

Verses from the mind of 18<sup>th</sup> century India  
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What was the intellectual climate of 18<sup>th</sup> century India? We have heard the account of Europeans such as William Jones, but until very recently little from the Indians themselves. Sheldon Pollock and the project “Sanskrit Knowledge Systems on the Eve of Colonialism” have revitalised interest in 16<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> century Indian thought. Kaviraj has proposed a ‘renaissance’ of Indian thought during this period, well before colonialism, which was lost in the tide of colonialism.

It has been my good fortune to be presented with a previously untranslated Sanskrit text, Bodhasāra, written in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century by Narahari, which gives some first-hand insights into India at this time. Bodhasāra is particularly interesting because it is possibly one of the last Sanskrit texts written before the advent of British rule. Its scope is vast - including many topics such as Dharma, various types of Yoga, Advaita Vedānta, Tantra, Sāṃkhya, the daily rituals and study of the sages, to list only a few, and for each of these Narahari, the author, gives a clear insight into what he sees as their true essence. He invites connection with a realm beyond the physical world that is not separate from the physical world. He describes a fabric of knowing beyond vision and beyond hearing. Narahari uses his knowledge of *rasa* and Indian poetics to skillfully make his work a potent ‘elixir’ or medicine to be tasted and imbibed by the reader.

For Narahari the whole world is divine. He finds complete refreshment in the river Yamunā and in a stone cow made of crystalised moonstone. He recognises that he doesn’t have to look in a special place for spiritual nourishment. Narahari presents his culture as something relevant in the present, rather than something to be unconditionally preserved. He advocates a spontaneous stepping out into the play of life that includes both the transcendent and the manifest. For him intent is vital – more important than merely following rules. It is as though he feels the wise no longer understand their practices. His work is an elixir to be drunk by the sages to release them from the self-imposed bondage of their tradition.

In the time available this paper will give a brief overview of Bodhasāra in order to present Narahari’s thinking as well as the audience he was addressing. Several Sanskrit verses will be examined in detail to showcase his style.