The Literary—and Vaishnava?—Excellence of Surdas

A striking feature of the reception of the great Brajbhasha poet Surdas was the effort in the course of the eighteenth century to reformat his oeuvre in such a way that it followed the pattern of the Bhāgavata Purāṇa. Why do this? To make him appear more archetypally Vaishnava or a better representative of that which is literarily “fine”—and of course Sanskrit? Or both? Moving beyond my essay “Did Surdas Perform the Bhāgavata-purāṇa?” (2015), I will consider examples of Sur’s literary craftsmanship in several characteristic genres (bhramargīt, nindāstuti, stotra, rāmāyaṇa, nakh-śikh) and ask what makes them “fine.” How important is it to have Sanskrit aesthetic theory in the back of one’s mind—or the example of “classic” Vaishnava texts? Could these be distractions?