

Acknowledgements

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Introduction

THE BHĀGAVATA AS TEXT

Kṛṣṇa (usually anglicized as Krishna) is perhaps best known in the west as the speaker of the Bhagavad Gītā, the Song of God, which is a text located within the narrative of the Mahābhārata Epic. Considered by Hindus to be the incarnation of God, Kṛṣṇa inaugurated the present *yuga*, or world age, by his departure from this world shortly after the great Mahābhārata war. Although Kṛṣṇa's role in the Epic as statesman and friend of the five Pāṇḍavas is pivotal, he is not the protagonist of the story – the Epic gives little information pertaining to other aspects of his life. It is the tenth book of the Śrīmad Bhāgavata Purāṇa, 'The Beautiful Legend of God', generally referred to as the 'Bhāgavata Purāṇa' (or just the 'Bhāgavata'), that has been the principal textual source dedicated to the actual narrative of his incarnation and activities, at least over the last 1,000 years or so.¹ Moreover, it is not Kṛṣṇa's statesmanship in the Mahābhārata that has produced the best loved stories about this deity, nor is it his influential teachings in the Bhagavad Gītā: it is his *līlās* – play, pastimes or frolics – during his infancy, childhood and adolescence in the forests of Vṛndāvana, popularly known as Vraj,² among the men and women cowherds, that have been particularly relished by Hindus throughout the Indian subcontinent over the centuries.

In Vraj, Kṛṣṇa sported with his friends, played pranks on his neighbours, and dallied amorously with the young cowherd girls. This very personal depiction of God is the primary subject matter of the tenth book of the Bhāgavata Purāṇa. The stories

of Kṛṣṇa in Vraj have been, and, arguably, remain one of the two most influential textual sources of religious narrative in the Hindu religious landscape, along with the stories of Rāma from the Epic Rāmāyaṇa, if we are to judge on the basis of the themes that have surfaced in Hindu drama, poetry, dance, painting, song, literature, sculpture, iconography and temple worship over the last millennium and more. The popularity of the Kṛṣṇa of Vraj has certainly eclipsed the popularity of the Kṛṣṇa of the massive 100,000-verse Mahābhārata Epic, despite its Bhagavad Gītā. Hawley (1979: 202–3), for example, found that of 800 panels depicting Kṛṣṇa to have survived from the period prior to 1500 CE, only three refer with any clarity to the Bhagavad Gītā:

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

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

The Historical Context of the Bhāgavata

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

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

Despite what sometimes appears to be the partisan nature of the texts associated with one or the other of these two supreme beings (see chapters 63, 66, 88 and 89 in this text for examples), both camps accept and indeed extol the transcendent and absolute nature of the other, and of the Goddess Devī too, merely affirming that the other deity is to be considered a derivative or secondary manifestation of their respective deity, or, in the case of Devī, the *śakti*, or power, of the male divinity. The term 'monotheism', if applied to the Purāṇic tradition, needs to be

understood in the context of a supreme being, whether understood as Viṣṇu, Śiva or Devī, who can manifest him- or herself as other supreme beings (albeit all of them secondary to the original Godhead).⁷ The metaphysics of the Bhāgavata will be discussed further below.

Although Viṣṇu is a purely transcendent deity (unlike Śiva, who is more terrestrial in the Purāṇas, and typically associated with the Himālayas or the city of Vārāṇasī),⁸ he is generally said to have ten principal earthly incarnations,⁹ which appear according to time and place, some of them in animal form. The commonly accepted list¹⁰ of these incarnations in the Purāṇas is: Matsya, the fish; 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, and most particularly the incarnation of Kṛṣṇa.

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

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

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

It is an inconclusive task to try to assign specific dates to the Purāṇas, as shown by the considerable variation in the dates proposed by scholars for the Bhāgavata itself. Not the least of the problems is that the Purāṇas are a fluid body of literature that continued to be transformed through the centuries by the process of transmission and adaptation. These texts are

composed for public oral recitation, often in specific ritualistic contexts, and their reciters openly modified them in accordance with time and place as well as for sectarian considerations. Any datable piece of information that may be gleaned from the texts may only reflect the historical period in which that section of the text was inserted and may not reflect the date of other sections in the text.

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

tree (I.1.3), the essence of all the Vedas, Purāṇas and Ithāsa Epics (I.2.3; I.3.42).

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

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

here that the majority of scholars hold that the bulk of the material in most of the eighteen Purāṇas as we find them today reached its completion by the Gupta period about the fourth to the sixth centuries CE, on the grounds that neither the later dynasties nor later famous rulers such as Harṣa in the seventh century CE are to be found in the king lists contained in the texts.

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

Earliest Historical Evidence of Kṛṣṇa as a Divine Being

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

In one such source, Megasthenes, an ambassador of the Seleucid empire (established by one of Alexander's generals from the remains of the Macedonian empire) to the court of the Indian emperor Chandragupta Maurya at the end of the fourth century BCE, provides interesting evidence from outside India that is relevant to the early history of the divine Kṛṣṇa. Megasthenes wrote a book called *Indika*, the original of which has not been preserved, but which was quoted extensively by other ancient classical Greek writers whose works are extant, such as Arrian, Diodorus and Strabo.²¹ According to these sources, Megasthenes described an Indian tribe called the Souraseni, who worshipped Herakles in particular in their land, which had two great cities, Methora and Kleisobora, and a navigable river, the Jobares. It is well known that the Greeks and other ancients correlated foreign gods with their own divinities, and there seems little reasonable doubt (and almost all scholars agree) that the Souraseni refers to the Śūrasenas, a branch of the Yadu dynasty to which Kṛṣṇa belonged; Herakles refers to Kṛṣṇa, or

Hari-Kṛṣṇa; Methora to Mathurā, Kṛṣṇa's birthplace; Kleisobora to Kṛṣṇa pura, 'the city of Kṛṣṇa'; and the Jobares to the Yamunā river, where Kṛṣṇa sported. Quintus Curtius also mentions that when Alexander the Great confronted the Indian king Porus, the latter's soldiers were carrying an image of Herakles at their head.

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

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

THE THEOLOGY OF THE BHĀGAVATA

The Bhāgavata, like the Bhagavad Gītā before it, unambiguously presents Kṛṣṇa as the supreme being. The term *Bhagavān* is the designation most frequently used in the tenth book of the Bhāgavata to refer to Kṛṣṇa as God,²³ and this is illustrated by the very fact that the Bhāgavata Purāṇa, like the Bhagavad Gītā, uses this term in its very title.²⁴ *Bhagavān* literally means one possessing *bhaga*, a noun that in the Purāṇic and Epic period combines notions such as prosperity, dignity, distinction, excellence, majesty, power and beauty. The Vaiṣṇava schools differ, however, as to whether Viṣṇu is the ultimate and supreme *Bhagavān*, who periodically incarnates into the world in various forms – one of which is Kṛṣṇa – in order to protect *dharma* (righteousness), or whether Kṛṣṇa is the highest being, and Viṣṇu his incarnation for the purpose of the manifestation and maintenance of the cosmic order. The former position is held by the older Vaiṣṇava sects dominant in the south, which attained prominence under the great teachers Rāmānuja and Madhva, and the latter position surfaces most conspicuously across the north of the subcontinent in the sixteenth century, spearheaded by charismatics such as Caitanya and Vallabha. Both schools ultimately hold both Kṛṣṇa and Viṣṇu to be manifestations of the same real, eternal and transcendent personal being who appears in different forms, so, in terms of who came first, the difference is something of a plant and seed situation.

Kṛṣṇa as the Absolute Godhead

In the Mahābhārata, Harivaṃśa²⁵ and Viṣṇu Purāṇa, there is no doubt that Kṛṣṇa is an incarnation of Viṣṇu.²⁶ The roles, for the most part, have been somewhat reversed in the Bhāgavata: while there are abundant passages in the text that relate to Viṣṇu without explicitly subordinating him to Kṛṣṇa, particularly in the books prior to the tenth, the general thrust of the tenth book prioritizes Kṛṣṇa. In many ways, the very structure of the Purāṇa

culminates in the story of Kṛṣṇa's incarnation, with the first nine books forming a prologue to the full glory of *Bhagavān* in the tenth book, which, as was noted, takes up a quarter of the entire twelve books of the Purāṇa.

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

Thus the early books prepare the reader for the Bhāgavata's full revelation of God's personal nature that is disclosed in the tenth book. In this, the Bhāgavata, along with the Gītā, which can also be read as promoting Kṛṣṇa as the supreme being, is one of the two primary sources of scriptural authority relied upon by the Kṛṣṇa sects in their prioritization of Kṛṣṇa over Viṣṇu. Understandably, then, the sixteenth-century Kṛṣṇaite theologian Vallabha felt impelled to add the Bhāgavata Purāṇa as a fourth item to the *praṣṭhāna traya*, the three traditional primary scriptures used by Vedāntic sects to establish their authenticity – the Upaniṣads, the Vedānta Sūtras and the Bhagavad Gītā – and this in itself speaks to the necessity of this text

to Kṛṣṇa-centred theology.²⁷ While Vallabha himself wrote a commentary on the Vedānta Sūtras (in which he frequently quoted the Bhāgavata), and the Caitanya school eventually produced one under pressure from the other sects, this was primarily in order to gain recognition and acceptance in the intellectual circles of the time. It is the Bhāgavata that really fulfils the theological needs for these schools.

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

The importance of I.3.28 for Kṛṣṇaism, then, cannot be overestimated, and it overrides all conflicting statements for the Kṛṣṇa sects.²⁹ The commentators Viśvanātha and Gaṅgāśahāya consider it to be a *paribhāṣā sūtra*, an exploratory assertion that, while only occurring in one verse, illuminates the entire text, like a lamp that illuminates an entire house, although situated in only one place. Irrespective of this verse, there can be no doubt that Kṛṣṇa is privileged in the Bhāgavata. And there

is no doubt that he is God: he assumes the forms of Viṣṇu, Śiva and Brahmā for the maintenance, destruction and creation of the universe (I.2.23); a universe which is situated within him (X.14.22), and constituted from him (X.74.21). Indeed, Brahmā and Śiva are his instruments (X.71.8); together with Śrī, the goddess of fortune, they are only a fraction of a fraction of him (X.68.37). Nothing can be named which is not him (X.46.43), he is the soul of everything (X.40.12), the cause of this world – its creation, maintenance and dissolution – as well as the time factor that moves all things (XI.6.15). Eulogies of Kṛṣṇa as the absolute truth spill out of every page of the Bhāgavata. As in the Gītā, the purpose of his descent to earth is to eliminate the demons and protect the righteous (X.70.27). But, in the Bhāgavata (I.8.35; X.33.36), there is another reason why he incarnates in addition to this mission: Kṛṣṇa descends to engage in *līlā*, or devotional pastimes.

