

Hardened Inner Feelings: Kanakadasa's Phenomenology of Mind

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Abstract

This paper undertakes a literary–psychological analysis of the keertanas of Kanakadasa, a prominent saint-poet of the Haridasa tradition, with special attention to how his hymns explore the nature of happiness, motivation, self-discipline, and liberation. Reading his compositions as narrative case studies of the human mind, the paper examines how Kanakadasa depicts the movement from basic, sensory needs toward higher, spiritual aspirations, and how he dramatizes the struggle between worldly attachment and inner freedom. The study brings Kanakadasa into conversation with key concepts from modern psychology—such as ego defense mechanisms, self-respect, self-discipline, and Maslow's hierarchy of needs—showing striking convergences between his idea of moving from “food and clothing” to “liberation and bliss” and Maslow's model of progression from physiological needs to self-actualization. At the same time, the paper emphasizes that Kanakadasa's framework culminates not merely in self-actualization but in self-transcendence and liberation (moksha), reorienting the ultimate goal of human life from temporary satisfaction to eternal happiness. By closely reading themes of confession, self-critique, emotional regulation, and surrender in his keertanas, the paper argues that Kanakadasa offers an indigenous model of psychological growth grounded in devotion, which remains relevant to contemporary discussions in positive psychology and mental health.

Keywords

Kanakadasa; Haridasa tradition; devotional literature; positive psychology; Maslow's hierarchy of needs; ego defense mechanisms; self-discipline; self-respect; liberation; Indian bhakti poetry

1. Introduction

Kanakadasa (c. 1509–1609) occupies a distinctive place in the bhakti canon of Karnataka, not only as a poet-saint but also as a subtle analyst of human motivations, anxieties, and aspirations. Writing in a vernacular idiom accessible to ordinary people, he translated complex spiritual and ethical ideas into vivid metaphors, narratives, and confessional lyrics. While his devotional identity is well recognized, the psychological depth of his work has received relatively less systematic attention, especially in literary studies that bridge textual analysis with concepts from modern psychology. The attached paper “Kanakadasa: In the Light of Psychology” has already opened a productive line of inquiry by foregrounding psychological themes in his hymns; the present study takes that cue and develops it into a more comprehensive research paper in literary criticism.

Central to Kanakadasa’s thought is the conviction that merely living is not enough; one must live a life that is truly “worthwhile,” and this worth is ultimately measured in terms of inner happiness and liberation rather than external success. Happiness, for Kanakadasa, is fundamentally a mental state: external possessions such as money, spacious houses, and family can provide comfort but not lasting fulfillment. The human mind, he suggests, is always restless, “yearning to find something more fulfilling,” and this restlessness propels the search for inner wealth as opposed to mere material gain. In this sense, Kanakadasa prefigures the concerns of positive psychology, which shifts focus from pathology to well-being, meaning, and human flourishing.

This paper situates Kanakadasa’s keertanas as a literary corpus that encodes a theory of mind and a pathway of psychological growth framed in devotional terms. It asks: How does Kanakadasa conceptualize the reasons for turning to devotion? In what ways does he portray internal conflict, ego defenses, and self-discipline? How does his depiction of basic needs and higher aspirations compare to Maslow’s hierarchy of needs? And finally, how does his notion of liberation reorient the discussion beyond the limits of secular psychological models?

Methodologically, the paper employs close reading of thematic clusters within his hymns—particularly those dealing with the futility of worldly pleasures, the confession of inner flaws, and the aspiration for liberation—and brings these readings into critical dialogue with selected psychological concepts. The goal is neither to impose Western psychological categories onto a premodern saint, nor to claim that Kanakadasa “anticipated” modern psychology in a simplistic way, but to illuminate how his poetic exploration of inner life resonates with and can enrich contemporary psychological discourse.

2. The Purpose of Life and the Nature of Happiness

2.1. Worldly Happiness and Its Limits

Kanakadasa begins from an existential insight: it is not enough merely “to live”; human life must acquire meaning and depth by becoming “worthwhile.” For him, the central purpose of life is happiness, yet he insists that most people misunderstand this happiness by equating it with external comforts such as wealth, family, and social status. While acknowledging that money can be a source of external happiness, he insists that “this alone does not give happiness,” because the mind remains unsatisfied and continues to yearn for something more enduring.

