



KRISHNA: THE BEAUTIFUL LEGEND OF GOD

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Krishna: The Beautiful Legend of God

Śrīmad Bhāgavata Purāṇa, Book X

*With Chapters 1, 6 and 29–31
from Book XI*

Translated with an Introduction and Notes by
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2

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To my daughter Mohinī

Contents

[Acknowledgements](#)

[Introduction](#)

[Note on Translation and Method](#)

[Krishna: The Beautiful](#)

[Legend of God](#)

[ŚRĪMAD BHĀGAVATA PURĀNA](#)

[BOOK X](#)

[PART ONE](#)

[PART TWO](#)

[BOOK XI, Chapters 1, 6 and 29–31](#)

[Notes](#)

[Glossary of Sanskrit Terms and Names](#)

[Pronunciation Guide](#)

[List of Primary Sources Mentioned in the Text](#)

[Bibliography](#)

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THE BHĀGAVATA AS TEXT

Kṛṣṇa (usually anglicized as Krishna) is perhaps best known in the west as the speaker of the Bhagavad Gītā, the Song of God, which is a text located within the narrative of the Mahābhārata Epic. Considered by Hindus to be the incarnation of God, Kṛṣṇa inaugurated the present *yuga*, or world age, by his departure from this world shortly after the great Mahābhārata war. Although Kṛṣṇa's role in the Epic as statesman and friend of the five Pāṇḍavas is pivotal, he is not the protagonist of the story – the Epic gives little information pertaining to other aspects of his life. It is the tenth book of the Śrīmad Bhāgavata Purāṇa, 'The Beautiful Legend of God', generally referred to as the 'Bhāgavata Purāṇa' (or just the 'Bhāgavata'), that has been the principal textual source dedicated to the actual narrative of his incarnation and activities, at least over the last 1,000 years or so.¹ Moreover, it is not Kṛṣṇa's statesmanship in the Mahābhārata that has produced the best loved stories about this deity, nor is it his influential teaching in the Bhagavad Gītā: it is his *līlās* – play, pastimes or frolics – during his infancy, childhood and adolescence in the forests of Vṛndāvana, popularly known as Vraj, among the men and women cowherds, that have been particularly relished by Hindus throughout the Indian subcontinent over the centuries.

In Vraj, Kṛṣṇa sported with his friends, played pranks on his neighbours, and dallied amorously with the young cowherd girls. This very personal depiction of God is the primary subject matter of the tenth book of the Bhāgavata Purāṇa. The stories of Kṛṣṇa in Vraj have been, and, arguably, remain one of the two most influential textual sources of religious narrative in the Hindu religious landscape along with the stories of Rāma from the Epic Rāmāyaṇa, if we are to judge on the basis of the themes that have surfaced in Hindu drama, poetry, dance, painting, song, literature, sculpture, iconography and temple worship over the last millennium and more. The popularity of the Kṛṣṇa of Vraj has certainly eclipsed the popularity of the Kṛṣṇa of the massive 100,000-verse Mahābhārata Epic despite its Bhagavad Gītā. Hawley (1979: 202–3), for example, found that of 800 panels depicting Kṛṣṇa to have survived from the period prior to 1500 CE, only three refer with any clarity to the Bhagavad Gītā:

We are given to understand that for two millennia the *Gītā* has been India's most influential scripture, yet... it is remarkable how indifferent sculptors were to this part of Krishna's adult life... instead sculptors focus on the events of his youth. The Krishna we see is the cowherd boy who was so fond of butter as a child, [and who] became such an attractive lover as a youth. This sculpture may at least in some respects be a more accurate index of what people's religious

commitments were all along.

T. A. Gopinath Rao (1986) has listed the nine major iconographical forms under which Kṛṣṇa has been worshipped in India, and seven of these relate to his childhood pastimes in Vraj; the remaining two are Kṛṣṇa and his consort Rukmiṇī, the goddess of fortune, and Kṛṣṇa as Pārthasārathi, the charioteer of Arjuna. This latter image is the only representation of Kṛṣṇa in the role of teacher and speaker of the Bhagavad Gītā (Kṛṣṇa had agreed to drive Arjuna's chariot and delivered the Bhagavad Gītā to him on the Mahābhārata battlefield immediately prior to the war). Thus, it is the Kṛṣṇa of Vraj that has most particularly influenced the devotional life of India, and it is the story of the Kṛṣṇa that is the subject of the tenth book of the Bhāgavata Purāṇa.

The Historical Context of the Bhāgavata

The Bhāgavata Purāṇa forms part of a corpus of texts known as the Purāṇas. The word *Purāṇa*, in Sanskrit, signifies 'that which took place previously', namely ancient lore or legend. Several Purāṇas list the total number of Purāṇas as eighteen, one of which is the Bhāgavata. As we have them today, these Purāṇas are a vast repository of stories about kings and royal dynasties; the gods and their devotees; sectarian theologies; traditional cosmologies; popular religious beliefs concerning pilgrimages, holy places and religious rites; *yogic* practices; information of social and cultural relevance such as caste duties; and even prophetic statements about the future – almost everything that has come to be associated with 'modern Hinduism' has its roots in the Purāṇas. The eighteen Purāṇas are said to contain 400,000 verses,³ and are the largest body of writing in Sanskrit.

The three chief gods in the Purāṇas are Brahmā, the secondary creator;⁴ Śiva, the destroyer; and Viṣṇu, the maintainer. A number of stories speak of the competition between these three for ultimate supremacy. Brahmā, being himself a mortal created being (albeit with an immense life-span), is never in fact, a serious contender, and the main rivalry in the Purāṇas is played out between the two transcendent Lords Viṣṇu and Śiva; a late Purāṇa, the Devī Bhāgavata Purāṇa, marks the ascendance into the Purāṇic genre of Devī, the Goddess, as the supreme matrix.⁵ Such usually playful rivalry notwithstanding, the Purāṇas, taken in total, indicate that it is Viṣṇu who as a rule is pre-eminent, especially in the earlier texts.⁶

Despite what sometimes appears to be the partisan nature of the texts associated with one or the other of these two supreme beings (see chapters 63, 66, 88 and 89 in this text for examples), both camps accept and indeed extol the transcendent and absolute nature of the other, and of the Goddess Devī too, merely affirming that the other deity is to be considered a derivative or secondary manifestation of their respective deity, or, in the case of Devī, the *śakti*, or power, of the main divinity. The term 'monotheism', if applied to the Purāṇic tradition, needs to be understood in the context of a supreme being, whether understood as Viṣṇu, Śiva or Devī, who can manifest himself as other supreme beings (albeit all of them secondary to the original Godhead).⁷ The metaphysics of the Bhāgavata will be discussed further below.

