



## Devotional Discourse of Narasinha Mehta: Analysis of Bhakti Trends

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### Abstract:

*Narasinha Mehta is regarded as the first Bhakti poet of Gujarati literary tradition. He is often assigned to this status due to his poetic capacity to merge multiple trends within his poetic creation and his skill to transform the scriptural events into something singable with regional flavor. The present paper is an attempt to locate devotional trends to be found in the poetic oeuvre of Narasinha Mehta<sup>1</sup>. In addition, the play of Sagun and Nirgun forms of Bhakti is also powerfully interwoven in NM's poetic creations. The present paper also exerts the attempt to locate these loaded terms with the contextual literary reality of NM's creation. A close examination of both shows that despite the differences in moods, the lyrics resemble in terms of themes and style. The important common feature in both these categories is their emphasis on love as the fundamental link among the human, the nature and the divine as the key to experience joy.*

**Keywords:** *Sagun, Nirgun, prosodic treatment, rupa & naam poetics*

### 1. Introduction

Before looking at these elements into the creations of Narasinha Mehta, it is important to understand what they signify. In devotional poetry, *sagun bhakti* is often expressed as adoration for the beautiful form of the deity or as intense personal love. On the other hand, *nirguna bhakti* poetry stressed inner search and repetition of the divine name. Kenneth Bryant suggests that a good way to appreciate *sagun* and *nirguna* poetry is to recognize the first as poetry of form (*rupa*) which has association with Sanskrit poetics and the latter as poetry of name (*nama*), which does not follow a specific poetic tradition. The first appeals to imagination, while the second asks the audience to listen and understand. (Bryant: 67) In this sense, the corpus of NM's lyrics incorporates both *sagun* and *nirgun* strands and thereby integrates *rupa* and *nama* poetics.

Sociologically as Schelling says, the two *bhakti* paths are seen as having different degrees of concern for egalitarian social organization. Both paths underplay the rules of hereditary purity and pollution that dominate priestly rituals. However, it is required to mention that the *nirgun* path is associated with explicit and sharp questioning of caste hierarchies prevalent in the Hindu society in ways that the *sagun* path is not. The presence of both the paths generates a debate in Gujarati scholarship. These debates echo the broader conversations prevalent in scholarly circle on devotional poetry of India since the early twentieth century, in which *nirgun bhakti* poets are called *sants* and they are distinguished from the *sagun bhakti* poets termed as *bhagats*. (Yashaschandra: 67) However, it is difficult to maintain the position taken by Yashashchanra as the showing difference between sant and bhagats overlap very often and bhagat is in fact a *tadbhav*<sup>2</sup> form of Sanskrit term bhakt. Moreover, in the view of most

<sup>1</sup> For the briefness of expression, an acronym NM is used instead of poet's full name.

<sup>2</sup> There are three types of words entered into Gujarati language and one of such types is *tadbhav*.

Gujarati scholars and most of the people who sing NM's lyrics, this apparent distinction represents similar facets of his comprehensive understanding of *bhakti*, in which *sagun* and *nirgun* conceptions of divine emotions and contemplation, personal spiritual aspirations and concern for social equality all have a place in it. (Joshi: 166)

## 2. Lyrics and Language of Narasinha Mehta

It is important to note that there are categorically two parts wherein scholars divide the poetic creations of NM. The first part is of the songs or *padas* of NM related with *Krishna-lila* (divine play) and the other part defines as the *Gyan-bhaktina Pado* (songs of Knowledge *bhakti*). A close examination of both shows that despite the differences in moods, the lyrics resemble in terms of themes and style. The important common feature in both these categories is their emphasis on love as the fundamental link among the human, the nature and the divine as the key to experience joy. Along with adoration for the Krishna as beloved deity, these songs contain an exaltation of the human capacity for love. Social or religious norms that distract from experiencing the joy derived from love are described as inadequate at best. Lyrics in both the categories refer to the meaninglessness of priestly rites, ascetic practices and caste and gender discrimination.

However, it is required to note that most of NM's lyrics are based on Krishna's life in Vraj, as narrated in *Bhagavat Purana*. Like the story of Jesus as a divine incarnation, the story of Krishna as a divine incarnation on Earth is extraordinarily interwoven. Another important source of his lyrics is *Gitagovinda* as shall be discussed later in this chapter. But, as noted by K.K. Shashtri, the *Bhagavata*'s influence on NM's lyrics is profound and comprehensive. While drawing materials from the Sanskrit classical texts, NM's songs do not simply give the regional reproductions of these sources instead they present the fresh interpretations of myths using regionally popular poetic devices along with regionalizing the whole *Krishna-lila* (the divine play). The poetic structure of the lyrics is teemed with colloquial expressions and images drawn from the folklore and everyday life of women in rural Gujarat. (Yashaschandra: 38)