Līlā

The tenth book can be divided into two distinct and equal sections: the childhood pastimes of Kṛṣṇa in Vṛndāvana, or Vraj, called Vraj *līlā*, and the post-Vṛndāvana, adult activities. The moods of the two sections are quite distinct. Many of the chapters in the second section contain stories of Kṛṣṇa's battles with numerous demoniac kings, narrations of his heroic martial exploits, descriptions of his winning the hands of his various wives, and accounts of his statesmanship and lavish life in the royal household. This second section is regal, and resonates far more closely with the tone of the Mahābhārata than does the first section. The stories of the first section, in contrast, paint a delightfully different and far more intimate picture of the supreme being, and it is in this section that the term *līlā*, pastime, occurs most frequently. Here we find God stealing butter from the cowherd women and feeding it to the monkeys, hiding from his mother in fear as she chases him with a stick on account of his mischief, or dallying with the *gopī* cowherd girls in the moonlit forests of Vraj. As has been suggested above, it is the Kṛṣṇa of the first section who has

provided the themes that have been the most prominently depicted and represented in the devotional art forms that are so fundamental to Indian culture, not the Kṛṣṇa of the second section, or of the Mahābhārata or Bhagavad Gītā.

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

Thus, although all of God's activities, including creation, are play, the noun *līlā* is especially used in the tenth book of the Bhāgavata when God is enjoying himself as a child in the beautiful and idyllic landscape of Vraj, interacting with his friends and loved ones, free of any sense of mission or purpose. It is rarely used once Kṛṣṇa leaves Vraj and sets out to accomplish his mission and fulfil his promise to Brahmā to kill demons (although sometimes it is used in these contexts in the instrumental case³⁰ in the sense of 'effortlessly' or 'playfully'), and it is never used in the Bhagavad Gītā. The Gītā gives us Kṛṣṇa as God in the role of teacher imparting spiritual knowledge to humanity, while the Mahābhārata presents Kṛṣṇa as God in the role of diplomat scheming to bring about the destruction of the hosts of unruly armies, which had become a burden on the earth; both depict God with a mission. The Vraj section of Book X presents us with a description of God at play, God with no agenda other than to engage in *līlā* with his most intimate devotees. This observation is further reinforced if we consider

the eight or so usages of the word *vihāra*, 'pastime' or 'pleasure', in Book X, all of which occur only in the Vraj section.

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

A number of the usages of the noun *līlā* in the tenth book, inform the reader that the Lord has assumed a body for the sake of *līlā* (X.23.37; X.45.44; X.52.36; X.58.37). There is no other reason for the Lord's activities in the world than his voluntary decision to engage in pastimes. In this he is different from the *jīvas*, the souls in the world who are helplessly injected into bodies as a result of their *karma*, the reactions to actions performed in previous lives,³¹ and who are propelled along by forces beyond their control. This point is continually reinforced throughout the text. At the same time, it is also declared repeatedly that the Lord is *āptarāma*, self-satisfied. The Bhāgavata resonates with the discussion of the Vedāntīs in insisting that God is complete and requires nothing. His decision to engage

in *līlā*, then, does not point to a lack or need – it is an expression of his blissful nature. This is not to say that God does not enjoy himself – chapter 33, verse 23 tells us that although Kṛṣṇa is *svaratih*, 'one whose pleasure is self-contained', he still takes pleasure from his *līlā*. Moreover, we are informed that his *līlā* gives pleasure to those devoted to him – the residents of Vraj, including the livestock (X.23.36), the cowherd boys who accompany him on his adventures in the forests (X.12.3), and the elderly *gopīs* who enjoy themselves watching and laughing at his childhood *līlā* (X.8.24). Kṛṣṇa's *līlā* enchants the residents of Vraj (X.8.52). *Līlā*, then, is an opportunity for Kṛṣṇa and his devotees to enjoy themselves in the blissful and spontaneous reciprocation of love.

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

life for the Bhāgavata school, a goal unobtainable to all except God's highest and most intimate devotees. The text repeatedly tells us that he who is beyond the reach of the greatest of *yogīs* (X.9.9) is bound by the love of the residents of Vraj even to the point that, 'like a wooden puppet, he was controlled by them' (X.11.7).

Yogamāyā

A further term essential to a discussion of *līlā* is *yogamāyā*, the power of 'divine illusion'. The unqualified term *māyā*, in the Bhāgavata, is generally used in the same way that it is used in the Gītā (VII.14), and in Hindu thought in general, namely, the illusory power that keeps the *jīva* souls bewildered by the sense objects of this world and ensnared in *saṃsāra*, the cycle of birth and death, by their *karma*, or reactions to their previous actions (X.40.23). As we find extensively in Hindu philosophical discourse, the bonds of illusion are typically articulated in terms of attachment to one's body, home, wealth, spouse and offspring (X.48.27; X.60.52; X.63.40). *Māyā* is the force that prevents the *jīva* souls from realizing their true nature as *ātmā*, pure eternal consciousness,³² and diverts them into identifying with their external bodily covering as well as with the things of this world as objects of desire (X.14.44; X.51.46; X.70.28). As in the Gītā (IX.10), the Bhāgavata specifically and repeatedly subordinates this *māyā* to Kṛṣṇa – it is his *śakti*, power, a force subservient to his will.³³ In consonance with much of the Hindu tradition in general, then, the Bhāgavata portrays *māyā* in negative terms as the ultimate source and cause of bondage of the soul, and, consequently, of all the sufferings of the world.

Māyā has another face in the Bhāgavata, however. This role of *māyā* is especially represented by the name *yogamāyā*.³⁴ In contrast with the term *māyā*, which is generally used in connection with the *saṃsāric* world, *yogamāyā* is a term that only occurs in the context of Kṛṣṇa's *līlā*. In her personified form, *yogamāyā* is sent by Viṣṇu at the beginning of Book X to help his *līlā* by taking birth in Vraj as his sister (X.2.7). But more importantly, in another capacity, she covers the pure

liberated souls participating in the *līlā* with her power of illusion so that they do not perceive Kṛṣṇa as God, but rather as their friend, lover or child, etc. Were *yogamāyā* not to extend her influence in this way, the souls would realize Kṛṣṇa's true nature and consequently be incapable of interacting with him in *līlā* in these intimate modes. Kṛṣṇa relishes these personal associations far more than the conventional formal worship in awe and reverence that results from the awareness of his position as Lord and creator of everything. It is *yogamāyā* who ensures, with her illusory spell, that the *jīvas* in Kṛṣṇa's *līlā* remain unaware of Kṛṣṇa's real nature (X.11.2ff.; X.16.14; X.20.2; X.42.22; X.61.2).³⁵ Indeed, even Kṛṣṇa himself becomes so involved in his *līlā* that he sometimes seems to prefer to forget his own supremacy (X.12.27–8; X.70.47; X.77.23 and 28).³⁶ To put it differently, how could God truly play spontaneously and unceremoniously with anyone in the role of a son or friend, if everyone knew he was really God?

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

As both personality and power, *yogamāyā* serves Kṛṣṇa during his *līlās* in this world (and, according to the medieval commentators, in the *brahman* world of Goloka as well),³⁷ and it is clear that her influence is a positive and highly desirable one. Although even great *ṛṣīs* (sages) are anxious to *avoid* the illusory power of the conventional *saṃsāric māyā*, the greatest sage of all, Nārada, by contrast, is very eager to *experience* the power of the divine *yogamāyā* (X.69.19ff.). While the regular *māyā*

can only *disappear* by devotion to Kṛṣṇa, the divine *yogamāyā* can only *appear* by devotion to Kṛṣṇa (X.69.38). Just as entrance to the mundane world of *samsāra*, an undesirable state of affairs, depends on the pure knowledge of the *jīva* being enveloped by the influence of the *samsāric māyā*, entrance into the transcendent world of *līlā*, a desirable state of affairs, depends on the pure knowledge of the *jīva* being enveloped by the influence of the divine *yogamāyā*.

The Bhāgavata vividly illustrates *yogamāyā*'s essential role in the world of *līlā* when Kṛṣṇa's foster-mother, Yaśodā, looks into her son's mouth to see if he has eaten dirt, but sees the entire universe there instead (X.8.36). Becoming enlightened as to the real nature of both herself and Kṛṣṇa, she immediately loses her ability to interact with him as his mother and begins to bow down at his feet, spout Vedāntic-type philosophy, and eulogize him (X.8.4off.). Kṛṣṇa immediately 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 real parents, Vasudeva and Devakī, after they too had become aware of his supremacy (X.45.1). Kṛṣṇa doesn't want to be God all the time, he wants to enjoy *līlā* with his friends as an equal, or with his parents as a subordinate. As the text puts it: 'For those who could understand, *Bhagavān* Kṛṣṇa manifested the condition of [submitting] himself to the control of his dependants in this world' (X.11.9).

Being subject to the influence of *yogamāyā* and hence able to play such intimate roles in God's *līlā*, then, is the highest and rarest boon of human existence. The text repeatedly states that not even the gods, or most elevated personalities, or even Viṣṇu's eternal consort, the goddess of fortune herself, enjoy the grace bestowed on the residents of Vraj (X.9.20). Kṛṣṇa's foster-mother Yaśodā was able to chase Kṛṣṇa in anger, to spank him whom the greatest *yogīs* of all cannot reach even in their minds (X.9.9). So elevated are the residents of Vraj that Kṛṣṇa himself becomes subservient to them, 'like a wooden puppet, . . . controlled by them' (11.7). They are able to see Kṛṣṇa, whom *yogīs* cannot reach even after many births of austere disciplines

(X.12.12). All this is possible by the power of *yogamāyā*. Without her, there could be no *līlā*.