Although Viṣṇu is a purely transcendent deity (unlike Śiva, who is more terrestrial in the Purāṇas and typically associated with the Himālayas or the city of Vārāṇasī),⁸ he is generally said to have ten principal earthly incarnations,⁹ which appear according to time and place, some of them in animal form. The commonly accepted list¹⁰ of these incarnations in the Purāṇas is: Matsya, the fish; Kūrmā, the tortoise; Varāha, the boar; Narasimha, the man-lion; Vāmana, the dwarf; Paraśurāma, the warrior; Rāma, the prince; Kṛṣṇa, the cowherd boy; Buddha, the founder of Buddhism; and Kalki, the future warrior incarnation who will ride a white horse and terminate the present world age of the *kaliyuga*. The stories of these different incarnations are related in detail in the various Purāṇas. The Bhāgavata Purāṇa occupies itself almost exclusively with Viṣṇu and his incarnations, and most particularly the incarnation of Kṛṣṇa.

The Bhāgavata Purāṇa consists of twelve *skandhas* (cantos, subdivisions or books), of which the tenth book disproportionately comprises about one quarter of the entire text. It is this tenth book that has caused the Purāṇa to be recognized as the most famous work of Purāṇa literature, as evidenced by the overwhelming preponderance of traditional commentaries on the text. Whereas most of the Purāṇas have produced no traditional commentaries at all, and others only one or two, the Bhāgavata has inspired eighty-one commentaries currently available, in Sanskrit alone, as well as others no longer extant.¹¹ It has been translated into almost all the languages of India, with forty or more translations on record in Bengal alone. It was the first Purāṇa to have been translated into a European language: three different French translations were completed between 1840¹² and 1857, and these were followed in 1867 by a translation of the *pañcādhyāya*, the five chapters of the tenth book dedicated to Kṛṣṇa's amorous pastimes with the *gopīs* (cowherd women), again in French.

Curiously, although a number of English translations by Indian scholars have surfaced from local publishing houses in the subcontinent over the last century, no western scholar has until now undertaken an English translation (with the exception of the disciples of Bhaktivedānta Swami, who completed the latter's in-house translation after his demise), despite the immense importance of the text. This is mainly because the Victorian sensibilities of certain nineteenth-century western (and westernized Indian) critics were offended by the amorous liaisons of Kṛṣṇa in the Bhāgavata, causing the Kṛṣṇa of this text to be passed over in most intellectual circles in favour of the more righteous Kṛṣṇa of the Gītā – a text which has seen hundreds of non-Indian translations. This neglect continues to the present day.

As an unambiguously Vaiṣṇavite text (that is, adhering to Viṣṇu as supreme), the first nine books of the Bhāgavata discuss in greater or lesser detail all the major incarnations prior to Kṛṣṇa. The tenth book, which comprises about 4,000 out of a total of a claimed 18,000 verses of the entire Purāṇa,¹³ is dedicated exclusively to Kṛṣṇa and, indeed, it is Kṛṣṇa, under his title of *Bhagavān* who gives his name to the whole Purāṇa.¹⁴ While the Bhāgavata Purāṇa, then, is a Vaiṣṇavite text in general, it is a Kṛṣṇa-centred text in particular, as the disproportionate size of the tenth book indicates. Indeed, as will be discussed further on pp. xix–xxii, the Kṛṣṇaite theologies that emerged in the sixteenth century, initiated by influential teachers such as Vallabha and Caitanya, suggest that it is not Kṛṣṇa who is an incarnation of Viṣṇu, but Viṣṇu who is a partial incarnation of Kṛṣṇa. The sects extol Kṛṣṇa as the supreme absolute truth from whom all other deities, including Viṣṇu, evolved, the Bhāgavata Purāṇa being presented as the scriptural authority in this regard.

It is an inconclusive task to try to assign specific dates to the Purāṇas, as shown by the considerable variation in the dates proposed by scholars for the Bhāgavata itself. Not the least of the problems is that the Purāṇas are a fluid body of literature that continued to be transformed through the centuries by the process of transmission and adaptation. These texts are composed for public oral recitation, often in specific ritualistic contexts, and their reciters openly modified them in accordance with time

and place as well as for sectarian considerations. Any datable piece of information that may be gleaned from the texts may only reflect the historical period in which that section of the text was inserted and may not reflect the date of other sections in the text.

The oldest preserved literatures in India are the four Vedas, which primarily contain hymns recited in the ritualistic context of the ancient Vedic sacrificial cult of the Indo-Aryans. Unlike the Purāṇas, the contents of these texts were fixed at a very early stage by various mnemonic devices such that the different recensions of the Ṛgveda have been transmitted identically across the millennia, despite differences of geographical place. Considered *śruti*, ‘that which is heard’, or divine revelation not of human authorship, these texts could never be tampered with, particularly since their efficacy as sacred text depended upon the precise preservation and pronunciation of each phoneme. In contrast to these, there are much more flexible expectations associated with the Purāṇas, which are *smṛti*, ‘that which is remembered’, or indirect revelation, divine in origin, but composed through human agency. While nonetheless sacred and authoritative, the Purāṇas transmit information for the general public and their adjustments according to the day and age are not viewed askance – indeed, such fluidity is inherent in the claim made by most Purāṇas of presenting the ‘essence’ of the Veda according to time and place. On the one hand they recognize the need to preserve and transmit faithfully the ancient sacred material intact, and, on the other, they claim to explain, expand upon and even supersede the contents of previous scriptures, by revealing secret truths not contained either in the Vedas or in other Purāṇas. They are thus on-going revelation. In the Bhāgavata (I.5.1ff.), Vyāsa, the traditional author of the text, remained unfulfilled even after compiling all the Vedas as well as the Mahābhārata Epic, until the sage Nārada informed him that the cause of his despondency was that he had not yet described the highest goal of knowledge. The result was the Bhāgavata, the *galitam phalam*, the ripened fruit of the Vedic tree (I.1.3), the essence of all the Vedas, Purāṇas and Itihāsa Epics (I.2.3; I.3.42).

