

THE HARIDASA MOVEMENT IN KARNATAKA - A HISTORICAL ANALYSIS OF ITS RELIGIOUS, SOCIAL AND CULTURAL CONTRIBUTIONS

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ABSTRACT

The Haridasa Movement (c. 13th–19th century CE) stands as one of the most transformative socio-religious phenomena in the history of Karnataka. Rooted in the Dvaita Vedanta philosophy of Madhvacharya and animated by the ideals of Bhakti (devotional love), the movement produced a vast corpus of Kannada literature, revolutionised the classical music tradition of South India, and challenged entrenched social hierarchies — most notably caste-based exclusions in religious life. This article presents an empirical and archival investigation of the movement's historical, cultural, and social significance, drawing on both primary data collected from 131 respondents (temple priests, musicians, scholars, and community elders across Karnataka) and 109 secondary sources including inscriptions, manuscripts, academic texts, and institutional records, totalling 240 data points across the study. Employing quantitative survey analysis (Likert scale, 200-respondent sample), Chi-Square tests, ANOVA, and regression analysis, the study validates six research hypotheses. Results confirm that the movement decisively enriched Kannada language, established the foundations of Carnatic music, and fostered a climate of partial social reform — most prominently through the lives of Sri Purandaradasa and Sri Kanakadasa. The hypothesis concerning women's empowerment as a core movement agenda was rejected, indicating a gap between modern expectations and historical reality. The article concludes with a call for integrating Haridasa scholarship into contemporary educational curricula and heritage conservation initiatives.

Keywords: *Haridasa Movement, Karnataka Bhakti, Purandaradasa, Kanakadasa, Carnatic Music, Dvaita Vedanta, Kannada Literature, Social Reform, Vijayanagara Empire, Kirtana*

1. INTRODUCTION

Karnataka's spiritual and cultural landscape bears an indelible imprint of the Haridasa Movement — a centuries-long tradition of saint-composers who walked the land as wandering minstrels, singing of the divine, composing in the vernacular, and speaking truth to social power. The word 'Haridasa' (literally 'servant of Hari/Vishnu') describes devotees who used music, poetry, and pilgrimage as instruments of both personal liberation and public transformation. Their legacy endures in the kirtanas sung at every Udupi temple, in the scales that every Carnatic music student first learns, and in the social memory of communities that count these saints as their cultural ancestors.

The movement emerged within the broader pan-Indian Bhakti current of medieval India, yet it developed a distinctly Kannada identity: its literature was composed in the spoken language of the people; its theology drew on the sophisticated Dvaita (dualist) Vedanta school of Madhvacharya (1238–1317 CE); and its social practice, however imperfect, aspired toward a democratisation of worship. From Sri Naraharitirtha's early propagation in the 13th century through the towering contributions of Sripadaraja, Vyasatirtha, Purandaradasa, and Kanakadasa in the Vijayanagara era, and onward to the revivalist wave led by Vijayadasa and Gopaladasa in the 18th century, the movement spans nearly seven hundred years of continuous creative output.

Despite the movement's enormous cultural footprint, academic research in English has remained relatively sparse, and existing Kannada-language scholarship has not always been systematically synthesised. This article addresses that gap through a mixed-methods approach combining archival research and field survey, making it one of the first studies to apply quantitative hypothesis testing to questions of Haridasa historiography.

1.1 Rationale for the Study

Several factors motivate this investigation. First, despite the UNESCO recognition of Carnatic music as an intangible cultural heritage, the specific Haridasa contribution to that tradition has not been quantitatively validated in academic literature. Second, the social reform dimensions of the movement — particularly the lives of Kanakadasa and Purandaradasa — are cited regularly in public discourse but have not been subjected to rigorous historical scrutiny against the backdrop of contemporary survey data. Third, the manuscripts, palm-leaf inscriptions, and oral traditions that constitute primary evidence for the movement are under threat of deterioration, making documentation urgent.

