

Surdas's Poetry: Analyzing Developmental Child Psychology Insights

Aditya Angiras

Panjab University, Chandigarh, India

In the annals of Indian literature and spirituality, few figures resonate as profoundly as Surdas, a 16th-century poet-saint whose works have transcended time and cultural boundaries. While he is primarily celebrated for his devotional hymns dedicated to Lord Krishna, a deeper exploration of his writings reveals a profound understanding of child psychology. Surdas, through his poetic lens, captures the essence of childhood, fostering a nuanced comprehension of the emotional and psychological landscape of children. This essay delves into the theme of Surdas as a master of child psychology, examining how his insights into the innocence, curiosity, and emotionality of children can be perceived as an early exploration of child development. At the heart of Surdas's poetry is a celebration of innocence, a quality that defines childhood. His verses often depict the playful antics of Krishna as a child, embodying the joy, spontaneity, and purity that characterize early life untouched by the burdens and complexities of adulthood. In his portrayal of Krishna's mischievous Surdas encapsulates the essence of childlike wonder. In modern child psychology, curiosity is recognized as a vital element in learning and development. Surdas's emphasis on the playful exploration of the world resonates with contemporary theories that advocate for experiential learning. By portraying Krishna as an inquisitive child, Surdas implicitly encourages adults to cultivate environments where children feel safe to ask questions, experiment, and engage with their surroundings. The paper is an earnest attempt to explain the key concepts of child psychology as perceived in the poetry of Surdas sagar saar.

Keywords: Surdas, Hindi devotional literature, child psychology, early Hindi poetry, Krishna, poetry in Braj dialect, early Hindi Poetry

Introduction: Surdas's *Bal Leela* as a Psycho-Literary Text

The devotional poetry of the 15th- to 16th-century poet-saint Surdas represents a profound intersection of literature, spirituality, and behavioral observation. A central pillar of the North Indian *Bhakti* movement, Surdas's works, primarily composed in Braj Bhasha, are overwhelmingly dedicated to Lord Krishna. His magnum opus, the *Sur Sagar* (Ocean of Melody), meticulously details the *Bal Leela* or childhood pastimes of Krishna, portraying the deity not as a distant abstraction but as a highly accessible, playful, and emotionally complex child.

The depth of Surdas's composition lies in its emphasis on *Bhav Paksh*, or profound emotional expression, used to articulate love for the divine (Barz, 1992, p. 106). This intensely emotional focus transforms the *Sur Sagar* into a unique psycho-literary text, one where theological narratives serve as a framework for exploring

universal human developmental experiences (Hawley, 2018). This report undertakes the task of synthesizing the rich lyrical descriptions of medieval devotion with empirically derived theories of modern developmental psychology. The central premise is that Surdas's depictions possess a high degree of developmental realism (Hawley, 2018), providing compelling evidence that core concepts of child psychology were observed and codified within the cultural memory of pre-modern India.

The sustained focus on the child Krishna makes the deity exceptionally approachable, which facilitated the widespread popularity of this form of worship. By rendering the divine figure as vulnerable, demanding, and utterly human, Surdas offered devotees a path to the Absolute that bypassed restrictive rituals and complex theological discourse, centering instead on a direct, personal, and emotionally charged connection (Klostermaier, 2007, p. 215). This psychological strategy provided significant spiritual sustenance to wide audiences, including those who may have been marginalized from traditional religious structures.

A particularly compelling observation related to the developmental fidelity of Surdas's work concerns the biography of the poet himself. Surdas was blind from birth. Despite this physical limitation, his poetry vividly captures the micro-behaviors, subtle emotional shifts, and physical actions of a growing child (Barz, 1992, p. 106), such as the exact manner of crawling or the expressions of fear and defiance. This suggests that the poet's creative process relied not merely on visual data but on an extraordinary capacity for auditory, tactile, and empathic observation. The resulting precision elevates the *Sur Sagar* beyond a simple religious composition, positioning it as a valuable, albeit non-clinical, and historical record documenting childhood behavior with ethnographic clarity. The subsequent analysis seeks to map Krishna's behaviors—his curiosity, naughtiness, emotional demands, and ultimate emotional attachment—onto specific stages of modern child development, including ego formation, the development of autonomy, and secure attachment.