In literary terms, this theme is often dramatized through contrasts: between the comfortable householder immersed in sensory pleasures and the seeker who begins to perceive their transience; between the apparent fullness of possessions and the inner emptiness of the mind. Such juxtapositions align with modern observations that material prosperity does not guarantee subjective well-being, a tension that positive psychology explores under the rubric of hedonic adaptation and the limits of material satisfaction. Kanakadasa’s critique, however, is not merely sociological; it is deeply spiritual, arguing that without inner wealth, external prosperity remains hollow.

2.2. Inner Wealth, Inner Happiness, and Self-Realization

Kanakadasa distinguishes between outer and inner wealth, insisting that “inner wealth, inner happiness, is as important as external happiness.” This inner wealth is not a metaphor for hidden material resources but refers to qualities such as devotion, detachment, self-knowledge, and the experience of divine presence. Only when this inner happiness is cultivated, he suggests, does “the true meaning of life become clear,” a statement that frames spiritual realization as the key to existential clarity and psychological integration.

Viewed through the lens of positive psychology, Kanakadasa’s emphasis on inner happiness parallels the move from purely hedonic conceptions of happiness (pleasure, comfort) to eudaimonic conceptions (meaning, self-realization, virtue). His keertanas can be read as narratives of individuals transitioning from hedonic pursuits to eudaimonic fulfillment, where the self is reoriented toward a higher, enduring source of joy—identified as devotion to Hari and the pursuit of liberation. In this sense, his poetry offers a vernacular phenomenology of well-being that transcends simple pleasure and pain calculus.

3. Motives for Devotion: Deprivation, Detachment, and Transcendence

3.1. Two Pathways to Devotion

The attached paper identifies two primary reasons for becoming a devotee in Kanakadasa's framework: first, the experience of abundance accompanied by the realization of its impermanence; and second, the experience of deprivation that exposes the fragility of worldly happiness. In the first case, an individual who enjoys a "spacious house, children, family, abundant wealth, grains, etc." and lacks nothing eventually comes to see this condition as temporary and turns toward eternal happiness, renouncing worldly wealth and pleasures. In the second case, poverty prevents full enjoyment of worldly happiness, and the realization of its fragility leads to a different kind of detachment, where the individual ceases to chase what cannot be securely possessed.

Literarily, these two pathways allow Kanakadasa to speak to both the privileged and the marginalized: the former are urged to see beyond their comfort, the latter are consoled and elevated by the idea that their deprivation can be transmuted into spiritual strength. Psychologically, both pathways converge on a revaluation of worldly goods and a reorientation of desire toward something more stable and meaningful.

3.2. Ego Defense and the "Sour Grapes" Motif

Within the second pathway—devotion arising from deprivation—Kanakadasa (as read in the attached article) distinguishes two subtypes. In the first, a person excluded from worldly pleasures due to poverty outwardly rejects them, declaring they are unnecessary, while inwardly still longing for them. This attitude is compared to the fox in the famous fable who calls the unattainable grapes "sour." Here the person employs what modern psychology calls an ego defense mechanism—specifically, rationalization or "logical solace," providing acceptable reasons in place of the real, painful reason.

By narrating and critiquing this stance, Kanakadasa displays a keen awareness of how the human mind protects self-respect by distorting its own motives. His insight anticipates psychoanalytic understandings of defense mechanisms, yet he embeds it in a moral-spiritual context: such rationalization, although understandable, prevents genuine transformation because the underlying desire and attachment remain unaddressed. Only when the individual moves beyond this defensive stance to a true realization of impermanence can authentic detachment and devotion arise.

3.3. Genuine Detachment and Positive Psychology

The second subtype within deprivation-based devotion involves "realizing the impermanence of worldly pleasures and deciding to give them up." Here the person does not merely console themselves with "sour grapes" rhetoric but arrives at a clear, reflective judgment about the limits of sensory satisfaction and consciously chooses a different path. The attached paper

rightly connects this to the concerns of positive psychology, seeing in this move an attempt “to understand ourselves for self-satisfaction through the manifestation of devotion.”