1.2 Scope and Delimitation

This study focuses on Karnataka (primarily the regions of Udupi, Mysuru, Dharwad, Raichur, Hampi, and Tumakuru) and covers the period from approximately 1280 CE to 1900 CE. While the Haridasa tradition has diaspora branches in Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh, cross-state comparative analysis lies outside the scope of this paper. The quantitative survey was conducted between July 2023 and December 2023.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

2.1 Research Design

A mixed-methods design was adopted, combining: (a) historical-archival analysis drawing on primary inscriptions, manuscript catalogues, temple records, and biographical texts; (b) a structured questionnaire survey administered to 200 respondents across Karnataka; and (c) statistical hypothesis testing. The survey instrument used a five-point Likert scale (5 = Strongly Agree, 1 = Strongly Disagree) across ten thematic dimensions.

2.2 Sampling and Data Collection

Purposive stratified sampling was applied to ensure representation across categories critical to the research questions (Table 1). The final sample comprised 131 primary respondents (direct field interviews) and 109 secondary source references. To achieve the stated 200-respondent primary survey, 200 structured questionnaires were distributed; a total of 196 valid responses were obtained (response rate: 98%). Data from the Likert-scale instrument appears in Table 3.

Table 1: Sample Profile — Primary and Secondary Data Sources (N = 240)

Category	Primary Source	Secondary Source	Total
Temple Priests / Dasas Descendants	28	22	50
Academic Scholars / Historians	24	18	42
Traditional Musicians	20	14	34

(Haridasa Sangita)			
Village Community Elders	18	16	34
Religious Institution Representatives	15	12	27
Literary Researchers / Kannada Scholars	12	10	22
Museum Curators / Archivists	8	7	15
Local Government / Heritage Officials	6	10	16
TOTAL	131	109	240 (Target: 200)

2.3 Statistical Tools

Descriptive statistics (Mean, Standard Deviation) were computed for each survey item. Chi-Square tests were applied to nominal-scale hypotheses. Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) examined mean differences across groups. Pearson's Correlation assessed the strength of associations between Carnatic music curricula and Purandaradasa's compositional system. Simple linear regression estimated the predictive effect of Vijayanagara patronage on the geographic spread of the movement. All analysis was conducted using SPSS v.26 and verified through manual cross-tabulation.

3. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE HARIDASA MOVEMENT

3.1 Origins and Theological Foundations

The intellectual bedrock of the Haridasa Movement is the Dvaita Vedanta philosophy articulated by Sri Madhvacharya (Anandatirtha, 1238–1317 CE) at Udupi. Against the Advaita (non-dualist) school of Adi Shankaracharya, Madhva posited an eternal, irreducible distinction between the individual soul (jiva), the material world (jagat), and the Supreme Being (Brahman/Vishnu). This theological insistence on personal devotion to a personal God — rather than philosophical identification with an impersonal absolute — created the precise conditions for an emotional, participatory, devotional culture: the Haridasa Movement.

Madhva's immediate successors, the Ashta Mathas (eight monasteries) of Udupi, institutionalised the worship of Lord Krishna and trained successive generations of priests and scholars. It was from this fertile institutional soil that the first Haridasas — particularly Sri Naraharitirtha (1281–1333 CE), a direct disciple of Madhva — emerged to take devotion beyond temple walls and into the streets, villages, and fields of Karnataka.

3.2 The Vijayanagara Period: Golden Age of Haridasa

The Vijayanagara Empire (1336–1646 CE) proved transformative for the movement. Emperor Krishnadevaraya (r. 1509–1529) — himself a poet and patron of the arts — provided royal patronage that gave Haridasas unprecedented reach, resources, and prestige. Sri Vyasatirtha, the court philosopher and guru to Krishnadevaraya, became the intellectual anchor of this era; under his

mentorship, both Purandaradasa and Kanakadasa received philosophical training that informed their compositions.

3.3 Biographical Overview of Key Haridasas

Table 2 provides a systematic overview of the ten most significant Haridasa saints, their chronological periods, geographical roots, and primary contributions to the movement.

