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ALL ABOUT KṚṢṆA



Swami Harshananda

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PREFACE

'Kṛṣṇa' means 'black'. But Kṛṣṇa was also beautiful; hence the appellation 'śyāmasundara,' the 'black-beautiful'. The 'beautiful' has mesmerized us for generations. And for generations, the 'black' has been an enigma too!

In this monograph, an earnest attempt has been made to reveal the beauty and unravel the sublime mystery surrounding this Kṛṣṇa, 'the greatest of Incarnations' as Swami Vivekananda has declared. To what extent it has succeeded, only the readers can tell.

We are grateful to Sri Nithyananda Printers for the neat printing and the fine format.

July 1991.

S.H.

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1

Introduction

The philosophy of the Upaniṣads is characterized by a rational temper, a passion for the welfare of the human beings and a spirit of harmony as applied to the whole world. This philosophy, though impersonal in itself, has yet been the womb of a galaxy of personalities who have shone brilliantly in the horizon of India. Rāma and Kṛṣṇa are the brightest of these stars; and, they have dominated the pages of Indian cultural history for centuries. Not only that, they have become models for emulation for later ages.

Between the two, it is perhaps, Kṛṣṇa who has influenced the Indian thought, life and culture in a more profound way. He has entered, not only into its religion and philosophy, but also into its mysticism and poetry, painting and sculpture, music and dancing, and all aspects of the Indian folklore. To say the least, he has mesmerized a whole people for generations. Where else can one seek for the secret of this mesmerism of Kṛṣṇa except in his great character and noble life?

And yet, it is a strange irony that no other person in India's history and culture has been

subjected to so much of unsympathetic or even foul criticism, based on either an incomplete or an incorrect understanding of all the facts available, if not a deliberate distortion of the same to serve an ulterior purpose. True, there have also been presentations of his personality by over-enthusiastic votaries that rob quite a bit of the grace of a wondrously graceful personality. Hence an attempt will be made in this monograph to steer clear of the extremes and give a fairly balanced assessment of his life, personality and work.

2

Several Kṛṣṇas

We come across several Kṛṣṇas in the Hindu scriptures. The *Rgveda* (1.116.23) mentions one Kṛṣṇa, the father of a Viśvakāya. The last maṇḍala or section of the same work (10.42-44) attributes two sūktas or hymns to the sage Kṛṣṇa. We meet with a Kṛṣṇa Āṅgīrasa in the *Kauṣītaki Brāhmaṇa* (30.9) and a Kṛṣṇa Hārīta in the *Aitareya Āraṇyaka* (3.26). Then there is the Kṛṣṇa Dvaipāyana, also called Vyāsa, the reputed author of the epic *Mahābhārata*. It can safely be assumed that none of these Kṛṣṇas is the Kṛṣṇa of our study.

However, the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* (3.17.6) mentions Kṛṣṇa-Devakīputra as a disciple of Ghora

Āṅgīrasa by whom he was taught the science of Puruṣayajña. It is very likely that this is the same as Kṛṣṇa, the son of Vasudeva and Devakī. The only snag is that Sāṅdīpani has been specifically mentioned as the guru or preceptor of Kṛṣṇa and not Ghora Āṅgīrasa.*

Some scholars opine that the Kṛṣṇa we worship today is a syncretic deity of four personalities: Viṣṇu (a solar deity), Nārāyaṇa (of some theistic philosophical systems), Vāsudeva (of the Bhāgavata cult) and Gopāla (a cowherd king of Ābhīra). However, this much has to be conceded that at the time of the epic story of the *Mahābhārata*, Kṛṣṇa was already wellknown, considered not only as a very great person, but, even deserving worship as a manifestation of the Divine.

3

Date of Kṛṣṇa

Since Kṛṣṇa took an active part in the Mahābhārata war, his date naturally depends upon the date of this war. Scholars have been battling for

* This problem can be solved if it can be proved that Sāṅdīpani belonged to the Āṅgīras gotra (i.e., that he was a descendant of the sage Āṅgīras). The title 'ghora' ('the terrible') may be explained as indicating that he was a strict disciplinarian.

decades to fix its date. Adopting various methods like philological considerations of the language of the epic, or, allowing an average length of period of a ruler and calculating backwards from the time of a known ruler whose date has been fixed, the European scholars* have generally assigned it to the period 1400 B.C. – 300 B.C. Indian scholars,** who have seriously weighed the internal astronomical evidence, have concluded that the latest date can be around 1400 B.C. They are more inclined, however, to accept the period 3200 to 3100 B.C.

4

Sources of the Kṛṣṇa Story

The primary sources of the Kṛṣṇa story are four: the *Mahābhārata*, and its adjunct *Harivaṁśa*, the *Viṣṇupurāṇa* and the *Bhāgavata*. The story is also met with in other purāṇas like the *Brahmapurāṇa*, *Padmapurāṇa* and *Brahmavaivarta-purāṇa* (*Kṛṣṇa-janma-khaṇḍa*).

In the *Mahābhārata*, Kṛṣṇa appears for the first

* H. H. Wilson 1370 B.C.; Pargiter 950 B.C.; Bertley 575 B.C. and so on.

** D. S. Trivedi 3206 B.C.; K. S. Narayanachar 3067 B.C.; Ś. Samashrami 2400 B.C.; Shama Shastri 1613 B.C.; S. C. Vidyabhushana 1922 B.C.; K. P. Jayaswal 1424 B.C.

time during the marriage of Draupadī with the Pāṇḍavas. Though there are casual references to his earlier life, no details have been given. To make up for this lacuna, as it were, the *Harivaṁśa* was added as an adjunct, later. It is a fairly long work of over 16,000 verses and deals with the story of Kṛṣṇa in great detail in the section called *Viṣṇuparva*. The *Viṣṇupurāṇa* (A.D. 300; 6000 verses) is one of the earliest purāṇas and deals with the story of Kṛṣṇa in the fifth section (pañcamāṁśa). The *Bhāgavata* (A.D. 600; 18,000 verses) seems to be an expanded version of the *Viṣṇupurāṇa* in that it deals with practically the same topics, but in much greater detail.

5

Story of Kṛṣṇa in brief

The story of Kṛṣṇa may now be stated briefly, following the accounts given in the *Mahābhārata* and the *Bhāgavata*.

Mother Earth, unable to bear the burden of sins committed by evil kings and rulers, of whom Kāṁsa of Mathurā and Jarāsandha of Magadha were the worst, appealed to Brahmā, the Creator for help. Brahmā prayed to the Supreme Lord Nārāyaṇa and got the assurance that He would soon be born in this world to eliminate all the evil doers.

Ugrasena of the Yādava race, was the ruler of the kingdom of Mathurā, with its capital at the city of Mathurā. His son Kāṁsa, the crown prince, was a tyrant, dreaded by all and it was he that was practically ruling the kingdom. When Devakī, a daughter of Devaka, the cousin of Ugrasena, came of age, she was married to Vasudeva, the son of Śūrasena, another Yādava chieftain. Kāṁsa who loved his sister Devakī, took the couple out for a ride on a royal chariot, driving it himself. A voice from the void (ākāśa-vāṇī) warned him that the eighth issue of the couple would destroy him. Enraged and unnerved by this quirk of fate, Kāṁsa was about to kill Devakī. Vasudeva intervened and averted the tragedy to his wife, by promising to hand over all the children born of her. Though Kāṁsa spared Devakī's life, not being prepared to take chances, he put the couple in prison.

Vasudeva kept up his word. Kāṁsa mercilessly slaughtered the first six sons of Devakī. The seventh foetus was mysteriously transferred to the womb of Rohiṇī, the elder wife of Vasudeva, now living at Gokula, a cowherd settlement, across the river Yamunā. She gave birth to a hefty boy. Then the Lord entered into Devakī and she conceived for the eighth time. Now she shone with a brilliance that was matchless but soothing. Ever since Kāṁsa came to know of it, he started living in mortal fear. On

the blessed day when nature was at its best to welcome the Lord, He appeared to the couple in all His glory and instructed Vasudeva to exchange him for the baby-girl just born to Yaśodā, wife of the cowherd chief Nanda, at Gokula. Then He assumed the form of an extremely charming human baby. The instructions were carried out faithfully. Under the divine spell, the gates of the prison opened up, the guards slept and the river Yamunā made way for the transportation of the divine infant.

When Kāṁsa arrived at the prison next morning on hearing the news, he found a baby-girl in his sister's lap! Since fear of death had dehumanized him, he dashed the babe against a boulder. But, it escaped, flew up into the sky, assumed the fierce form of Yogamāyā (Durgā) and prophesied that his enemy was living elsewhere and would soon kill him.

The divine child started growing at Gokula giving the greatest joy to one and all by his bewitching beauty and supremely charming pranks. All attempts of Kāṁsa to kill the child were set at nought by the little fellow who dispatched demon after demon to the abode of death.

Garga, the family priest of the Yādavas arrived at Gokula and secretly performed the nāmakaraṇa (the ritual of christening) for the two children. Rohiṇī's son was christened as 'Rāma' or 'Balarāma' and Yaśodā's baby-son as 'Kṛṣṇa.'

