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Reading Hindu Devotional Poetry through Maternal Theory: Maternal Thinking and Maternal Figures in Sūrdās' *Bhakti* Poetry

INTRODUCTION

In *Maternal Thinking: Towards a Politics of Peace,* initially published in 1989, Sara Ruddick outlines three demands of maternal thinking and their corresponding maternal practices. These demands have generally been understood to be universal, even though their specific contents and implementation are culturally variable. In this chapter, I ask which elements of maternal thinking are present in the Hindu devotional poetry attributed to Sūrdās, a prominent literary and religious figure of early-modern northern India. I read a selection of his poetry through the lenses of motherhood studies, with the intent to shift the focus from the Kṛṣṇa, the god as a baby and a child, to the maternal and feminine figures that surround him. My analysis primarily addresses historians of religions and motherhood scholars interested in the complex intersection of religion, motherhood, and mothering, but specialists of South Asia may also find it valuable. My main purpose is to show the relevance of some of the key tenets of maternal theory for the study of literary representations of motherhood that do not stem from the same cultural context as those in which theories about maternal thinking first emerged.

Ruddick explains that maternal thinking is rooted in and shaped by the activities in which mothers engage. She identifies three demands of maternal thinking, defined as "those requirements that are imposed on anyone doing maternal work" (*Maternal Thinking* 17). Ruddick adds:

> In this sense of demand, children "demand" that their lives [p. 164] be preserved and their growth fostered. In addition, the primary social groups with which a mother is identified, whether by force, kinship, or choice, demand that she raise her children in a manner acceptable to them. These three demands—for preservation, growth, and social acceptability—constitute maternal work; to be a mother is to be committed to meeting these demands by works of preservative love, nurturance, and training. (17)

This constitutes "maternal practice." In her more recent "Conversation about Maternal Thinking" with Andrea O'Reilly, Ruddick further specifies: "[s]ome practices are recognizable in some but not all or even most cultures.... Some practices are virtually ubiquitous; there is something suspicious about their apparent absence. Mothering is such a practice" (O'Reilly and Ruddick 17). Ruddick is aware that "this demand to foster children's growth appears to be historically and culturally specific to a degree that the demand for preservation is not" (19). When analyzing literary material from a religious context that is distant both in time and in space from Ruddick's feminist philosophy, it is important to acknowledge that the third demand, that of shaping social acceptability, is even more culturally determined than the other two. What is socially acceptable varies across and even within cultures, and if all mothers are expected to teach their children social acceptability, they obviously do so differently.[1]

Many South Asian works of art and literature represent motherhood as an institution as well as mothering as a woman's experience. This distinction between motherhood and mothering, initially made by Adrienne Rich in *Of Woman Born* (13) and another key component of maternal theory, also applies here. Even if "gender" has become a widely used critical category of analysis for studying South Asian material from anthropological, sociological, historical, and literary perspectives, there still is little scholarship that attempts a systematic reading of literary material on South Asian mothers.[2] It is beyond the scope of this chapter to determine to what extent the literary descriptions of mothers who are mythological figures (but not necessarily mother goddesses) in Hindu devotional poetry correspond to, stem from, or give shape to social realities in their [p. 165] contexts of production, transmission and performance. Rather, my purpose is to show how reading devotional poetry, such as that attributed to Sūrdās on the theme of Kṛṣṇa growing up, through the lenses of maternal theory can highlight the relevance of Ruddick's distinction between the demands of maternal thinking and their corresponding maternal work. I start with a brief contextualization of the poetry of Sūrdās and the mythology of Kṛṣṇa.

1. Sūrdās and his Poetry

1.1 Building Up on the Mythology of Kṛṣṇa

One of the most famous and prolific poets of his time, Sūrdās composed in *brajbhāṣā* (the language of Braj), a common vernacular language of the area of northern India in which he lived. Braj is also the mythological site where most of the religious themes that he sings about are located. Scholars lack certified sources to retrace an exact biography of Sūrdās. As John Stratton Hawley writes, "all we can know is that this great poet lived somewhere in north India in the course of the sixteenth century" (*Sur's Ocean* xii). Tradition retains that he was blind,[3] and the authorship of many poems attributed to Sūrdās is questionable (*Sur's Ocean* xiii-xv).[4] What is important to consider is that at least some part of his poetry may be the product of collective and mostly oral authorship. Sūrdās probably did not "write" all of his poems, but these were circulated, collected, and transcribed during his lifetime and long after his death, until they were compiled into manuscripts of various lengths. The devotional and mostly oral poetry of that time in vernacular languages was widely accessible, even to women and uneducated people (as opposed to Sanskrit texts of the literate religious male elite, to use broad categories). In the nineteenth century, one manuscript of the *Ocean of Sūr* (*Sūrsāgar*) contained almost ten thousand poems (*Sur's Ocean* xii). Most editions,