The Yoga of the Bhāgavata

Kṛṣṇa's *līlā* extends beyond the actual acts performed by Kṛṣṇa. Meditating upon his *līlā* is a process of *yoga*, 'union with the divine'.³⁸ Five of the seventeen verses where the term *līlā* is used in Book X as a noun occur in the context of the residents of Vraj singing about Kṛṣṇa's *līlā*.³⁹ Hearing, singing about and meditating upon Kṛṣṇa's *līlā* are the primary *yogic* activities in the Bhāgavata school and, indeed, head the list of the nine standard processes of *bhakti yoga*, the *yoga* of devotion, outlined in Book VII: hearing about Kṛṣṇa, singing about him, remembering him, serving him, worshipping him, making obeisance to him, dedicating all one's actions to him, confiding in him as a friend, and offering one's body and belongings to his service (VII.5.23-4).⁴⁰ The entire Bhāgavata Purāṇa is recited because Parīkṣit, 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). *Bhakti yoga* involves immersing the mind and senses in God; meditation, in this school, does not involve the withdrawal of the senses from their sense objects, or stilling the mind in the manner outlined in the Yoga Sūtras of Patañjali, the founder of one of the six classical schools of orthodox Indic thought.⁴¹

In Patañjali's *yoga* system, it is only when distractions from the external objects of the senses are eliminated and internal thoughts stilled that the soul, which is distinct from both the sensual body and the internal mind, can realize itself as pure awareness. *Bhakti yoga*, in contrast, involves saturating the senses with objects connected with Kṛṣṇa's *līlā*, and constantly filling the mind with thoughts of him. It is a process that transforms the focus of the mind and senses, rather than attempting to shut them down, and a saint is one whose mind and senses are used in this fashion (X.13.2). Singing and hearing about Kṛṣṇa's *līlā* with the sense organs of the tongue and the ear are

two prime activities in this regard, and the residents of Vraj are constantly engaged in this type of *bhakti yoga*. In fact, in the present world age of *kaliyuga*, the recommended process for worshipping God, *Bhagavān*, is the chanting and hearing of his name (XI.5.24). Indeed, for hundreds of years Kṛṣṇa's names have been recited repetitively all over the Indian subcontinent, either in unison with others, or in personal *mantra* meditation.⁴² According to the Bhāgavata, although the present age of *kaliyuga* is a 'storehouse of faults', it has one major redeeming quality: by simply chanting about Kṛṣṇa, one is freed from self-centred attachments, and can attain the highest destination (XII.3.51).

In addition to chanting Kṛṣṇa's name, by simply hearing the stories about Kṛṣṇa one overcomes ignorance (XI.6.48-9), forgets oneself (X.90.46), rejects all other desires (XI.6.44) and attains love for Kṛṣṇa (X.6.44). Echoing the Gītā (VIII.6-7), the Bhāgavata states that anyone whose mind is absorbed in Kṛṣṇa's feet is liberated from the material world at the time of death (X.2.37; X.90.50), does not experience suffering while still within it (X.11.58; X.87.40) and ultimately attains Kṛṣṇa's abode (X.90.50). More than this, those who are absorbed in this way are so satisfied that they do not even desire Kṛṣṇa's abode, let alone Brahmā's position, universal sovereignty or kingship (X.83.41-2). The stories of Kṛṣṇa's *līlā*, even if recited in the household, vanquish lust from the heart (X.33.39), purify (X.15.41), award the highest devotion (XI.31.28) and conquer even the unconquerable Lord (X.14.3). This practice was followed by the great *yogīs* of the past (X.14.5), and anyone rejecting this path toils uselessly (X.14.4). Even 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 *gopīs* imitated his

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

In the first book of the Bhāgavata, the text is presented as the sun, arisen after Kṛṣṇa departed to his abode, 'for all those who have lost their sight' (I.3.45). A verse in the section of the Padma Purāṇa called the Bhāgavata Māhātmya, 'Glorification of the Bhāgavata', states that the Bhāgavata is the Lord himself in this world (VI.193.20). In other words, the Bhāgavata is a literary substitute for Kṛṣṇa, and by reading, hearing and reciting the text itself one is interacting directly with God. Indeed, the Bhāgavata goes to great lengths to reinforce the point that hearing, chanting and meditating about Kṛṣṇa in his absence are as potent as interacting with Kṛṣṇa in person; Kṛṣṇa goes so far as to attempt to discourage the *gopīs* from personally meeting with him in favour of engaging in *bhakti yoga* at home: 'Love for me comes from hearing about me, seeing me, meditating on me and reciting my glories – not, in this way, by physical proximity. Therefore, return to your homes' (X.29.27). Indeed, Kṛṣṇa later states that the *gopīs* who had been prevented from meeting him in the forest were especially fortunate, because they were united with him by meditating upon him apart, with complete absorption, while those whose lover was on hand did not do so (X.47.35). The importance of meditating upon the stories of the Bhāgavata in isolation is underscored by

the fact that the last verse of Book X ends with the following message:

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

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

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

If continuous immersion in Kṛṣṇa's *līlā*, either directly or through the practice of *bhakti* meditation, is the goal of *yoga* and therefore of human life, what experience does this produce? The text is littered with terms such as *paramamudā*, *paramānanda* and *paramāhlāda*, the extremes of bliss experienced by Kṛṣṇa's devotees in their encounters with Kṛṣṇa. Simply from seeing Kṛṣṇa, his devotees are thrown into uncontrollable states of ecstasy, their eyes overflow with tears, and their body hairs

stand on end (X.38.26; X.38.35; X.41.28; X.71.25). Bliss spreads throughout the three worlds (X.27.25), and, in some of the most beautiful verses of the text, even the natural world is thrown into a stunned rapture simply by the sound of Kṛṣṇa's flute:

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

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

The rivers found their force disrupted by their state of mind after hearing the sound of Mukunda's [Kṛṣṇa's] flute, as could be seen from their whirlpools. Bearing offerings of lotus flowers, they grasped the two lotus feet of Murāri [Kṛṣṇa] and embraced them closely with 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 embodied beings who are capable of movement are made motionless by the sounds of that renowned 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 palaces, it was as if he had entered the bliss of *brahman*. Kṛṣṇa, after all, is *brahman*, the supreme bliss (X.12.11). This rapturous experience is not available only for those fortunate enough to have been born during Kṛṣṇa's incarnation, but also for anyone immersed in thought of Kṛṣṇa - Śuka, the narrator of the Bhāgavata, enters into a state of ecstatic trance simply from remembering Kṛṣṇa when questioned by king Parīkṣit (X.12.44). The experience of *bhakti yoga* is not the detached self-awareness of *puruṣa (ātmā)*,⁴³

of change is an illusory superimposition upon an unchanging, formless, qualityless and impersonal *brahman*, the ultimate reality.⁵⁵ Thus, everything in the realm of *prakṛti* is illusory, *māyā*;⁵⁶ the changing world of forms simply does not exist from the perspective of absolute reality – or, perhaps more accurately, everything that exists is in reality the changeless *brahman*. Similarly, the individuality of the *ātmā* is also illusory; there is not an infinite number of living entities: in reality there is only the undivided, all-pervading *brahman* – hence the name, *advaita*, of this school of philosophy. For Śaṅkara there is only one underlying truth and all apparent dualities perceived in existence – the world of forms and individuals – are the product of illusion, or *māyā*.

A number of later Vaiṣṇava commentators on the Vedānta Sūtra vigorously critiqued Śaṅkara's views. Rāmānuja in the twelfth century presented a position of *viśiṣṭādvaita*, 'differentiated non-duality', which modified the basic metaphysical concept of *advaita* by proposing that there were differentiations within ultimate reality. Rāmānuja posited a basic and eternal tripartite subdivision within *brahman*: *brahman* as supreme personal being, or *Īśvara*, whom he identified as Viṣṇu (also known as Nārāyaṇa); *prakṛti*; and the *jīvas*. These are eternal and real ontological categories for Rāmānuja, not illusory superimpositions on an undifferentiated *brahman*, as Śaṅkara had claimed, but they do not compromise the essential non-duality of the absolute since everything emanates from, and remains dependent upon, *brahman* as Viṣṇu. In one of Rāmānuja's analogies, the relationship of the supreme *brahman*, Viṣṇu, with *prakṛti* and *jīva* is like that of the body and the possessor of the body; although in one sense they are one, the latter is dependent upon, and supported by, the former. Madhva, in the thirteenth century (who wrote a commentary on the Bhāgavata), emphasized the divisions between these categories even further. In his system of *dvaita*, 'duality', Madhva posited five eternal and essential differences: between God and the souls, between God and matter, between souls and matter, between individual souls, and between individual atoms of matter. Both of these philosophers took great pains to oppose Śaṅkara's extreme *advaita*

non-dualism. Other Vaiṣṇava commentators on the Vedānta added their particular sectarian perspectives on the issue,⁵⁷ but, despite differences of nuance, they all shared the basic position of a *brahman* which incorporated *Īśvara*, God, the supreme personal being – Viṣṇu or, depending on the sect, Kṛṣṇa – a world of matter, and eternal, subordinate individualized souls who, in the liberated state, could interact with God in devotion and service. All these commentators drew upon the Upaniṣads, the Vedānta Sūtra and the Bhagavad Gītā as sources of authority.

