, in the Vaishnava tradition, of which the last representative is Rabindranāth Tagore. A poem by the latter well resumes and explains the theory of the Vaishnava lovers:<sup>[2]</sup>

Not my way of Salvation, to surrender the world!  
Rather for me the taste of Infinite Freedom,  
While yet I am bound by a thousand bonds to the wheel:  
In each glory of sound and sight and smell  
I shall find Thy Infinite Joy abiding:  
My passion shall burn as the flame of Salvation,  
The flower of my love shall become the ripe fruit of  
Devotion.

This leads us to the subject of the true significance of poems such as Vidyāpati's. It is quite true, as Mr. Nicholson says, that students of oriental poetry have sometimes to ask themselves, 'Is this a love-poem disguised as a mystical ode, or a mystical ode expressed in the language of human love?' Very often this question cannot be answered with a definite 'Yes' or 'No': not because the poet's meaning is

vague, but because the two ideas are not at all mutually exclusive. All the manifestations of Kama on earth are images of Pursuit or Return.

As Vidyāpati himself says (No. LXIII):

The same flower that you cast away, the same you use in prayer.

And with the same you string the bow.

It is quite certain that many poems of Vidyāpati have an almost wholly spiritual significance.<sup>[3]</sup> If some others seem very obviously secular, let us remember that we have no right to detach such poems from their context in books and still less any right to divorce them from their context in life.

We may illustrate this point by a comparison with poetry of Western Europe. Take for example a poem such as the following, with a purely secular significance (if any true art can be said to be secular):

Oh! the handsome lad frae Skye  
That's lifted a' the cattle, a'oor kye.  
He's t'aen the dun, the black, the white.  
And I hae mickle fear  
He's t'aen my heart forbye.

Had this been current in fifteenth century Bengal, every Vaishnava would have understood the song to speak as much of God and the Soul as of man and maid, and to many the former meaning would have been the more obvious. On the other hand, there are many early medieval Western hymns in which the language of human love is deliberately adapted to religious uses, for example:

When y se blosmes springe,  
And here foules songe,