however, feature only several hundreds of poems. Kenneth E. Bryant and John Stratton Hawley's newest edition and translation, which I quote in this chapter,[5] consists of 433 poems.

Sūrdās adds colourful and sensual details to the already rich mythological layout present in earlier Vaiṣṇava Sanskrit texts, such as the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* or the *Harivaṃśa*. Generally keeping [p. 166] with the original mythological narrative, he expands on details and elaborates on descriptions that are less developed in earlier texts while also drawing from oral, iconic, and popular traditions. Feminine and, at times, maternal figures that surround the god Kṛṣṇa during his infancy and childhood are well represented in Sūrdās' poetry. The selected poems quoted in the following section feature Devakī, who gives birth to Kṛṣṇa in her jail cell, and Yaśodā, his foster mother and wife of Nanda, the chief of a village in the Gokul rural area. There, Yaśodā and Nanda raise the child-god as their son. Another figure of interest is Pūtanā, a female demon who, under the guise of a beautiful wet-nurse, attempts to kill the infant by suckling him at her poisonous breast. Some poems focus on the relationship that Kṛṣṇa shares with one or several of these distinctive figures, whereas other compositions feature women and men in groups such as the *gopīs*, cowherd girls or milkmaids, who are the wives and daughters of the Braj villagers (*gopās*) among whom Kṛṣṇa grows up. When he comes of age, Kṛṣṇa departs to Mathura to fulfill his destiny by killing the king who usurped the throne and by reestablishing *dharma*, the right order. That he does not immediately return to Gokul causes sorrow to the *gopīs* and the villagers. Other texts, in particular the *Mahābhārata*, feature a grown-up Kṛṣṇa, who becomes a charioteer for his cousin Arjuna during a war and, eventually, a king.

Although the mythology of Kṛṣṇa is much broader, my focus here is on poems that relate to his birth, infancy, and childhood, or memories thereof. Yaśodā and Nanda often are labelled the "foster parents" of Kṛṣṇa, but it would be inaccurate to say that they "adopted" him as in the legal or administrative contemporary definition. In fact, Kṛṣṇa was born to Devakī and Vasudeva in the city of Mathura, which is ruled by the evil king Kaṃsa, Devakī's brother, who has usurped the throne. According to a prophecy, Devakī's eighth child will kill the usurper. Kaṃsa attempts to eliminate his sister on the day that she marries, but Devakī's husband, Vasudeva, convinces him otherwise. Kaṃsa then keeps his sister and her husband in jail. He kills the first six children born to them. The fetus of Devakī's seventh child is exchanged *in utero* and is born directly in Gokul as Kṛṣṇa's elder brother, Balarāma. Later, Kṛṣṇa is born as their eighth child. Through a [p. 167] series of miraculous interventions, his father Vasudeva brings him to safety at Yaśodā and Nanda's house in Gokul. The girl child whom Yaśodā has just given birth to is exchanged with Kṛṣṇa and brought back to Mathura. As Kaṃsa kills her human baby form, she reveals herself as a goddess and reiterates the prophecy. Although Kṛṣṇa's birth parents are aware that their child is safe in Gokul, it seems that Yaśodā, and perhaps Nanda as well is not fully aware of all the intricacies of the situation. There are different versions of the myth, but all show that a divine power of illusion (*yogamāyā*) is at work in many episodes preceding and following the birth of Kṛṣṇa.