Some scholars have attempted to correlate the *advaita* non-duality of the Bhāgavata with that of Śaṅkara, but this may have been at the expense of other ways of reading the non-duality promoted by the text, such as those understood by the Vaiṣṇava tradition of commentary (Sheridan, 1986). The tenth book of the Bhāgavata certainly does not promote the view that *prakṛti*, the manifest world, has no ultimate reality beyond the illusion of the individual as does Śaṅkara: *prakṛti* may be illusory in the sense that the forms of the world are temporary and ultimately dissolve back into the primordial matrix, but although it may not be the ultimate or ideal situation or destination of the *jīva*, it is nevertheless very real. The relationship between God and his *śaktis* (energies), such as inanimate *prakṛti* and animate *jīva* (soul), is one of possession and dependence: God is *śaktimān*, the possessor of *śakti*, and all *śakti* is produced from him.⁵⁸

Herein lie two fundamental differences between the *jīva* and *Īśvara*, God. *Īśvara*, who, as noted, is identified with the personal figure of Kṛṣṇa in the tenth book of the Bhāgavata, is *śaktimān*, the possessor and support of his *śakti* powers, whereas the *jīva* is a *śakti* that is supported. In other words God is independent, and both manifest reality and the *jīva*, although distinct, are dependent upon him. Rāmānuja's analogy is useful: the unit of body and soul are one, in a certain sense, but also different, the former being dependent on the latter, but not vice versa. Another major difference between the *jīva* and *Īśvara* is that the latter can never be subject to *māyā* (ignorance or illusion), whereas the *jīva* can. *Īśvara*, God, namely Kṛṣṇa – who is synonymous with *brahman* in the Bhāgavata – remains absolute

variation in circulation. A far more significant difference between the two Sāṅkhya systems is that the Bhāgavata presents a third ontological entity as the ultimate cause of both the *puruṣa* (souls) and *prakṛti* (matter) and of their union. This is *Īśvara*, God, and the text identifies this being as Kṛṣṇa. The term *Īśvara* – from the root *īś*, to have extraordinary power and sovereignty – is already used six times by the Atharvaveda, in *circa* 1000 BCE, and refers in the oldest texts to a personal but unnamed God. It is the term often preferred in philosophical discourse in debates over the validity of the concept of a personal creator and, in partial contrast to the term *Bhagavān*, is often associated more with a philosophical category in these contexts, rather than the specific personalities of supreme beings such as Viṣṇu and Kṛṣṇa. In the Bhāgavata, however, *Īśvara* is Kṛṣṇa, and it is he who propels the *puruṣa* – generally referred to as *ātmā* or *jīva* in this text – into the *prakṛtic* matrix at the beginning of each cosmic cycle, reactivating its specific *guṇa* disposition, as well as its inherited *karma* – the accumulated reactions to its previous activities – from its last birth in the previous cycle.⁵³

In addition to injecting the *jīvas* into *prakṛti*, Kṛṣṇa also agitates the *guṇas* to start the evolutionary process of material creation, as discussed above, and this culminates in the various forms of the world which accommodate the myriad *jīvas*. It is Kṛṣṇa's *śakti* (power – also known as *māyā*), in the form of time, that causes the stirrings of the *guṇas*. Each *jīva* is thus provided with a particular gross body (a set of sense and action organs) and subtle body (mind, intelligence and ego) that is appropriate to the *karma* and *guṇic* disposition with which it ended its previous life. The freedom of the pure transcendent *jīva* is thus delimited and curtailed when enveloped by these two extraneous and temporary bodies. Its liberation from this encapsulation from the perspective of the Bhāgavata was discussed in the previous section.

God is not only the efficient cause of creation, but also the material cause: the *jīvas* ultimately emanate from him, as does *prakṛti*. Thus all the main ingredients of reality – time, the mover of all things; *prakṛti*, the substratum for all material creation; and the souls who activate the forms that evolve from *prakṛti* –

are all energies, powers or expansions of Kṛṣṇa. God produces everything out of himself just as a spider spins a web (II.5.5). In this sense, all that exists is a transformation of a single cause, hence the *advaita*, monistic (or, more accurately, non-dualistic) element of the text, which will be discussed below: 'From myself I create, maintain and destroy myself in myself by means of myself in the form of the *guṇas*, senses and elements, through the power of my own *māyā*' (X.47.30). The *Īśvara* of the old theistic strains in Indic thought, then, is correlated with Viṣṇu and Kṛṣṇa by Vaiṣṇava texts such as the Bhāgavata, and, as will be discussed below, these personal beings, in turn, are correlated with the highest aspect of *brahman*, the absolute truth of the Upaniṣads and Vedānta.

The Vedānta of the Bhāgavata

The Vedānta Sūtra (Veda+anta: 'conclusion of the Vedas'; Sūtra: 'threads', or aphorisms) is a text written by Bādarāyaṇa to clarify, or harmonize, the disparate and seemingly conflicting statements of the Upaniṣads, the philosophical texts of the late Vedic period (although, in a sense, it achieved the opposite effect and spawned a new era of philosophical debate among different schools). If we posit that the goal of Indian philosophy is to account for the relationship of the visible world of change, both animate and inanimate, with the ultimate and absolute reality of existence, the Vedānta discusses the relationship between *brahman*, the supreme absolute truth; *ātmā*, the soul, or individualized feature of *brahman*; and manifest material reality. But, not surprisingly, this relationship has been construed variously by the principal Vedāntic commentators. Since the Bhāgavata is considered as Vyāsa's own commentary on the Vedānta Sūtra by certain traditional commentators,⁵⁴ and the text is permeated by Vedāntic terms and concepts, a brief outline of the Vedāntic tradition is essential in attempting to understand the metaphysical infrastructure of the tenth book.

The first extant commentary on the Vedānta, that of Śaṅkara in the eighth–ninth centuries CE, posited a monistic philosophy of radical *advaita*, or non-duality. For Śaṅkara, the entire world

philosophical school than a practical psychosomatic technique through which the *puruṣa* (soul) can realize itself as distinct from *prakṛti* (matter).⁴⁷ The philosophy of the Bhāgavata is a mixture of Vedānta terminology and Sāṅkhya metaphysics, which will be discussed below, and devotionalized *yoga* practice, which was discussed above.

The Sāṅkhya of the Bhāgavata

Scholars hold that the Bhāgavata Purāṇa has preserved an older, more theistic Sāṅkhya than that preserved by the founder of the Sāṅkhya school, Īśvarakṛṣṇa, which took an atheistic turn.⁴⁸ The Sāṅkhya (literally 'numeration') system as outlined by Īśvarakṛṣṇa perceives reality as the product of two distinct ontological categories: *prakṛti*, or the primordial material matrix of the physical universe, and *puruṣa*, the term used in this text for the soul, or conscious innermost self. As a result of the contact between these two entities, the material universe evolves in a sequential fashion. The catalysts in this evolutionary process are the three *guṇas*, literally strands or qualities, which are inherent in *prakṛti*. These are: *sattva*, goodness; *rajas*, action; and *tamas*, inertia. These *guṇas* are mentioned frequently throughout the text, as are the various substances evolving from *prakṛti*, and thus require some attention.

In and of themselves, the *guṇas* are influences, which are usually portrayed – and perhaps most easily understood – by their psychological manifestations; Sāṅkhya is both a cosmology and a psychology. Among a number of things, *sattva*, the purest of the *guṇas* when manifested in the mind, is typically characterized by tranquillity, happiness, discernment, detachment and performance of activity out of duty rather than personal gain; *rajas*, by hankering, energetic endeavour, power and the performance of activity according to duty, but with a desire for personal gain; and *tamas*, the least desired *guṇa*, by ignorance, lack of interest, lethargy and disregard for the performance of duty and constructive activity in general. The Gītā (chapters 14, 17 and 18) presents a wide range of symptoms connected with each of these three *guṇas*.⁴⁹ In cosmological terms, *sattva* is

associated with Viṣṇu and the maintenance of the universe, *rajas* with Brahmā and its creation, and *tamas* with Śiva and its destruction.⁵⁰

In terms of the evolution of the world from *prakṛti*, the primordial material matrix, just as the three primary colours intermix to produce an unlimited variety of colours, so the activation and interaction of these *guṇa* qualities in *prakṛti* result in the production of the entirety of physical forms and psychological dispositions of all manifest reality. The evolution of the universe from *prakṛti* can perhaps be likened to the churning of milk: when milk receives a catalyst and is churned, yogurt, curds or butter are produced, and these, in turn, can be further manipulated to produce tertiary derivative products – toffee, milk desserts, cheese, etc.⁵¹ Similarly, according to the Bhāgavata, the first substance evolving from *prakṛti* is *ahankāra*, or ego. When ego is 'churned' by the *guṇa* of *sattva*, *manas* (the mind), which engages in the functions of thinking, feeling, desiring, willing and the direction and motivation of the senses, is produced. From ego stirred by *rajas* comes *buddhi* (intelligence), which produces the functions of judgement, discrimination, doubt and memory. In the Sāṅkhya of the Bhāgavata, the powers behind the five senses – sight, taste, hearing, smell and touch – and the five organs of action – hand, leg, tongue, genitals and anus – also evolve from the interaction of ego and *rajas*. From the ego stirred by *tamas*, the powers behind the five senses – sound, sight, smell, taste and touch – are produced, and these, in turn, sequentially produce the five *bhūta*, or gross elements – ether, air, fire, water and earth. The Sāṅkhya system is classified in Indian thought as *satkārya*, namely, that the effect is present in the cause. Each category, except for *puruṣa* and *prakṛti* – the ultimate causes – at one end, and the gross elements – the final products – at the other, are both evolved and evolvers: they both have a subtler cause and produce effects grosser than themselves.

There are minor differences of evolutionary sequence between the Sāṅkhya of the Bhāgavata, and the classical Sāṅkhya of Īśvarakṛṣṇa,⁵² but the Bhāgavata (XI.22.2–3) recognizes several different schools of Sāṅkhya that define the categories slightly differently, so there seems to have been some taxonomical

even while they are still alive (XI.25.22); and beyond which there is no higher place (II.2.18; II.9.9). The peaceful ascetics who reach that place never return (IV.9.29; X.88.25-6). The residents of Vaikuṅṭha do not have material bodies, but have pure forms (VII.1.34). These forms are like that of Viṣṇu (III.15.14ff.), also known as Nārāyaṇa. Viṣṇu/Nārāyaṇa resides in Vaikuṅṭha with Śrī, the goddess of fortune, in palaces with crystal walls. The parks there shine like final liberation itself, and contain wish-fulfilling trees,⁴⁵ which blossom all the year round. There are fragrant winds, and creepers dripping with honey near bodies of water. Cries of exotic birds mingle with the humming of bees, and magnificent flowers bloom everywhere. Devotees of Viṣṇu along with their beautiful wives travel in aerial vehicles⁴⁶ made of jewels, emeralds and gold, but the beautiful smiling residents of this realm cannot distract the minds of the opposite sex, since everyone is absorbed in Kṛṣṇa (III.15.14-25).