The exploits of Kṛṣṇa at the cowherd settlement included revealing the whole universe in his little mouth to his mother Yaśodā and felling the twin trees by dragging the grinding stone to which he had been tied, in between them. Meanwhile, the elders of the village decided to abandon Gokula and migrate to Vṛndāvana, a nearby place, which offered better facilities for a new settlement. It proved to be very attractive to the brothers Balarāma and Kṛṣṇa.

Apart from extirpating some more emissaries of death dispatched by Kāṁsa, Kṛṣṇa's adventures at Vṛndāvana included subduing and driving away the serpent Kāliya from the river to the sea, lifting the Govardhana hill up with his little finger and holding it like an umbrella to protect the people of Vṛndāvana from the torrential rain caused by Indra (the king of gods in heaven) who had been annoyed by Kṛṣṇa's stopping of worship to him, the Rāsa dance with the gopīs on the banks of Yamunā and rescuing his foster-father Nanda from drowning.

Finding that all his efforts to assassinate the two children were in vain, Kāṁsa decided to get them to his capital on the pretext of a royal invitation and contrived to kill them there. Accordingly he sent Akrūra, a Yādava chief, with a chariot to Vṛndāvana to bring the two brothers. Balarāma and Kṛṣṇa siezed this opportunity and went there gladly. After a few more bouts of adventure in the capital and in the

palace, Kṛṣṇa killed Kāṁsa, freed his parents Vasudeva and Devakī, as also his grandfather Ugrasena who was then re-installed on the throne.

Vasudeva, then, arranged for the upanayana (a religious sacrament done at the commencement of Vedic studies) and education of the boys under the preceptor Sāndīpani, living at Avantīpura. The geniuses that they were, Balarāma and Kṛṣṇa mastered the well-known sixty-four sciences and arts in just sixty-four days. They returned to Mathurā after restoring to the preceptor his dead son at his request, as gurudakṣiṇā (respectful offering to the preceptor as a mark of gratitude).

Jarāsandha, the emperor of Magadha, started invading Mathurā with his huge army. Though beaten back, he was returning again and again. So, Kṛṣṇa built an impregnable capital Dvārakā in an island in the sea and shifted the people there.

Soon after this, Balarāma and Kṛṣṇa married Revatī and Rukmiṇī, the daughters of Revata and Bhīṣmaka. Kṛṣṇa also married Jāmbavatī, the daughter of Jāmbavan, and, Satyabhāmā, the daughter of Satrajit.

Narakāśura, the demon king of Prāgiyotiṣapura, had abducted and imprisoned 16,000 princesses. Kṛṣṇa invaded his kingdom, killed him in the battle, released the girls and married them, since they had nowhere else to go.

Vasudeva had a sister, Prthā by name—but more well-known as Kuntī—who had been married to prince Pāṇḍu, the ruler of Hastināpura. He died early, leaving five young sons (later known as the Pāṇḍavas) to the care of Kuntī. She took refuge in Bhīṣma, the grandsire of the Kuru race, who brought them up along with the hundred Kauravas, sons of the blind king Dhṛtarāṣṭra, the elder brother of Pāṇḍu. Jealousy and enmity of the Kauravas towards the Pāṇḍavas forced the latter to go into exile. After many a travail, they reached Kāmpilya, the capital of southern Pāñcāla kingdom ruled by Drupada, just in time for the svayaṁvara (marriage by self-choice) of his daughter Draupadī. Disguised as brāhmaṇas they too were sitting in the assembly.

Kṛṣṇa also had come there along with Balarāma. He immediately recognized the Pāṇḍavas. After the failure of all the princes, Arjuna, the third of the Pāṇḍava brothers, succeeded in piercing the fish fixed on a special contrivance called 'matsyayantra,' thus passing the prescribed test. That a beggarly brāhmaṇa succeeded where mighty princes failed, naturally roused the wrath of the kings assembled there. When they started a fight with the Pāṇḍavas, Kṛṣṇa intervened, reminding them all that Arjuna had won the hand of Draupadī according to dharma or righteous and just way. This cooled their frayed tempers and an ugly situation was averted.

Once, while on a pilgrimage, Arjuna came to Dvārakā and fell in love with Subhadrā, the sister of Kṛṣṇa. Since the love was mutual and since Arjuna was the best match for her, Kṛṣṇa successfully contrived to get them married.

When the Pāṇḍavas got their share of half the kingdom, and wanted to build the capital, it was Kṛṣṇa who helped them to clear the Khāṇḍava forest and establish their capital there. It came to be known as Indraprastha or Khāṇḍavaprastha.

Yudhiṣṭhira, the eldest of the Pāṇḍavas wanted to perform the Rājasūya sacrifice. Kṛṣṇa encouraged him to undertake this ambitious sacrifice. Since the performer of the Rājasūya sacrifice would be proclaimed as the emperor, all opposition had to be overcome before taking it up. Jarāsandha of Magadha was a mighty king and a tyrant. He had to be conquered first, as a part of that victory expedition. Kṛṣṇa, along with Arjuna and the mighty Bhīma (the second of the Pāṇḍavas), went to the capital of Jarāsandha in disguise, challenged him to a dual with Bhīma and got him killed. He then crowned Jarāsandha's son Sahadeva as the king of Magadha. He also released from prison the large number of princes and kings held captive by Jarāsandha.

The Rājasūya went off on a grand scale. When the question of who should be offered the 'agrapūjā'—worship offered to the best of the assembled men,

the highest honour bestowed on such occasions—came up, there was near unanimity in favour of Kṛṣṇa. The lone dissenter was Śiśupāla, the king of Cedi, who did so, out of an old enmity. Since he abused Kṛṣṇa, Bhīma and others in that august assembly and even challenged them to fight him, Kṛṣṇa was obliged to kill him using his celebrated discus, the Sudarśana.

Unable to bear the prosperity of the Pāṇḍavas, Duryodhana, the eldest of the Kauravas challenged Yudhiṣṭhira, the eldest of the Pāṇḍavas, to gambling through a game of dice. The latter, who had a weakness for the game, succumbed; but was defeated by the wily Śakuni, uncle of the Kauravas, who played as Duryodhana's substitute. In the process Yudhiṣṭhira lost everything including his brothers, wife Draupadī and also himself. Then, Duryodhana forcibly got Draupadī to the assembly hall and an attempt was made by Duśśāsana, the second of the Kaurava brothers, to disrobe her. Her fervent prayers to Kṛṣṇa brought him there in an invisible form, who protected her modesty by multiplying her robes to infinite length. Then Dhṛtarāṣṭra, the blind king, got Draupadī released and restored to the Pāṇḍavas their lost wealth and kingdom. They returned to Indraprastha and resumed their rule.

However, prodded by the evil counsels of Śakuni, his uncle, Duryodhana succeeded once again in

extracting a promise from the blind king Dhṛtarāṣṭra to challenge the Pāṇḍavas for a second round of the game of dice. Yudhiṣṭhira, with his proverbial weakness for the same, succumbed to it and lost his kingdom. As per the stakes he was banished to the forest. When the Pāṇḍavas were living in the forest, undergoing great hardship, Kṛṣṇa came to know of it and arrived there to console them and advise them. Kṛṣṇa told Yudhiṣṭhira that if he were at Hastināpura, the capital of the Kauravas, he would have left no stone unturned to prevent the game by impressing upon all, the evils of such gambling.

After successfully completing the period of banishment, the Pāṇḍavas, who had gathered in Virāṭanagara, the capital of the country Matsya, celebrated the marriage of Abhimanyu (son of Arjuna and Subhadrā) with Uttarā (daughter of the king Virāṭa and Sudeśṇā, his second wife). Kṛṣṇa and Balarāma attended the same. While discussing the future plans of the Pāṇḍavas in the assembly that had gathered there, Kṛṣṇa advised them all to think of any course that will bring the good of *both* the Pāṇḍavas and the Kauravas.

Seeing that Duryodhana was obdurate in refusing to part with even the minutest part of his kingdom for the sake of the Pāṇḍavas, Kṛṣṇa decided to make a *last* attempt at restoring peace between them. He tried hard and sincerely, but without success.

When it was finally decided that war was the only way out for the Pāṇḍavas to get back their kingdom, Kṛṣṇa was wooed by both the parties. When he offered the choice of the mighty Yādava army on one side or himself, but unarmed, on the other, Arjuna chose him. Duryodhana was happy to get the army.

Before the commencement of the war at Kurukṣetra, Kṛṣṇa tried to win over Karna, the king of Aṅgadeśa and a warrior of exceptional valour, to the side of the Pāṇḍavas, but, without success.

During the war which lasted for eighteen days, Kṛṣṇa, at the request of Arjuna, consented to be his charioteer. At the very outset, he had to deliver the great sermon, now well-known as the *Bhagavadgītā*, to rouse Arjuna who, suddenly, being overcome by a moral stupor, had refused to fight.

