

The Mystic Poet Candidas

There is a certain air of mystery around the poet-priest Candidas. Scholars believe there to have been at least four poets who wrote under the name of Candidas, including but not exclusive to Baru Candidas, Dwija Candidas, and Dina Candidas. It is not clear whether these different names found in the *bhanita* (autobiographical lines in poetry mentioning the name of the poet) refer to different individuals or to the same person. However, it is Baru Candidas who has been credited for most of Candidas' work, including the lyrical *The Srikishnakirtan*. The others who signed their *bhanita* with the Candidas name are most likely entirely different, and later, writers of Vaisnava *padas*, rather than the work of Baru Candidas under some sort of pseudonym (Devenath, "Candidas"). It is information like this and the many more unresolved questions that fuel the Candidas mystery.

It is believed that Baru Candidas was born in the village of Nanur in the Birbhum district of Bengal, early in the 14th century. He was the son of Durgadas Bagchi, a Varendra Brahmin (Devenath, "Candidas"). By being born into a Brahmin family, Candidas grew up in a society full of religious bigotry and strong Brahminical authoritarianism. But despite the fact that he came from a family who believed in harsh and ascetic principles, it was Candidas' passion for poetry which kept him from being as devotionally religious as his the rest of his family. But even more powerful than Candidas' love for poetry was his love for love itself. A hopeless romantic, Candidas would spend hours down by the river, where Rami, a washerwoman who would do her washing down at the river and sing songs. Rami was the daughter of a low-caste man, as well as a widow, and both of these factors barred her from having any sort of social contact with a man of Candidas' status. However, Rami and Candidas were drawn to

each other just the same. Rami had noticed Candidas herself and believed in his talent as a poet. But in the small close-knit community, keeping their relationship a secret was next to impossible. And on top of that, a rich local landowner, Bijoynarayan, had become infatuated with Rami as well. But Rami was not interested, she considered him a hypocrite. Bijoynarayan was a wealthy member of the upper-caste and for the most part, he would avoid touching and sharing meals with the low-castes, not wanting to contaminate himself. However, his lust could occasionally overpower his religious devotion and cause him to break sacred caste rules (Watkins and Pettinger, "Chandidas"). Rami's rejection of Bijoynarayan infuriated him and made Candidas and Rami's relationship a source of great scandal in the village. Bijoynarayan began a personal vendetta to persecute Rami and her community. Though Candidas tried to stay strong, the attacks of the Brahmins caused Candidas to cave to their pressure and agree to perform a religious ceremony to repent for his sins and denounce Rami. Rami could not believe that Candidas would turn his back on this way and fought her way through Bijoynarayan's men, desperate to reach the temple on time. She arrived at the temple, wounded from fighting through Bijoynarayan's men, seeking an explanation from Candidas as to why he was denouncing her with his religious mentor in attendance (Watkins and Pettinger, "Chandidas"). All of this caused Candidas to come to an epiphany about his beliefs. It is said that the goddess Basuli, whom Candidas worshipped, is said to have advised him to trust in his love for Rami, going on to tell him that by staying with Rami, she would teach him that religious practice could and lead him to a life of bliss. He knew that he believed in a god who was fair, a god who would never treat people the way his mentor and priests did. He then went on to renounce his religion

and leave his village with Rami. That act is why Chandidas is considered one of India's first humanists. One of the most famous quotes credited to Chandidas is "*sabar upare manus satya tahar upare nai*", ("The supreme truth is man, there is nothing more important than he is") (Watkins and Pettinger, "Chandidas"). He devoted himself to the living a life which was fixated on the spirituality of love and the praising of human love, for he thought that more could be realized through such an existence than through any other approach to worship (Dasgupta 148).

These values can be seen in Chandidas' most famous work, as well as one of the most famous examples of Bengal literature, *The Srikishnakirtan*. Basanta Ranjan Ray Bidvadvallabh found the *puthi* (manuscript) of the composition from the collection of Debendranath Mukhopadhyaya, who was a resident of Kankilya village of Vishnupur in Bankura district, in 1316 of the Bangli calendar. But because the manuscript was found without the first pages intact, the name of the work was unknown. However, over time it came to be referred to as *The Shrikrnakirtan* for it deals with the dalliance of Krsna with Radha, the milkmaid. When published in 1323 of the Bangla calendar, it drew the attention of scholars (Bhowmik, "The Shrikrnakirtan").

The manuscript has 412 songs that are organized into 13 sections, namely, *Janma* (birth), *Tamvula* (piper betel), *Dana* (donation), *Nauka* (boat), *Bhara* (weight), *Chhatra* (umbrella), *Vrindabana*, *Kaliyadamana* (coercion of *Kaliya* mythology), *Yamuna* (Jamuna), *Hara* (necklace), *Bana* (shaft), *Bangshi* (flute) and *Biraha* (estrangement of Radha). The songs are meant to be sung and accompanying each one is an appropriate *raja* (key) and *kala* (time signature) (Stewart 152). It is a lyrical composition, composed in *payar* and *tripadi* meters.

Though the story is modeled on the *Bhagavata*, one of the Puranic texts of Hindu literature, with its primary focus on devotion to the incarnations of Visnu, particularly

Krsna, Candidas also found inspiration *dhamlis*, erotic folk songs popular at the time (Bhowmik, “The Shrikrnakirtan”). In fact, some even consider *The Srikishnakirtan* to be the most graphically erotic text that has been written in the Bengali language. Eroticism is often found in Vaishnava poetry, however, *The Srikishnakirtan* goes further than just sexually suggestive banter or physical descriptions of the characters. It provides descriptive stories of coitus between Radha and Krsna and contains dialogue, which can be seen as sensational or even lewd (Klaiman 11). Candidas also borrowed from the Puranas and the work of Sanskrit poet, Jayadeva (Bhowmik, “The Shrikrnakirtan”).

Although the story borrows from other works, many of the actions and reactions among the character add the originality that makes this story the masterpiece of Bengal literature that it is. The story consists of three major characters, Krishna, Radha and Badai. Krsna, the deity and eighth incarnation of Visnu, is depicted in the tale as the lover of Radha and the sweetheart of the *gopis* (milkmaids). Krsna's love for Radha, the daughter of a milkman and the wife of another, epitomized the beliefs of Vedanta Philosophy. According to this philosophy, the *jivatma* (mortal souls), separate human souls, and the *paramatma* (eternal soul) are one and the same. This is why human souls are constantly searching for a way to unite with the eternal soul. Radha represents the mortal souls and Krsna represents Visnu or God. Therefore, Radha's love for Krsna is yet another expression of the yearning of the human soul to be united with God (Bhowmik, “Krishna”).

Both Candidas' work and life contributed greatly to the world of Vedanta Philosophy. By living a life he believed to be righteous and dedicating his work to praising the spirituality of love, Candidas was able to help establish a new school of thought. To this day, Candidas is studied and admired. In his birthplace, Nanur, a school and a hospital have been founded as memorials for the poet and to this day, people come to the village to show their reverence and respect for Candidas (Devenath,

“Candidas”).

REFERENCES AND FURTHER RECOMMENDED READING

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http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shreekrishna_Kirtana

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http://www.poetseers.org/spiritual_and_devotional_poets/india/chand.

<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/92409/Candidas>

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