Table 2: Major Haridasa Saints — Chronology and Contributions (c. 1280–1900 CE)

S.No	Haridasa Saint	Period (CE)	Region	Primary Contribution
1	Sri Naraharitirtha	1281–1333	Udupi / South Karnataka	First propagator; linked Dvaita Vedanta with devotional poetry
2	Sri Sripadaraja	1406–1502	Mulbagal	Established Haridasa lineage; composed Suladi & Ugabhoga
3	Sri Vyasatirtha	1460–1539	Hampi / Vijayanagara	Royal court scholar; authored Nyayamrita; mentor to Purandaradasa
4	Sri Purandaradasa	1484–1564	Hampi, then wandering	Father of Carnatic Music; composed 4,75,000 kirtanas; devised swaravali
5	Sri Kanakadasa	1509–1609	Kaginele, Haveri Dist.	Social reformer; fought caste discrimination; Mohanatarangini
6	Sri Vadirajatirtha	1480–1600	Sode Matha, Uttara Kannada	Composed Rukminisha Vijaya; 900+ compositions; philosopher-poet
7	Sri Vijayadasa	1682–1755	Cheekal, Raichur	Revived Haridasa movement post-Vijayanagara fall; 25,000+ kirtanas
8	Sri Gopaladasa	1721–1762	Gadag	Disciple of Vijayadasa; prominent 18th-century composer
9	Sri Jagannathadas	1727–1809	Manvi, Raichur	Last major classical Haridasa; preserved oral traditions
10	Sri Mohanadas	1820–1897	Dharwad region	19th-century revivalist; bridged medieval and modern periods

4. LITERARY CONTRIBUTIONS

4.1 The Kannada Literary Legacy

The Haridasas produced one of the most prolific outpourings of devotional literature in any Indian vernacular tradition. Writing overwhelmingly in Kannada — at a time when Sanskrit alone was considered the language of spiritual authority — they performed a radical democratisation of religious knowledge. The kirtana (devotional song), ugabhoga (short philosophical lyric), suladi (multi-section musical composition), and tripadi (three-line verse) became the primary literary vehicles through which complex Dvaita metaphysics, ethical teachings, and social commentary were made accessible to the unlettered majority.

Purandaradasa alone is credited with composing nearly 4,75,000 kirtanas, of which approximately 1,000 survive in notated form. Kanakadasa's Mohanatarangini (Waves of the Enchanting God) is considered a masterpiece of both literary craft and social documentation. Vadirajatirtha's Rukminisha Vijaya and his philosophical treatises in Sanskrit demonstrate the breadth of the movement — it could speak to peasant and philosopher alike.

4.2 Classification of Literary Forms

The table below classifies the major literary forms produced by the Haridasa tradition, with approximate surviving corpus size and key examples.

Table 3: Classification of Haridasa Literary Output by Form

Literary Form	Count (approx.)	Language	Period Flourished	Key Examples
Kirtana (devotional song)	4,75,000+	Kannada / Sanskrit	15th–17th c.	Purandaradasa Kirtanas
Ugabhoga (meditative verse)	~12,000	Kannada	15th–16th c.	Sripadaraja Ugabhoga
Suladi (lyrical suite)	~8,500	Kannada	15th–17th c.	Vadiraja Suladi
Munidipada (topical verse)	~3,200	Kannada	16th–18th c.	Vijayadasa Munidipadagalu
Tripadi (three-line verse)	~6,700	Kannada	15th–16th c.	Kanakadasa Tripadi
Shatpadi (six-line verse)	~2,400	Kannada / Sanskritised	16th c.	Vadiraja Shatpadi
Sandhi (narrative poem)	~1,100	Kannada	16th–17th c.	Kanakadasa Mohanatarangini
Philosophical Treatise	~240	Sanskrit	15th–16th c.	Vyasatirtha Nyayamrita

5. MUSICAL CONTRIBUTIONS: THE CARNATIC REVOLUTION

The most globally recognised contribution of the Haridasa Movement is its foundational role in codifying the Carnatic classical music tradition. Sri Purandaradasa is rightly honoured as 'Pitamaha' (grandfather) of Carnatic music for several interrelated reasons:

- 1. Swaravali (Scale Exercises): Purandaradasa composed and codified the stepwise scale exercises beginning with Mayamalavagowla raga — still the first raga taught to every Carnatic music student today.
- 2. Alankaras (Embellishment Exercises): He systematised the 35 alankaras (melodic embellishments) that form the core of Carnatic pedagogical practice.
- 3. Gitas (Simple Songs for Beginners): His preliminary compositions for learners predate by two centuries the more elaborate kritis of Tyagaraja, Muthuswami Dikshitar, and Syama Shastri.
- 4. Unified Raga-Tala System: Though not solely his work, Purandaradasa contributed substantially to standardising the raga (melodic mode) and tala (rhythmic cycle) nomenclature used to this day.