Kanakadasa portrays this process as one where the mind gains happiness through singing hymns, which in turn fosters self-respect grounded in self-discipline. Unlike self-esteem based on external validation or comparison, this self-respect is earned through inner work: making a decision in the mind (“I should be like this”) and aligning thoughts and practices with that decision. Such a view resonates with contemporary theories that link well-being to self-concordant goals and values-based action, where individuals experience deeper satisfaction when their behavior coheres with their chosen ideals.

4. Devotion as Psychological Journey: From External to Internal

4.1.Devotion as Inner Pilgrimage

For Kanakadasa, devotion (bhakti) is not merely ritual or emotional expression; it is “a journey from the external to the internal.” The ultimate goal of this journey is liberation (moksha), but reaching this goal requires moving beyond material desires and confronting “hardened inner feelings.” Crucially, this does not mean abandoning family or social responsibilities; rather, it entails going “beyond the illusion that samsara or family is everything, not renouncing samsara.”

This nuanced view counters the simplistic dichotomy between worldly life and spiritual life by emphasizing an inner detachment rather than external withdrawal. In psychological terms, this can be interpreted as a shift from identity built entirely around social roles and external markers to a deeper, more autonomous sense of self anchored in spiritual awareness. The journey of devotion thus doubles as a journey of psychological individuation and integration, where the self learns to relate to the world without being dominated by it.

4.2.The Function of Keertana

Keertana, literally “praise,” is a key vehicle for this inner transformation. Kanakadasa and the attached paper highlight two primary functions of keertana: first, it serves as “a method of lightening the mind in solitude”; second, it is an act of praising the desired deity with the aspiration to draw closer to God. Both functions have clear psychological dimensions. As a practice of catharsis, keertana allows the devotee to articulate fears, longings, guilt, and hope in a structured, aesthetically shaped form, thereby reducing inner tension. As an act of praise and longing, it focuses attention and emotion toward a transcendent ideal, reorganizing the motivational structure of the self.

When examining the keertanas, several recurring features emerge: (1) belittling or re-evaluating the life lived so far; (2) the restless mind seeking its rightful place and eventually turning toward devotion; (3) an ongoing dialogue between the devotee and the Lord centered on liberation; and (4) unreserved confession of inner states. Together, these elements create a narrative arc of self-critique, searching, commitment, and surrender, which closely mirrors therapeutic processes of insight, reorientation, and behavioral change.

5. Confession, Self-Examination, and Ego-Transcendence

5.1. Clarity of Feeling and Mental Fulfillment

One of the most psychologically sophisticated aspects of Kanakadasa's hymns is the use of confession and self-examination. By openly articulating his doubts, fears, failures, and desires before the divine, the devotee achieves "clarity of feeling" and "free fulfillment of mental activity." This process resembles modern therapeutic techniques that emphasize emotional awareness, naming feelings, and narrative reconstruction of experience. In Kanakadasa's framework, however, confession is not merely self-expression; it is oriented toward transformation through divine grace and self-discipline.

The hymns composed for "the achievement of devotion through self-examination for the confession of devotion" can be seen as models of ego or self-denial. They depict an attempt to improve and elevate oneself before attempting to reform the world, suggesting that genuine social or moral action must be preceded by inner victory over one's own weaknesses. This inward struggle is described as "fighting with one's inner self and winning" before seeking to "save the world," a sequence that aligns with psychological insights about the importance of self-regulation and inner coherence for effective external engagement.

5.2. Emotional Structures and Stages of Spiritual Maturity

Kanakadasa's keertanas exhibit a wide range of emotional "structures": prayer, wish, concern, disappointment, determination, dedication, and ultimately surrender. These emotions appear in different intensities and configurations at various stages of the devotee's spiritual journey, allowing readers to trace a developmental trajectory from initial fear-based supplication to mature, love-based surrender. The attached paper observes that by tracking these emotional shifts, "the various stages of their evolutionary journey can be identified," culminating in the "final perfection of devotion, unique surrender, and realizations."