This worked and Arjuna fought valiantly. Kṛṣṇa also played many an important role, but always in defence of dharma.

The Pāṇḍavas emerged victorious at the end and the Kauravas were decimated. After the coronation of Yudhiṣṭhira as the king at Hastināpura, Kṛṣṇa retired to Dvārakā.

After a few years, the Yādavas, the kinsmen of Kṛṣṇa, fell into evil ways of life and exterminated one another in mutual fighting, at Prabhāsa a place near Dvārakā. Kṛṣṇa taught spiritual wisdom to

Uddhava, his friend and disciple, and ascended to his abode after casting off his body which was shot at by a hunter named Jara.

6

Personality of Kṛṣṇa

Whether Kṛṣṇa-Vāsudeva was a human being or God-incarnate, there is no gainsaying the fact that he has been ruling the hearts of millions of Hindus for over three millennia. If a person can make such a profound impact on the Hindu race affecting its psyche and ethos and all aspects of its life for centuries, he is no less than God. And, the Hindus do believe that he was an avatāra, God Himself come down to save mankind.

An avatāra or incarnation of God is not a product of history but creates it and shapes it. The primary purpose of an avatāra, as Kṛṣṇa himself has stated in the *Gītā* (4.7, 8) is to re-establish dharma or righteousness on a firm foundation. This needs protecting and strengthening the hands of the good people who protect dharma; and, if need be, subduing and eliminating the evil ones who are out to destroy it. To achieve this he will use all the powers and resources at his command. But, in the process, he does not and need not give up his human character.

If at all, at times, he may transcend it, just to exhibit to the human beings the possibility of rising to superhuman levels, if only they exert themselves sufficiently.

A study of Kṛṣṇa's character and personality from this angle will not only be useful but also inspiring.

Throughout his life, Kṛṣṇa's sole concern was dharma; to uphold it, to protect it and to reassert its supremacy; and to unravel its mystery whenever it became inscrutable.

Dharma becomes just an ethereal concept unless it lives in the minds and hearts of human beings and gets expressed through their actions. Hence, Kṛṣṇa was very much concerned about human beings, especially the underprivileged or the weaker sections of the society as also women. The care he bestowed on the cowherds of Vṛndāvana, his curing Kujā of her deformity, his protecting the honour of Draupadī at a critical moment or his bestowal of wealth on the poor Kucela, reveal this.

Kṛṣṇa, though possessing a heart 'softer than a flower,' could exercise an adamant will and terrific valour when necessary, in defence of dharma and the dhārmic people. In fact, he was the strongest man and the greatest warrior of his times. He knew no fear, nor tasted defeat at any time in his life. The demons he killed, the tyrants he subdued were

legion. He was an expert in the martial arts.

All the same, he was not a war-monger. He was a master statesman, skilled in the art of peace too. He was interested in peace; but not at the cost of dharma.

There is a common belief that brain and brawn cannot go together. But Kṛṣṇa was an extraordinary exception. His scholarship in the Vedic lore and the secular sciences and arts, was renowned. His three Gītās, the *Bhagavadgītā*, the *Anugītā* and the *Uddhavadgītā* are standing monuments to his learning and wisdom.

He possessed a tremendous intellect, and an intuitive insight, coupled with immense common sense, which he often brought to bear upon knotty problems or nasty situations solving them in the best interest of all concerned. His going to Hastināpura as a peace emissary, his trying to win over Karna to the side of the Pāṇḍavas or his apparently questionable strategies during the Kurukṣetra war bespeak of this.

Intelligence and learning do not necessarily lead to culture and refinement. Arrogance or craftiness is the more common result. But Kṛṣṇa was a perfect gentleman. When he killed Kamsa or got Jarāsandha eliminated, he put Ugrasena and Sahadeva on the thrones though he could have easily usurped them. He was the first to honour elders, brāhmaṇas, sages

and others, showering respect wherever it was due. Even in the face of grave provocation, he could be calm and nonchalant. The remarkable tolerance he exhibited towards the cantankerous Śiśupāla is a case to the point.

Kṛṣṇa was not only a philosopher but an accomplished yogi or mystic as well; hence the epithet 'Yogeśvara' applied to him (*vide Gītā* 18. 78). The *Bhāgavata* narrates several incidents wherein he had displayed yogic powers. Giving a vision of Viṣṇu to Akrūra, the Yādava emissary who had come to Vṛndāvana or curing Kubjā-Trivakrā of her physical handicap are instances to the point.

Mysticism and activism rarely go together; but in Kṛṣṇa, they did. Kṛṣṇa was ever active, ever busy, in the best interest of the world. From the cradle to the grave, his life was one continuum of dynamic activity; but always for the good of others and never for himself. The very personification of selflessness, he lived ever for others.

Kṛṣṇa as a rule, followed old customs, kept up time-honoured traditions; but would not make a fetish of the same. If in his judgment, any such custom needed to be altered or even given up, or replaced with another, he would unhesitatingly do so. He stopped the worship of god Indra by the cowherds at Vṛndāvana and substituted it with the worshipping of the cows and the Govardhana Hill which were the

backbone of their agrarian society. He acceded to Arjuna's request to be his charioteer, though such a job was considered to be menial, reserved for the lowborn ones because, he knew that any help rendered to the Pāṇḍavas would help the cause of dharma.

Above all, Kṛṣṇa was intensely human. He responded to every human emotion in an appropriate way making the persons concerned feel at home with him, even important. His parents Devakī and Vasudeva, his foster parents Yaśodā and Nanda, his mates at Gokula and Vṛndāvana, the gopīs, his own wives like Rukmiṇī and Satyabhāmā, the Yādava chieftains, the Pāṇḍavas, the elders at Hastināpura, even cows, monkeys or horses, in fact everyone that came in touch with him, was never left untouched by his magic touch of their hearts. His bewitching beauty, enchanting music of his flute and honey-sweet words as also irrefutable logic behind them could enslave even the gods; what to speak of the poor human beings! It is but natural that he was called 'Puruṣottama,' the best of human beings.

7

In Defence of Kṛṣṇa

Does Kṛṣṇa who staked his life to defend and protect the defenceless ones, himself need defence?

It appears so, on the face of it, if only we look at the spate of criticisms and abuses heaped upon him by the aliens to Indian culture or decultured Indians themselves who are aliens in their own society.

At the outset, one thing has to be made clear. The criticisms levelled against Kṛṣṇa are based on the story as depicted in the *Mahābhārata* and the *Bhāgavata*. These two works have declared the greatness, nay, the divinity, of Kṛṣṇa in no uncertain terms calling him as the Supreme Lord Himself. If the detractors of Kṛṣṇa accept as true only those parts of these works that come in handy for their criticism and conveniently ignore the rest, they are no wiser than the guy who wanted to cut an egg into two halves, keep one half for hatching chicken and use the other half for preparing an omelet!

Jesting apart, it is yet possible to offer satisfactory explanations to the objections and criticisms raised against Kṛṣṇa.

These criticisms fall under two broad categories: those pertaining to his relationship with the gopīs (cowherd women) of Vṛndāvana and those related to the various stratagems he adopted to get victory for the Pāṇḍavas.

The former again, is related to two well-known incidents as given in the *Bhāgavata*: gopīvastrāpaharaṇa (snatching away the clothes of the gopīs) and Rāsalīlā (Rāsa-dance). Neither the *Viṣṇupurāṇa* nor

the *Harivaṁśa* refers to the first episode. The second is dealt with in all the three works.

Kṛṣṇa snatches away the robes of the bathing gopīs and perches himself atop a nearby tree along with his friends. When the gopīs plead for the return of their robes, he asks them to come up from water and stand with uplifted arms to receive them from him. This is the gist of the episode as given in the *Bhāgavata* (10.22).

The gopīs were *kumārikās*, girls in the prepuberty age-group (*vide* 10.22.1). Kṛṣṇa was just seven years old (*vide* 10.26.3). Hence it is foolish to attribute any sexual motives to Kṛṣṇa here. Actually, the girls were undergoing a religious vow (called Kātyāyanīvrata) to get Kṛṣṇa as their husband! (10.22.4)

Having seen for themselves all the superhuman acts of Kṛṣṇa even from babyhood, they were convinced of his greatness and divinity. Hence they had mentally cherished conjugal love towards him. This attitude of a soul towards the Divine is well-known as *kāntabhāva* or *madhurabhāva* (bridal mysticism) in the works on devotion and mysticism. It is very much present in Christianity and Sufism too. One who wants to approach God should eschew *aṣṭapāśas* or eight infirmities that bind a soul like *ghrṇā* (hatred), *śaṅkā* (doubts), *bhaya* (fear), *lajjā* (shame) and so on. What is depicted here is just symbolic of this, of total surrender of the *jīvas* or

souls to God by giving up all bonds of life; and hence should be studied in the proper perspective.

The five chapters 29 to 33, of the tenth skandha or book of the *Bhāgavata*, are called *Rāsapañcādhyaī* and deal exclusively with Kṛṣṇa's play with the gopīs.