1.2 Love and Devotion on the Parental Mode (*Vātsalya Bhāva*)

Sūrdās' poetry participates in a movement known as *bhakti*, a term frequently translated as "devotion," which comprises varied traditions. In *bhakti*, the devotee (*bhakta*) engages in a "loving participation in divine life" (another translation for *bhakti* suggested by Carl-

A. Keller) through imagining and reliving the scenes of Kṛṣṇa's life. In the context of *bhakti*, an "emotional-devotional-relational mode" to relate to the divine is known as *bhāva.* There are several prominent *bhāvas* that consist in relating to God as a servant, as a friend, as a parent (*vātsalya bhāva*), or as a lover, the latter being the most significant in most devotional traditions and poetry. In some instances, *bhakti* operates a "gendering" of the *bhakta* by positioning the devotee, whether a man or a woman, as feminine in relation to God who, in the form of Kṛṣṇa, is masculine. This is an unsurprisingly heteronormative relational model. All these *bhāva*s are present in Sūrdās' poetry, and he is not the only one to celebrate *vātsalya bhāva*.

When relating to God through the *vātsalya bhāva* or parental mode, devotees do not become God's beloved child (as with "God the Father" in Christianity); rather, they become the loving and affectionate parent of an "adorable, beautiful babe" (Kinsley 18). Kṛṣṇa as a child prompts an "intimate, parental response" (18). As David Kinsley puts it, "God, revealing himself as an infant, invites man to dispense with formality and undue respect and come to him openly, delighting in him intimately" (18). In his poetry, Sūrdās insists on such intimacy and expresses a [p. 168] full range of emotions felt by mothers towards their children, including love, concern, anxiety, awe, sorrow, guilt, irritation, and wrath. Because these maternal (and sometimes paternal) emotions have great spiritual potentials, they are turned into a model of devotion that women and men still emulate today.[6] In the following discussion, however, rather than address actual or contemporary practices of *bhakti*, I examine a selection of poems attributed to Sūrdās that reflect *vātsalya bhāva* as a significant or even dominant mode.

2. Ruddick's Three Demands of Maternal Thinking and Practices of Maternal Work in Sūrdās's Poetry

I now set out to identify the three demands of maternal thinking and how maternal practice is shaped in poems by Sūrdās that reiterate and reinterpret mythological narratives. For the first demand, protection, I contrast mother Yaśodā with Pūtanā, a negative feminine figure who imitates a maternal position through breastfeeding. I then compare Yaśodā with Devakī, Kṛṣṇa's birth-giver, as I consider the maternal practice of nurturance and contrast the positions of the two women who can claim to be the god's mother. Finally, in order to discuss the shaping of social acceptability, I examine the theme of the confrontation of other *gopīs* with Yaśodā, a mother who faces criticism because of her son's pranks.

2.1 Protection and Preservative Love: Yaśodā and Pūtanā

Providing "protection" through "preservative love" is the first of the maternal practices that constitute "maternal thinking" (Ruddick 65-81). This demand for protection poses a challenge in the case of mothering a child-god. Pūtanā is the first of a series of demons sent to Gokul by king Kaṃsa to kill newborn Kṛṣṇa. Through her powers, Pūtanā takes the guise of a beautiful wet-nurse. As there are many and occasionally contradictory versions of the myth, some more precise than others, it is difficult to determine if the episode of Pūtanā's fatal breastfeeding happens in the presence of Yaśodā and other women in her household or if Pūtanā approaches the child while he is momentarily left alone. The fake wet-nurse starts suckling the newborn at her poisonous [p. 169] breast in order to kill him, but Kṛṣṇa is

immune to any harm. In fact, the divine child goes on suckling "the life breath from [Pūtanā] by clinging, clinging to her breast" (Sūrdās, *Sur's Ocean* 35, line 3, transl. Hawley; see note 5). As she dies, she reveals her real horrendous appearance to the inhabitants of Braj. As is the case for other demons or enemies defeated by Kṛṣṇa, an intimate contact with him—be it through a poisoned nipple— also brings salvation: the female demon, and any danger, is eliminated, but Pūtanā also is granted his grace.

In the following poem, past, present, and future intersect in just a few lines. Sūrdās captures a recollection of the Pūtanā episode in which Yaśodā could be seen, at first view, as unable to provide protection: her now grown-up son is facing a risky situation, just as he had as a baby. A *gopī* friend tries to reassure a worried Yaśodā that Kṛṣṇa will be safe even as he has headed to confront and kill Kaṃsa:

> In Kānh I have full faith.
> Listen, Yaśodā, don't worry yourself
> at the fear of what Kaṃsa might do:
> long ago, cunning Pūtanā arrived
> with poison spread across her breasts,
> and that two-day-old child had strength enough
> to kill her before your very eyes (179, lines 1-4)