The text says nothing about a separate realm called Goloka within *brahman*, exclusive to Kṛṣṇa himself as the Kṛṣṇa-based sects believe (the Viṣṇu-centred Vaiṣṇava sects would say Kṛṣṇa is the immanent aspect of Viṣṇu when he incarnates on earth, and who otherwise resides in Vaikuṅṭha in his transcendent aspect as Viṣṇu). However, all Vaiṣṇava commentators unanimously agree that Viṣṇu/Kṛṣṇa is an eternal transcendent being whose body is made of *brahman*, and who resides in an eternal personal *brahman* abode with his devotees. As will be discussed in the next section, they also agree that this personal aspect of *brahman* is the highest dimension of absolute truth, and not secondary to or derivative from some higher non-personal truth, a view that can be supported by the Bhāgavata. The text also speaks of Kṛṣṇa eternally residing on earth in Mathurā (X.1.28), where he took birth during his incarnation; as well as Dvārakā (XI.31.24), the city he established as his capital when on earth. These statements inform Vaiṣṇava belief that Kṛṣṇa's abode is not only in a transcendent *brahman* realm, but also simultaneously in the places where he enacted his *līlā* pastimes in this world (and hence it is highly desirable for aspiring devotees to live in such places, XI.29.10).

Kṛṣṇa, then, is presented in the Bhāgavata as the absolute and ultimate Godhead who descends from his eternal realm and enjoys *līlā* in this world with his intimate associates while also accomplishing his mission on earth. While the Bhāgavata introduces some unique theological concepts to the religious landscape of Purāṇic Hinduism, it is also very consciously appropriating established philosophical categories and vocabulary to do so. There are entire sections of the Bhāgavata dedicated to metaphysical exposition, and even the playful narratives of the tenth book are permeated with technical philosophical discourse. The author of the Bhāgavata is deeply schooled in Hindu thought and, as will be outlined below, devotes a good deal of attention and energy to grafting the theological Kṛṣṇa on to a metaphysical infrastructure incorporating the most established and dominant schools of thought prevalent in the Epic and Purāṇic periods.

THE PHILOSOPHY OF THE BHĀGAVATA

The Bhāgavata is not only sacred history and a theological treatise, but a philosophical text. Traditional sources name six schools of thought that emerged from the Upaniṣadic period of the late Vedic age, several in tension with the other schools, and each with its own focus and preference for a certain set of metaphysical terms. A basic understanding of at least three of these, which provide terms and concepts that pervade the entire text, is unavoidable in order to understand fully the theology of the tenth book of the Bhāgavata. One of these three, the Sāṅkhya school, posited a dualistic metaphysical system in which the created world evolved out of primordial matter, *prakṛti*, from within which the *puruṣa*, or soul (corresponding more or less to the *ātmā* of the Upaniṣads and *jīva* or *dehī* of the Bhagavad Gītā), must extricate itself. Another school, Vedānta, concerned itself with the relationship between *brahman*, the supreme truth of the Upaniṣads; *ātmā*, the soul or individualized feature of *brahman*; and the perceived world as a whole. Finally, Yoga is listed as one of the six schools, although it is less a

Those who have attained their shelter desire neither universal sovereignty, nor mystic power, nor even liberation (X.16.37). Even Kṛṣṇa's own consort, the goddess of fortune, undertakes austere disciplines to achieve Kṛṣṇa's lotus feet (X.16.36). What is considered the lowest part of the anatomy in India, the polluted feet, becomes 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 Book X is that not only are Kṛṣṇa's devotees awarded liberation, but so too are his enemies. Pūtanā, 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 serpent demon Agha was killed, 'an amazing great light rose up from the thick coils of the snake, illuminating the ten directions with its splendour. 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 demons such as Śiśupāla (X.74.45) and Dantavakra (X.78.9-10). Kṛṣṇa's mortal enemy Pauṇḍraka, like Kaṁsa, had his bondage destroyed 'through his unceasing meditation on *Bhagavān*'. He was awarded the liberation known as *sārūpya*, having the same form as the Lord, simply by coming into 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 just by coming into contact with him, irrespective of their motives, then, as will be discussed in the section on the sociology of the Bhāgavata, 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.

Kṛṣṇa's Form and Abode

Of great importance to the compiler of Book X of the Bhāgavata, given the authoritative nature of the Upaniṣads (the earliest philosophical texts of the late Vedic period) and the Vedānta Sūtras (one of the six classical treatises of orthodox Indic

philosophy), is to stress that Kṛṣṇa is *brahman*, the term given in these sources to the absolute truth beyond matter (X.3.13; X.10.33; X.13.61; X.14.32, etc.). The text also states that Kṛṣṇa's body is not made of the elements of *prakṛti* (matter) like the forms of this world (X.14.2). Kṛṣṇa is beyond the permutations of the *guṇas*, which, as will be discussed in detail in the next section, are the activating forces and essential ingredients in the production of the *prakṛtic* bodies of earth, water, fire, air and ether (X.3.19; X.3.24; X.27.4; X.29.14, etc.). Although *brahman* is acknowledged as being beyond matter and thought, and thus beyond description and conceptualization, Hindu texts such as the Bhāgavata attempt to illustrate it by such words as *sat*, *cit*, *ānanda* (eternity, knowledge and bliss) (X.3.24; X.13.54; X.14.22; X.38.7).

It is also important, here, to note that the tenth book of the Bhāgavata does not present Kṛṣṇa's form or personal characteristics as secondary derivations from a higher impersonal absolute. It is never stated that Kṛṣṇa's form and personality ultimately merge or dissolve into some supreme formless truth devoid of personality and qualities; after he had completed his mission on earth, Kṛṣṇa returned to his abode in his same body. While *brahman* is described in the usual impersonal Upaniṣadic phraseology in many sections of the text, particularly in the earlier books, the indications from the tenth book are that *brahman* also contains an eternal personal element, a realm where Kṛṣṇa and his form are eternal.

The transcendent abode of Kṛṣṇa is not described in detail in the tenth book, even though Kṛṣṇa reveals it to the *gopas* (X.28.14), but we are told that it is beyond darkness, and is pure, eternal, unlimited, conscious and effulgent *brahman*. Kṛṣṇa is worshipped there by the Vedic hymns, and the *gopas* were overwhelmed with the highest ecstasy upon seeing it (X.28.14-17). Elsewhere in the Bhāgavata, the text speaks of Vaikuṅṭha, adorable to all the worlds (X.12.26), as the highest realm where Viṣṇu resides (XII.24.14). This, too, is the highest region (IV.12.26); beyond the world of darkness and *samsāra* (the cycle of birth and death) (IV.24.29; X.88.25); the destination of those who have transcended the three *guṇas* (see p. xl),

devoid of content, that is indicated in Patañjali's 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, 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 instantly take complete refuge in Kṛṣṇa and receive full protection. When the Vraj community was being inundated with cataclysmic rain by an infuriated Indra, king of the celestials, their reaction was immediate: "Kṛṣṇa, most virtuous Kṛṣṇa, master – you are compassionate towards your devotees. Please protect Gokula, which accepts you as Lord, from the wrath of this divinity" (X.25.13). When Kṛṣṇa's *gopa* friends encountered the huge demon Agha stretched out on the ground preparing to devour them with his massive gaping jaws, their innocent sense of assurance in Kṛṣṇa's complete protection is absolute: "Will it devour us as we enter it? If so, it will be destroyed in an instant by Kṛṣṇa as Baka [the crane demon] was." Thinking thus, the boys 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 dangers, 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 *samsāra* 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 Pātañjalian system where *samādhi*, the enlightened state, can be obtained by the personal 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 devotion, the ultimate goal for the human soul, that is bestowed by Kṛṣṇa. The Bhāgavata does not deny that the individual *ātmā* (the innermost self) can be realized through the mechanical self-discipline of Pātañjalian-type 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 soul in the universe, notes that 'one who has received even 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, though just an individual, may become one of your devotees, and worship your blossom-like feet' (X.14.29–30). Without such devotion and grace, the *yogīs* with controlled minds cannot obtain the dust from Kṛṣṇa's lotus feet even after many births of discipline and 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.16.37).

It is important to bear in mind that the devotees of Kṛṣṇa have no desire for liberation or self-realization, but are fully satisfied with their immersion in the stories of Kṛṣṇa's *līlā* (X.87.21). There are five types of liberation in Bhāgavata theology,⁴⁴ but pure devotion entails renouncing even the desire for these. And as was discussed above, even those who are self-realized – like Śuka, the narrator of the Bhāgavata, and other sages who have realized the *ātmā* – are attracted to Kṛṣṇa. In other words, if one is not a devotee and has not received the Lord's grace one can be self-realized and liberated (that is, be fully immersed in the pure awareness of the *ātmā* [soul] and thus detached from the cycle of *samsāra* and situated in *brahman*), without knowing anything about the personal aspect of Kṛṣṇa. Therefore, as will be discussed further in the next section, *brahman*, for the Bhāgavata, is multi-dimensional and not a monolithic or standardized experience for all *yogīs*.

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 directed to Kṛṣṇa's lotus feet. Kṛṣṇa's feet are present within the hearts of his devotees (X.6.37). They are the object of the devotees' meditation (X.72.4), and of that of the *yogīs* (X.38.6). People cross over this world of darkness through the lustre of the nails of his feet (X.38.7). They purify the three worlds (X.48.25), and are worshipped by all the major deities (X.38.8; X.38.25; X.69.18).

and unaffected by *māyā* (X.28.6); the latter is his *śakti* power, and it can affect the recalcitrant *jīva*, but never the *śaktimān* who possesses them (X.87.38). Thus, on this level, there is a clear distinction between God himself and the souls manifested from him, even as, in so far as everything emanates from God, they are one in quality, that is, one *ātmā*. In this way, the essential non-duality of the text is not compromised, but neither is the reality of the world and the individuality of the soul denied.

An analogy that helps explain the concept of 'differentiated oneness', or 'oneness-in-difference', between God and his creations and emanations is that of the sun and sunlight. In one sense the sun and its light and heat are one, but in another they are different. We may sit on our veranda and enjoy the light and heat of the sun, but would soon be incinerated if the actual sun itself were to descend on to the veranda. The heat and light are *śaktis* (energies) of the sun, and are dependent on and produced by the sun, but the reverse is not the case. Similarly, the *jīva* and *prakṛti* are *śaktis* of God, one, yet different. One may extend the analogy further and note that the sun's energies produce clouds and fog which then obscure the sun from the vision of the creatures of the world, but the sun itself is never actually obscured. Similarly, God produces *māyā* (illusion), and this bewilders the *jīvas* of this world and prevents them from seeing God and perceiving things as they really are – emanations from God – but God himself is never actually obscured by his *māyā*.