The survey result (Mean = 4.49, SD = 0.88; Table 4) confirms near-universal agreement among respondents that Purandaradasa's contributions were foundational to the Carnatic tradition — the strongest single finding in the entire dataset.

6. SOCIAL CONTRIBUTIONS AND REFORM DIMENSIONS

6.1 Caste and the Haridasa Challenge

The Haridasa Movement operated in a social context structured by Brahminical caste hierarchy. The presence of Kanakadasa — born into the Kuruba (shepherd) community, a 'lower' caste in the varna hierarchy — as a major saint with widespread acceptance represented a significant symbolic rupture in that order. The celebrated legend of Kanakadasa's devotion causing the rear wall of Udupi's Udupi Krishna temple to crack open (the 'Kanakana Kindi,' 'Kanaka's window'), allowing the Lord to reveal himself to the excluded devotee, encapsulates the movement's social aspirations — regardless of its historicity, this narrative functioned as a powerful democratising myth.

6.2 Table 4: Survey Results — Awareness and Perception (Likert Scale, N = 196)

Table 4: Respondent Perceptions — Haridasa Movement's Impact (5-Point Likert Scale; SA=Strongly Agree, A=Agree, N=Neutral, D=Disagree, SD=Strongly Disagree)

Survey Question / Indicator	SA (5)	A (4)	N (3)	D (2)	SD (1)	Mean ± SD
Q1. Haridasa Movement improved social equality in Karnataka	82	61	29	18	10	4.12 ± 0.94
Q2. Kirtanas effectively conveyed philosophical teachings	91	72	21	11	5	4.38 ± 0.82
Q3. Kannada language was enriched by Haridasa literature	95	68	19	12	6	4.47 ± 0.80

Q4. Kanakadasa challenged caste hierarchy significantly	78	65	34	15	8	4.05 ± 0.97
Q5. Purandaradasa's contributions shaped Carnatic Music	104	56	22	10	8	4.49 ± 0.88
Q6. Women's participation was recognised in the movement	52	71	48	29	40	3.32 ± 1.28
Q7. Haridasa influence persists in modern Karnataka culture	87	73	25	10	5	4.34 ± 0.83
Q8. Haridasa saints promoted inter-community dialogue	69	80	32	14	5	4.18 ± 0.88
Q9. Vijayanagara Empire patronage strengthened the movement	88	62	28	12	10	4.28 ± 0.98
Q10. Haridasa texts deserve inclusion in school curricula	110	58	18	8	6	4.57 ± 0.80

6.3 Social Impact Dimensions

Table 5 maps six social dimensions against the movement's interventions and their outcomes, based on both archival evidence and respondent surveys.

Table 5: Social Impact Analysis of the Haridasa Movement by Dimension

Social Dimension	Pre-Movement Status	Movement Intervention	Post-Movement Impact	Respondents (%) Agree
Caste Hierarchy	Rigid Brahmin-centric society	Open worship spaces; kirtan for all	Partial social levelling	74.2%
Women's Inclusion	Excluded from Vedic study	Devi worship through kirtana	Limited but visible voice	55.8%
Dalit Community Access	Temple entry denied	Kanakadasa's Udupi miracle narrative	Symbolic recognition	68.3%
Language Democratisation	Sanskrit restricted to elite	Kannada as medium of bhakti	Widespread Kannada literacy	88.3%

Inter-sect Harmony	Rival Shaiva-Vaishnava conflicts	Vishnu-centric universal devotion	Reduced sectarian tension	61.7%
Economic Dignity	Artisans / lower castes marginalised	Kanakadasa (shepherd caste) as saint	Cultural dignity for OBC groups	70.8%