From a psychological perspective, this can be understood as a movement from external locus of control and conditional self-worth to internalized values and stable identity grounded in a sense of relationship with the divine. As devotion "gradually expands" and becomes

“perfect,” the self’s dependence on fluctuating external conditions diminishes, and its emotional life acquires greater resilience, coherence, and depth.

6. Basic Needs, Maslow’s Hierarchy, and Kanakadasa’s Critique

6.1. “For Stomach and Clothes”: Basic Needs and Their Limits

A striking point of contact between Kanakadasa and modern psychology arises in his observation that “everyone does for their stomach, for their clothes,” which he presents as a basic truth about the world. This line, as the attached paper notes, is “close to the basic needs” described by Abraham Maslow in his hierarchy of needs, particularly physiological and safety needs such as hunger, thirst, and shelter. Kanakadasa expresses sorrow that many people remain content with merely fulfilling these basic roles, never aspiring to higher ideals. Maslow similarly notes that most human beings are occupied with satisfying fundamental needs and do not make sustained efforts to rise above them, typically turning to higher ideals only when their basic needs are adequately met. Both thinkers thus diagnose a kind of motivational stagnation at the level of survival and comfort, although they write from very different cultural and conceptual backgrounds.

6.2. From Basic Needs to Liberation and Self-Realization

At the end of the hymn in question, Kanakadasa contrasts this basic, survival-oriented existence with “the highest place,” where the meditation of Kesava is performed “for liberation and bliss.” Here he proposes a radical reorientation: the human goal should be not merely to live for “food and clothing” but to strive for liberation and the happiness of self-bliss. In Maslovian terms, this corresponds to transcending the lower four levels of the hierarchy (physiological, safety, love/belonging, esteem) and moving toward self-realization or self-actualization.

However, Kanakadasa goes beyond Maslow’s secular notion of self-actualization by explicitly framing the goal as liberation from samsara and union with the divine. He suggests that one must attempt to renounce the desire for temporary happiness and instead seek eternal happiness, a move that he interprets as a shift from ego-centered realization to self-transcendent realization. His hymn thus serves as an “indication of the bases that are and should be,” mapping a transition from living purely for basic survival to living for liberation and bliss.

6.3. Beyond the Dependencies of Reality: Standing Above the Senses

Kanakadasa insists that to attain liberation, one must “stand beyond the dependencies of reality,” which include hunger, thirst, sorrow, and attachments. These dependencies are tied

to the senses and to the basic necessities that Maslow describes. In Kanakadasa's imagery, the senses are often represented as a "castle" that can imprison the mind if left unguarded. His hymns about the "castle of the senses" highlight the difficulties of standing beyond inner lures, thereby illuminating the psychological struggle involved in transcending basic drives. In almost all lines of his hymns, one can see an attempt to turn the mind inward even as it is distracted by external things. Initially, these attempts may fail, but Kanakadasa insists that "with effort, it is possible," emphasizing the role of sustained practice and self-discipline in reshaping the mind's habits. This resonates with contemporary understandings of neuroplasticity and habit formation, though Kanakadasa couches it in devotional rather than neuroscientific terms.

7. Self-Discipline, Self-Respect, and Mental Training

7.1. Self-Discipline as Mental Decision

In Kanakadasa's model, self-discipline is entirely rooted in the mind. It begins with a clear decision—"I should be like this"—through which the person sets an internal standard and commits to practices aligned with that standard. Thoughts then begin to form "in accordance with it," indicating a feedback loop between decision, cognition, and behavior. Devotion thus becomes a disciplined practice through which one "comes to the decision to live and change one's life through devotion."

Psychologically, this can be interpreted as an early articulation of self-regulation and intentionality: by choosing a guiding value (devotion to Hari, pursuit of liberation), the individual organizes their mental and behavioral life around that value. This anticipates modern models of self-determination theory, where autonomy, competence, and relatedness contribute to well-being, but here autonomy is expressed as voluntary surrender to a higher ideal.