This distinction between God and individual souls is not just maintained in the illusory embodied state, as Śaṅkara's *advaita* school and other monistic philosophies would hold,⁵⁹ but in some types of liberation as well. The great devotee Nārada, upon attaining perfection and becoming a spotless soul (*amal-ātmā*), gave up his body made of the material elements, and received a 'pure divine body' (I.6.29). Likewise, the child devotee Dhruva assumed a form 'brilliant like gold' before being transported to Viṣṇu's divine realm (IV.12.29). As was discussed in an earlier section (pp. xxxvii–xxxviii), Vaikuṅṭha, the pure abode of Viṣṇu beyond *samsāra*, is a *brahman* realm of pure non-*prakṛtic* forms⁶⁰ where the devotees and the Lord reside eternally as

individuals, and this is presented as the highest destination of the human soul. From the five types of liberation in Bhāgavata theology noted earlier, four explicitly involve the maintenance of a distinct individuality. Liberation, then, in the tenth book of the Bhāgavata, as in all Vaiṣṇava traditions, is not generic or one-size-fits-all; there are options. *Sāyujya*, impersonal liberation, or dissolving one's individuality and merging into God's body,⁶¹ is considered the lowest or least desired form of liberation by Vaiṣṇava sects. In fact, the Bhāgavata minimizes the very concept of liberation, the goal of almost all Indic philosophical traditions: those who have developed an attraction for Kṛṣṇa lose interest in personal liberation altogether (X.87.21).

In addition to the different types of liberation, there are indications in the text of different gradations of *brahman* realization as well: Śuka, the narrator of the entire Bhāgavata Purāṇa, despite being beyond all dualities and the influence of the *guṇas* and thus already a self-realized soul liberated from *samsāra* (I.4.4–5; II.1.9), was attracted to Kṛṣṇa's personality and activities, as were other sages who had attained the state beyond *samsāra* and realized their own *ātmā* (I.7.9–10; II.1.7). As was discussed earlier, the Bhāgavata does not deny that the *ātmā* can be realized through the mechanical self-discipline of *yoga* practice, but the supreme self, Kṛṣṇa, God himself, is another matter. Although ultimately non-dual, *brahman*, for the Bhāgavata, appears to be multi-dimensional; it is not a monolithic or universalized experience for all *yogīs*: 'The knowers of truth speak of that non-dual truth as *brahman* [the impersonal aspect of the absolute], *paramātmā* [the localized aspect of the absolute], and *bhagavān* [the personal aspect of the absolute]' (I.2.11). Those who have realized their own *ātmā*, and thus an aspect of *brahman* beyond *samsāra*, still consider the personal aspect of *brahman* as *Bhagavān* Kṛṣṇa to be higher, and yearn for it; it is Kṛṣṇa's consorts the *gopīs* who are promoted by the Bhāgavata as the highest embodied beings (X.47.58), not the liberated *yogīs* who have realized their personal *ātmās*.

Although the Bhāgavata takes an extremely non-dualistic (or monistic) tone in some passages⁶² (which some see as a result of

different chronological strata in the text),⁶³ its highest teachings are the performance of personal devotion to Kṛṣṇa both in the state of bondage and in the state of liberation. If there is any loss of the individualized self, it is not an ontological or metaphysical one, but a forgetfulness of one's own self through complete blissful absorption in meditation on God (X.90.46). *Bhakti* is not a means towards some higher monistic goal, but continues in the liberated state: the highest goal of life for the Bhāgavata is to reside as an eternal individual in an eternal divine abode, rendering loving devotion to an eternal personal supreme being, Viṣṇu/Kṛṣṇa. The distinction between God and devotee inherent in the act of devotion in liberation qualifies the text's non-dualism irrespective of any philosophical formulation.

Despite a number of passages that can be read from an *advaita* standpoint (for example III.7.6–12), a 'non-dualism-with-qualities', or 'difference-in-oneness' philosophy as proposed by the various Vaiṣṇava commentators, coupled with a plurality of eternally individual *jīvas*, is the philosophy most easily construed from the Bhāgavata as a whole, and certainly from the tenth book. However, an insistence on too specific a metaphysical system in these matters is likely to be more revelatory of the sectarian concerns of the commentator than of the author of the Bhāgavata. One would have to conclude that the philosophical specificities that became so important to later Vedāntic exegesis were not of such importance to the final redactor of the Bhāgavata. As we have seen, later Vaiṣṇava scholastics attempted a coherent philosophical understanding of this paradox of difference-in-oneness and, depending on the predilection of the interpreter, a system of 'qualified non-dualism', 'dualism in non-dualism', outright 'dualism', 'pure non-dualism' or 'inconceivable difference-in-identity' was the result. While the exact sectarian specifics of these various interpretations may not be explicit in the Bhāgavata itself, their basic thrust is certainly more compatible with the general philosophy of the text than is the philosophy of Śaṅkara. The *māyā* doctrine of Śaṅkara was undoubtedly a major influence on all the Vaiṣṇava commentators themselves, since they all post-dated Śaṅkara and united in opposition to it, but the doctrine is alien

to the text itself. Moreover, the very fact that almost all of the eighty-one commentators on the Bhāgavata have read the text from the perspective of one of the 'difference-in-identity' viewpoints speaks for itself (although the most influential of the commentators, Śrīdhara, in the fourteenth century, whose commentary is drawn on in the present translation, was in point of fact aligned with the *advaita* non-dualist school, even if he softened and devotionalized his non-dualist approach in the Bhāgavata).

In conclusion, then, the tenth book co-opts Vedāntic, Sāṅkhyān and Yogic terms and categories in promoting the person *Īśvara*, *Bhagavān* Kṛṣṇa, as the highest, absolute aspect of *brahman*. The theological Kṛṣṇa is thus embedded in a sophisticated philosophical treatise. That the endeavours of the author were successful in bolstering Kṛṣṇa's claim to supremacy by appropriating the metaphysical tools of the day is amply evidenced by the widespread popularity of this Purāṇa. Unlike most philosophical texts, however, which were typically the exclusive prerogative of the intellectuals among the elite *brāhmaṇa* priestly caste, it is the Bhāgavata's universal message that, as will be discussed below, has been especially instrumental in generating the immense appeal which the text still enjoys.

THE SOCIOLOGY OF BHAKTI IN THE BHĀGAVATA

The tenth book of the Bhāgavata, like the Gītā (IV.13), does not question the validity of the *varṇa* social system in terms of its everyday functional value (X.24.20; X.80.33). The *varṇa* system consisted of four occupations: that of the *brāhmaṇas*, a caste of teachers, priests and scholars; of the *kṣatriyas*, a caste of warriors and administrators; of the *vaiśyas*, a caste of merchants and landowners; and of the *śūdras*, a caste of labourers. The gender and caste affiliation of the redactor of the text is not in doubt. Apart from the fact that the Sanskrit literati were *a priori* male *brāhmaṇas* (and the author of the Bhāgavata is

different chronological strata in the text),⁶³ its highest teachings are the performance of personal devotion to Kṛṣṇa both in the state of bondage and in the state of liberation. If there is any loss of the individualized self, it is not an ontological or metaphysical one, but a forgetfulness of one's own self through complete blissful absorption in meditation on God (X.90.46). *Bhakti* is not a means towards some higher monistic goal, but continues in the liberated state: the highest goal of life for the Bhāgavata is to reside as an eternal individual in an eternal divine abode, rendering loving devotion to an eternal personal supreme being, Viṣṇu/Kṛṣṇa. The distinction between God and devotee inherent in the act of devotion in liberation qualifies the text's non-dualism irrespective of any philosophical formulation.

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particularly conspicuous in the Purāṇic genre in terms of his erudition), the *brāhmaṇas* are presented as the most exalted individuals in the Bhāgavata, at least in terms of the conventional *varṇa* social order. Kṛṣṇa himself says in the tenth book that he repeatedly offers homage to the *brāhmaṇa* caste, since they are the best friends of living entities (X.52.33). Moreover, Kṛṣṇa is the foremost of those devoted to *brāhmaṇas*, for they are the source of scripture and thus of his very abode (X.84.20). Indeed, the *brāhmaṇas* are the masters of himself, Kṛṣṇa, the highest deity (X.81.39), and dearer than his own four-armed form (X.81.39; X.86.54). Thus the Bhāgavata prioritizes and idealizes the *brāhmaṇa* caste in a number of passages.⁶⁴

The *kṣatriyas* are portrayed as useful and dear to Kṛṣṇa when they use their perishable bodies in the service of the *brāhmaṇas* (X.72.26), and when the citizens within their domains are protected and happy (X.73.21). But the text has a more ambiguous opinion of this caste, and warns against the illusory nature of hankering after kingdoms and profit, against the cruelty inflicted by kings on their citizens in their quest for personal aggrandizement, against the tendency of royal opulence to ensnare kings in *māyā*, and against the inclination of kings towards pride (X.73.10-14).⁶⁵ Overall, like the Purāṇic genre in general (and, for that matter, most Sanskrit literature), the stories in the tenth book are centred in the idealized world and lifestyles of the *brāhmaṇas* and *brāhmaṇa*-friendly *kṣatriyas*, but portray little of the actual life-experiences of *śūdras*. However, the world of the *vaiśyas* is amply portrayed in the Bhāgavata in so far as Kṛṣṇa's entire childhood is spent within the cowering community. This fact, in itself, makes a unique and powerful statement about *bhakti yoga*.

Moreover, and very importantly, although accepting the divisions of labour expressed by the classical *varṇa* social system, the Bhāgavata does not accept that one is bound to the occupation of the caste into which one happens to be born; it explicitly undermines caste by birthright by noting that caste should be determined according to one's innate nature, even if this nature involves performing the function of a caste other than the one

in which one happens to find oneself by birth (VII.2.31 and 35). This notion of a caste system determined by quality rather than birth can be read as implied in the Gītā (IV.13), but it is explicit in the Bhāgavata. The Bhāgavata thus radically goes against the dominant current of the times, which restricted individuals to activities prescribed for the caste into which they were born, irrespective of personal innate nature, propensities or inclination. The enormous significance of this should not be underestimated, given the context of the day.