This and other episodes featuring Kṛṣṇa as a baby or a child portray a mother who is worried but prevented from exercising one of her maternal practices: actively protecting her child from harm. This is the case, for instance, when Kṛṣṇa dances on the snake Kaliyā to subdue him. To ensure that the life of her child is preserved, Yaśodā engages in religious practice, more precisely prayer. This religious strategy can be seen as part of her "preservative love" (Ruddick 17). Furthermore, she is shown as willing to take upon herself any harm, as expressed in the following poem, which starts with her teaching Kṛṣṇa how to walk:

> Mother Yaśodā is teaching him to walk.
> He wobbles a little, so she gives him her hand;
> he sways and puts his foot back on the ground. [p. 170]
> Sometimes she sharply summons Balarām:
> "Play here in the courtyard, you two!"
> Sometimes she prays to the household gods:
> "Let little Kāhn, my son, live long!"
> Sometimes she stands there just staring at his face,
> so that any harm to her heart's beguiler
> would rest on her instead.
> The Lord of Sūrdās is the giver or all happiness,
> and King Nanda reaps the utmost joy. (9)

For the readers or listeners of Sūrdās, a theological irony lies in this poem: Yaśodā prays to other gods to protect her son when, in fact, he himself is not only *a* god but also the supreme divinity. As part of his playful divine game (*līlā*), he takes the guise of a fragile infant so that his mother (and the devotees who will imitate her attitude) can express love for him through their wish to protect him, even if this is impossible. Far from needing maternal protection, Kṛṣṇa will later reveal himself as a divine protector for the people of Braj (for instance, when he swallows up a forest fire and when he protects the people of Braj from

the pouring rain by lifting up Mount Govardhan) and, later, for the devotees and the poets themselves.

2.2 Fostering Growth and Nurturance: Yaśodā and Devakī

The importance of the second demand of maternal thinking (fostering growth) and of its corresponding practice (nurturance) can be identified in the devotional poetry of Sūrdās even more poignantly than in the original Sanskrit mythology. Sūrdās gives voice to two mothers: the birth-giver, Devakī and the nurturer, Yaśodā. On the one hand, Yaśodā is unable to provide protection to her child who does not need it anyway because he is God. On the other hand, Devakī is deprived of the opportunity to provide nurturance. She does, however, provide protection by sending her son away to Gokul.

Devakī's feelings as a mother who is deprived of her newborn son are expressed in the following excerpt of this poem that Bryant and Hawley chose to place first in their edition of the *Sūrsāgār*. Here is how Sūrdās phrases Devakī's lament: [p. 171]

> … this dark night–
> soldiers have closed the streets, dear, shut the doors,
> and the fear of Kaṃsa is heavy everywhere.
> …
> "Husband, why did I heed your words that day?
> Better I'd been slaughtered there and then,
> for look at this child, and tell me how a mother
> could live if torn from such a son."
> Devakī's wail was heard by the One
> who pities the poor and removes his servant's pain.
> The chains were loosed, says Sūr, the gates undone.
> He gave her his wisdom and banished her distress. (1, lines 1-2 and 5-8)

Devakī states that it would have been better for her to be killed by Kaṃsa on her wedding day rather than be forced to experience separation from this very special newborn son. The painful feeling of separation (*viraha*) is an important theme in *bhakti* poetry (Hardy), but most of the time, this *viraha* is experienced by the beloved *gopī* waiting for her lover Kṛṣṇa (and the *bhakta* amorously longing for God). In this and other poems, the separation between mother and son (and, sometimes, father and son, as in poem 187) is as intense and painful as that between lovers.

Other poems reflect the attachment felt by the two mothers of Kṛṣṇa, the potential tensions or rivalry between them, as well as their difference in status (queen versus wife of the village's chief), in location (city versus rural area), and in lifestyles (taste for elaborate delights versus simple pleasures). In the following poem, Yaśodā addresses Devakī after Kṛṣṇa, now a young man, has left Gokul, killed Kaṃsa, and freed his birth parents but has not returned from Mathura:

> You are the wife of Vasudeva, a queen,
> and I'm just a boor from Braj [*gavāri brajbāsī*],
> but it's time to send me my darling boy
> and put this joke to an end.
> It was fine for him to kill Kaṃsa and the rest,
> doing the work of all the gods, [p. 172]

but the worry that weights so heavy on my heart is:
who's to herd these cows?
You can ply him with thousands of royal delights—
handsome clothes and the finest food and drink—
but there's nothing better than a bowl of butter, says Sūr,
to delight my little cowherd Kānh. (191, lines 3-8)