One moonlit night Kṛṣṇa plays tantalizing tunes on his flute, sitting on the bank of the river Yamunā. On hearing it, unable to control themselves, the gopīs rush to the spot.

Kṛṣṇa nonchalantly asks them the purpose of their coming to him at that hour and advises them to return home. They refuse, express their desire to enjoy his company and beg him for the same. Kṛṣṇa obliges them with amorous sports seeing that they have totally given up everything for his sake. After some time, conceit creeps into their minds and hearts, thinking that the Lord of the universe is their mate. Sensing it, and to teach them a lesson, Kṛṣṇa suddenly vanishes from their midst. Stricken with remorse, the gopīs wail and wander, pine for and pray to him. After chastising them thus, Kṛṣṇa reappears in their midst to their great delight and dances the Rāsa-dance, multiplying himself so that each gopī has a Kṛṣṇa with her. All the while, the people at the homes of the gopīs, have not missed them at all! They continue to 'exist' there! This is the summary of this section.

Now, the question is: By sporting with the wives

of other people, did not Kṛṣṇa behave like an ordinary paramour? If so, was it not against even the primary norms of dharma?

In fact, such a question was raised by the king Parīkṣit himself (*vide Bhāgavata* 10.33.27-29).

At the outset, an interesting fact has to be brought to light. During the Rājasūya sacrifice performed by the king Yudhiṣṭhira, Kṛṣṇa was chosen by the gathering for the 'agrapūjā' or 'first worship'. Śiśupāla, the ruler of the Cedi kingdom, who was an inveterate enemy of Kṛṣṇa, vehemently opposed it and rained abominable abuses upon him. But he did not so much as even mention Kṛṣṇa's illicit relationship with the gopīs of Vṛndāvana! (*vide Mahābhārata, Sabhāparva*, ch. 39 and 40). Since the *Mahābhārata* is the earliest of the works on Kṛṣṇa, can we say that the gopī-episodes are the poetical fancies of the later writers who were eager to propagate the cult of Kṛṣṇabhakti or devotion to Kṛṣṇa? Such an answer will remove the very ground from under the feet of the objectors!

However, since the *Harivaṁśa*, considered as an adjunct to the epic to complete the Kṛṣṇa story, deals with the Rāsailā episode, an earnest attempt can be made to meet the objection squarely. *Since the objection itself is based on the Bhāgavata, the rebuttal also should be based on the same.*

The gopīs were not ignorant of Kṛṣṇa's greatness

and divinity (*vide Bhāgavata* 10. 29. 32, 33, 37; 10.31.3, 4, 9). They had been captivated by the bewitching beauty of the Kṛṣṇa-form, even as *everyone else* in the Vraja (Vṛndāvana) had been. The woman in them had got the upper hand and so, they had approached him as their lover. This type of love or approach is not unknown to human history. Many a mystic, both of the East and the West, has cultivated this type of love towards the Divine. Āṇḍāl, Akka Mahādevī and Mīrā of India, St. Teresa of Avila of Spain and Rabiya of Basra, Iraq are the well-known mystics who prove this point.

Kṛṣṇa was not a libertine, nor a paramour. It is the gopīs that approached him with love tainted by sex-passion. Considering it more as a disease that vitiates pure love, he treated them with sympathy, responding to their love, but without himself being affected by it (*vide Bhāgavata* 10.33.26). It is more like the parents or teachers responding to the whims of children in a healthy and dignified way, gradually leading them to wisdom. This worked and the gopīs were put back on the road of rectitude (*ibid* 10.47.18, 46; 10.82.40, 48, 49). The gopīs were not unchaste. They remained faithful to their husbands. The only person whom they loved, apart from their husbands, was Kṛṣṇa and none else. This they did, knowing full well, that he was the Lord Himself.

Wonder of wonders, the men-folk of Vraja never

felt that they had been separated from their wives! (*ibid* 10.33.38)

All this is from the subjective standpoint of Kṛṣṇa and the gopīs. From the objective standpoint, did not Kṛṣṇa transgress dharma? If yes, has he not set a bad example to the world for centuries? This is exactly the question that the king Parīkṣit put to the sage Śuka, the narrator of the *Bhāgavata* (*vide* 10.33. 27-29).

Śuka in his reply classifies men into three groups: the Īśvaras (Lords, Incarnations), the jīvanmuktas (the liberated ones) and the ordinary people.

Those who realize God in this very life are called jīvanmuktas. According to the Hindu scriptures like the Upaniṣads, they have transcended even dharma and hence are not bound by the dos and don'ts of this world. Nor are they tainted even by grave sins (*vide Kauṣītaki Upaniṣad* 3.1).

These jīvanmuktas get that power by meditating on the lotus feet of God. Then, what to speak of Kṛṣṇa, who is God Himself! He can transgress the ordinary norms of dharma for extraordinary ends in life, which are always for the good of others. The acts of such Īśvaras cannot be and should not be emulated by the ordinary beings. Śiva drank the deadly poison hālāhala. Fire can destroy everything it touches. But ordinary mortals can never do it. Kṛṣṇa responded to the love of the gopīs for *their*

sake and *never* for *his own* sake. Even in doing so he multiplied himself, out of his *māyā* power, to be with them all *simultaneously*. He was also, *at the same time*, present as *gopīs* in their houses, doing their normal work. Hence, the supra-dhārmic doings of Īśvaras like Kṛṣṇa cannot be and should not be emulated by the ordinary run of mankind. If someone can do *all* that Kṛṣṇa did, then, he, like Kṛṣṇa, is an Īśvara and so, can take liberties with dharma!

That is why Swami Vivekananda, whose life was unsullied and whose criticism spared none who was not above board, has spoken of Kṛṣṇa at Vṛndāvana in these glorious terms: 'Ah! that most marvellous passage of his life, the most difficult to understand, and which none ought to attempt to understand until he has become perfectly chaste and pure, that most marvellous expansion of love, allegorized and expressed in that beautiful play at Vrindaban, which none can understand but he who has become mad with love, drunk deep of the cup of love! Who can understand the throes of the love of the Gopis—the very ideal of love, love that wants nothing, love that even does not care for heaven, love that does not care for anything in this world or the world to come?... A great landmark in the history of religion is here, the ideal of love for love's sake, duty for duty's sake, and it for the first time fell from the lips of the greatest of Incarnations, Krishna,

and for the first time, in the history of humans, upon the soil of India.' (*The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, 1984 edn., pp. 257-258)

Allied to this is the criticism that Kṛṣṇa had married 16,008 wives, a staggering number by any standards! The 'aṣṭa-mahiṣīs' were the eight queens, chief among them being Rukmiṇī and Satyabhāmā. The other 16,000 were the princesses he had saved from the prison of the demon Naraka. Since they had been practically deserted by their relatives, Kṛṣṇa gave them shelter for which ceremonial marriage was a necessity. And, polygamy was quite common among kings and princess during those days. It is important to note that the divine sage Nārada, once, out of curiosity, visited the houses of *all* the wives of Kṛṣṇa and *found him there* (*Bhāgavata* 10.69).

Sometimes an esoteric interpretation is given to this. The number 16,000 really represents 16, the zeros being the reflection of poetic fancies. And, this 16 actually represents the 16 parts of the human personality with which the jīvatman, the individual soul, is associated. They are: five organs of perception, five organs of action, five vital airs and the mind. The jīvatman is the lord of all these 16 parts. Hence they are allegorically represented as his wives. Since, in the ultimate analysis (as per Advaita Vedānta) the jīvatman is identical with Paramātmān or God, Kṛṣṇa is depicted as having 16(000) wives.

An allegorical interpretation is also given for the love of the gopīs towards Kṛṣṇa. The gopīs represent the jīvas or the individual souls pining for reunion with the Paramātmān or the Supreme Soul who is Kṛṣṇa, from whom they have been separated.

The second category of objections that pertain to Kṛṣṇa's way of handling the various problems that arose during the Kurukṣetra war may now be taken up. He is accused of political perfidy and Machiavelian methods in his dealings with the Kauravas. It is therefore necessary to examine the various episodes and incidents of the *Mahābhārata* and get at the truth. They may be listed and tackled as follows:

1. *He tried to break the friendship of Karṇa with Duryodhana and wean him away from the Kauravas.*

Kṛṣṇa never wanted the fratricidal war of Kurukṣetra to take place. Having failed in his peace mission due to the recalcitrance of Duryodhana, he made a final attempt to somehow stop it by revealing to Karṇa the wellkept secret that he was really the first son born to Kuntī. If Karṇa had agreed to defect to the Pāṇḍava side, Duryodhana, having come to know the truth, might have agreed to his being the king of half the kingdom and both the groups could have lived in peace. Karṇa was the best friend and the main source of strength of Duryodhana. His loss

would certainly have had a demoralizing effect on Duryodhana forcing him for a compromise. Thus bloodshed would have been avoided and dharma kept up. Hence what Kṛṣṇa did was really a master stroke of statesmanship.