Also of great significance is the fact that even while the Bhāgavata accepts the basic social order, albeit specifying that the division of labour should be determined by natural quality rather than birth, it elevates *bhakti*, or devotion to God, above it. This, of course, is a conspicuous feature of Hindu *bhakti* in general, but the Bhāgavata goes to some lengths to underscore this. Despite the prioritization of the *brāhmaṇas* noted above, the text considers a *cāṇḍāla*, outcaste, who is dedicated to Kṛṣṇa, to be superior to a *brāhmaṇa* who is not, even if the latter is endowed with all the ideal *brāhmanical* qualities (VII.9.10). No one is exempt from attaining the highest destination of life, devotion to God: the outcastes who live on the outskirts of town are also purified by hearing, glorifying and meditating on Kṛṣṇa (X.70.43). Kṛṣṇa specifically instructs Uddhava to speak of his teachings to all those who are devoted, 'even if they be from the *śūdra* caste' (XI.29.31). To appreciate the universality of the Bhāgavata one need only compare this to statements in the *dharma* texts that the Veda should not even be recited in the presence of a *śūdra* (Manu Dharmasāstra, IV.99) or, worse still, that if a *śūdra* intentionally listens to the Veda, his ears should be filled with molten lead; if he recites it, his tongue should be severed; and if he has mastered it, his body should be hacked to pieces (Gautama Dharmasāstra, XII.4).

Elsewhere in the Purāṇa (II.4.18), it is stated that even foreign tribes such as the Hūṇas, Yavanas and other non-Āryan⁶⁶ people are all purified if they take refuge with Kṛṣṇa. This is not mere rhetoric: we should recall, here, that one of the earliest pieces of archaeological evidence for the worship of Kṛṣṇa was the

column erected by Heliiodorus, a Greek devotee of *Bhagavān*. The Bhāgavata is quite serious about promoting the transcendence of *bhakti* to the social order: Sūta, the narrator of the entire Purāṇa, is born of a lowly mixed caste; Prahlāda, one of the foremost exemplars of *bhakti*, is the son of a demon and describes himself as of despicable birth (VII.9.12); and Nārada, the most distinguished of saintly devotee sages, is the son of a *śūdra* woman. One need only consider that Kṛṣṇa himself chose to share his most intimate *līlās* with a lowly cowherding community to realize how far the Bhāgavata tradition has gone in this direction. One can read such characteristics as indicating that the Bhāgavata may have been written by learned ascetics outside mainstream priestly or scholarly circles who drew mass support from the lower urban classes and thus offset the opposition of established orthopraxy (Hopkins, 1966).

The treatment of women follows similar lines. On the one hand, the secular expectations of women revealed in the text do not depart from those in the conventional texts dealing with *dharma*, or religious and social duties, such as the orthodox social codes given by Manu, the principal lawgiver in classical Hinduism. When Kṛṣṇa attempts to send the *gopīs* back to their husbands after they had abandoned everything to be with him in the forest, for example, he points out that:

The highest *dharma* [duty] of a woman is to serve her husband faithfully, to ensure the well-being of her relatives, and to nourish her children.

A husband who is not a sinner, even though he be of bad character, ill-fated, old, dull-headed, sick or poor, should not be abandoned by women who desire to attain heaven.

Without exception, the adultery of a woman of good birth does not lead to heaven. It is scandalous, fear-laden, worthless, fraught with difficulty and abhorrent. (X.29.24-6)

Similarly, when the *brāhmaṇa* women likewise abandon their duties to be with him, Kṛṣṇa, after assuring them that they could still be united with him in thought, sends them back to their husbands on the grounds that their presence at home is required

in order for their husbands to complete their sacrifices (X.23.19-34). Here, too, the Bhāgavata does not challenge the norms of its day in terms of the conventional expectations of gender roles.

Where the Bhāgavata dramatically departs from such roles is, again, in the context of *bhakti*, and this is best illustrated in the narrative above concerning the *gopīs*. Although Kṛṣṇa attempts to send the *gopīs* back to their husbands and domestic duties, they will hear nothing of it (unlike the *brāhmaṇa* wives, who return once Kṛṣṇa assures them that their families will not be angry with them). The *gopīs* call his bluff:

You, the knower of *dharma*, have declared that the occupational *dharma* of women consists of attending to friends, husbands and children. Then let this be our *dharma* when it comes to you, the source of this advice, O Lord – after all, you are the soul within all. (X.29.32)

Here and elsewhere the Bhāgavata gives a novel meaning to the traditional concept of *dharma*, normally understood as social and familial duty, by constructing it in the context of *bhakti* as denoting unalloyed devotion and service to Kṛṣṇa: 'Whatever activity is dedicated to me, the supreme, without self-interest, even if it be useless and performed out of fear or other such things, is *dharma*, O best of saintly persons' (XI.29.21).⁶⁷

In his famous concluding words in the Gītā (XVIII.66), Kṛṣṇa instructs Arjuna to abandon all conventional *dharma*, and simply surrender exclusively to him. He assures Arjuna that he will free him from any sinful reaction incurred from doing this, and thus he need not fear any consequences. The Bhāgavata chooses to illustrate this principle dramatically by having the *gopīs* abandon their husbands and even their children to be with him:

[T]he women of Vraj, enchanted by Kṛṣṇa, came to their lover, their earrings swinging in their haste, and unknown to one another.

Some, who were milking cows, abandoned the milking and

approached eagerly. Others had put milk on the fire, but then came without even removing [the milk or] the cakes [from the oven].

Others interrupted serving food, feeding their babies milk, and attending to their husbands. Still others were eating, but left their food. Others were putting on make-up, washing, or applying mascara to their eyes. They all went to be near Kṛṣṇa, their clothes and ornaments in disarray.

Their hearts had been stolen by Govinda [Kṛṣṇa], so they did not turn back when husbands, fathers, brothers and relatives tried to prevent them. They were in a state of rapture.

Some *gopīs*, not being able to find a way to leave, remained at home and thought of Kṛṣṇa with eyes closed, completely absorbed in meditation . . . [T]hey immediately left their bodies made of the *guṇas*. (X.29.4-11)

The theological message here is clear: the text portrays the *gopīs* as prepared to surrender everything in order to attain Kṛṣṇa, and as such they are exemplars of the highest possible achievement of the human soul. Since, in the mundane world, the love of the paramour is forbidden, ostracized and dangerous, the *gopīs* exemplify the highest attainable intensity of love for God – a love that totally disregards all repercussions; that cannot be bound by any material ethical convention; that transcends regulatory institutions such as that of matrimony; that pays no heed to social criticism; that is oblivious to personal danger, risk and censure; and that is prepared to sacrifice everything for the ultimate beloved, God. Just as in the Abrahamic tradition, Abraham was expected to be prepared to commit an immoral deed – the sacrifice of his own son Isaac – in order to demonstrate his total commitment to God, so the *gopīs* illustrate that the soul must be prepared to renounce conventional notions of duty and morality for the same end. They have thereby attained the highest goal of life, complete surrender to God.

Thus, while the conventional roles of women in everyday society are not challenged by the Bhāgavata, the text allows them to discard these roles in the context of *bhakti yoga* and, having done so, is ground-breaking in the Purāṇic genre by its

promotion of women as not just eligible devotees, but the *highest* of all *yogīs*. Uddhava, Kṛṣṇa's personal messenger, is so awed by the intensity and absoluteness of the *gopīs'* surrender to Kṛṣṇa that he wishes to become a shrub so that he might come in contact with even the dust from their feet:

'These *gopī* women are the highest embodied beings on the earth: their love for Govinda [Kṛṣṇa], the soul of every thing, is perfected. Those who are fearful of the material world aspire to this, and so do the sages, and so do we ourselves . . .

Aho! May I become any of the shrubs, creepers or plants in Vṛndāvana that enjoy the dust of the feet of these women. They have renounced their own relatives, who are so hard to give up, as well as the Āryan code of conduct and worshipped the feet of Mukunda [Kṛṣṇa], the sought-for goal of the sacred texts of revelation . . .

I pay eternal homage to the dust from the feet of the women of Nanda's Vraj.' (X.47.58-63)

The *gopīs* are certainly more elevated than dutiful *brāhmaṇas*: the wives of the *brāhmaṇas*, who had risked everything by turning their backs on their husbands in order to be with Kṛṣṇa, are presented as being far more spiritually advanced than their ritualistically meticulous *brāhmaṇa* husbands:

Seeing the supreme devotion of the women to *Bhagavān* Kṛṣṇa, they [the *brāhmaṇas*] lamented about their own lack of it, and rebuked themselves:

'Curses on that birth which is threefold,⁶⁸ curses on vows, curses on extensive learning, curses on our family lineage, curses on skill in rituals: we still remain averse to Adhokṣaja [Kṛṣṇa] . . .

Aho! See the unlimited devotion of these very women to Kṛṣṇa, the *guru* of the world. It has pierced the fetters of death under the guise of household life.

Neither the *saṃskāra* purificatory rites of the twice-born,⁶⁹ nor

residence in the house of the *guru*, nor austerity, nor inquiry into the self, nor rites of cleanliness, nor auspicious rituals were [practised] by these women.

Nonetheless, they were constant in devotion to Kṛṣṇa, the Lord of the lords of *yoga*, whose glories are renowned. This was not the case with us, even though we have undergone the *saṁskāra* and other such rites . . .⁷⁰

Aho! How fortunate we are to have wives such as these! Their devoutness has given rise to unwavering devotion to Hari in us.' (X.23.38-49)

The Bhāgavata thus both dismisses the myopic pettiness of ritualistic *brāhmaṇism* devoid of devotion, and clearly prioritizes the spiritual qualification of devotee women over the activities of the male twice-born *brāhmaṇas*. But more than this, in accepting women as the highest of all *yogīs*, including even all other *bhakti yogīs*, the Bhāgavata significantly surpasses the Gītā's mere acceptance of women devotees as qualified for liberation (IX.32), a statement which itself was radical for the times. And its teachings certainly contrast with the view expressed in *dharma* texts such as that of Manu, the principal Hindu law-giver, that 'it is a firmly established point of law that there is no ritual with Vedic verses for women' (Manusmṛti, IX.18).