A number of Purāṇas, then, claim to be equal or superior to the Vedas, and thus the Purāṇas are often called the fifth Veda. In Purāṇic narrative, the hymns of the Vedas, along with the Purāṇic stories, were transmitted orally through the first three of the four *yugas*, or world ages – the *satyāyuga*, *trētā* and *dvāpara yugas* – and then, with a view to preserving the material from the ravages of time, heralded by the beginning of the present fourth world age of *kaliyuga*,¹⁵ the great sage Vyāsa (‘the divider’) divided the single Veda into four, and then compiled a Purāṇa Samhitā, or ur-Purāṇa text, from the tales, lore, anecdotes and songs that had been handed down through the ages. This original Purāṇa text was then further divided by his disciples.

There is little doubt that some of the material in the Purāṇas does indeed go back to the earliest Vedic age. Many of the Vedic hymns assume common knowledge of bygone persons and events to which they briefly allude and which would have been remembered through tradition, and some of these are also mentioned in the Purāṇas.¹⁶ As early as the Atharvaveda of *circa* 1000 BCE, there is reference to ‘the Purāṇa’, and numerous references to it in the later Vedic texts. Thus, while the present Purāṇas contain later material that refers to events in historical time, they also contain ancient narratives and anecdotes from the earliest period of proto-history in Southern Asia. Much of the endless conjecture and difference of opinion among scholars results from assigning old dates to an entire text on the basis of an archaic reference, which might simply be an ancient, well-preserved fragment in a later compilation. Equally problematic is the reverse tendency of assigning a much later date to an entire text on the basis of a more recent datable reference such as a dynasty of the historical period, which might in fact be a much later interpolation in an older text. It is thus futile to speak of absolute dates for any Purāṇa as a whole, since one would have to speak of the age of individual sections within particular Purāṇas. Hence Purāṇic scholars such as Rocher (1986) decline even to attempt to date them. Accordingly, I will simply note here that the majority of scholars hold that the bulk of the material in most of the eighteen Purāṇas as we find them today reached its completion by

the Gupta period about the fourth to the sixth centuries CE, on the grounds that neither the late Vedic dynasties nor later famous rulers such as Harṣa in the seventh century CE are to be found in the king lists contained in the texts.

The date of the Bhāgavata Purāṇa must be charted from within this somewhat nebulous chronological framework. Understandably, there is no consensus regarding the date of the text, that is to say, the final version of the text that has been handed down in its present form. While most specialists of the Purāṇas from India have opted for dates around the Gupta period, the present consensus among most western scholars familiar with the text is that it is the latest of the eighteen Purāṇas written (depending on the scholar) sometime between the ninth and thirteenth centuries CE in the south of the subcontinent. There are a number of significant reasons to question such a time frame as well as place of origin, which cause me to wonder whether the Bhāgavata might not have reached its final form by the Gupta period, along with the other major Purāṇas. I have outlined my concerns elsewhere in detail (Bryant, 2002), and will only reiterate here that whatever date one assigns to the Bhāgavata applies only to the final date of the *entirety* of the text as we now have it, not to the material contained within it, or even to portions of the text itself. As noted previously with regard to the Purāṇic genre, the upper limit date of the text is one issue, the date of the subject matter recorded in it is another; the story of Kṛṣṇa is far older than the flowering of Purāṇic literature in the Gupta period. The following outline of the earliest historical evidence external to the Bhāgavata pertaining to Kṛṣṇa as a divine being will be limited to evidence datable to before the common era (but I will leave aside the Purāṇic genre and the Mahābhārata Epic because of the problems and differences of opinion involved in dating the Kṛṣṇa narrative in these sources).¹⁷

Earliest Historical Evidence of Kṛṣṇa as a Divine Being

There is no obvious reference to Kṛṣṇa in the Ṛgveda, the oldest Indic text, although the name does appear occasionally in the hymns. A few scholars have unconvincingly tried to connect these references with Kṛṣṇa, or with some proto-figure from whom he evolved,¹⁸ but most instances of the word *kṛṣṇa* in the Ṛgveda are simply as the adjective ‘black’, and there is nothing in these occurrences that allows us to connect these references to the Kṛṣṇa of the Purāṇas. The Chāndogya Upanisad, a philosophical text of the later Vedic age of about the sixth century BCE, gives us the first plausible, but still questionable, reference to the Purāṇic Kṛṣṇa (III.17.6). The verse in question has provoked considerable debate as to whether or not it refers to an older portrayal of the Kṛṣṇa, a discussion that ultimately remains inconclusive.¹⁹ In any event, indisputable and numerous references to Kṛṣṇa as a divine being occur in a number of subsequent texts in the fifth and fourth centuries BCE,²⁰ including early Greek sources.

In one such source, Megasthenes, an ambassador of the Seleucid empire (established by one of Alexander’s generals from the remains of the Macedonian empire) to the court of the Indian emperor Chandragupta Maurya at the end of the fourth century BCE, provides interesting evidence from outside India that is relevant to the early history of the divine Kṛṣṇa. Megasthenes wrote a book called *Indika*, the original of which has not been preserved, but which was quoted extensively by other ancient classical Greek writers whose works are extant, such as Arrian, Diodorus and Strabo.

According to these sources, Megasthenes described an Indian tribe called the Souraseni, who worshipped Herakles in particular in their land, which had two great cities, Methora and Kleisobora and a navigable river, the Jobares. It is well known that the Greeks and other ancients correlated foreign gods with their own divinities, and there seems little reasonable doubt (and almost all scholars agree) that the Souraseni refers to the Śūrasenas, a branch of the Yadu dynasty to which Kṛṣṇa belonged; Herakles refers to Kṛṣṇa, or Hari-Kṛṣṇa; Methora to Mathurā, Kṛṣṇa's birthplace; Kleisobora to Kṛṣṇa pura, 'the city of Kṛṣṇa'; and the Jobares to the Yamunā river, where Kṛṣṇa sported. Quintus Curtius also mentions that when Alexander the Great confronted the Indian king Porus, the latter's soldiers were carrying an image of Herakles at their head.

