

NĀMARŪPA

Publishers & Founding Editors
ROBERT MOSES & EDDIE STERN

Advisors
DR. ROBERT E. SVOBODA
MEENAKSHI MOSES
JOCELYNE STERN

Editors
MEENAKSHI MOSES
LIDA STINCHFIELD

Design & Production
ROBERT MOSES
EDDIE STERN

Diacritic Editor
ISAAC MURCHIE

Assistant to the Publishers
YOUNGBLOOD ROACH

Assistance from
JOHN & ANNIE ABBOT
(INTELLIFOTO.COM)
JOHN CAMPBELL
JEAN-FRANCOIS FOURTOU
DEBORAH HARADA

Website development
KENDAL KELLY



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NĀMARŪPA, *Categories of Indian Thought* is a journal that seeks to record, illustrate and honor, as well as comment on, many systems of knowledge, practical and theoretical, that have originated in India. Passed down through the ages, these systems have left tracks, paths already traveled, which can guide us back to the Self—the source of all names [NĀMA] and forms [RŪPA].

NĀMARŪPA seeks to present articles that shed light on the incredible array of DARŚANAS, YOGAS and VIDYĀS that have evolved over thousands of years in India's creatively spiritual minds and hearts. The publishers have created this journal out of a love for the knowledge that it reflects, and desire that its content be presented clearly and inspirationally, but without any particular agenda or sectarian bias. The aim is to permit contributors to present offerings that accurately represent their own traditions, without endorsement or condemnation. Each traditional perspective on reality is like a different branch on a vast tree of knowledge, offering diverse fruits to the discerning reader.

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अ	• a
आ	• ā
इ	• i
ई	• ī
उ	• u
ऊ	• ū
ऋ	• ṛ
ॠ	• ṝ
ऌ	• ḷ
ॡ	• ḹ
ए	• e
ऐ	• ai
ओ	• o
औ	• au
अं	• aṃ
अः	• aḥ
क	• ka
ख	• kha
ग	• ga
घ	• gha
ङ	• ṅa
च	• ca
छ	• cha
ज	• ja
झ	• jha
ञ	• ña
ट	• ṭa
ठ	• ṭha
ड	• ḍa
ढ	• ḍha
ण	• ṇa
त	• ta
थ	• tha
द	• da
ध	• dha
न	• na
प	• pa
फ	• pha
ब	• ba
भ	• bha
म	• ma
य	• ya
र	• ra
ल	• la
व	• va
श	• śa
ष	• ṣa
स	• sa
ह	• ha
क्ष	• kṣa
त्र	• tra
ज्ञ	• jña

Rishikesh—looking east across the Ganga, Uttaranchal, North India.
Photograph by Maxine Henryson.

NĀMARŪPA

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KṚṢṆA'S LĪLĀ

AND THE PRACTICE OF BHAKTI YOGA IN THE BHĀGAVATA PURĀṆA

EDWIN BRYANT

This article is taken from the introduction to the author's translation of the tenth book of the Bhāgavata Purāṇa (Krishna: The Beautiful Legend of God: Śrīmad Bhāgavata Purāṇa Book X London: Penguin, 2005.)

KṚṢṆA 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 an 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 *Śrīmad Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, 'The Beautiful History of God,' popularly referred to as the 'Bhāgavata Purāṇa,' or just the 'Bhāgavata,' that is the principal textual source dedicated to the actual narrative of his incarnation and activities. Moreover, it is not Kṛṣṇa's statesmanship in the Mahābhārata that has produced the most popular and beloved stories about this deity, nor his influential teachings in the *Bhagavad Gītā*: it is the *līlās*—'play,' 'pastimes,' or 'frolics'—of his infancy, childhood and adolescence in the forests of Vṛndāvana, popularly known as Vraj,¹ amongst the cowherd men and women that have been most especially relished all over the Indian subcontinent over the centuries.

In Vraj, Kṛṣṇa sported with his friends, played pranks on his neighbors, and dallied amorously with the young cowherd maidens. This very personal depiction of God is the primary subject matter of the tenth book of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*. This text has

been, and remains, arguably one of the two most prominent textual sources of religious narrative in the Hindu religious landscape along with the epic Rāmāyaṇa (more influential even than the massive 100,000-verse Mahābhārata epic), if we are to judge on the basis of the themes that have surfaced in Hindu drama, poetry, dance, painting, song, literature, iconography and temple worship over the last millennium and more. Iconographically, for example, Hawley (1979) found that of 800 panels of Kṛṣṇa to have survived from the period prior to 1500 C.E., only three refer with any clarity to the *Gītā*. Thus it is the Kṛṣṇa of Vraj in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* who has most particularly influenced the devotional life of India, not the Kṛṣṇa of the *Gītā*.