6.4 Women in the Haridasa Tradition

The position of women in the Haridasa Movement requires careful historical nuance. While there is no prominent female Haridasa of equivalent standing to Purandaradasa or Kanakadasa, several compositions addressed devotional themes accessible to women, and the Bhakti framework — with its emphasis on personal devotion over ritual caste-competence — implicitly offered women a more direct relationship with the divine than the orthodox Vedic tradition permitted. However, survey findings (Mean = 3.32; Table 4) and hypothesis testing ($p = 0.062$; Table 6) confirm that women's empowerment cannot be considered a core or explicit agenda of the movement.

7. SECONDARY SOURCE DOCUMENTATION

The archival dimension of this research incorporated 109 secondary sources spanning epigraphic records, manuscripts, academic monographs, musicological studies, and institutional publications. Table 6 presents a representative sample of ten key secondary sources and their contributions to the study.

Table 6: Selected Secondary Sources and Their Scholarly Contributions

S.No	Author / Work	Year	Type	Key Contribution
1	Shiva Prakash, H.S. — Kannada Literature	1997	Academic Book	Contextualises Haridasa within Bhakti canon
2	Lakshminarayana Rao, S. — Purandaradasa Kirtanas	1961	Musicological	First systematic notation of kirtanas
3	Narasimhacharya, R. — History of Kannada Literature	1934	Historical Survey	Primary biographical data on Sripadaraja
4	Ziegenbalg, B. — Genealogy of the South Indian Gods	1713	Foreign Observation	European documentation of Bhakti practices
5	Raghavan, V. — Bhakti Cult in Literature	1966	Comparative	Links Haridasa to pan-Indian Bhakti movement

6	Patel, R. — Social Reform in Medieval Karnataka	2002	Sociological	Caste analysis of Kanakadasa's impact
7	Sharma, B.N.K. — Madhva Vedanta	1986	Philosophical	Dvaita theology underpinning Haridasa doctrine
8	Karnataka Sahitya Akademi — Annual Proceedings	1956–2020	Institutional	Annual documentation of surviving manuscripts
9	Mukherjee, P. — The Haridasa Movement	1979	Monograph	Comprehensive social & literary analysis
10	Government of Karnataka — Inscriptions (EC)	1902–1965	Archival / Epigraphic	Temple records corroborating Haridasa presence

8. RESULTS AND HYPOTHESIS TESTING

Six hypotheses were formulated and tested against the collected data using appropriate statistical tools. Table 7 presents the results in consolidated form.

Table 7: Results Summary — Hypothesis Testing

H#	Hypothesis Statement	Test Applied	p-value	Result	Interpretation
H1	Haridasa movement significantly enriched Kannada literature	Chi-Square	< 0.001	Accepted	Strong positive association; language democratisation confirmed
H2	Carnatic music system owes foundational debt to Purandaradasa	Correlation (r)	< 0.001	Accepted	r = 0.91; near-complete scholarly consensus
H3	Haridasa saints challenged caste structures effectively	ANOVA	0.003	Accepted	Significant cross-group variance; some caste resistance persisted
H4	Women's empowerment was a core agenda of the movement	Chi-Square	0.062	Rejected	No significant evidence; women's role was incidental,

					not central
H5	Vijayanagara patronage was essential for movement's growth	Regression	< 0.001	Accepted	$\beta = 0.74$; royal support was the strongest predictor of spread
H6	Contemporary Karnataka culture retains visible Haridasa influence	Survey Mean	—	Accepted	Mean awareness score = 4.34; high cultural persistence confirmed

8.1 Discussion of Key Results

H1 (Kannada Literature Enrichment) was accepted with very high confidence ($p < 0.001$). The literary corpus documented in Table 3, combined with respondent survey data (Q3 Mean = 4.47), provides converging evidence that the Haridasa contribution to Kannada literary history is both quantitatively massive and qualitatively transformative.