2. *Though he had taken the vow of renouncing weapons and not fight during the war, he broke the same and attacked Bhīṣma.*

When Bhīṣma was fighting so fiercely that the Pāṇḍava forces were being mercilessly destroyed or put on the run, Kṛṣṇa found that Arjuna was not putting forth his best against Bhīṣma due to an inherent softness towards him. It was then that Kṛṣṇa decided to take up his discus and attack Bhīṣma himself. He was stopped by Arjuna halfway with the promise of doing his best (*Mahābhārata, Bhīṣmaparva*, 59. 103). Then, Kṛṣṇa returned to the chariot.

The act of Kṛṣṇa was more to induce and inspire Arjuna than himself fight Bhīṣma. Again, the primary purpose of Kṛṣṇa's life was to uphold and protect dharma. For him no sacrifice was too great compared to this task; and, transgressing a vow when needed was a part of the same.

It is necessary to mention here that the popular story that Bhīṣma too had vowed that he would force Kṛṣṇa to take to arms and that Kṛṣṇa, pleased by

his intense devotion, obliged him by breaking his own vow is *not* found in the *Mahābhārata*.

3. Kṛṣṇa induced Yudhiṣṭhira to tell a lie ('*aśvatthāmā hataḥ*'—*Aśvatthāma* has been killed') camouflaging it like truth, by adding the words '*kuñjaraḥ*' ('elephant'), to force the invincible Droṇa to retire from the battle.

The original verse in the *Mahābhārata* attributed to Yudhiṣṭhira is: *tamatathyabhaye magno jaye sakto yudhiṣṭhiraḥ | aśvatthāmā hata iti śabdāmuc-caiścacāra ha | avyaktamabravīd rājan hataḥ kuñjara ityuta ||* (*Droṇaparva* 190. 55). 'Yudhiṣṭhira, O king, afraid of telling an untruth, but interested in victory, addressed Droṇa thus in a loud voice: "*Aśvatthāmā* is dead." But, he also added the words, "The elephant is dead" in an inaudible voice.'

If we accept this version as a part of the original text (and not an interpolation), then we will be obliged to concede that Yudhiṣṭhira told a blatant lie at the instance of Kṛṣṇa, to discomfit Droṇa, notwithstanding the fact that Bhīma had just then killed an elephant of the same name, *Aśvatthāmā*.

But, fortunately, there are strong reasons to believe that *this is an interpolation* carelessly added by a raw hand at a later period. The same may now be summarized briefly as follows:

- a. Contrary to the common belief, Droṇa did

not lay down arms, even on hearing this shocking news, but continued to fight, routing Dhr̥ṣṭadyumna and others. Thus, the very purpose of telling that lie has been nullified (*Droṇaparva*, ch. 191).

- b. It is unthinkable that Bhīma, fearlessness personified, who dared to face even the Nārāyaṇāstra discharged by *Aśvatthāmā* against the advice and persuasion of even Kṛṣṇa, would stoop to such mean levels as killing an elephant by name '*Aśvatthāmā*' and give grist to the mill of falsehood. It is, by the same standards, absurd to think that Yudhiṣṭhira, the Dharmarāja (king of dharma), would have allowed himself to utter a falsehood, that too against his preceptor; and that, Kṛṣṇa, the very purpose of whose life was to establish dharma, could be the originator of such a heinous plan.

- c. Since Droṇa was killing innocent warriors on the battlefield by using formidable weapons like the *Brahmāstra*, *against the norms* prescribed for the discharge of such missiles, several sages like Viśvāmitra, Jamadagni, Bharadvāja, Gautama, Atri, Vasiṣṭha, Bhṛgu and others, arrived there and remonstrated with him, urging him to renounce his weapons and return to the spiritual path which he had given up out of delusion (*ibid* 190. 32-40). They also reminded him that his time was up and death was imminent.

It was this that ultimately made Droṇa retire

from the battle and sit in meditation at which time, Dhṛṣṭadyumna (son of king Drupada) beheaded him.

We can safely conclude from this that this part of the story that maligns Yudhiṣṭhira and Kṛṣṇa is a clumsy interpolation which serves no purpose.*

It will not be out of place here to mention another incident from the *Mahābhārata* (*Karṇaparva*, chs. 68-71) which brings out brilliantly Kṛṣṇa's character and wisdom. Arjuna, in a moment of impulse, had taken a vow that he would decapitate anyone that would speak disparagingly of his celebrated bow, Gāṇḍīva. Once, on the battlefield, Yudhiṣṭhira was routed by Karṇa and barely managed to escape with his life. When Arjuna came to enquire about his welfare, learning that Karṇa had not yet been killed by Arjuna, Yudhiṣṭhira abused him and taunted him to part with his Gāṇḍīva. 'True' to his vow, Arjuna was about to attack Yudhiṣṭhira, when Kṛṣṇa intervened. After learning of his vow, Kṛṣṇa brought wisdom to his mind through a wonderful discourse on dharma (righteousness) and satya (truth).

This is the gist of his discourse: Satya is that which is sanctioned by dharma and asatya (untruth) is that which is not. Dharma is that which brings

* That the critical edition of *The Mahābhārata* edited by V.S. Sukhtankar (pub. : Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, Poona) has completely omitted this verse is proof enough of this conclusion.

about lokahita or good to the world. Hence, the test of satya is whether it will result in good to the world. Looked at from this angle, an asatya which brings about good to the world is satya; and a satya which harms the world is asatya!

4. *Kṛṣṇa tricked Jayadratha by creating artificial darkness, hiding the orb of the sun through his disc sudarśana, and got him killed by Arjuna.*

Jayadratha, the king of Sindhu country was the brother-in-law of the Kauravas and was fighting on their side. Once he had abducted Draupadī, when the Pāṇḍavas were living in the forest. He was however caught and punished, and Draupadī was rescued from his clutches. Later, he was primarily responsible in preventing the four Pāṇḍavas (without Arjuna) from coming to the rescue of the young Abhimanyu (son of Subhadrā and Arjuna) who had been trapped inside the Cakravyūha or wheel formation of the Kaurava army. This had resulted in the cruel murder of the boy by the so-called warriors and against all norms of the battle. On coming to know of it, Arjuna had vowed that he would kill Jayadratha before sunset, the next day or immolate himself by entering fire. The Kauravas were frightened by this terrible vow and tried their best to hide Jayadratha from Arjuna's view. Though Arjuna fought fiercely and relentlessly till the evening

there was no sign of the targeted enemy. At that time Kṛṣṇa, by *his yoga power* (and not by Sudarśana discus) created *subjective* darkness in Jayadratha, who out of joy and relief stuck his head out, but was killed by Arjuna (*Droṇaparva* ch. 146. 64-68). Since Jayadratha was fighting on the side of adharma or unrighteousness and had sinned on two counts, it is but proper that Arjuna killed him and that Kṛṣṇa who was working for the re-establishment of dharma, aided him.

5. *Kṛṣṇa incited Arjuna to kill Karṇa eventhough the latter was unarmed and was trying to lift up his chariot which had run aground. This was a cowardly act, against all norms of dharma.*

The fact is that Karṇa was *not* killed when in a disarmed or helpless condition. He died *fighting* in the usual way.

This incident is narrated in detail in the *Karṇaparva* (chs. 90, 91). The rebuttal given by Kṛṣṇa to Karṇa (ch. 90. 1-14) was so logical and powerful that Karṇa had to swallow it in shame (*vide* 90. 15).

Kṛṣṇa's argument was simple. When the Kauravas had flouted all norms of dharma in trying to kill or harm the Pāṇḍavas—reflected in their trying to poison Bhīma, destroy them all through arson, molest their wife Draupadī and snatch away their kingdom through the deceitful game of dice—and

since Karṇa had abetted in their crimes, he had forfeited all claims to dharma!

6. *During the gadā-yuddha (mace-fight) between Bhīma and Duryodhana, Kṛṣṇa reminded Bhīma of his vow to break Duryodhana's thighs by slapping his own thigh, though hitting below the navel was prohibited in such fights.*

Actually it was Arjuna who did it after hearing Kṛṣṇa's comments on the fight, since Duryodhana was slowly getting the upper hand (*vide Śālyaparva* ch. 58. 21).

Though it was against the rules of the mace fight, Bhīma had to do it since he had vowed to break Duryodhana's left thigh at the time when the latter had indecently showed to Draupadī his bared lap (*vide Sabhāparva* ch. 69. 10-14). If this had not been done, Kṛṣṇa averred, then, Duryodhana would have won and would have continued to rule the kingdom persisting in his evil ways, bringing misery upon all. When the choice was between losing dharma on earth or breaking a rule in the duel, the lesser evil was chosen. It is like amputating a limb to save life.

7. *Kṛṣṇa did not prevent the fratricidal fight among the Yādavas though he was capable of doing so. On the other hand he too joined in it.*

The Yādavas as a race, had degenerated beyond

redemption due to severe addiction to drinking. All efforts of Kṛṣṇa to reform them had proved futile. Since Kṛṣṇa was *for dharma* and never for *his own people*, his role in the destruction of the Yādavas who had given up dharma is rather laudable!