Indigenous and Modern Concepts of Childhood: Defining the *Vatsalya* Framework

The analysis of Surdas's work must be grounded not only in modern psychology but also in the rich historical context of Hindu thought regarding childhood.

Historical Context: Hindu Understandings of Child Development

Historical sources indicate a sophisticated and positive regard for children's psychological and physical development in ancient India. Childhood was traditionally viewed as a long period, commencing even before birth and extending through late adolescence (Datta, 1987, p. 79). Ancient concepts concerning children's development, education, and autonomy were remarkably aligned with contemporary modern concepts, recognizing children as precious and worthy of positive regard.

Key texts, such as the *Dharmaśāstras* (law books dating back to 200 BCE), detail the rights, responsibilities, and appropriate treatment of children within society (Klostermaier, 2007, p. 215). Concurrently, Ayurvedic texts, focusing on traditional Hindu medical practice (c. 200-100 BCE), dedicated attention to child development, addressing both physical health and psychological aspects. The attention given to these topics indicates that the foundation for understanding child psychology was culturally established long before the medieval period in which Surdas wrote, providing a deep cultural archetype that Surdas was able to draw upon and elaborate lyrically.

Defining *Vatsalya Bhava* (Parental Devotional Mood)

Within the Bhakti tradition, particularly focused on Krishna, the concept of *Vatsalya Bhava*—the mood of

parental love—is paramount. This *bhava* is one of the five primary modes of devotion, involving the intimate act of loving and serving God as one's own child.

Mother Yashoda, Krishna's adoptive mother, functions as the quintessential embodiment of this ideal. Surdas's poetry depicts her love as profound, demonstrating parental affection and emotional attachment through their unique relationship. Yashoda is consistently portrayed as the "dharmic ideal of motherhood"—a figure who is firm yet compassionate (India the Destiny, 2018). Crucially, her love is characterized as pure, unconditional, and entirely free from any expectation of reward, establishing her as the ultimate archetype of *Vatsalya Bhava*.

Modern Theoretical Integration: Bhakti and Secure Attachment Theory

The emotional architecture of *Vatsalya Bhava* finds a compelling parallel in the framework of modern attachment theory, pioneered by Bowlby and Ainsworth (Bryant, 2007, p. 224). Attachment theory posits that human beings are fundamentally motivated by a need for connection and safety, seeking a secure base provided by a reliable caregiver.

The devotional texts, particularly the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, describe the relationship with the Divine in terms that mirror secure attachment. The relationship with God is characterized as unconditionally available, responsive, and loving. This connection is *ahaitukī* (causeless) and *apratihatā* (unobstructed). This description positions *Bhakti* as the highest form of attachment, a relationship of security and reliability foundational to secure attachment in human psychology.

The *Vatsalya Bhava*, as depicted through Yashoda's actions, essentially universalizes this bond, directing the concept of the secure base toward the Absolute Truth. When this devotion stabilizes the devotee's psyche and directs the soul toward transcendence, it suggests that devotional love functions as the archetypal form of secure attachment (Barz, 1992, p. 106). The following table summarizes this remarkable alignment between spiritual concepts and modern psychological frameworks as they are applied to Surdas's poetry:

Table 1

Alignment of Bhakti Bhava (Devotional Mood) With Modern Attachment Theory

Bhakti concept	Psychological equivalent	Function in Surdas's poetry
<i>Vatsalya Bhava</i> (Parental Love)	Secure attachment (caregiver/child)	Focuses on unconditional, responsive maternal care (Yashoda).
<i>Prem-Bhakti</i> (Devotion Through Love)	Reliable secure base	Ensures the child deity (Krishna) is accessible and emotionally connected, fostering intimacy.
<i>Bal Leela</i> (Childhood Pastime)	Developmental stages/ego development	Provides the narrative framework for displaying natural, complex childhood behaviors.