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.² 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; and 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 actuality, a serious candidate, and the main rivalry in the *Purāṇas* is played out between the two transcendent Lords, Viṣṇu and Śiva; a later *Purāṇa*, the *Devī Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, marks the ascendancy into the *Purāṇic* genre of *Devī*, the Goddess, as the supreme matrix.⁵ Such usually playful rivalry notwithstanding, everything in the *Purāṇas* points to the fact that it is Viṣṇu who, as a rule, occupies a position of pre-eminence 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 the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, or *Bhagavad Gītā* IX.23 for examples), each camp accepts and indeed extols the transcendent and absolute nature of the other deity, and also of the goddess, *Devī*, merely affirming that this 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 male divinity. The term 'monotheism,' if applied to the *Purāṇic* tradition, needs to be understood in the context of a

¹Present day Vraj is located between Delhi and Agra in the state of Uttar Pradesh, in the northwest of the Indian subcontinent.

²The *Vāyu Purāṇa* states: "yasmāt purā hi anati idam Purāṇam," 'that which existed previously is the *Purāṇa*.'

³Bonazzoli (1979) has determined that the actual number of verses in the *Purāṇas* is, indeed, almost exactly 400,000.

⁴Brahmā is the creator of all the forms in the universe in the sense of being their engineer, but he is not the creator of the primordial universal stuff itself. He is born from the lotus stemming from Viṣṇu's navel, and thus is himself a created being.

⁵Indeed, followers of this *Purāṇa* claimed that it is the *Devī Bhāgavata* that is referred to by the reference to the "Bhāgavata" in the list of eighteen *Purāṇas* (see Brown, 1983; and Bryant (2002).

⁶See Rocher (105) Gonda (194) for discussion. The fact is that Viṣṇu is associated with the *guṇa* of *sattva*, the influence of goodness and enlightenment, and Śiva with that of *tamas*, the influence of ignorance and bondage. Even if the later Śiva-centered texts attribute to Śiva the roles of creator and preserver, in the broader *Purāṇic* scheme, he is the destroyer.



Kṛṣṇa Līlā, Vrīndāvan, India 2002. Photograph by Shawn Lakshmi Greenberg.

supreme Being, whether understood as Viṣṇu, Śiva, or Devī, who can manifest him/herself into other supreme Beings (albeit all of them secondary to the original Godhead).⁷

Although Viṣṇu is a purely transcendent deity (unlike Śiva who is more terrestrial in the Purāṇas, said to reside in the Himālayas or the city of Vārānasi),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; Kūrma, the tortoise; Varāha, the boar; Narasiṃha, 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, 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 indisputably recognized as the most famous work of Purāṇa literature, and this can be evidenced by the overwhelming preponderance

of traditional commentaries on the text. Whereas most of the other Purāṇas have produced no traditional commentaries at all, and others only one or two, the Bhāgavata has inspired eighty-one commentaries in Sanskrit alone that are presently available, and there must have been others that are no longer extant, since Madhva, in the thirteenth century, refers to some that are not presently available, as does Jīva Gosvāmin in the sixteenth century. It has been translated into almost all the languages of India, with forty or so 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 1840¹¹ and 1857, and these were followed, in 1867, by a

⁷Thus, in the Bhāgavata, Viṣṇu, in addition to being able to manifest unlimited other identical Viṣṇu forms, manifests himself in the form of Śiva for a specific function—to perform the task of destruction at the end of the universe (X.71.8), and as the goddess, Devī, or Śakti for another function—to manifest the actual stuff of the universe, *prakṛti*, and perform other tasks such as cover the souls with illusion, in her capacity as Māyā. Viṣṇu also manifests the *jīvas*, or *ātman*s—‘souls’—who populate the world, and he can also empower certain jivas to perform extraordinary tasks, such as those performed by Brahmā, who creates the actual forms in the world out of *prakṛti*. Such jivas are considered empowered incarnations.

⁸See X.87.3-5, where Śiva is associated with the *guṇas* and material prosperity, while Viṣṇu is associated with transcendence and the state beyond the *guṇas*.

⁹The Bhāgavata Purāṇa, while mentioning twenty-two principle incarnations, states that they are actually innumerable (1.3.26).

¹⁰There are some minor variations between lists, chiefly in connection with the Buddha.

¹¹A translation of the Viṣṇu Purāṇa by H. H. Wilson also appeared in 1840.

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.