8. *Kṛṣṇa's end was ignominious since he was assassinated by an ordinary hunter.*

Kṛṣṇa left his body out of his own free will, in yoga (*Viṣṇupurāṇa* 5. 37. 75). According to the *Bhāgavata* (11. 31. 6) he ascended to his world *with the body* (since it was divine).

The story of Jara, the hunter, killing Kṛṣṇa may be an allegorical way of describing that Kṛṣṇa left the body in old age (jarā = old age).

Even if the story is taken to be literally true, there is nothing in it that lowers Kṛṣṇa's prestige. The manner of discarding the physical body, after the purpose of life has been achieved, is left to the person concerned and does not affect his greatness in any way. Buddha was poisoned. Jesus was crucified like ordinary criminals. Some of the Sikh Gurus died as martyrs at the hands of barbarians.

Not only the manner of death, even insults heaped upon such great ones while they were living, neither affected them nor their reputation. For instance, Mahāvīra was spat upon. Sri Ramakrishna was kicked by a greedy treacherous priest. Since they

practised ahimsā as the highest dharma, they never retaliated. On the other hand, they blessed these sinners. But, today, the world continues to adore them. In fact, these very incidents have made them shine even more brilliantly.

8

Teachings of Kṛṣṇa

Kṛṣṇa was as great a master in the spiritual sciences as he was in the secular ones. His immortal teachings have been left to us through three great works: *Bhagavadgītā*, *Anugītā* and *Uddhavadgītā*. The first two are a part of the well-known epic, *Mahābhārata* and the last, of *Bhāgavata*.

Bhagavadgītā

The *Bhagavadgītā* is the most celebrated of these and has been considered as a monumental work in the religio-philosophical literature of India for centuries. It is a part of the *Bhīṣmaparva* (Ch. 25 to 42). It is in the form of a dialogue between Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna spread over 18 chapters, comprising 700 verses.

Just at the commencement of the Kurukṣetra war, after his chariot has been stationed in between the armies of the Pāṇḍavas and the Kauravas, but

right in front of the venerable Bhīṣma and the preceptor Droṇa, Arjuna sees them as also the others arrayed against him and collapses due to mental depression. He refuses to fight after narrating his reasons to do so. His arguments boil down to this: Killing is a sin. Killing one's own kith and kin, that too for the sake of a paltry kingdom, is worse. It is far better to renounce the world and take to begging to maintain oneself.

Kṛṣṇa's reply to this is direct and clear. Here, the basic question is not whether to fight and kill or to retire from it. The basic question is whether to punish those who, impelled by greed and selfishness, have transgressed all norms of dharma with impunity; or to let them enjoy the fruits of their heinous crimes. This war has been *foisted* upon the Pāṇḍavas by the irascible Duryodhana even though they have tried all means at their command to avoid it. Since the society expects the Kṣātriya prince to protect its life, possessions and values, which duty it has put on his shoulders, Arjuna (and the Pāṇḍavas) have no other go but to fight in defence of these.

As to the question of killing or dying, Kṛṣṇa states that the essential nature of all beings is ātman, the Self. It has no birth, no change, no disease nor death. It is the body worn by the soul like an apparel that is born or that dies. Hence, there need be no misgivings about the sin of killing or the fear of

dying. Even supposing that our birth and death are coterminous with those of the body, there is no cause for sorrow since this is inevitable in life.

Kṛṣṇa avers that no living being can avoid activity or work. Hence one must learn to perform one's duties and discharge one's responsibilities, —Kṛṣṇa calls this as 'svadharma'—however unpleasant they may appear to be. The reaction of work on the mind, whether it is pleasant or unpleasant, is due to the emotional attachment one has towards it and its results. If one can learn to do one's work as best as one can, without attachment or aversion, as a matter of duty or to serve the world or to please God, then, it brings about internal peace and equanimity. This mode of working is known as 'niṣkāmakarma-yoga.'

Incidentally and in reply to Arjuna's several questions, Kṛṣṇa deals with many other topics too. He accepts the yajña-system, the system of sacrifices in duly consecrated Vedic fires, but expands the scope of the word 'yajña' by calling any act of self-sacrifice and public good as a yajña, no less than its Vedic counterpart. Thus, donating one's wealth to the needy can be called 'dravya-yajña' (dravya = wealth or money); imparting knowledge to others becomes 'jñānayajña' and so on.

Kṛṣṇa has christened as 'śreṣṭha' anyone who works for the good of the world and advises him to

be extremely careful in his personal and public life so as to set a model to others.

Kṛṣṇa also deals with the several paths to perfection like Jñānayoga (the yoga of knowledge), Bhaktiyoga (the yoga of devotion to God) and Dhyānayoga (the yoga of meditation) and equates Karmayoga (the yoga of selfless action) with them.

Another teaching of tremendous hope given by Kṛṣṇa is the assurance that He, the Lord, will come down as an 'avatāra' or incarnate Himself here, whenever dharma declines and adharma gains in momentum. There are no conditions with regard to time and place in this act of grace. And, this doctrine of avatāra has been enunciated for the *very first time* in the Hindu scriptures, in the *Bhagavadgītā* (4. 6-8).

Kṛṣṇa reveals His divinity by vouchsafing to Arjuna his Cosmic Form (viśvarūpa) so as to strengthen his faith. Towards the end Kṛṣṇa advises Arjuna to surrender himself to Him with the assurance of freeing him from all sins.

Arjuna shakes off his delusion and rouses himself to action to defend dharma.

Anugītā

The *Anugītā*, the second of the three Gītās attributed to Kṛṣṇa is also a part of the epic *Mahābhārata* (*Aśvamedhaparva*, chs. 16 to 51). It

comprises 1056 verses spread over 36 chapters.

Having completed his task of restoring their kingdom to the Pāṇḍavas so that they can rule according to dharma, Kṛṣṇa has decided to return to Dvārakā. Wishing to take advantage of his spiritual wisdom before his departure, Arjuna requests him to teach him once again the great spiritual knowledge which he had taught at the start of the Kurukṣetra war. Chiding Arjuna for having forgotten such a profound teaching and pleading his inability to bring back to memory all that teaching once again, Kṛṣṇa proceeds to teach him through 'itihāsa' or ancient stories.

Avoiding these rather involved stories, the gist of the teachings may be given here. The first topic dealt with is that of the jīva, the individual soul, how he gets out of the body and how he gets into another, after death. Both these depend upon the karma (action) he has done. Good karma takes him to svarga or heaven, bad karma to naraka or hell. He then returns to this human birth to continue his journey. If he takes to the path of dharma, he is gradually led towards mokṣa or liberation.

The next topic is how a human being can attain mokṣa or liberation. Anyone who has cultivated virtues like equanimity, intense desire for mokṣa, renunciation and self-control becomes fit for mokṣa. By adopting the path of yoga in which self-control,

austerity, contemplation on the ātman or the Self within, desirelessness and peace are important sādhanas, he will be able to attain the Abode of Brahman.

The third topic, expounded in the form of a dialogue between a brāhmaṇa and his wife—hence called *Brāhmaṇagītā*—comprises miscellaneous subjects like the Ātman-Brahman principle which is beyond the ken of the senses, meditating on the functioning of the senses and the mind as a yajña or sacrifice, importance of the pañcaprāṇas or the five vital airs, the greatness of Janaka, the king of Mithilā who had conquered mamakāra or the sense of possessions and the state of a jīvanmukta, one liberated even while living in the body.

Then, Arjuna questions Kṛṣṇa about the path that leads to mokṣa or liberation. Kṛṣṇa in his reply states that the Paramātmā, or the Supreme Self, residing in the hearts of all, is to be realized through tapas or austerity, for which sannyāsa (life of renunciation) is the best means. Trying to see one Self in all and giving up all that obstructs this, is a part of this discipline.

This is followed by a description of the three guṇas—sattva, rajas and tamas—and their products like ahaṅkāra (egoity) and the five elements like earth and water.

Then comes a description of the four āśramas

or stages of life (brahmacarya, gārhaṣṭhya, vānaprastha and sannyāsa), the allegory of the 'Brahma-vṛkṣa' (actually the human body, compared to a tree) and how it can be cut by the sword of jñāna (spiritual wisdom), some discussions about dharma or religious duties and activities, and the efficacy of tapas or austerity in the form of self-control, which can destroy sins and give spiritual enlightenment. The *Anugītā* ends with this.

Uddhavadgītā

Unlike these two Gītās, the *Uddhavadgītā* is not a part of the epic *Mahābhārata*, but of the *Bhāgavata*. It comprises 23 chapters (chs. 7 to 29 of the eleventh skandha or book) and has 1030 verses.

Having intuited the imminent destruction of his race of the Yadus by mutual fighting, Kṛṣṇa decides to return to his divine Abode. Realizing this, Uddhava, an intimate companion and devotee, approaches him for guidance. Kṛṣṇa then teaches him spiritual wisdom and directs him to go to the Badaryāśrama in the Himālayas.