The Greek connection provides further interesting data: the earliest archaeological evidence of Kṛṣṇa as a divine being (under his name of Vāsudeva) is the Heliodorus column in Besnagar, north-central India, dated to c. 100 BCE. The inscription on the column is startling because it reveals that foreigners had been converted to the Bhāgavata religion by this period – Heliodorus was a Greek. This would seem to suggest that the Kṛṣṇa tradition was prominent and prestigious enough to attract a powerful foreign envoy as a convert at the end of the second century BCE. Another interesting feature of the inscription is that it calls Vāsudeva (Kṛṣṇa) the God of gods, suggesting that the cult of Kṛṣṇa's pre-eminence in relation to Viṣṇu, discussed below, might be as old as this column (although this is anyway indicated by the Bhagavad Gītā, commonly dated to around this time, somewhat earlier). Other archaeological evidence of a divine Kṛṣṇa also surfaces in the first century BCE.²²

Vāsudeva Kṛṣṇa, then, can first be documented as a divine being at the tail-end of the Vedic period in the fifth to fourth centuries BCE, and heralds the rise of a new theistic religion based on loving devotion to a personal God. While this is much later than the date that the Mahābhārata and Purāṇa tradition assigns to this divinity at the end of the fourth millennium BCE, one must always bear in mind that the earliest date something appears in written or archaeological sources does not necessarily correspond to the actual date of the thing in question: it simply points to the earliest *provable* date that can be assigned to it. In any event, in one regard at least, traditional and academic discourses overlap – Kṛṣṇa appears at the end of one cultural age, and is pivotal to the inauguration of a new one.

THE THEOLOGY OF THE BHĀGAVATA

The Bhāgavata, like the Bhagavad Gītā before it, unambiguously presents Kṛṣṇa as the supreme being. The term *Bhagavān* is the designation most frequently used in the tenth book of the Bhāgavata to refer to Kṛṣṇa as God,²³ and this is illustrated by the very fact that the Bhāgavata Purāṇa, like the Bhagavad Gītā, uses this term in its very title. *Bhagavān* literally means one possessing *bhaga*, a noun that in the Purāṇic and Epic period combines notions such as prosperity, dignity, distinction, excellence, majesty, power and beauty. The Vaiṣṇava schools differ, however, as to whether Viṣṇu is the ultimate and supreme *Bhagavān*, who periodically incarnates into the world in various forms – one of which is Kṛṣṇa – in order to protect *dharma* (righteousness), or whether Kṛṣṇa is the highest being, and Viṣṇu his incarnation for the purpose of the manifestation and maintenance of the cosmic order. The former position is held by the older Vaiṣṇava sects dominant in the south, which attained prominence under the great

teachers Rāmānuja and Madhva, and the latter position surfaces most conspicuously across the north of the subcontinent in the sixteenth century, spearheaded by charismatic figures such as Caitanya and Vallabha. Both schools ultimately hold both Kṛṣṇa and Viṣṇu to be manifestations of the same real, eternal and transcendent personal being who appears in different forms, so, in terms of who came first, the difference is something of a plan and seed situation.

Kṛṣṇa as the Absolute Godhead

In the Mahābhārata, Harivaṃśa²⁵ and Viṣṇu Purāṇa, there is no doubt that Kṛṣṇa is an incarnation of Viṣṇu.²⁶ The roles, for the most part, have been somewhat reversed in the Bhāgavata: while there are abundant passages in the text that relate to Viṣṇu without explicitly subordinating him to Kṛṣṇa, particularly in the books prior to the tenth, the general thrust of the tenth book prioritizes Kṛṣṇa. In many ways, the very structure of the Purāṇa culminates in the story of Kṛṣṇa's incarnation, with the first nine books forming a prologue to the full glory of *Bhagavān* in the tenth book, which, as was noted, takes up a quarter of the entire twelve books of the Purāṇa.

The books prior to the tenth teach various aspects of *bhakti yoga*, the path of devotion, and are, in fact, mostly associated with Viṣṇu as the goal of devotion. In the first nine books, the reader of the text encounters prominent features of *bhakti yoga*, as well as the most famous Vaiṣṇava role model Prahlāda, the child devotee, who shows that by complete faith and surrender to God, Viṣṇu, one can surpass any and all mortal dangers; Dhruva, another child devotee, who demonstrates that one can attain audience of Viṣṇu by unstoppable determination; Gajendra the elephant, who shows that one can attain, and only attain, Viṣṇu's refuge when one finally fully surrenders to him; Ajāmila, who exhibits the power of Viṣṇu's name by attaining liberation simply by chanting it at the moment of death, although accidentally; and Bali, who illustrates that even demons can become perfect devotees. These and other stories familiarize the devotee with the requirements and expectations of the path, while providing illustrations of successful exemplars. The tenth book reveals the goal – Lord Kṛṣṇa himself – and the text makes it clear that those who associate with Kṛṣṇa in his activities during his incarnation are highly elevated and fortunate souls, who have already performed all the requirements of the devotional path in previous lives (X.3.32–8).

Thus the early books prepare the reader for the Bhāgavata's full revelation of God's personal nature that is disclosed in the tenth book. In this, the Bhāgavata, along with the Gītā, which can also be read as promoting Kṛṣṇa as the supreme being, is one of the two primary sources of scriptural authority relied upon by the Kṛṣṇa sects in their prioritization of Kṛṣṇa over Viṣṇu. Understandably, then, the sixteenth-century Kṛṣṇaite theologian Vallabha felt impelled to add the Bhāgavata Purāṇa as a fourth item to the *praśṭhāna traya*, the three traditional primary scriptures used by Vedāntic sects to establish their authenticity – the Upaniṣads, the Vedānta Sūtras and the Bhagavad Gītā – and this text itself speaks to the necessity of this text to Kṛṣṇa-centred theology.²⁷ While Vallabha himself wrote a commentary on the Vedānta Sūtras (in which he frequently quoted the Bhāgavata), and the Caitanya school eventually produced one under pressure from the other sects, this was primarily in order to gain recognition and acceptance in the intellectual circles of the time. It is the Bhāgavata that really fulfills the theological needs for these schools.

The crucial verse in the Bhāgavata used by the Kṛṣṇa theologians to justify the pre-eminence of Kṛṣṇa over all other manifestations of Godhead is I.3.28. Situated after a number of verses listing previous incarnations, this verse states: ‘These [other incarnations] are *aṃśa*, or *kalā* [partial incarnations], but *kṛṣṇastu bhagavān svayam* [Kṛṣṇa is *Bhagavān*, God, himself].’ This verse becomes something of a *mahāvākya*, a ‘pivotal’, ‘most important’ or ‘representational statement’ for the theology of the Kṛṣṇa sects. The word *aṃśa* is the crucial term here, and appears frequently throughout the text. It is primarily used in connection with Viṣṇu and Kṛṣṇa,²⁸ and means a ‘portion’ or ‘partial incarnation’. In ways that roughly approximate the notion of the Christian trinity, the sense of the term is that the supreme Godhead can maintain his (or her) own presence, while simultaneously manifesting some aspect of himself (or herself) elsewhere in a separate and distinct presence (or a number of presences). That secondary, or derivative manifestation, which exhibits a part but not the full characteristics or potency of the source being, is known as an *aṃśa*. A further term, *kalā*, has similar connotations. Verse 28 identifies all other incarnations as *aṃśas* or *kalās*, but sets Kṛṣṇa apart as *Bhagavān* himself, which is taken by the Kṛṣṇa sects to indicate that he is the original being and source of the other incarnations.