The tenth book can be divided into two distinct sections: the childhood pastimes of Kṛṣṇa in Vṛndāvana, called Vraj līlā, and the post-Vṛndāvana, adult activities. The mood 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 Kṛṣṇa's heroic martial exploits, descriptions of his winning the hands of his various wives, and accounts of his statesmanship and lavish royal household life. It 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* occurs most frequently. Here we find God stealing butter from his mother, feeding it to the monkeys and hiding from her in fear as she chases him with a stick on account of his mischief, or making love to the married cowherd women in the forests of Vraj. As has been noted, 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 Mahābhārata or Bhagavad Gītā.

The term *līlā* first surfaces in literary sources in the Vedānta Sūtra (circa third century C.E.). In 2.1.33, we find the author 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 responds that "just as [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 considering 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 the fullness of spirit. Unlike the term 'sport' or even 'game', then, which might contain a suggestion of competition or drivenness, *līlā* is pure play, or spontaneous pastime.

Thus, although all of God's activities, including creation, are play, the proper noun *līlā* is especially used in the tenth book of the Bhāgavata when God is enjoying himself in the beautiful and idyllic landscape of Vraj, interacting with his friends and loved ones, devoid of any sense of mission or purpose. It is rarely used once Kṛṣṇa leaves Vraj and sets out to accomplish his mission and fulfill his promise to Brahmā to kill demons (although sometimes it is used in the instrumental form in the sense of 'effortlessly' or 'playfully'), and it is never used in the Bhagavad Gītā. The Gītā presents us Kṛṣṇa as God in the mood of teacher imparting spiritual knowledge to humanity, and the Mahābhārata, Kṛṣṇa as God in the mood of diplomat machinating to bring about the destruction of the hosts of armies which had become a burden on the earth; both depict God with a mission. The Vraj section of book ten 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 ten, all of which only occur in the Vraj section.

This is not to say that demons are not killed by Kṛṣṇa in the first part of book ten, in Vraj. But the demons that meet their fate here are intruders into Kṛṣṇa's realm of play—they are not sought after by Kṛṣṇa. They disrupt Kṛṣṇa's carefree frolics in the groves of Vraj with murderous intent and hence are spontaneously killed by the Lord. There are no weapons involved. Moreover, most of the demons that enter Vraj assume the forms of enormous animals—Vatsa is a calf, Baka a crane, Agha a serpent, Dhenuka an ass, Kāliya a sea serpent, and Keśin a horse. Other demons take the forms of a witch disguised as a beautiful woman (Pūtanā), a whirlwind

(Tṛṇāvarta), and 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 by the adult Kṛṣṇa outside of Vraj which (with the exception of the gorilla Dvividā) have human forms, or, at least humanoid forms (if, like Naraka, they have five heads or, like Bāna, a thousand arms). Moreover, unlike in Vraj, Kṛṣṇa goes out of his way to seek confrontation with these demons on the battlefield in the second part of book ten, and the showers of weapons released in the encounters closely echo the martial exchanges of the Mahābhārata. The hostile intrusions in Vraj, in contrast, become an extension of Kṛṣṇa's play, and the instrumental form *līlayā* is most often used to describe the manner in which Kṛṣṇa playfully rescues his friends from the evil intentions of these demons, whom he effortlessly kills.

From the usages of the proper noun *līlā* in the tenth book, at least five (X.23.37; X.45.44; X.52.36; X.58.37; X.61.9) inform the reader that the Lord has accepted a body for the sake of *līlā*. There is no other cause for the Lord's activities in the world apart from his own voluntary decision to engage in *līlā*. In this he is different from the *jīvas*, souls in the world who are helplessly injected into their bodies as a result of their karma accrued in previous lives, and propelled along by *guṇic* forces beyond their control. This point is continually reinforced throughout the text. At the same time, pains are also repeatedly taken to insist that the Lord is *āptarāma*, self-satisfied. The Bhāgavata resonates with the discussion of the Vedāntins 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—verse X.33.23 tells us that although Kṛṣṇa is *svaratīḥ*, '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.23.37), the cowherd boys who accompany him on his adventures in the forests

(X.12.3), and the elderly gopis who enjoy themselves watching and laughing at his childhood *lilā* (X.8.24); Kṛṣṇa's *lilā* completely enchants the residents of Vraj (X.8.52). *Lilā*, 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 *lilā* 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 gopis, 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 *lilā* with God, particularly the Vraj *lilā*, is hard-earned (X.11.12)—in their previous lives, Kṛṣṇa's parents, Devakī and Vasudeva, worshipped Kṛṣṇa for twelve thousand years in order to obtain him as their son, performing intense austerities by enduring the extremes of temperature and subsisting on only leaves and wind (X.3.32-38). The cowherd boys who had the opportunity to roam about with Kṛṣṇa 'had accumulated heaps of merit' (X.12.11), and the author of the Bhāgavata cannot even describe the previous penance that must have been performed by the queens 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*: upon seeing the intense devotion of Kṛṣṇa's devotees in Vraj, 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 *lilā*, 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 yogis is bound by the love of the residents of Vraj (X.9.9) even to the point that, 'like a wooden puppet, he was controlled by them' (X.11.7).