Kṛṣṇa commences his teaching with an ancient story. King Yadu, the son of Yayāti, once saw an Avadhūta, a perfect being (who had shaken off all bonds born out of ignorance), and asked him how he had attained to that state of freedom and bliss. The

Avadhūta replied that he had learnt his lessons from 24 teachers: patience from earth; non attachment from wind which is not tainted by the smell it carries; purification from water; power to destroy evil, from fire; living for the good of others from the sun; indifference towards the world from a python; dangers of temptation from a moth; the desirability of collecting good teachings from all available sources, from a bee; the need to conquer the instinct of sex and taste from an elephant and a fish; the need to conquer desires, from a courtesan; the necessity of living alone, to progress in the inner life from a girl and so on.

Then Kṛṣṇa proceeds to tell Uddhava that karma or action binds a person to transmigratory existence. Hence one should renounce evil actions and actions motivated by desires; but perform ordained or obligatory duties without the desire for fruits. He clarifies that saṁsāra or transmigratory existence is due to attachment to the body and, the ātman or Self is never subject to it.

He then describes the characteristics of the bound and the free souls. Bondage comes from egoism and attachment to the body. Freedom results from detachment.

At the specific request of Uddhava, Kṛṣṇa delineates the signs of sādhus or holy beings and of devotion to God. Compassion, truthfulness, self-

control, devotion to duties, equanimity under all conditions, fortitude—these are some of the traits found in sādhus. Devotion to God (or Kṛṣṇa) manifests itself as worship of images, interest in listening to the stories of the Lord, cultivation of certain attitudes of love, going on pilgrimage, observing religious festivities and so on. A true devotee is deeply interested in serving the Lord through rituals, and is devoid of pride and self-praise. Satsaṅga or cultivating the company of devotees and holy beings is the best means of attaining God.

Continuing, Kṛṣṇa describes the three guṇas or qualities of sattva, rajas and tamas and stresses the need to overcome the last two but augment the first. This leads to devotion and knowledge.

Then comes a description of dhyāna or meditation on God. The mode of sitting, method of prāṇāyama or breath-control and contemplation on the beautiful form of Kṛṣṇa-Viṣṇu are dealt with in detail. The aṣṭasiddhis or the eight psychic powers that result by yogic practices are also touched upon; but the yogi is advised against taking interest in them since they are obstacles to spiritual enlightenment.

Uddhava now puts a question: 'O Lord! What are the various ways in which the sages contemplate you and attain the siddhis or powers?' Kṛṣṇa in reply, states how he is the best in all things, their very essence. For instance, he is the Self, friend and inner

controller of all beings. He is Viṣṇu among the Ādityas and Nīlāhita among the Rudras. He is Bhṛgu among the great sages, Prahlāda among the daityas or demons, Vāsuki and Ananta among the serpents, lion among the animals, Gaṅgā among the rivers, Himālayas among the mountains, Uddhava among the devotees and so on. In fact, wherever there is excellence, he is that.*

Uddhava is now interested to know those dharmas or duties that are conducive to the development of devotion. In reply Kṛṣṇa gives a fairly detailed account of the well-known varṇāśramadharma, duties of the four castes and stages of life.

Kṛṣṇa then proceeds to declare that all duality that appears here, is only māyā, illusion and hence unreal. He, the basis of all, alone is Real. Uddhava then requests Kṛṣṇa to teach him jñāna and bhakti by which one can attain mokṣa or liberation. In reply Kṛṣṇa expounds them. Jñāna or knowledge is that by which one knows that Paramātmā, the Supreme Self, is in everything; He is everything. Since karmas or ritualistic actions give transient fruits, one should not get attached to them. Bhakti or devotion arises as a result of listening to and reciting the stories of the Lord, of worshipping the Lord and honouring His

* This section (11. 16) is very similar to the *Bhagavadgītā* (10.19-42).

devotees. Renunciation of worldly desires and worldly objects of pleasure strengthens bhakti.

Kṛṣṇa, at the request of Uddhava, further expounds the various spiritual disciplines that are conducive to jñāna and bhakti. They are: yama and niyama comprising the disciplines like ahimsā (non-injury), satya (truth), japa (repetition of the divine name), tapas (austerities), pūjā (worship), paropakāra (helping the needy), ācāryasevā (serving the preceptor) and so on; śama (concentrating the mind on the Lord), dama (self control), titikṣā (forbearance), dhṛti (controlling the instincts of taste and sex), sannyāsa (renunciation of the fruits of action) and so on.*

Continuing further, Kṛṣṇa describes the three well-known yogas: Jñānayoga, Karmayoga and Bhaktiyoga. An intense spirit of renunciation is a must for the first. Renouncing evil actions and the fruits of the good ones is a precondition for the second. Interest and faith in listening to the stories of the Lord is a quality needed for the third.

This is then followed by a discussion about the various philosophical truths and principles given in other works like prakṛti (nature) and puruṣa (soul). The mode of rebirth of an ignorant being, due to that very ignorance, is also stated.

Uddhava now raises a pertinent question: How

* c. f. *Bhagavadgītā* 16.1-3.

should a devotee react to the evil behaviour of evil persons? Kṛṣṇa, in reply, narrates the story of a bhikṣu (mendicant) who put up bravely with the harassment of unsympathetic and evil persons. (This section is known as the *Bhikṣugītā*.) There was a rich man in the country of Avantī. He was a miser and treated even his own wife, children and other relatives with scant regard. The gods were offended with him. So, he lost everything, being cheated by his own people. His troubles gave rise to wisdom and a genuine spirit of renunciation. He then became an itinerant mendicant. Whenever he moved out, begging for alms, evil people who had known his earlier life, started harassing him in many ways including violent physical assaults. However, accepting everything as the fruit of his evil karmas, he never retaliated nor reacted in any way, practising extreme forbearance, without any rancour in his heart. He then sang unto his own mind, a poem containing nuggets of great spiritual wisdom. The gist of that poem—the *Bhikṣugītā*—is that it is one's own mind that is responsible for weal or woe, and that one who conquers his own mind is the Master of even gods! And, this can be achieved by devotion to God.

Some discussions about getting rid of moha or delusion by Sāṅkhya-yoga or the path of knowledge, as also a description of the three guṇas and their products follow next.

The obstacles created by lust in the path of yoga are described by narrating the story of Purūras. The need for and the tremendous advantages of cultivating satsaṅga or company of the holy ones is the topic that comes next.

This is followed by a rather detailed description of pūjā or ritualistic worship of God. A brief summary of the items involved in the worship can be given as follows: bath and wearing clean clothes suitable for pūjā; keeping the image or symbol of worship; preliminary processes of ritual purification (called *nyāsa*); *āvāhana* or inviting the Lord into the image or symbol; offering sandal paste, flowers, incense, lamp and items of food. On special occasions *homa* (offering oblations into a duly consecrated fire) may also be done. The whole worship can be concluded with recitation of hymns and salutation. Faith and devotion are most important in such worship.

After stressing once again that the external world is only an appearance, that the ātman or Self is the spirit beyond the body-mind complex and giving some methods of yoga that help in overcoming the obstacles to the inner life, Kṛṣṇa concludes his teaching with a description of a paṇḍita, a man of spiritual wisdom who has attained equanimity. Uddhava then departs for the Badarikāśrama in the Himālayas with a heavy heart, due to the pain of separation from Kṛṣṇa.

9

Kṛṣṇa's Philosophy of Life

He lives long that lives well! He alone lives, who lives for others! And, Kṛṣṇa did all these: He lived long; he lived for others and so, he lived well!

The philosophy of life that Kṛṣṇa has taught us can best be learnt from his own life. The basic note of the music of his life was dharma. And, to him, anything that brought about the good of the individual and the society, the two being in consonance with each other, was dharma. Whenever there was a conflict between these two, it was the social good that he preferred.

There are three recognized sources of dharma: the śāstras or the Holy Books; the sampradāya or tradition set up by a long line of ṛṣis or sages; and, one's own purified mind. Kṛṣṇa followed them all in his personal life. He performed all the rituals prescribed for his station in life, did his duties, honoured the elders, the brāhmaṇas and the sages and took good care of all his dependents.

Dharma is protected and nourished when institutions and the people running the institutions follow dharma unhindered. Kṛṣṇa was ever ready to protect them both. If, in the process, confrontation with the wicked was necessary, he was the first to rise against them in defence of dharma.

The *Bhāgavata* (1.3.28) has called him as 'Bhagavān,' the Lord Himself (*kṛṣṇastu bhagavān svayam*). He is the 'Puruṣottama,' the best of men, of the *Bhagavadgītā* (15. 18). Hence, there was no need for him to be engaged in action, either to get or get rid of anything in life. And yet, he worked relentlessly; but, only for the sake of others, for the good of the world. He never had any axe to grind. He was unselfish to the core.

Furthermore, his work, his actions, were *always perfect*. He was as skilled in the art of love and compassion as in war; as dexterous in speaking honey and milk to the suffering ones, as in chiding or deriding hotheaded renegades. He was easily controlled by pure love, but adamant to those that hated him and fought with him. He was ever forgiving to the meek and the humble, but an inveterate enemy of the cheats and the hypocrites.