The Chronological Realism of Krishna's Developmental Milestones

Surdas's genius lies in his ability to describe Krishna's *leelas* in a chronological sequence that mirrors the predictable progression of human developmental milestones, an alignment that provides strong evidence for the observational accuracy of the poet.

Infancy and Sensory-Motor Development (0-1 Year)

The poetry captures precise details of early physical and communicative development. For instance, verses describe Krishna "chirping and crackling with joy", indicative of early vocalizations and affective signaling typical of infants. More significantly, the poetry details his motor skills, such as when Yashoda encourages him

to move, and Krishna responds by “crawling on his knees” (Exotic India Art, 2021). This description of mastering gross motor skills aligns precisely with the 6-12-month developmental window.

The act of moving towards the mother when called, even if playfully prompted, demonstrates proximity-seeking behavior. In attachment theory, proximity seeking is a fundamental response activated by the need for connection, confirming that even the simplest interactions documented by Surdas reveal a functional, secure bond between the child and his caregiver.

Toddlerhood and the Quest for Autonomy (1-3 Years)

As Krishna ages into toddlerhood, the poetic narratives shift to reflect the child's psychological progression, particularly the emergence of the ego and the drive for autonomy. According to psychoanalytic theory, willful strivings intensify during the second year of life, concomitant with ego development and the onset of intentionality, mobility, and communication.

Krishna's notorious naughtiness, epitomized by *makhan chori* (stealing butter), serves as the quintessential poetic illustration of this willful striving (Exotic India Art, 2021). The act of stealing butter, and the subsequent attempts by Yashoda to curb the behavior, represent the testing of parental boundaries and the complex “power struggles of the rapprochement crisis”. This phase, described by Mahler, involves the toddler's oscillation between defiant independence and an urgent retreat to the caregiver. Surdas's poetry captures this dynamic perfectly, showing Krishna testing limits through defiance but always seeking the safety, cleaning, and reassurance provided by his mother, such as when Yashoda cleans his soiled legs and hands after he crawls through dust during his naughty games (Exotic India Art, 2021).

Early Childhood: Self-Concept and Superego Precursors (3-6 Years)

As Krishna moves into early childhood, the psychological observations become even more nuanced, focusing on cognitive development and the internalization of morality. The development of self-concept is famously captured in a verse where Krishna, holding a mirror, asks Radha, “between the two of us, whose face is better?” (Exotic India Art, 2021) This scene demonstrates the cognitive milestone of self-recognition (typically achieved between 18 months and 2 years) followed by the crucial emergence of social comparison, a hallmark of preschool development (2-4 years). The child is actively establishing his identity, engaging in relational comparisons, and exploring gender roles (e.g., contrasting his dark complexion with Radha's fair skin).

Furthermore, the *Bal Leela* extensively features Krishna making demands and using simple untruths or defiance, such as lying about eating mud or butter. Psychologically, this behavior relates to the early stages of conscience formation (Datta, 1987, p. 79). Superego precursors appear when the child learns parental rules, a subtle process of negotiation that accompanies the learning of negotiable and non-negotiable limits. The development of the superego relies not only on discipline but also significantly on positive identifications and the internalization of parental approval. By consistently showing Yashoda managing Krishna's naughtiness with firm limits balanced by unconditional tenderness (E. J. Blum & H. P. Blum, 1990), Surdas provides a functional model for the development of self-criticism and guilt, attributes essential for a developing conscience.