In another poem, Sūrdās puts the following plea, also addressed to Devakī, in Yaśodā's mouth:

How might I see your son [*tumhāre sut*]
just one more time?
You are the mother [*jananī*] who showed the world
this sun, says Sūr; I was only a sort of nurse [*dhāī*],
but because of that tie, perhaps he could come
just a day or two and let me see
his face. (190, lines 6-8)

Two maternal functions are outlined in these (and other) poems: giving birth to children and nurturing them, in particular through breastfeeding, which Devakī could not do. This distinction is also made in Devakī's voice in other poems, where her tears become another symbolic bodily fluid: the milk that her offspring, killed at birth, was denied. The poet positions Yaśodā as the mother who has raised Kṛṣṇa and knows his regular occupation (tending the cows) and his favourite food (butter). Now that the "little cowherd" has come of age and has left, Yaśodā and Devakī's positions are reversed: Yaśodā suffers from separation, whereas Devakī is finally reunited—though not for very long— with the son whom she had to give up at birth for his safety.

2.3 Social Acceptability and Training: Yaśodā and the Other Women of Braj

Training is the practice that corresponds to the third demand on mothers, consisting of shaping social acceptability in the child (Ruddick 103-123). Some of the tensions involved in this demand are reflected in Sūrdās' poetry. In the following poem, an adult *gopī* confronts Yaśodā and complains about the recurring pranks [p. 173] that Kṛṣṇa commits in her household. She urges the boy's mother to reprimand her son and take action so as to prevent further mischiefs:

Why don't you reprimand that boy?
What can I say? Every day it happens.
I haven't the strength to endure:
he swallows the butter, spills milk on the floor,
smears his body with curd,
then chases after any children in the house,
spraying them with butter-whey.
If ever I hide a thing, even in places
far off and secret, he knows where.
What do to? Defeated, undone,
I'm driven to despair by your son.
His thefts are so clever –that wish-fulfilling jewel!–
that their tale cannot be told,

And so, to get a hold on him, says Sūr,
all of Braj is flowing, dashing here and there. (23)

The *gopī* reproaches Yaśodā for her lack of reaction and authority over her misbehaving son. Some occasional pranks may be tolerated from a mischievous boy, but this persistent behaviour drives the woman to despair. Here again lies some theological irony: is Kṛṣṇa ever *really* a child? How could mother Yaśodā have authority over God himself?

Through the lenses of maternal theory, it is tempting to read this as a literary representation of a (mythological) mother who fails at training her child to behave properly. However, at least to the devotee, the most evident interpretation is that of a spiritual metaphor: the *bhakta* relates to a divinity who is omniscient, even as a naughty little boy. The prankster child finds the dairy products even when the *gopī* (or, in other poems, his own mother) "hide[s] a thing, even in places far off and secret" (23, line 5). The retelling of his deeds by a *gopī* to mother Yaśodā is a way to further proclaim and celebrate them, to "tell the tale" again, including to the audience of the poems. This reminds devotees that, just as pots cannot be hidden in the *gopī*'s house, nothing can be [p. 174] hidden from God, not even secrets in one's heart. Commenting on another poet who composed on similar mythological motives, A. Withney Sanford observes that "Krishna's boyhood games and pranks intensify the passion Yaśodā and the other *gopīs* feel toward him" and that the god's interventions are meant to "enhanc[e] the devotees' *bhāva*" (69).

Other possible readings of these poems through the lenses of maternal theory are not meant to invalidate or undermine the *bhakta*'s perspective. Nevertheless, a critical reading uncovers that some of the issues at stake in this poetry may not be just spiritual, but have material consequences for mothers. In poem 23, quoted above, Kṛṣṇa disrupts domestic labour and the product of the cowherd economy goes to waste (spilled milk, butter and curd used up by Kṛṣṇa). The poetry of Sūrdās grants its listeners access to an imaginary social universe. In such an idyllic pastoral community, it would be common to have children come and go between households during the day and not be constantly under their parents' surveillance. If the *gopīs* complain to Yaśodā, then the issue must be quite serious, and they cannot solve it by disciplining the child themselves. Furthermore, the direct consequences of his actions are to be remediated by the *gopī* herself, in addition to her other usual duties. The task of cleaning up and giving the other "children in the house" a bath and clean clothes will fall onto her and not onto the male *gopā* who is busy with other tasks (traditional gendered division of labour as reflected in this poetry).