Fearlessness personified, he was ever ready to face any problem in life. But he always tried his best to defuse nasty situations before they grew into knotty problems.

Above all, he was completely detached, the very picture of supreme unconcern.

Finally, he was Yogeśvara, the master of yoga and Yogīśvara, the master of yogis too. He never forgot to teach the highest spiritual verities to those that sought them.

This, then, is what he has taught us to emulate: Be ever active for the sake of dharma, for the good of others; but never be selfish. Do your work as best as you can. Follow dharma and have firm faith that it will protect you. Do not run away from the problems of life; but face them boldly. Pray to God and He will give you the strength needed to face them or transcend them. Never forget that the final goal of life is liberation. Strive your best to attain it through jñāna and bhakti, and be free!

10

Rādhā

In the popular religious lore of the Hindus Rādhā has been very intimately associated with Kṛṣṇa. Hence it is but meet that a few lines be devoted to her here.

At the outset, it must be mentioned that Rādhā is *nowhere* to be seen in the four well-known sources of the Kṛṣṇa story: *Mahābhārata*, *Harivaṁśa*, *Viṣṇu-purāṇa* and *Bhāgavata*. There is a reference in the *Bhāgavata* (10.30.25 ff.) to a fortunate gopī who had gone alone with Kṛṣṇa just before the Rāsakṛīḍā. The words used here—*anayārādhitaḥ* (= being propitiated by her)—might have provided the seeds for the later concept of Rādhā, as the gopī dearest to Kṛṣṇa.

The story of Rādhā in detail appears in the *Kṛṣṇajanma-khaṇḍa* of the *Brahmavaivartapurāṇa*, a late work. She is described here as having emerged out of Kṛṣṇa and as his Śakti or power. It is, perhaps, the poet Jayadeva (A.D. 1200) that has immortalized her through his well-known lyric, *Gītagovinda*. Bengal Vaiṣṇavism nourished by Caitanya (A.D. 1485-1533) and others, has given her a unique place in its Kṛṣṇa theology and metaphysics.

It is plausible that the 'Prakṛti-pradhāna' (Mother Nature) of the earlier Sāṅkhya system of philosophy has gradually got metamorphosed into the Rādhā personality of the later Vaiṣṇava schools of theology.

11

Kṛṣṇa Festivals

Generally, every religion has three aspects: philosophy, mythology and rituals. Philosophy tries to deal with the ultimate truths and values. Mythology tries to present them to the masses in a language that they can understand. Rituals, by affording opportunities to *practise* religion, fulfil an emotional need.

Festivals in Hinduism are legion. A few of the more important ones, directly related to the Kṛṣṇa legends, will be outlined here.

The most important of these is **Kṛṣṇa-janmāṣṭamī**, the birthday of Kṛṣṇa. He was born on the *aṣṭamī* or the eighth day of the *kṛṣṇapakṣa* or dark fortnight of the month of *Śrāvaṇa* (August-September) at midnight. The *nakṣatra* or constellation was *Rohiṇī*. Generally this comes the next day. Hence that day is called **Jayantī**. Both the days are important though the actual worship has to be done at midnight on the *aṣṭamī* day.

Fasting for the whole day and night, worship of Kṛṣṇa in image or picture, keeping vigil throughout the night, listening to the stories and exploits of Kṛṣṇa, recitation of the *Bhāgavata*, singing of hymns and songs, and *japa* (repetition of the divine name) of the famous mantra *Om namo bhagavate Vāsudevāya* are the essential parts of this festival.

In Mathurā and Vṛndāvan, the two towns associated with Kṛṣṇa's birth and childhood, there are a number of temples dedicated to him. *Janmāṣṭamī* is celebrated there on a grand scale.

It may be of interest to state here that in Maharashtra, it is the practice, particularly of boys and the common folk, to hang up pots full of curds and buttermilk on the day after the birth of Kṛṣṇa is celebrated, to play underneath the pots and get drenched by the curds and buttermilk running out from the holes made by the boys, in typical Kṛṣṇa fashion!

The birthday of Rādhā or Rādhikā, the *gopī* dearest to Kṛṣṇa, is celebrated as **Rādhāṣṭamī**, on *Bhādrapada śukla aṣṭamī* (eighth day of the bright fortnight in the month of *Bhādrapada*, September). During this festival, worship is offered to Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa together. One should subsist on fruits only on this day. Apart from hearing and singing devotional music, one should also listen to certain episodes from the *Brahma-vaivarta-purāṇa* related to Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa.

Govardhanapūjā (worship of the hill Govardhana of Mathurā) which includes **Annakūṭa** ('mountain or heap of food') is another festival, more commonly observed in North India, related to Kṛṣṇa. It is observed on the first day of the bright half of the month of *Kārttika* (*kārttika śukla pratipad*—generally in November), a day after the famous *Dīpāvalī* (Diwali) festival. Worship of the Govardhana hill and Kṛṣṇa as *Gopāla* (cowherd boy), decorating and worshipping the cows, calves and bulls, keeping vigil in the night as also contemplating on the Kṛṣṇa story are its salient features. Of course, the Govardhana hill can be worshipped only in Mathurā (Uttar Pradesh). Elsewhere, a replica is made, generally in cowdung, for purposes of worship. A big heap of food, comprising various items of eatables, should also be prepared resembling a hill, and worshipped. This is the **Annakūṭa** festival.

When the festival of revelry, the Holi or Holikā, is celebrated all over the country, Bengal celebrates it as **Dolāyātrā** or **Dolotsava** (festival of the swing). It is observed for three or five days from the 14th day of the dark half of the month Phālguna (March) (phālguna kṛṣṇa caturdaśī). Worship of Agni or the fire-god, worship of Kṛṣṇa in an image stationed in a dolā or swing and swinging it for 7 times on the first day and 21 times on the last day are the chief elements of this festival.

The day on which Kṛṣṇa taught the *Bhagavad-gītā* to Arjuna, called **Gītājayantī**, falls on the eleventh day of the bright half of the month Mārgaśira (December) (mārgaśira śukla ekādaśī). It is celebrated with fasting, worship of Kṛṣṇa as Gītācārya (preceptor of the *Gītā*), chanting of the *Gītā* and listening to discourses on the same.

12

Conclusion

For aeons if Kṛṣṇa has been an agonizing enigma to some, he has put millions into ecstasies. There is nothing to wonder at in this. His very name 'Kṛṣṇa-Vāsudeva' solves this riddle. Etymologically speaking, 'Kṛṣṇa' is one who is ever blissful and ever attracts others to himself (*vide Viṣṇusahasranāma*

57). 'Vāsudeva' is the Divinity that pervades everything in the universe and is also immanent in it (*ibid* 332). So, Kṛṣṇa as a human being, extremely handsome and intensely affectionate, has been driving the votaries into rapturous moods. But as God or God's incarnation on earth, his ways have been inscrutable.

The word 'Kṛṣṇa' also means 'dark,' 'mysterious'. He was dark in colour and his ways were mysterious!

The ocean appears to be dark from a distance. But when we approach it and take its water into our hands, the water is pure and colourless. Similarly, Kṛṣṇa is a problem and a riddle only from a distance. When approached with love and faith, the dark mist of misunderstanding dissolves into a crystal clear experience of divine bliss and eternal presence.

Kṛṣṇa is true to his word: 'In whichever way people approach me, in the same way do I respond.' (*Gītā* 4.11). If we approach him as 'problem-Kṛṣṇa' he will create more problems for us! If on the other hand, we approach him as the Divine in human form, ever gracious and merciful, he will solve all our problems. The innumerable mystics and devotees of Kṛṣṇa over the centuries, are the standing proof of this.



Key to Transliteration and Pronunciation

<i>Sounds like</i>	<i>Sounds like</i>
अ a-o in son	ठ th-th in ant-hill
आ ā-a in master	ड ḍ-d in den
इ i-i in if	ढ ḍh-dh in godhood
ई ī-ee in feel	ण ṇ-n in under
उ u-u in full	त t-t in French
ऊ ū-oo in boot	थ th-th in thumb
ऋ ṛ-somewhat between r and ri	द d-th in then
ए e-ay in May	ध dh-the in breathe
ऐ ai-y in my	न n-n in not
ओ o-o in oh	प p-p in pen
औ au-ow in now	फ ph-ph in loop-hole
क k-k in keen	ब b-b in bag
ख kh-ckh in blockhead	भ bh-bh in abhor
ग g-g (hard) in go	म m-m in mother
घ gh-gh in log-hut	य y-y in yard
ङ ṅ-ng in singer	र r-r in run
च c-ch in chain	ल l-l in luck
छ ch-chh in catch him	व v-v in avert
ज j-j in judge	श ś-sh in reich (German)
झ jh-dgeh in hedgehog	ष ṣ-sh in show
ञ ñ-n (somewhat) as in French	स s-in sun
ट ṭ-t in ten	ह h-in hot
	म् m-m in sum
	ः ḥ-h in half

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