



The Memory of Love: Surdas Sings to Krishna

John Stratton Hawley

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No Hindu god is closer to the soul of poetry than Krishna, and in North India no poet ever sang of Krishna more famously than Surdas—or Sur, for short. He lived in the sixteenth century and became so influential that for centuries afterward aspiring Krishna poets signed their compositions orally with his name. This book takes us back to the source, offering a selection of Surdas's poems that were known and sung in the sixteenth century itself. Here we have poems of war, poems to the great rivers, poems of wit and rage, poems where the poet spills out his disappointments. Most of all, though, we have the memory of love-poems that adopt the voices of the women of Krishna's natal Braj country and evoke the power of being pulled into his irresistible orbit. Following the lead of several old manuscripts, Jack Hawley arranges these poems in such a way that they tell us Krishna's life story from birth to full maturity. These lyrics from Sur's Ocean (the Sursagar) were composed in the very tongue Hindus believe Krishna himself must have spoken: Brajbhasa, the language of Braj, a variety of Hindi. Hawley prepares the way for his verse translations with an introduction that explains what we know of Surdas and describes the basic structure of his poems. For readers new to Krishna's world or to the subtleties of a poet like Surdas, Hawley also provides a substantial set of analytical notes. Sur is the sun, as a familiar saying has it, and we feel the warmth of his light in these pages.

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