NM is popularly known for his morning hymns and it is believed that most of his songs are created during his morning visit to Lake Damodar<sup>3</sup> in order to take morning bath. (Joshi: 87) Three types of regionally popular melodies are used for the creation of such hymns i.e. *ramgiri*, *prabhati* and *prabhatiya*. Each tune is linked with different parts of the morning and invokes specific aspect of the meditative mood. The first two are associated with twilight or *sandhiprakasha*- the gap between the dense darkness and sunrise. *Ramagiri* songs generally revealing mix of hope and perplexity are meant to sing just before dawn. *Prabhati* songs are sung at dawn, as the first rays of the sun reach to the earth. Connected with the early morning, the songs of third type, *Prabhatiya*, are sung soon after the sunrise and hence, they express hope for new day. The tune for this category is loosely based on raga bilaval<sup>4</sup> and they invoke a peaceful mood at the beginning of a new day. (Joshi: 77). The usage of this melody in his songs turns his songs part of the oral traditions and they are heard in a wide variety of contexts even in the present time of Gujarat.

The prosodic treatment employed in NM's lyrics is also very important to look into. NM's lyrics use meters that have traditionally been popular in the rural parts of Gujarat. The meters he's employed are based on the organization of the beats (*matra*), and hence they are called as *matramela chanda* in Gujarati. These meters are completely different from the meters derived from classical Sanskrit meters known as *aksharmela* or syllabic meters which follow fixed arrangements of long (*Guru*) and short (*Laghu*) syllables. (Trivedi: 14-17) *Matra* based meters were greatly popular in the regional poetry of medieval India and as Barbara Stoler Miller observes, since the early medieval period, even Sanskrit poet Jayadeva had begun to employ them for a broader mass appeal. (Miller: 11-13) Three meters are

<sup>3</sup> A lake situated at the foothill of Mt. Grinar, nearby the city of Junagadha.

<sup>4</sup> It is a type of classical raag sung during the time of early morning.

frequently employed by NM and they are: *Savaiya* having 32 matras, *harigit* having 28 matras and *Jhulana* having 37 matras. Each of them is also in line with a widely popular tala<sup>5</sup> for bhajan singing in north India. Hence, the treatment of meters is also very unique in NM's songs and it is this treatment that marks his novel path as being *adikavi*.

### 3. The Songs Associated with *Krishna-lila* and its Significance

As mentioned earlier, NM's poetic creations closely follow the *Bhagavata* and draw on a fuller range of narratives. At the same time, his lyrics notably avoid the subject of Krishna's heroic endeavors in killing demons as a child. Rather, they feature only those moments that provide a scope for projecting human love and divine grace as fulfilling the quest of devotee's heart.

A melodious lyric dated 1643 CE about the celebration of Krishna's birth at his foster parents' home portrays a scene in which the residents of Vraj enthusiastically express their love without an awareness of the child's divine status:

Resounded Nand's courtyard,  
with five types of instruments.  
Women sang propitious *dhaval* songs.  
A proclamation was made in Gokul.  
From each house a gopi came out.  
Throwing the pots, they have carried on their heads,  
They created curds-mud in Nand's yard.  
On the eighth of the dark half of Shravan  
Brought good luck Rohini constellation!  
At mid-night Narasaiya's Lord came to Gokul.  
(Trans. Sharma and Daheja: 21)

Here, the advent of Krishna is an act of grace. However, the gopi's (milkmaid) zealous celebration which is at the center of this song is not an expression of gratitude to the divine. There is only a natural expression to the love. Gratitude is revealed by the poet through a reference to Krishna as "Narasaiya's Lord" (*Narasaiyano swami*). The lyric's main focus on the celebration of gopis reinforces the centrality of love in NM corpus.

The point of significance is that the dependence of Krishna on the love of ordinary people is not simply a theological matter in NM's lyrics. It also serves to explicitly dismiss the hierarchies of caste as meaningless, as the following lyric found in the late eighteenth century asserts:

Look Lord of us dances daily  
in the courtyard of the cowherd.  
The one who is reluctant to enter Brahma's dream  
Came here for mortals' love.  
How beautiful Hari looks  
With his anklets ringing sweetly!  
Blessed are the cowherds.  
What (can be gained) from being of high caste?  
(Trans. Sharma and Daheja: 30)

The happy atmosphere of a cowherd's courtyard, the poet stresses, is a result of affection. It can never be created by the consciousness of caste. Such expressions suggesting the superiority of love over status in generating happiness are scattered throughout NM's *Krishna-lila* lyrics.

<sup>5</sup> Taal is a classical rhythm. There are many taals in the Indian classical music.

Thus, it becomes visibly clear that the songs of Narasinha Mehta hold tremendous potential to transform the course of poetic frame. Apart from that, it also gives a natural play creating a sway of both Sagun & Nirgun nuances within same literary frame.

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