The *gopīs* sometimes also come to Yaśodā as a group, as victims of Kṛṣṇa's pranks. As the boy's mother, Yaśodā is urged to intervene and keep her son in check. The intended audience of this devotional poetry is aware that these pranks are manifestations of the child-god's divine character and that "the waywardness of childhood becomes an effective image for the divinity in one of its aspects.… In the story of Kṛṣṇa, childhood is associated with the sport or *līlā* of the transcendent form of the deity" (White 162). However, the audience may still be sensible to some of the specific economic issues in these idealized rural settings. This sort of disruptive interaction with the god can still be considered as positive when read on the spiritual (and not materialist) level: as [p. 175] in the case of Pūtanā's death through sucking out her life breath (see above), *any* contact with the god is to be regarded as desirable, even if this means suffering some inconvenience from his joyful pranks.

At first, mother Yaśodā simply does not believe the other *gopīs*: "But they: whatever has possessed these herder girls to come around pretending, complaining each dawn? How can they insist on blaming him … when he never even touches his butter here at home?" (26, lines 5-6). She "sees their complaints solely as a pretext to see Krishna" (Sanford 70). However, when Kṛṣṇa disrupts her own domestic chores, the mother's reaction is far from mild and cheerful. In an episode narrated in detail in the ninth chapter of the tenth book of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, Kṛṣṇa disturbs Yaśodā while she is busy churning butter. Her "two quivering breasts lactated due to affection for her son" (*Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 10,9,3) who demands to be breastfed. Yaśodā agrees, but she abruptly has to interrupt their breastfeeding, as she notices that some milk on the fire is about to boil over. She exits the room, leaving Kṛṣṇa unsatisfied and angry. The child then breaks the churning pot with a stone. Afterwards, he hides to eat the freshly churned butter that he has stolen. When his mother returns and notices what he has done, she sets out to find Kṛṣṇa, who is now distributing butter to a monkey. A stick in her hand, Yaśodā runs "after him, whom the minds of yogis, directed by the power of austerity, are not able to reach" (*Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 10,9,9; translations from Bryant's *Krishna* 124). The readers of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* and the audience of its poetic reprises appreciate the irony in her attempt to chase God with a stick. Finally, Yaśodā grasps her son and starts chastising him, but Kṛṣṇa begins to cry. The mother throws away the stick and, instead, attempts to bind Kṛṣṇa to a mortar as punishment. The rope is always too short by two fingers, even as Yaśodā joins one rope after another. In the end, out of pity for his mother, the child-god lets himself be tied to the mortar.

On the basis of this episode, Sūrdās imagines how other *gopīs* who witness Yaśodā's wrath plead with her to not discipline Kṛṣṇa too harshly, whereas they previously demanded that he be punished for similar pranks in their own houses: [p. 176]

> The eyes of the lad have filled, filled with tears.
> Look at your little boy's face, Yaśodā—
> Why are you so senselessly enraged?
> Loose from his belly that painful rope!
> Release from your hand that cruel stick!
> And tell me how you can feel such black emotions
> toward the one who is your very own son.
> The tears in his face and the little drops of butter
> on his breast bring joy to the eyes
> as if the moon had brought forth pearls of nectar
> to complement a necklace of stars.
> Sacrifice yourself in every way, every day,
> for that son, the Dark One of Sūr.
> Who knows whose merit has caused him to appear
> here in Braj and here in Nanda's house! (27)

In other poems on the same theme, the *gopīs* ask Yaśodā "how could such a little bit of curd … provoke in you such wrath?" and, though they see the rationale behind the reprimand, they wonder "how much cow's wealth could [Yaśodā] possibly have lost to justify berating him so" (28, lines 2 and 7). They berate Yaśodā for her extreme feelings of anger: "How could you have become so angry with Kāhn that you took a stick in that harsh hand of yours

and let it touch his soft, tender frame?" (31, line 1). The *gopīs* are sensitive to the "tears [that] drip down from his eyes and glisten as they settle on his breast" (31, line 2).