The importance of I.3.28 for Kṛṣṇaism, then, cannot be over-estimated, and it overrides any conflicting statements for the Kṛṣṇa sects.²⁹ The commentators Viśvanātha and Gaṅgāsahāya consider it to be a *paribhāṣā sūtra*, an exploratory assertion that, while only occurring in one verse, illuminates the entire text, like a lamp that illuminates an entire house, although situated in only one place. Irrespective of this verse, there can be no doubt that Kṛṣṇa is privileged in the Bhāgavata. And there is no doubt that he is God: he assumes the forms of Viṣṇu, Śiva and Brahmā for the maintenance, destruction and creation of the universe (I.2.23); a universe which is situated within him (X.14.22), and constituted from him (X.74.21). Indeed, Brahmā and Śiva are his instruments (X.71.8) together with Śrī, the goddess of fortune, they are only a fraction of a fraction of him (X.68.37). Nothing can be named which is not him (X.46.43), he is the soul of everything (X.40.12), the cause of this world – its creation, maintenance and dissolution – as well as the time factor that moves all things (XI.6.15). Eulogies of Kṛṣṇa as the absolute truth spill out of every page of the Bhāgavata. As in the Gītā, the purpose of his descent to earth is to eliminate the demons and protect the righteous (X.70.27). But, in the Bhāgavata (I.8.35; X.33.36), there is another reason why he incarnates in addition to this mission: Kṛṣṇa descends to engage in *līlā*, or devotional pastimes.

Līlā

The tenth book can be divided into two distinct and equal sections: the childhood pastimes of Kṛṣṇa in Vṛndāvana, or Vraj, called Vraj *līlā*, and the post-Vṛndāvana adult activities. The moods of the two sections are quite distinct. Many of the chapters in the second section contain stories of Kṛṣṇa’s battles with numerous demoniac kings, narrations of his heroic martial exploits, descriptions of his winning the hands of his various wives, and accounts of his statesmanship and lavish life in the royal household. This second section is regal, and resonates far more closely with the tone of the Mahābhārata than does the first section. The stories of the first section, in contrast, paint a delightfully different and far more intimate picture of the supreme being, and it is in this section that the term *līlā*, pastime, occurs most frequently. Here we find God stealing

butter from the cowherd women and feeding it to the monkeys, hiding from his mother in fear as she chases him with a stick on account of his mischief, or dallying with the *gopī* cowherd girls in the moonlit forests of Vraj. As has been suggested above, it is the Kṛṣṇa of the first section who has provided the themes that have been the most prominently depicted and represented in the devotional art forms that are so fundamental to Indian culture, not the Kṛṣṇa of the second section, or of the Mahābhārata or Bhagavad Gītā.

The term *līlā* (pastime) first surfaces in literary sources in the Vedānta Sūtra (circa third century CE). In II.1.33 of this work, we find the author raising and addressing an opposing atheistic view that a personal God who is in possession of everything does not create, because people create in order to attain possession of something they do not already have. The author's response to this is that 'just [one finds] in the world, it [creation] is merely *līlā*'. The commentators on this verse compare God to a king who, although completely fulfilled, plays simply as an act of spontaneity, and not out of some hidden need. In explaining this verse, the commentator Baladeva considers God's creation to be an outpouring of joy, as when a man full of cheerfulness, upon awakening, dances without any motive or need, but simply from fullness of spirit. Unlike the term 'sport' or even 'game', then, which might contain a suggestion of drivenness or competition, *līlā* is pure play, or spontaneous pastime.

Thus, although all of God's activities, including creation, are play, the noun *līlā* is especially used in the tenth book of the Bhāgavata when God is enjoying himself as a child in the beautiful and idyllic landscape of Vraj, interacting with his friends and loved ones, free of any sense of mission or purpose. It is rarely used once Kṛṣṇa leaves Vraj and sets out to accomplish his mission and fulfil his promise to Brahmā to kill demons (although sometimes it is used in these contexts in the instrumental case in the sense of 'effortlessly' or 'playfully'), and it is never used in the Bhagavad Gītā. The Gītā gives us Kṛṣṇa as God in the role of teacher imparting spiritual knowledge to humanity, while the Mahābhārata presents Kṛṣṇa as God in the role of diplomat scheming to bring about the destruction of the hosts of unruly armies, which had become a burden on the earth; both depict God with a mission. The Vraj section of Book X presents us with a description of God at play, God with no agenda other than to engage in *līlā* with his most intimate devotees. This observation is further reinforced if we consider the eight or so usages of the word *vihāra*, 'pastime' or 'pleasure', in Book X, all of which occur only in the Vraj section.

This is not to say that demons are not killed by Kṛṣṇa in Vraj in the first part of Book X. But the demons that meet their fate here are intruders into the Kṛṣṇa realm of play – they are not sought after by Kṛṣṇa. With murderous intent they disrupt Kṛṣṇa's carefree frolics in the groves of Vraj and hence are spontaneously killed by the Lord. There are no weapons involved. Moreover, most of the demons that enter Vraj assume the appearance of animals that take enormous forms – Vatsa is a calf, Baka a crane, Agha a serpent, Dhenuka an ass, Kāliya a sea-serpent, and Keśī a horse. Other demons take the form of a witch disguised as a beautiful woman (Pūtānā), of a whirlwind (Trnāvarta), and of a fellow cowherd boy (Pralamba) – all forms that might arise in the imagination of a child. This is in contrast to most of the demons killed later by the adult Kṛṣṇa outside of Vraj, who are king of the battlefield. Moreover, unlike in Vraj, Kṛṣṇa goes out of his way to seek confrontation with these demons on the battlefield in the second section of Book X, and the showers of weapons released in these encounters closely echo the martial exchanges of the Mahābhārata. The hostile intrusions in Vraj, by contrast, become an extension of Kṛṣṇa's play, and the instrumental form *līlayā* is often used to describe the manner in which Kṛṣṇa playfully rescues his friends from the evil intentions of these demons, whom he effortlessly kills.