AFURTHER TERM ESSENTIAL TO A discussion of *lilā* 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. 14-15), 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 *samsāra*, the cycle of birth and death, by their karma (X.23.52-53; 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; X.73.10). *Māyā* is the force that prevents the *jīva* from realizing its true nature as *ātman*, or pure soul, and diverts it into identifying with the things of this world (X.14.44; X.40.23; X.51.45; X.54.43; X.70.28). As in the *Gītā* (IX.10), the Bhāgavata specifically subordinates this *māyā* to Kṛṣṇa—it is his *śakti*, power, a real force, but one subservient to his will (X.70.37; X.1.25; X.14.9; X.14.22; X.16.58; X.23.41; X.23.51; X.28.6; X.37.22-23; X.38.11; X.40.23; X.47.30; X.48.27; X.49.29, etc.). 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 discernible under the name of *yogamāyā*.¹² In contrast to the term *māyā*, which generally refers to the power

involved in the creation of the *samsāric* world and the perpetuation of the *jīvas* transmigration therein, *yogamāyā* is a term that only occurs in the context of Kṛṣṇa's *lilā*. In her personified form, *Yogamāyā* is sent by Viṣṇu in the opening verses of this text (X.2.7) to assist his *lilā* by taking birth in Vraj as his sister. But more importantly, in another capacity, she covers the pure liberated souls in the *lilā* with her power of illusion so that they do not relate to 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 be incapable of interacting with him in *lilā* 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 *lilā* remain unaware of Kṛṣṇa's real nature (X.7.32; X.11.2ff; X.16.14; X.19.14; X.20.1; X.42.22; X.61.2).¹³ Indeed, even Kṛṣṇa himself becomes so involved in his *lilā* that he sometimes seems to prefer to forget his own supremacy (X.12.27-28; X.18.27; X.70.47; X.77.23 & 28).¹⁴ 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* counterpart as *māyā*, *Yogamāyā*'s power of illusion, then, is a highly desirable and positive one obtained only by the highest yogis. Indeed, the text suggests that Kṛṣṇa's incarnation has, in reality, two motives: one is the 'official' motive articulated in the Mahābhārata, *Gītā* and opening verses of the first book of the Bhāgavata, namely, to free the earth of the intolerable build-up of demoniac military power, and thus protect the righteous. The other is to attract the

¹²The regular term *māyā* is occasionally also used interchangeably with *yogamāyā* in the same capacity.

¹³At times, however, Kṛṣṇa's associates seem to express some awareness of Kṛṣṇa's real nature (X.3.12 ff; X.19.14, X.8.19ff; X.28.11; X.29.41; X.85.2 & 18).

¹⁴Even though the residents of Vraj and even Kṛṣṇa himself are lulled in these ways by *Yogamāyā* for the sake of enjoying their *lilā*, the author of the Bhāgavata takes pains to keep the reader, at least, reminded of Kṛṣṇa's supremacy, by frequently interjecting such asides as: "Those two boys, who are the sole keepers of the whole universe, became keepers of calves" (X.11.45). On occasion, such interjections are quite forceful (e.g., X.77.30-32).

lost souls in *saṁsāra* to the beauty of *līlā* with God, and thus entice them to relinquish their attachment for the self-centered indulgences of the world of *saṁsāra*, which simply perpetuate the cycle of karma, and thus of repeated birth and death (XI.16-7).

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 well¹⁵), and it is clear that her influence is a positive and highly desirable one. Although even great *ṛṣīs* (*sages*) are anxious to avoid the illusory power of the conventional *saṁsāric māyā*, the greatest sage of all, *Nārada*, in contrast, is very eager to experience the power of the divine *yogamāyā*. 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 into the mundane world of *saṁsāra*, a negative state of affairs, depends on the pure knowledge of the *jīva* being covered by the influence of the *saṁsāric māyā*, entrance into the transcendent world of *līlā*, a positive state of affairs, depends on the pure knowledge of the *jīva* being covered by the influence of the divine *yogamāyā*.