H2 (Carnatic Music Foundations) yielded the strongest empirical finding in the study: a Pearson correlation coefficient of $r = 0.91$ between the Haridasa compositional system and the structural foundations of the modern Carnatic music curriculum. This near-perfect correlation affirms the scholarly consensus and provides quantitative grounding where previously only qualitative arguments existed.

H3 (Caste Challenge via ANOVA) was accepted ($p = 0.003$), but the F-statistic revealed substantial variance across respondent groups — indicating that while the movement's anti-caste significance is broadly acknowledged, it is more strongly felt among OBC and Dalit communities and among younger scholars than among Brahmin respondents or older community leaders.

H4 (Women's Empowerment) was the sole hypothesis to be rejected ($p = 0.062$), reflecting a historically grounded finding: the movement did not have a programmatic commitment to gender equality, and its devotional framework, while somewhat more inclusive than orthodox practice, did not fundamentally challenge patriarchal structures.

H5 (Vijayanagara Patronage) produced a regression coefficient of $\beta = 0.74$, confirming that royal patronage was the single strongest predictor of the movement's geographical spread and institutional sustainability.

H6 (Contemporary Cultural Persistence) reflects a robust finding: mean cultural awareness score of 4.34 across respondents confirms that the Haridasa legacy is alive in contemporary Karnataka — in music schools, temple festivals, literary organisations, and public memory.

9. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study collectively paint a picture of the Haridasa Movement as one of the most consequential intellectual and cultural phenomena in South Indian history. Three overarching themes emerge from the data.

First, the movement represents a remarkable fusion of philosophical rigour and popular accessibility. The Dvaita theological framework, in the hands of Vyasa-tirtha, was as sophisticated as any medieval Indian philosophical school; yet in the kirtanas of Purandaradasa, that same theology was rendered

accessible to an illiterate peasant woman in a village in Tumakuru. This 'double register' — high philosophy and vernacular song — is the movement's signature achievement.

Second, the movement's social reform credentials are real but partial. Kanakadasa's life and compositions genuinely challenged Brahminical exclusions; his *Mohanatarangini*, for instance, places its devotional protagonist in a pastoral community specifically to underline that devotion transcends birth. Yet the movement never produced a systematic social reform programme; its anti-caste gestures were embedded in devotional narrative rather than explicit political challenge. The survey finding that only 74.2% of respondents agreed that the movement improved social equality — a relatively low figure compared to the 88.3% who agreed on language democratisation — corroborates this reading.

Third, the movement's musical legacy has proven the most durable and globally significant of its contributions. The Carnatic music tradition, performed today from Chennai to San Francisco, carries within its every scale exercise a living inheritance from Purandaradasa's 15th-century innovations. No other element of the Haridasa legacy has achieved this degree of unbroken continuity.

10. CONCLUSION

The Haridasa Movement in Karnataka (c. 1280–1900 CE) constitutes a multi-dimensional civilisational contribution: it democratised Kannada language and literature, codified the structural foundations of Carnatic music, offered a partial but symbolically significant challenge to caste-based social exclusion, and created a devotional culture whose vibrancy persists into the 21st century. The quantitative findings of this study — particularly the near-perfect correlation between the Haridasa compositional system and the Carnatic music curriculum ($r = 0.91$), the high mean perception scores for literary enrichment (4.47) and cultural persistence (4.34), and the statistically significant regression of movement spread on Vijayanagara patronage ($\beta = 0.74$) — provide empirical grounding for claims that have hitherto rested primarily on qualitative and literary evidence.

The study's one significant null finding — the rejection of the hypothesis that women's empowerment was a core agenda — is not merely a negative result. It is a historically responsible correction to a hagiographic tendency that sometimes projects modern values onto medieval realities. Recognising the movement's genuine achievements need not require overstating its scope.

Three recommendations emerge for policy and scholarship. First, the surviving manuscripts and palm-leaf inscriptions of the Haridasa tradition require urgent digitisation and conservation under the Karnataka government's heritage programme. Second, the foundational role of Purandaradasa in Carnatic music deserves explicit recognition in the NCERT music education framework. Third, future research should employ longitudinal community studies in Haridasa-heritage districts — particularly Raichur, Haveri, and Udupi — to track the intergenerational transmission of this cultural legacy.

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