A number of the usages of the noun *līlā* in the tenth book, inform the reader that the Lord has assumed a body for the sake of *līlā* (X.23.37; X.45.44; X.52.36; X.58.37). There is no other reason for the Lord's activities in the world than his voluntary decision to engage in pastimes. In this he is different from the *jīvas*, the souls in the world who are helplessly injected into bodies as a result of their *karma*, the reactions to actions performed in previous lives,³¹ and who are propelled along by forces beyond their control. This point is continually reinforced throughout the text. At the same time it is also declared repeatedly that the Lord is *āptarāma*, self-satisfied. The Bhāgavata resonates with the discussion of the Vedāntīs in insisting that God is complete and requires nothing. His decision to engage in *līlā*, then, does not point to a lack or need – it is an expression of his blissful nature. This is not to say that God does not enjoy himself – chapter 33, verse 23 tells us that although Kṛṣṇa is *svaratih*, 'one whose pleasure is self-contained', he still takes pleasure from his *līlā*. Moreover, we are informed that his *līlā* gives pleasure to those devoted to him – the residents of Vraj, including the livestock (X.23.36), the cowherd boys who accompany him on his adventures in the forests (X.12.3) and the elderly *gopīs* who enjoy themselves watching and laughing at his childhood *līlā* (X.8.24). Kṛṣṇa's *līlā* enchants the residents of Vraj (X.8.52). *Līlā*, then, is an opportunity for Kṛṣṇa and his devotees to enjoy themselves in the blissful and spontaneous reciprocation of love.

The great fortune of the residents of Vraj who were able to engage so intimately with Kṛṣṇa in his *līlā* is another theme that surfaces prominently throughout the text; to be an intimate associate of God, particularly one with the intensity of love exhibited by the *gopīs*, is the highest possible perfection of human existence in the Bhāgavata (X.47.58). The ecstatic states of love experienced by the dwellers of Vraj are not paralleled anywhere else in the text; the adult post-Vraj relationships of Kṛṣṇa with his other devotees seem quite formal in contrast. Not surprisingly, the opportunity to participate in *līlā* with God, particularly the Vraj *līlā*, is hard-earned: in their previous lives Kṛṣṇa's parents, Deva and Vasudeva, worshipped Kṛṣṇa for 12,000 years in order to obtain him as their son, undertaking intensely austere practices by enduring extremes of temperature and subsisting on only leaves and wind (X.3.32–8). The cowherd boys who had the opportunity to roam about with Kṛṣṇa 'had accumulated an abundance of merit' (X.12.11), and the author of the Bhāgavata cannot even describe the penance that must have previously been performed by the queens of Dvārakā who were able to massage Kṛṣṇa's feet (X.90.27). Consequently, the residents of Vraj are the ultimate role models for the devotional path of *bhakti yoga*: on seeing the intense devotion of Kṛṣṇa's devotees, Uddhava yearns to be a shrub or plant in Vraj, so that he might come in contact with the dust of their feet (X.47.61). Entrance into the *līlā*, then, is the supreme goal of life for the Bhāgavata school, a goal unobtainable to all except God's highest and most intimate devotees. The text repeatedly tells us that he who is beyond the reach of the greatest of *yogīs* (X.9.9) is bound by the love of the residents of Vraj even to the point that, 'like a wooden puppet, he was controlled by them' (X.11.7).

Yogamāyā

A further term essential to a discussion of *līlā* is *yogamāyā*, the power of 'divine illusion'. The unqualified term *māyā*, in the Bhāgavata, is generally used in the same way that it is used in the Gītā (VII.14), and in Hindu thought in general, namely, the illusory power that keeps the *jīva* souls bewildered by the sense objects of this world and ensnared in *saṃsāra*, the cycle of birth and death, by their *karma*, or reactions to their previous actions (X.40.23). As we find extensively in Hindu philosophical discourse, the

bonds of illusion are typically articulated in terms of attachment to one's body, home, wealth, spouse and offspring (X.48.27; X.60.52; X.63.40). *Māyā* is the force that prevents the *jīva* souls from realizing their true nature as *ātmā*, pure eternal consciousness,³² and diverts them into identifying with their external bodily covering as well as with the things of this world as objects of desire (X.14.44; X.51.46; X.70.28). As in the *Gītā* (IX.10), the *Bhāgavata* specifically and repeatedly subordinates this *māyā* to Kṛṣṇa – it is his *Śakti*, power, a force subservient to his will.³³ In consonance with much of the Hindu tradition in general, then, the *Bhāgavata* portrays *māyā* in negative terms as the ultimate source and cause of bondage of the soul, and, consequently, of all the sufferings of the world.

Māyā has another face in the *Bhāgavata*, however. This role of *māyā* is especially represented by the name *yogamāyā*.³⁴ In contrast with the term *māyā*, which is generally used in connection with the *samsāric* world, *yogamāyā* is a term that only occurs in the context of Kṛṣṇa's *līlā*. In her personified form, *yogamāyā* is sent by Viṣṇu at the beginning of Book X to help his *līlā* by taking birth in Vraja as his sister (X.2.7). But more importantly, in another capacity, she covers the pure liberated souls participating in the *līlā* with her power of illusion so that they do not perceive Kṛṣṇa as God, but rather as their friend, lover or child, etc. Were *yogamāyā* not to extend her influence in this way, the souls would realize Kṛṣṇa's true nature and consequently be incapable of interacting with him in *līlā* in these intimate modes. Kṛṣṇa relishes these personal associations far more than the conventional formal worship in awe and reverence that results from the awareness of his position as Lord and creator of everything. It is *yogamāyā* who ensures, with her illusory spell, that the *jīvas* in Kṛṣṇa's *līlā* remain unaware of Kṛṣṇa's real nature (X.11.2ff.; X.16.14; X.20.2; X.42.22; X.61.2).³⁵ Indeed, even Kṛṣṇa himself becomes so involved in his *līlā* that he sometimes seems to prefer to forget his own supremacy (X.12.27–8; X.70.47; X.77.23 and 28).³⁶ To put it differently, how could God truly play spontaneously and unceremoniously with anyone in the role of a son or friend, if everyone knew he was really God?