7.2. Self-Respect Through Inner Work

Kanakadasa explicitly links devotion and self-discipline to the birth of self-respect. Unlike self-respect derived from social recognition or dominance, this self-respect emerges from the inner effort to align one's life with spiritual insight. The mind gains happiness by singing hymns, and this experiential joy reinforces the disciplined path, creating a virtuous cycle of practice and reward. The devotee's self-respect is not pride in achievements but confidence in having chosen a meaningful direction and persevered in it.

In modern terms, this can be seen as an integration of self-esteem and humility: the self recognizes its limitations and flaws through confession and critique, yet finds dignity in its

sincere striving and in the grace it receives. Such a balanced self-view is associated with psychological resilience and lower vulnerability to shame-based distress.

8. Literary Strategies and Psychological Insight

8.1. Narrative Voice and Dialogic Structure

A notable literary feature of Kanakadasa's keertanas is their dialogic structure: the devotee often addresses the Lord directly, poses questions, and receives or anticipates answers. This internal dialogue can be read as an externalization of inner conflict, where different parts of the self—fearful, hopeful, resigned, determined—find voice in conversation with an idealized Other. The use of second-person address to the divine personalizes the abstract struggle, making psychological processes vivid and emotionally compelling.

At the same time, the belittling of the life lived so far, recurring in several hymns, functions as a narrative device to mark the turning point in the protagonist's journey: the moment when old patterns are recognized as futile and new commitments are undertaken. This structure parallels conversion narratives and recovery stories in modern psychology and literature, where self-reassessment leads to a re-authored life story.

8.2. Metaphor, Image, and Cognitive Reframing

Kanakadasa's metaphors—such as the castle of the senses, the sour grapes, and the movement from food and clothing to liberation and bliss—serve as tools for cognitive reframing. They invite listeners to reinterpret their everyday concerns from a higher vantage point, seeing the same realities as unstable, fragile, or secondary in light of spiritual goals. This reframing is central to cognitive-behavioral approaches in psychology, which seek to alter maladaptive thoughts by providing new interpretive lenses. Kanakadasa's metaphors similarly shift the frame from “this is all there is” to “this is only the first stage.”

Through such images, Kanakadasa not only conveys doctrinal content but also performs psychological work on the audience, loosening attachments and strengthening motivations for inner change. The poetic form thus becomes both aesthetic and therapeutic, merging literary artistry with psychological pedagogy.

9. Conclusion

This paper has argued that Kanakadasa's keertanas can be fruitfully read as literary texts that contain a sophisticated, indigenous psychology of human motivation, emotion, and transformation. Beginning from the insight that a merely lived life is insufficient without inner worth, Kanakadasa explores the nature of happiness, distinguishing between external

comforts and inner wealth, and urging a movement from temporary pleasures to eternal bliss. His analyses of why individuals turn to devotion—whether from abundance or deprivation—reveal a nuanced understanding of ego defense, rationalization, and genuine detachment, often illustrated through vivid narrative and metaphor.

By placing Kanakadasa in dialogue with modern psychological concepts, particularly positive psychology and Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, the study has shown points of convergence and divergence. Like Maslow, Kanakadasa recognizes that many people remain fixated on basic needs related to food, clothing, and sensory security, and that higher aspirations often arise only when these are reassessed. Yet he ultimately goes beyond self-actualization to propose liberation and union with the divine as the true culmination of human development, thereby integrating psychological well-being within a broader spiritual teleology.

Throughout his hymns, Kanakadasa employs confession, self-examination, emotional articulation, and dialogic address to the divine as means of achieving clarity of feeling and mental fulfillment. These practices model a path of inner discipline where self-respect is grounded not in external validation but in the sincere effort to align life with spiritual insight. His literary strategies—metaphor, narrative reversal, and dialogic questioning—function as cognitive and emotional tools that help listeners reframe their relationship with worldly pleasures and reorient their desires toward liberation.

For contemporary literary studies and psychology alike, Kanakadasa’s work offers a valuable resource for understanding how devotional literature can serve as a laboratory of the mind, articulating and transforming human experience in ways that complement, and sometimes challenge, modern theories. Future research could expand this inquiry by comparing Kanakadasa with other bhakti poets, engaging more deeply with clinical and empirical aspects of positive psychology, and exploring how these indigenous models might inform culturally sensitive approaches to mental health and well-being.

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