The *Bhāgavata* vividly illustrates *Yogamāyā*'s essential role in the world of *līlā* in the eighth chapter when *Kṛṣṇa*'s foster mother, *Yaśodā*, looks into her son's mouth to see if he has eaten dirt (X.8.36) but instead sees the entire universe there. 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.8.36). *Kṛṣṇa* then and there

deludes her with his *yogamāyā*, causing her to lose her memory of the event so that she can again place him on her lap and continue with her maternal duties. He does the same to his birth parents, *Vasudeva* and *Devakī*, after they too realize 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 of [submitting] himself to the control of his dependents 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 *Vraja* (e.g., X.9.20). *Kṛṣṇa*'s foster mother *Yaśodā* was able to chase *Kṛṣṇa* in anger, to spank him whom the greatest yogis of all cannot reach even in their minds (X.9.9). So elevated are the residents of *Vraja*, that *Kṛṣṇa* himself becomes subservient to them 'like a wooden puppet, ... controlled by them' (10.11.7). They are able to see *Kṛṣṇa*, whom yogis cannot reach even after many lives of austerities (X.12.12). All this is possible by the power of *Yogamāyā*. Without her, there could be no *līlā*.

KṚṢṆA'S LĪLĀ EXTENDS BEYOND THE actual acts performed by *Kṛṣṇa*. Meditating upon his *līlā* is a process of yoga, 'union with the divine.'¹⁶ Five of the seventeen verses where the term is used in book ten as a proper noun

(X.11.33; X.35.1; X.35.26; X.47.54; X.69.39) occur in the context of the residents of *Vraja* singing about *Kṛṣṇa*'s *līlā*. Hearing, singing about, and meditating upon *Kṛṣṇa*'s *līlā* are the primary yogic activities in the *Bhāgavata* school and, indeed, head up the list of the nine processes of *bhakti yoga* outlined in book seven: hearing about *Kṛṣṇa*, singing about him, remembering him, serving him, worshipping him, paying obeisances 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.5.23-24). In book ten, two gods who were fortunate enough to encounter *Kṛṣṇa* state: 'May our speech be engaged in the narration of your qualities, our two ears in your stories, our two hands in your work, our mind in the remembrance of your feet, our head in obeisance to the universe which is your residence, and our sight in the observing of the saints, who constitute the body of your Lordship' (X.10.38). The entire *Purāṇa* is recited because *Parikṣit*, who had seven days to live, asked *Śuka* 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). Meditation, in this school, does not involve the withdrawal of the senses from their sense objects and stilling the mind in the manner outlined in the *Pātañjali Yoga Sūtras*.¹⁷

In *Pātañjali*'s yoga system, it is only once the 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

¹⁵The *Kṛṣṇa*-centered theologies of *Vallabha* and *Caitanya*, hold that *Kṛṣṇa*'s *līlās* in this world are replicas of the *līlās* that are eternally ongoing in the divine *brahman* realm—*Kṛṣṇa*'s abode of *Goloka*—and it is *Yogamāyā* who arranges the scenery, landscape and situations in this divine realm. *Brahman* is not an impersonal, undifferentiated and non-active state in the *Bhāgavata*, but a dynamic realm with form and personal interactions between God and his consort and their devotees. The forms and substances constituting that realm are not made of the earth, water, fire, air, ether, etc.—of *prakṛti*—but of *brahman*, pure *sattva*, which is described as consisting of *sat*, *cit*, and *ānanda*—eternity, bliss and knowledge. These medieval commentators refer to *yogamāyā* as *Kṛṣṇa*'s 'internal' power of illusion, active in the realm of *brahman*, who serves *Kṛṣṇa* by facilitating his personal *līlā*, as opposed to *Kṛṣṇa*'s 'external' power of *māyā*, active in the external realm of *saṁsāra*, who serves him by facilitating the world of birth and death.

¹⁶The term yoga comes from the root *yuj*, 'to join.' It is cognate with the English word 'to yoke.'

¹⁷*Pātañjali*'s is the classical text outlining the eight steps of the psychosomatic yogic process of realizing the *ātman*, the innermost self. His is one of the six schools of Hindu philosophy.

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 ears 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 specific recommended process for worshipping God, Bhagavān, is the chanting and hearing of his name (XI. 5.24-26). Indeed, for hundreds of years Kṛṣṇa's names have been recited repetitively all over the Indian subcontinent, either congregationally, or softly in personal mantra meditation.¹⁸ 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-centered attachments, and attains the highest destination (XII.3.51).