Reading the poetry of Sūrdās reminds motherhood studies scholars that what is considered a socially acceptable mode of disciplining a child is culturally variable. Although some twenty-first century readers may be tempted to hastily label Yaśodā as harsh or even a "bad mother" for using a stick and a rope to tie her misbehaving child, we ought to remember that such reactions might not have been so unusual among the original intended listeners of Sūrdās'poetry, though not necessarily the educative norm. Even though they disagree with Yaśodā, the mythological *gopīs* are not surprised that she has grabbed a stick, as a form of threat, but that she intends (or even has started) to use it on her son. Would the *gopīs* have pleaded for a child other than the delightful Kṛṣṇa?

[p. 177]

CONCLUDING REMARKS

When using maternal theory to read past or contemporary sources from South Asia—or, in fact, from anywhere else—motherhood studies scholars ought to carefully contextualize these literary productions, their intended audience, and their primary purpose. Kṛṣṇa growing up and not Yaśodā's mothering is the central focus of poems on *vātsalya bhāva* by Sūrdās. However, motherhood studies scholars can still identify in this poetry the three demands of maternal thinking and their corresponding practices as defined by Sara Ruddick. The primary purpose of this poetry, not composed by a mother but attributed to a male saint poet, is to draw the *bhakta* closer to God and to celebrate Kṛṣṇa's feats. The range of emotions that are expressed, nevertheless, tell listeners or readers a lot about Yaśodā's feelings—not towards a god or God but towards the child that she regards as her very own son. Sūrdās' poetry very well captures ambivalent maternal feelings, such as irritation and pity, and it shows how a mother is supposed to train her child towards the goal of social acceptability. His behaviour should not disrupt her own household tasks or her relationship with other women of the community. Are these emotions predominantly religious or maternal? *Vātsalya bhāva* blends them together and validates maternal feelings as appropriate for a *bhakti* path. Even irritation and anger felt by a mother—or other women dealing with the naughty child—are channels for *bhakti* in the *vātsalya bhāva* "emotional-relational-devotional" mode.

Addressing one example does not prove Ruddick's claim that maternal thinking and its demands are universal. However, this analysis of a selection of poems shows that diverse expressions of mothering are reflected in Hindu devotional poetry of early-modern India. As the other chapters in this volume illustrate, investigations on mothering (and not motherhood or mother goddesses)[7] and religion are still largely focused on English-speaking and Euro-American Christian contexts of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. With this chapter, I hope to have shown how looking at South Asian literary materials can help validate the relevance of maternal theory. In addition, looking at mothers, mothering, and motherhood in non-Christian and non-Western [p. 178] contexts can uncover maternal figures that are not always portrayed as perfect, resilient, and cheerful mothers but that can still be looked at as models for devotional practices. Some feelings or positions experienced in mothering, such as irritation towards the child or strong sadness in separation, are frequently categorized as ambivalent, negative, or excessive. Outside of the religious and

cultural frameworks that influenced the contexts in which most maternal theorists live and write, we might find that such maternal emotions can also be channelled positively as part of coherent religious systems, as is the case for the maternal feelings of Yaśodā and Devakī in the devotional poetry attributed to Sūrdās.

NOTES

1 For examples in a contemporary context, see Andrea O'Reilly's edited reader *Mothers, Mothering and Motherhood Across Cultural Differences*.

2 See Sangha 413-427 for a few examples of literary analysis included in her review of the state of research, focusing on contemporary South Asian motherhood. Recent references include volumes by Sangha and Gonsalves, by Krishnaraj, and by Kumar Pramanick and Manna.

3 See Hawley, Vaudeville, and Rousseva-Sokolova for more details and discussions of the tensions between hagiography, biography, and history.

4 Hawley and Bryant's works on Sūrdās provide a wealth of philological information.

5 I always give the number of the poem (and not the page) in Bryant and Hawley's edition and translation, which I quote from in this chapter. For consistency's sake, I have modified back to their Sanskrit form the transliteration of names (e.g., Yaśodā instead of Yashoda).

6 Haberman provides a concrete fieldwork example of a woman engaged in tending the image of Kṛṣṇa and relating to him as a child (136).

7 Mother goddesses are a classical topic of investigation for scholars of religions. Although there is an increase in the number of historical studies on motherhood and religion as institutions, the [p. 179] study of mothering as experience often remains difficult due to a lack of available sources (such as first-hand accounts by women who focused their writing on the maternal component of their multiple identities). For more on the intersection between the academic study of religion and motherhood, see Pasche Guignard.

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