Unlike that of her *samsāric* counter-role as *māyā*, *yogamāyā*'s power of illusion, then, is a highly desirable and positive one experienced only by the highest *yogīs*. Indeed, the text suggests that Kṛṣṇa's incarnation has, in reality, two motives: one is the 'official' motive expressed in the *Mahābhārata*, the *Gītā* and the opening verses of the first book of the *Bhāgavata*, namely, to protect the righteous and free the earth from the intolerable build-up of demoniac military power. The other is to attract the souls lost in *samsāra* to the beauty of *līlā* with God, and thus entice them to relinquish their attachment to the self-centred indulgences of this world of *samsāra*, which simply perpetuates the cycle of *karma*, and thus of repeated birth and death (XI.1.6–7).

As both personality and power, *yogamāyā* serves Kṛṣṇa during his *līlās* in this world (and, according to the medieval commentators, in the *brahman* world of *Goloka* as well),³⁷ and it is clear that her influence is a positive and highly desirable one. Although even great *rsis* (sages) are anxious to avoid the illusory power of the conventional *samsāric māyā*, the greatest sage of all, Nārada, by contrast, is very eager to experience the power of the divine *yogamāyā* (X.69.19ff.). While the regular *māyā* can only disappear by devotion to Kṛṣṇa, the divine *yogamāyā* can only appear by devotion to Kṛṣṇa (X.69.38). Just as entrance to the mundane world of *samsāra*, an undesirable state of affairs, depends on the pure knowledge of the *jīva* being enveloped by the influence of the *samsāric māyā*, entrance into the transcendent world of *līlā*, a desirable state of affairs, depends on the pure knowledge of the *jīva* being enveloped by the influence of the divine *yogamāyā*.

The Bhāgavata vividly illustrates *yogamāyā*'s essential role in the world of *līlā* when Kṛṣṇa's foster-mother, Yaśodā, looks into her son's mouth to see if he has eaten dirt, but sees the entire universe there instead (X.8.36). Becoming enlightened as to the real nature of both herself and Kṛṣṇa, she immediately loses her ability to interact with him as his mother and begins to bow down at his feet, spout Vedāntic-type philosophy, and eulogize him (X.8.40ff.). Kṛṣṇa immediately deludes her with his *yogamāyā*, causing her to lose her memory of the event so that she can again place him on his lap and continue with her maternal duties. He does the same to his real parents, Vasudeva and Devakī, after they too had become aware of his supremacy (X.45.1). Kṛṣṇa doesn't want to be God all the time, he wants to enjoy *līlā* with his friends as an equal, or with his parents as a subordinate. As the text puts it: 'For those who could understand, *Bhagavān* Kṛṣṇa manifested the condition [submitting] himself to the control of his dependants in this world' (X.11.9).

Being subject to the influence of *yogamāyā* and hence able to play such intimate roles in God's *līlā*, then, is the highest and rarest boon of human existence. The text repeatedly states that not even the gods, or most elevated personalities, or even Viṣṇu's eternal consort, the goddess of fortune herself, enjoy the grace bestowed on the residents of Vraj (X.9.20). Kṛṣṇa's foster mother Yaśodā was able to chase Kṛṣṇa in anger, to spank him whom the greatest *yogīs* of all cannot reach even in their minds (X.9.9). So elevated are the residents of Vraj that Kṛṣṇa himself becomes subservient to them, 'like a wooden puppet, ... controlled by them' (11.7). They are able to see Kṛṣṇa, whom *yogīs* cannot reach even after many births of austere disciplines (X.12.12). All this is possible by the power of *yogamāyā*. Without her, there could be no *līlā*.

The Yoga of the Bhāgavata

Kṛṣṇa's *līlā* extends beyond the actual acts performed by Kṛṣṇa. Meditating upon his *līlā* is a process of *yoga*, 'union with the divine'.³⁸ Five of the seventeen verses where the term *līlā* is used in Book X as a noun occur in the context of the residents of Vraj singing about Kṛṣṇa's *līlā*.³⁹ Hearing, singing about and meditating upon Kṛṣṇa's *līlā* are the primary *yogic* activities in the Bhāgavata school and, indeed, head the list of the nine standard processes of *bhakti yoga*, the *yoga* of devotion, outlined in Book VI: hearing about Kṛṣṇa, singing about him, remembering him, serving him, worshipping him, making obeisance to him, dedicating all one's actions to him, confiding in him as a friend, and offering one's body and belongings to his service (VII.5.23–4).⁴⁰ The entire Bhāgavata Purāṇa is recited because Parīksit, who had seven days to live, asked Śukadeva what a person on the point of death should hear, chant and remember (I.19.38); the answer is the chanting of Kṛṣṇa's names (II.1.11), and meditation upon his personal form (II.1.19). *Bhakti yoga* involves immersing the mind and senses in God; meditation in this school, does not involve the withdrawal of the senses from their sense objects, or stilling the mind in the manner outlined in the Yoga Sūtras of Patañjali, the founder of one of the six classical schools of orthodox Indic thought.⁴¹

In Patañjali's *yoga* system, it is only when distractions from the external objects of the senses are eliminated and internal thoughts stilled that the soul, which is distinct from both the sensual body and the internal mind, can realize itself as pure awareness. *Bhakti yoga*, in contrast, involves saturating the senses with objects connected with Kṛṣṇa's *līlā*, and constantly filling the mind with thoughts of him.

It is a process that transforms the focus of the mind and senses, rather than attempting to shut them down, and a saint is one whose mind and senses are used in this fashion (X.13.2). Singing and hearing about Kṛṣṇa's *līlā* with the sense organs of the tongue and the ear are two prime activities in this regard, and the residents of Vraj are constantly engaged in this type of *bhakti yoga*. In fact, in the present world age of *kaliyuga*, the recommended process for worshipping God, *Bhagavān*, is the chanting and hearing of his name (XI.5.24). Indeed, for hundreds of years Kṛṣṇa's names have been recited repetitively all over the Indian subcontinent, either in unison with others, or in personal *mantra* meditation.⁴² According to the *Bhāgavata*, although the present age of *kaliyuga* is a 'storehouse of faults', it has one major redeeming quality: by simply chanting about Kṛṣṇa, one is freed from self-centred attachments, and can attain the highest destination (XII.3.51).