In addition to chanting Kṛṣṇa's name, simply by hearing the stories about Kṛṣṇa, one overcomes ignorance (XI.6.48-49), 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), does not experience suffering while still within it (X.11.58; X.39.37; X.87.40; X.90.49), and ultimately attains Kṛṣṇa's abode (X.90.50), even though those who are absorbed in this way are so satisfied that they do not even desire Kṛṣṇa's abode, let alone Brahmā's position of universal sovereignty or kingship (X.83.41-42). The stories of Kṛṣṇa's līlā, even if recited in the household, vanquish lust from the heart (X.33.39), purify (X.15.41), free one from sins (XI.11.31), award the highest devotion (XI.31.28), and

conquer even the unconquerable Lord (X.14.3). This practice was followed by the great yogis of the past (X.14.5), and anyone rejecting this path toils uselessly (X.14.4). Even Kāṁsa, Kṛṣṇa's mortal enemy, 'whether sitting, resting, eating, or moving about the land ... thought of ... Kṛṣṇa. He saw the whole universe as 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 gopis imitated his līlā. In this section of the text, the gopis use their entire bodies to enact dramas of Kṛṣṇa's pastimes to enhance their undeviated meditation on Kṛṣṇa. In the madness of their love, their acting was not conscious or staged but a spontaneous and irrepressible 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—the hearing, chanting, imitating and replicating of the līlās, 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 other Purāṇas, that has most prominently defined the aesthetic character of Hindu culture in the forms 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 'for those who have lost their sight' due to the evils of this age. A verse in the section of the Padma Purāṇa called the Bhāgavata Māhātmya, 'Glorification of the Bhāgavata,' notes that the sun of the Bhāgavata arose in this age after Lord Kṛṣṇa returned to his abode (VI.193.47-52). 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 gopis from personally meeting with him in favor 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 manner, by physical proximity. Therefore, return to your homes' (X.29.27). Indeed, Kṛṣṇa later states that the gopis who had been prevented from meeting him in the forest were especially fortunate, because they obtained him by meditating upon him in separation with complete absorption, 'while those whose lover is on hand, do not do so' (X.47.35-37). The importance of meditating upon the stories of the Bhāgavata in Kṛṣṇa's absence is underscored by the fact that the last verse of the entire tenth book 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 out of a desire to protect his own path [of dharma]. These deeds destroy karma, and are imitations [of human behavior] appropriate to each līlā.

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

Likewise, the eleventh book, 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 [Kṛṣṇa], Bhagavān,

¹⁸Congregational chanting, *kīrtana* and *bhājan*, generally consists of a primary singer singing a name or series of names of Kṛṣṇa (such as Hari, Govinda, Vāsudeva, etc.), which are then repeated back in unison by the congregation. Personal mantra meditation involves softly repeating a mantra containing Kṛṣṇa's names to oneself, using standard meditational practices in order to focus the mind on the mantra without distractions; 'Om Namō Bhāgavate Vāsudevāya' is a Kṛṣṇa mantra, as is the popular and by now commonly known Kṛṣṇa *mahāmantra*: 'Hare Kṛṣṇa, Hare Kṛṣṇa, Kṛṣṇa Kṛṣṇa, Hare Hare; Hare Rāma, Hare Rāma, Rāma Rāma, Hare Hare,' which followers of the Caitanya school hold to be particularly potent.

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 ends by stating that one 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 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 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* and *paramānanda* or *paramāhlāda*: the extremes of bliss and ecstasy 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.71.26). 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 were also drinking the nectar of the flute music coming from Kṛṣṇa's mouth through the vessels of their upraised ears. The calves stood transfixed with their mouths full of milk from the dripping udders. Shedding tears, they caressed Govinda [Kṛṣṇa] within their hearts with their eyes ...

The rivers found their force disrupted by their state of mind after hearing that 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 their arms in the forms of waves ...

O girlfriends, when those two [Kṛṣṇa and his brother], conspicuous by their cords and ropes for tying cows, lead the cows and cowherd boys into nearby forests, those amongst embodied beings who are capable of movement are made motionless by the sounds of that illustrious flute, with its sweet harmonies. The trees bristle with ecstasy—it is a wonderful thing. (X.21.9-19; see also X.35.4-9)

When Nārada entered one of Kṛṣṇa's palaces, it was as if he had entered the bliss of brahman. Kṛṣṇa, after all, is brahman, the supreme bliss (X.12.11; X.14.32). This rapturous experience is not just available to those fortunate enough to have taken birth during Kṛṣṇa's incarnation, but is available for anyone immersed in thoughts of Kṛṣṇa—Śuka, the narrator of the Bhāgavata, loses external consciousness simply from remembering Kṛṣṇa when being questioned by Parikṣit (X.12.44). The experience of bhakti yoga is not the detached self-awareness of puruṣa (ātman), devoid of content, that is indicated in the *Pātañjala Yoga Sūtras*. It is continuous blissful immersion in God's līlā, either directly by the inhabitants of Vraj, or, in Kṛṣṇa's absence, through meditation on his līlā as described in the Bhāgavata (X.47.37), and through the repetition of his name.