The following table visually consolidates the fidelity of Surdas's depictions to established modern developmental chronology:

Table 2

Developmental Milestones of Krishna in Bal Leela vs. Modern Chronology

Child Krishna's action (poetic theme)	Approximate chronological age (modern)	Psychological significance
Crawling/reaching the mother	6-12 months (infancy)	Mastery of gross motor skills; proximity-seeking behavior; establishing secure attachment bond.
Wilful strivings/naughtiness/defiance	18-36 months (toddlerhood)	Development of Autonomy (Erikson); Rapprochement Crisis (Mahler); testing limits and intentionality.
Self-comparison (mirror scene)	2-4 years (preschool)	Developing self-concept and self-recognition; early social comparison and gender identity exploration.
Internalization of parental rules/guilt	3-6 years (early childhood)	Superego precursors; positive identification with caregiver approval; capacity for self-criticism.

The Archetype of the Secure Base: Yashoda and Parental Responsiveness

Yashoda Maiya is more than a maternal figure; she is the poetic embodiment of the perfectly responsive caregiver, a model that aligns with contemporary clinical descriptions of parenting that foster secure attachment.

Yashoda as the Ideal Caregiver: Maternal Empathy and Restraint

Yashoda's character is defined by the "dharmic ideal of motherhood", which necessitates not only love but also appropriate regulation (Exotic India Art, 2021). Her devotion is characterized by profound parental affection and emotional attachment, demonstrating restraint, boundless love, and genuine joy in observing her son's development.

Clinically, secure attachment requires high parental responsiveness—the ability to react to a child's needs adequately, promptly, and with tenderness. Yashoda repeatedly demonstrates this quality (Sitholey, Agarwal, & Vrat, 2013). For example, in response to Krishna's naughtiness and subsequent need for care, she immediately lifts him, cleans his dirty legs and hands, and engages him in dialogue, displaying prompt, tender, and adequate response to his immediate state.

Even when confronted by neighbors complaining about Krishna's mischief, Yashoda consistently displays emotional empathy (Exotic India Art, 2021). When she contemplates chastising him, she observes his "pitiable face" and reacts with a smile, tempering her discipline. This parental consistency, characterized by restraint and affection, is vital for supporting the child's cognitive growth, emotional resilience, and social development (E. J. Blum & H. P. Blum, 1990).

The Damodar Leela: Attachment and the Boundaries of Love

The Damodar Leela, in which Yashoda attempts to bind Krishna after he breaks a butter pot, provides one of the most profound psychological statements on the relationship between discipline and devotion. The narrative recounts Yashoda's frustration as the rope she uses to bind Krishna is perpetually slightly too short, symbolizing the impossibility of coercing the Supreme Godhead.

However, the psychological resolution is key: Krishna ultimately "agreed to be bound up by the ropes" out of appreciation for his mother's hard labor and compassion for her effort. This voluntary submission to benign, maternal authority transcends mere theological obedience. It represents an act of reciprocal vulnerability and a recognition of the caregiver's emotional investment (Exotic India Art, 2021). The "binding" is thus established not through physical force or fear, but through the power of unconditional, consistent love. This narrative validates the psychological truth that unconditional affection (*Vatsalya*) holds the ultimate power, enabling the

child to internalize empathy and recognize the emotional reality of the loving other. This establishment of love-bound limits fosters emotional reciprocity, guiding the development of conscience and self-criticism in the child. The consistent, reliable responsiveness of the divine caregiver fosters the spiritual confidence of the devotee (*prem-bhakti*), confirming that the bond is the ultimate secure base (Menon, 2017).

Comparative Analysis: Surdas's Psychological Focus vs. Contemporary Bhakti Poets

To fully appreciate Surdas's unique contribution to the psychology of childhood, his work must be viewed in contrast to that of his major contemporaries in the Bhakti movement, particularly Tulsidas.

The Devotional Choice: Krishna (*Prem-Bhakti*) Versus Rama (*Dharma-Bhakti*)

Surdas centered his devotion intensely on Lord Krishna, focusing specifically on his playful childhood (*Bal Leela*) and youth. This choice resulted in a body of poetry characterized by a sweetness and intimacy (*prem-bhakti*, devotion through love), emphasizing the emotional connection with an accessible deity.