In addition to chanting Kṛṣṇa's name, by simply hearing the stories about Kṛṣṇa one overcomes ignorance (XI.6.48–9), forgets oneself (X.90.46), rejects all other desires (XI.6.44) and attains love for Kṛṣṇa (X.6.44). Echoing the *Gītā* (VIII.6–7), the *Bhāgavata* states that anyone whose mind is absorbed in Kṛṣṇa's feet is liberated from the material world at the time of death (X.2.37; X.90.50) and does not experience suffering while still within it (X.11.58; X.87.40) and ultimately attains Kṛṣṇa's abode (X.90.50). More than this, those who are absorbed in this way are so satisfied that they do not even desire Kṛṣṇa's abode, let alone Brahmā's position, universal sovereignty or kingship (X.83.41–2). The stories of Kṛṣṇa's *līlā*, even if recited in the household, vanquish lust from the heart (X.33.39), purify (X.15.41), award the highest devotion (XI.31.28) and conquer even the unconquerable Lord (X.14.3). This practice was followed by the great *yogīs* of the past (X.14.5), and anyone rejecting this path toils uselessly (X.14.4). Even Kamsa, Kṛṣṇa's mortal enemy, 'whether sitting, resting, eating or moving about the land... thought of... Kṛṣṇa. He saw the whole universe pervaded by Kṛṣṇa' (X.2.24). As a result of this, he attained liberation (X.44.39). The highest meditation and goal of life is total absorption in God – even if this is generated out of animosity. 'Those who always dedicate their desire, anger, fear, affection, sense of identity and friendship to Hari [Kṛṣṇa] enter for certain into his state of being' (X.29.15).

After Kṛṣṇa had departed from Vraj, the *gopīs* imitated his *līlā*. In this episode of the text, the *gopīs* used their entire bodies to enact dramas of Kṛṣṇa's pastimes as a result of their perpetual meditation on Kṛṣṇa. In the madness of their love, their acting was not conscious or staged but a spontaneous and irrepressible bodily exhibition of their absolute absorption in thoughts of their Lord to the amazement of Uddhava, the messenger sent to them by Kṛṣṇa (X.30.14). It is this type of devotional *yoga* – hearing, chanting, imitating and acting the *līlā*, especially of Kṛṣṇa and Rāma, but also of Śiva and Devī, the goddess – that remains the most visible form of Hinduism. It is *bhakti yoga* as evidenced especially in the *Bhāgavata* and *Rāmāyaṇa*, but also in the *Mahābhārata* and other *Purāṇas*, that has most prominently defined the aesthetic character of Hindu culture in the form of the devotional poetry, drama, dance performances, art, iconography and temple worship of the subcontinent over the centuries.

In the first book of the *Bhāgavata*, the text is presented as the sun, arisen after Kṛṣṇa departed from his abode, 'for all those who have lost their sight' (I.3.45). A verse in the section of the *Padma Purāṇa* called the *Bhāgavata Māhātmya*, 'Glorification of the *Bhāgavata*', states that the *Bhāgavata* is the Lord himself in this world (VI.193.20). In other words, the *Bhāgavata* is a literary substitute for Kṛṣṇa, and by reading, hearing and reciting the text itself one is interacting directly with God. Indeed, the *Bhāgavata* goes to great lengths to reinforce the point that hearing, chanting and meditating about Kṛṣṇa in his absence are as potent as interacting with Kṛṣṇa in person; Kṛṣṇa goes so far as to attempt to discourage the *gopīs* from personally meeting with him in favour of engaging in *bhakti yoga* at home: 'Love for me comes from hearing about me, seeing me, meditating on me and reciting my glories – not, in this way, by physical proximity. Therefore, return to your homes' (X.29.27).

Indeed, Kṛṣṇa later states that the *gopīs* who had been prevented from meeting him in the forest were especially fortunate, because they were united with him by meditating upon him apart, with complete absorption, while those whose lover was on hand did not do so (X.47.35). The importance of meditating upon the stories of the Bhāgavata in isolation is underscored by the fact that the last verse of Book X ends with the following message:

Therefore, one desiring to surrender to the feet of Kṛṣṇa, the best of the Yadus, should listen to the deeds of the supreme one who has assumed *līlā* forms... These deeds destroy *karma*...

By thinking about, reciting and hearing the beautiful stories of Mukunda [Kṛṣṇa], which constantly become more in number, a person [attains to] his incomparable abode, and overcomes death. Even rulers of the earth left their communities to go into the forest for this purpose (X.90.49–50)

Likewise, Book XI, which concludes the narration of the Kṛṣṇa story, ends with the same message in its final verse: ‘In conclusion, anyone who recites the delightful deeds of the incarnations of Hari, *Bhagavān* [Kṛṣṇa], and the most auspicious stories of his childhood as are described here and in other sources, achieves the highest devotion for Kṛṣṇa, who is the goal of swan-like devotees’ (XI.31.28). The entire Purāṇa concludes by stating that anyone born after the departure of Kṛṣṇa to his abode who is fortunate enough to interact with the Bhāgavata Purāṇa with a devotional attitude will attain the same liberation as those who were fortunate enough to interact with Kṛṣṇa when he was personally present on earth (XII.13.18). By reading, discussing, reciting and meditating upon the Bhāgavata, one can experience the same states of mind as those attained by the actual residents of Vraj in Kṛṣṇa’s presence, and reach the same ultimate destination. The text thus presents itself as a fully empowered literary incarnation of Kṛṣṇa for all future generations.

If continuous immersion in Kṛṣṇa’s *līlā*, either directly or through the practice of *bhakti* meditation, is the goal of *yoga* and therefore of human life, what experience does this produce? The text is littered with terms such as *paramamudā*, *paramānanda* and *paramāhlāda*, the extremes of bliss experienced by Kṛṣṇa’s devotees in their encounters with Kṛṣṇa. Simply from seeing Kṛṣṇa, his devotees are thrown into uncontrollable states of ecstasy, their eyes overflow with tears, and their body hairs stand on end (X.38.26; X.38.35; X.41.28; X.71.25). Bliss spreads throughout the three worlds (X.27.25), and, in some of the most beautiful verses of the text, even the natural world is thrown into a stunned rapture simply by the sound of Kṛṣṇa’s flute:

O *gopīs*... The rivers manifest bliss through their surfaces, and the trees shed tears...

The cows, their ears pricked, were also drinking the nectar of the flute music coming from Kṛṣṇa’s mouth. The calves stood transfixed with their mouths full of milk from the dripping udders. With tears in their eyes, they embraced Govinda [Kṛṣṇa] within their hearts...

The rivers found their force disrupted by their state of mind after hearing the sound of Mukunda’s [Kṛṣṇa’s] flute, as could be seen from their whirlpools. Bearing offerings of lotus flowers, they grasped the two lotus feet of Murāri [Kṛṣṇa] and embraced them closely with the

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