ULTIMATELY, HOWEVER, BHAKTI YOGA is a religion of surrender and grace. Whenever the residents of Vraj encounter any difficulty, they take complete refuge in Kṛṣṇa, and receive full protection. When the Vraj community was being inundated with cataclysmic rain by an infuriated Indra, their reaction was immediate: "Kṛṣṇa, most virtuous Kṛṣṇa, master—You are compassionate to your devotees. Please protect Gokula, which accepts you as Lord, from the wrath of this divinity" (X.25.13). When Kṛṣṇa's gopas (boy cowherd friends) encountered the huge demon Agha stretched out on the

ground preparing to devour them with his massive gaping jaws, they innocently say: "Will it devour us as we enter it? If so, it will be destroyed in an instant by Kṛṣṇa as Baka was." Thinking like this, they glanced at the beautiful face of Kṛṣṇa, the enemy of Baka, and ventured in, laughing and clapping their hands' (X.12.24).

Kṛṣṇa not only protects his devotees from physical danger, but delivers them from the clutches of māyā (illusion). Hearing and chanting about Kṛṣṇa purify the devotee and free him or her from the sufferings of saṁsāra because Kṛṣṇa is situated in the heart of the devotee and it is he who 'cleanses away all inauspicious things' (I.2.17). Unlike the Patañjalian system where *samādhi*, the enlightened state, is obtained by the personal disciplinary prowess of the meditator, the Bhāgavata advocates a grace-based system: it is Kṛṣṇa who bestows liberation (X.60.52). But, more important than liberation, it is Kṛṣṇa who bestows devotion, the ultimate goal for the human soul. The Bhāgavata does not deny that the ātman, the innermost self, can be realized through the mechanical self-discipline of Patañjalian practice, but the supreme Self, Kṛṣṇa, God himself, can only be attained by devotion, surrender and grace. Even the mighty Brahmā himself, the most powerful jīva in the universe, notes that 'one who has received even just a trace of grace from your two lotus feet understands the nature of the greatness of God, Bhagavān; no other individual will do so despite searching at length.' He prays that 'either in this life, or in another, or in one among the animals, may that great fortune occur through which I, even though just an individual, may become one of your devotees, and worship your blossom-like feet' (X.14.30). Without such devotion, the yogis with controlled minds cannot obtain the dust from Kṛṣṇa's lotus feet even after many lives of austerities (X.12.12); on the other hand, one who has attained this dust, does not desire the mystic powers of yoga, freedom from rebirth, or even the highest situation of Brahmā (X.13.37).

It is important to bear in mind that the devotees have no desire for liberation

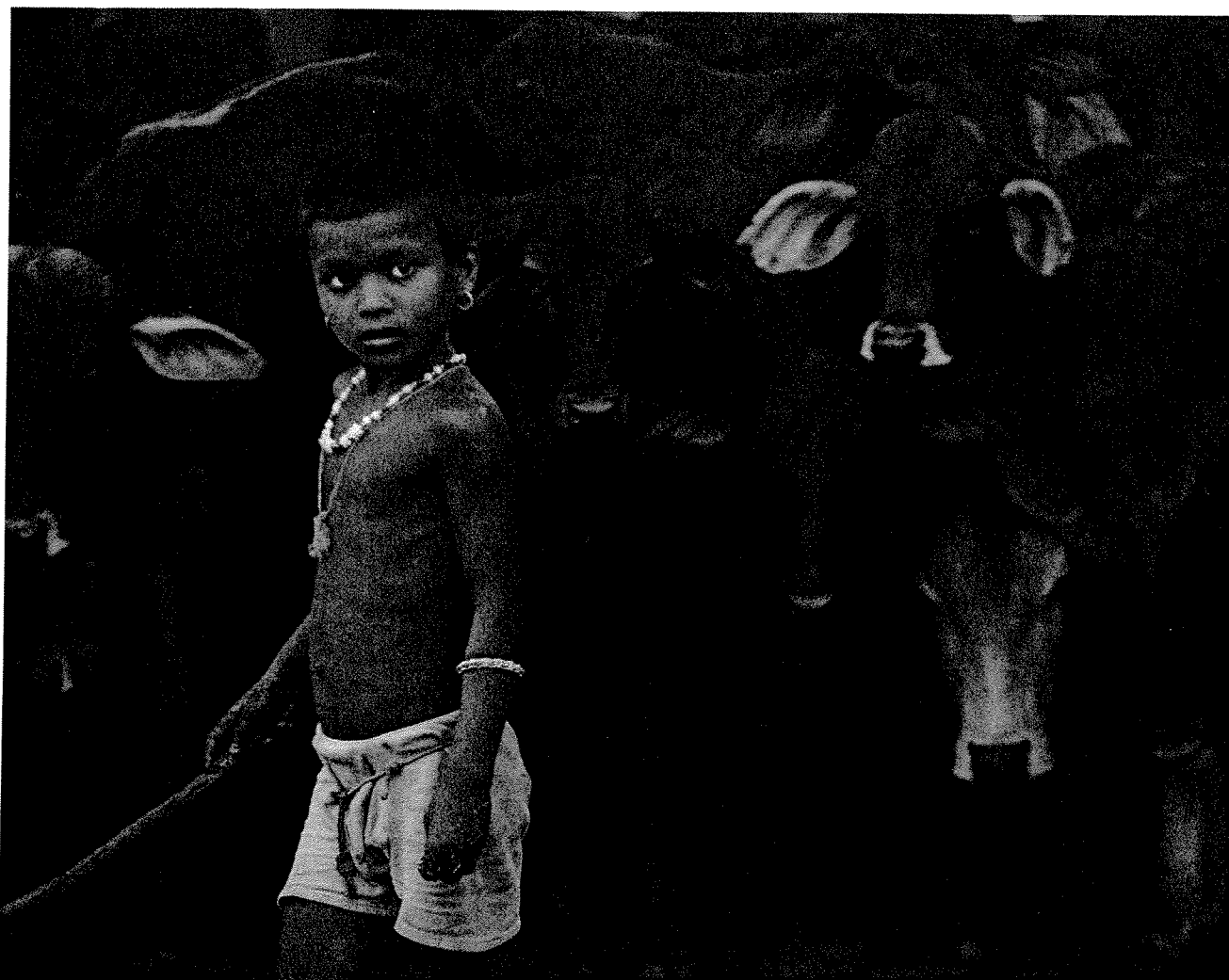
or self-realization; they are fully satisfied with their immersion in the stories of Kṛṣṇa's līlā (III.16.48; X.87.21). Even those who are self-realized—like Śuka, the narrator of the Bhāgavata, and other sages who have realized the ātman—are attracted to Kṛṣṇa. In other words, one can be self-realized and liberated (that is, be fully immersed in the pure awareness of the ātman and thus detached from the cycle of saṁsāra and situated in brahman), without knowing anything about the personal aspect of Kṛṣṇa, if one is not a devotee. Therefore, brahman, for the Bhāgavata, is multi-dimensional and not a monolithic or standardized experience for all yogis.