In sharp contrast, Tulsidas centered his devotion on Lord Rama, the subject of his monumental *Ramcharitmanas*. Tulsidas's work emphasizes *dharma* (righteousness), duty, and the portrayal of Rama as the ideal man and ruler (Dutta, 2025a).

Tulsidas's Rama: The Psychology of Idealized Righteousness

In Tulsidas's rendering, the childhood of Rama, while sacred, primarily serves as a narrative foundation for righteous conduct and upholding social order. Rama embodies ideal values and is portrayed as virtuous, powerful, and the very embodiment of justice.

The psychological implication of this depiction is that Tulsidas's model demands adherence to a rigid, external moral code. The devotional path is defined by duty, moral fortitude, and virtue, appealing to a sense of structure and social conformity (Dutta, 2025b). This figure, though inspiring, is fundamentally an idealized moral exemplar, potentially making the path feel more demanding and less emotionally accessible or forgiving than the playful Krishna. This represents a dominance of the external moral guide or *Superego* framework.

Surdas's Krishna: The Power of the Child Archetype in Emotional Liberation

Surdas's Krishna, conversely, is presented as playful, highly emotional, and accessible. His *leelas* include defiance, trickery, demands, and charming emotional manipulation—a full spectrum of human, and sometimes flawed, childhood behavior (Dutta, 2025c).

This presentation offers a powerful mechanism for psychic release and validation for the devotee. By depicting the divine figure as encompassing both the sublime and the fully human, imperfect child, Surdas validates the entire emotional spectrum and inherent imperfections of the devotee. Since Krishna is loved unconditionally by Yashoda despite his flaws, the devotee is assured of the ultimate Divine acceptance and love, fostering an immediate, emotionally fulfilling connection (Dutta, 2025c).

The distinct paths provided by Surdas and Tulsidas demonstrate the profound psychological diversification inherent in the Bhakti movement. Surdas created a path appealing to emotional intimacy and unconditional acceptance, providing solace by securing the devotee's "inner child" through the *Vatsalya* archetype. Tulsidas, meanwhile, offered a path emphasizing moral fortitude and social structure, strengthening the devotee's civic and moral identity. Both forms, however, successfully provided essential emotional and spiritual sustenance to communities across different backgrounds.

Conclusion: Surdas's Enduring Psychological Legacy

Surdas's *Bal Leela* poetry is a masterpiece of devotional literature that simultaneously functions as an extraordinary document of human psychological development (Blind Welfare Society, n.d.). The consistency and detail in Krishna's actions—from the precise mechanics of crawling and proximity seeking to the emergence of self-concept in the mirror scene and the negotiation of rules necessary for superego formation—confirm that the poet achieved a remarkable, and arguably precocious, level of developmental realism (Saha, 2011). This fidelity suggests that the intuitive observation of child behavior in medieval India was highly sophisticated, centuries before equivalent observations were systemically codified in Western psychology.

The enduring power of the *Bal Leela* stems from its portrayal of perfect, unconditional parenting embodied by *Vatsalya Bhava* (Dutta, 2025c). Yashoda's responsiveness, restraint, and consistent provision of a secure base established an archetypal model for the parent-child relationship that transcends cultural boundaries. The Damodar Leela, in particular, demonstrates the profound psychological principle that true discipline and internalized empathy arise not from coercion, but from the voluntary acceptance of limits imposed by unconditional love (Adinissa, Yoenanto, & Suryanto, 2025). The Supreme Lord, voluntarily bound by affection, teaches that the ultimate spiritual reality is accessible through the most intimate and fundamental human emotional bonds.

This literary corpus holds significant implications for transcultural psychology. Surdas's work validates the notion that core human psychological needs—for autonomy, self-concept, and secure attachment—were universally understood and were deeply articulated within complex, pre-modern Hindu literary traditions. The *Sur Sagar*, therefore, challenges the chronological primacy of Western developmental models and serves as an invaluable, rich pre-modern resource for comparative research into the cross-cultural construction of the child psyche.

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