A conspicuous symbol of the concomitant notions of surrender and grace in the Bhāgavata, as illustrated in Brahmā's prayers above, is that surrender is often associated with Kṛṣṇa's lotus feet. Kṛṣṇa's feet are situated within the hearts of his devotees (X.6.37). They are the object of the devotees' meditations (X.38.6; X.72.4; X.11.6) and of that of the yogis (X.11.11). People cross over

tamas (darkness) through the lustre of their nails (X.38.7). They purify the three worlds (X.48.25) and are worshipped by all the major deities (X.38.8; X.338.25; X.69.18). Those who have attained them desire neither universal sovereignty, nor mystic power, nor even liberation (X.16.37)—even Kṛṣṇa's own consort, the goddess of fortune, performs austerity to achieve his lotus feet (X.16.36). What is considered the lowest part of the anatomy in India, the polluted feet, become the most desired and esteemed part in the case of God, thus stressing his absolute and complete purity and auspiciousness.

Another striking feature of the yoga of the Bhāgavata is that not only are Kṛṣṇa's devotees awarded liberation, but his enemies are too. Pūtana, a devourer of children, attained liberation because she offered her breast to Kṛṣṇa, even though she had smeared it with poison in an attempt to murder him (X.6.35). When the demon Agha, in the form of a serpent, was killed, 'an amazing great light rose up from the

thick coils of the snake, illuminating the ten directions with its own splendor. It waited in the sky for the Lord to emerge, and then entered into him before the very eyes of the residents of the celestial realms' (X.12.33). The same happens with Śiśupāla (X.74.45) and Dantavakra (X.78.9-10). Kṛṣṇa's mortal enemy Pauṇḍraka, like Kāṁsa, had his bondage destroyed 'because of his incessant meditation on Bhagavān.' He was awarded the liberation known as *sārūpya*, assuming 'the personal form of Kṛṣṇa' and also 'Kṛṣṇa's nature, simply by dint of coming in contact with Kṛṣṇa,' because 'even Kṛṣṇa's sworn enemies, attain the highest destination' (X.66.24; X.87.23). Not surprisingly, if even those inimical to Kṛṣṇa are involuntarily liberated simply by coming into contact with him, irrespective of their motives, then anyone and everyone is eligible to engage voluntarily in the process of bhakti yoga and attain the goal of pure devotion, irrespective of caste, social status, race, or gender. ▴



Cowherd, Vrindavan, India 2000. Photograph by Shawn Lakshmi Greenberg.