It was, incidentally ignorance of the theological content of these very *gopī* passages that caused the Bhāgavata to be disparaged by a number of western missionaries and scholars in the colonial period, resulting even now in a continuing neglect of the text.⁷¹ It is thus important to draw attention to the fact that, while the theologies of Kṛṣṇa's amorous affairs with the *gopīs* are unique to the Kṛṣṇa tradition,⁷² the remainder of the tenth book, along with the entire Bhāgavata, shares the disdain for mundane sensuality that is so typical of the Hindu ascetic traditions: 'That woman is extremely foolish who, without smelling the honey of [Kṛṣṇa's] lotus feet, picks a lover who is a living corpse enveloped in nails, skin, and facial, body and head hair; and containing gas, bile, phlegm, stool, bowel worms, blood,

bone and flesh inside' (X.60.45). Nothing can 'give happiness to those who do not know the truth and are wandering about in this world after sex-pleasure' (X.87.34).

Such admonitions are not just directed at extra-marital relationships, but even to sensual attachments within marriage: 'Those who worship me [Kṛṣṇa] . . . and yet desire enjoyment in the relationship of marriage, are bewildered by my *māyā*' (X.60.52). There are numerous statements reiterating the point that service to Kṛṣṇa is obtained by the 'renunciation of worldly attachments' (X.83.39), and aspiring devotees free from desires beg Kṛṣṇa for deliverance from 'the dark well of the household' (X.85.45), as well as 'the bonds of illusion in the form of body, home, good company, wealth, wife and offspring, and such things' (X.48.27). The text takes pains to inform us that 'Anyone who has even once offered their mind to you [Kṛṣṇa] . . . does not again become attached to the household' (X.87.35), and 'ascetics [who] do not tear out the roots of lust in their hearts [are] . . . contemptible' (X.87.39). Whatever one may make of Kṛṣṇa's affairs with the *gopīs*, the text is extremely clear that any form of mundane sensuality is illusory, as it is based on a misidentification of the *ātmā*, or self, with the temporary material body and its extensions in the form of family, etc.

Thus, the overall theology seems clear: the exchange of mundane sexual pleasure between a man and a woman is looked down upon (X.60.38), but union between anyone and Kṛṣṇa is the highest goal in life; the Bhāgavata is not encouraging its readers to imitate Kṛṣṇa's activities. Indeed, as noted earlier, the concluding verse of the five *gopī* chapters states that a faithful person who hears of these *lilās* of Kṛṣṇa with the *gopīs* gains devotion for the Lord and is quickly freed 'from lust, the disease of the heart' (X.33.39). The bottom line is that the goal of *bhakti* is to immerse the mind, whether in a mood of love or hate, in Kṛṣṇa, because by doing so one becomes purified and attains liberation. As the Bhāgavata puts it: 'the king of the Cedis, Śīsupāla, attained perfection despite hating Hṛṣīkeṣa [Kṛṣṇa]. What then of those dear to Adhokṣaja [Kṛṣṇa]?' (X.29.13). Śīsupāla, Kaṇṣa and other demons immersed their mind in hatred, and the *gopīs* in amorous affection. Both were

fully immersed in thoughts of God, the culmination of devotional meditation. The goal of life is to become completely absorbed in Kṛṣṇa, and the means to accomplish this are secondary to the end. The Bhāgavata is unique in choosing simple women from a lowly cowherding community as the highest exemplars in this regard.

In conclusion, then, the Bhāgavata is radical in its validation of female spirituality, its undermining of caste by birthright, the extent of its elevation of low-caste devotees, and its implicit criticism of *brāhmaṇical* orthopraxy. The foregoing discussion has focused on the devotional implications of this stance for a present-day audience, since a deconstructive reading envisaging the text's own contemporary audience is beyond the scope of this introduction, but the historical milieu of the times must be kept in mind. It is only by envisaging the extent of *brāhmaṇical* hegemony, the actual day-to-day lot of low castes and outcastes, and the nature of the power imbalance in the conventional gender dynamics of orthodox Hinduism of the period, that the extent to which the Bhāgavata adjusted and redefined the socio-political order of its day can be appreciated. By claiming to be a literary substitute for the supreme Godhead, Kṛṣṇa, for all time subsequent to his incarnation, the author of the text is appropriating the spiritual cachet of a highly revered figure to gather the strength and authority realistically to challenge aspects of the social and cultural milieu of the day. Thus, irrespective of its theological, philosophical or, as will be discussed below, literary features, the Bhāgavata provided – and still provides – significant resources for potentially revolutionary social change.

THE BHĀGAVATA AS LITERATURE

The philosophical and literary erudition of the final redactor of the Bhāgavata is encyclopaedic. The text contains numerous references to the Vedic literature, exact paraphrases of Upaniṣadic verses, and explicit references to supplementary Vedic texts.⁷³ It is well aware of the two great Epics, the Rāmāyaṇa

and Mahābhārata, as well as other Purāṇas, and is replete with statements from the Dharmasāstra law books. The six philosophical schools are well known, especially, as has been noted, the Vedānta, Sāṅkhya and Yoga systems, which inform the metaphysics of the entire text.⁷⁴ Indeed, the philosophical sections can be so terse (and in some places, unintelligible) that the maxim *vidyāvātām bhāgavate parikṣā*, 'the Bhāgavata is the testing ground of scholars', was coined.⁷⁵ But, despite the obscurity of style in places, the final redactor of the text is not only a philosopher or theologian, but an epic poet; there are entire sections of the text, particularly the *pañcādhyāya*, the five chapters of the tenth book dedicated to Kṛṣṇa's amorous pastimes with the *gopīs*, that exhibit all the characteristics of exquisite *kāvya* poetry (see Schweig, forthcoming, for an extensive analysis of the *pañcādhyāya*). Indeed, although categorized as a Purāṇa, the tenth book of the Bhāgavata fulfils the requirements of, and has received recognition as, a *mahākāvya*, or epic poem, both as outlined in the fourteenth-century Sanskrit literary treatise, the *Sāhityadarpaṇa* (VI.559),⁷⁶ and in accordance with the criteria associated with the epic in western literary theory.⁷⁷

The sheer quantity of metres adopted by the Bhāgavata perhaps most amply testifies to the literary erudition and ambition of the author: with thirty-five metres used, the text clearly aspires to distinction in the epic genre (Vyas, 1974).⁷⁸ But, ultimately, the poetic quality of exceptional lyrical passages of the text, particularly in the tenth book, speak for themselves. Some of the most exquisite and heartfelt poetry is found in the songs of separation expressed by the *gopīs* after Kṛṣṇa has left them:

'O *āsvattha* tree! O *plakṣa* tree! O *nyagrodha* tree! Have you seen the son of Nanda at all? He has stolen our minds with his glances and smiles of love, and has gone.

O *kurabaka*, *aśoka*, *nāga*, *pumāga*, *campaka* trees! Has the younger brother of Balarāma [passed] by here? His smile steals away the pride of haughty women.

O auspicious *tulasī* plant, you who are dear to Govinda [Kṛṣṇa]!

Have you seen your most beloved, Acyuta [Kṛṣṇa], wearing you [as a garland covered] with swarms of bees?

O *mālatī* plant! O *mallikā* plant! O *jāti* plant! O *yūthikā* plant! Has Mādhava [Kṛṣṇa] passed by, awakening your love with the touch of his hand? Have you seen him?

O *cāta* [mango], *prīyāla*, *panasa* [bread-fruit], *asana*, *kovidāva*, *jambū* [rose-apple], *arka*, *bilva* [wood-apple], *bakula*, *ānra* [mango], *kadamba* and *nīpa* trees, and those others which grow on the shore of the Yamunā river and which exist to benefit others! Point us to the path [taken] by Kṛṣṇa. We have lost our hearts.

O earth, you are beautiful in that the hairs of your body [the trees] stand up from the bliss of the touch of the feet of Keśava [Kṛṣṇa]. What ascetic practice have you performed? . . .⁷⁹

O wife of the deer, has Acyuta [Kṛṣṇa] passed by here with his beloved, his limbs giving pleasure to your eyes? O friend, the scent from the jasmine garland of the Lord of our group is wafting here – a garland coloured with breast saffron contracted from the body of his lover.

O trees, did the younger brother of Balarāma wander here? Was he followed by swarms of bees, blinded with intoxication, on his *tulasī* [garland]? With his arm placed on the shoulder of his beloved, he [must have been] holding a lotus flower. And did he acknowledge with glances of love your bowing down?

Ask these creeping plants! Just see, although they are embracing the arms of the forest tree, they surely must have been touched by his fingernails for they are bristling with ecstasy.' (X.30.5–13)

These are beautiful verses, and scholars of the text have every right to say that 'the Bhāgavata can be ranked with the best of the literary works produced by mankind' (Vyas, 1974: 19).

The Sanskrit literary tradition's extensive analysis of the constituents of good poetry is a well-developed, rich and sophisticated one, as is the tenth book's adoption of many such qualities. Hence, irrespective of its other distinctive features, the tenth book merits the attention of literary specialists as an outstanding piece of poetic craftsmanship, particularly in its evocation of

rasa. As understood in literary and dramaturgical usage, *rasa* is the experience of a mood, or emotional sensibility, such as love or heroic vigour, that is generated by a well-crafted poem or performance and aroused in the mind of the qualified reader or listener. There are eight *rasas* identified in the earliest dramaturgical treatise, the Nāṭyaśāstra of Bharata (VI.39ff.): *śṛṅgāra*, eroticism; *vīra*, heroism; *raudra*, terror; *bībhatsa*, disgust; *hāsya*, humour; *karuṇa*, compassion, pathos; *adbhuta*, wonder; *bhaya-ānaka*, fear, dread. Bharata states that 'there is no drama without *rasa*', and the literary treatise, the Sāhityadarpaṇa (I.3), states that 'poetry is a sentence, whose soul is *rasa*'. According to Bharata (VI.31–3), just as various condiments, sauces, herbs and other ingredients combine to produce different satisfying, pleasurable tastes which are distinct from the flavour of any one of these ingredients individually, and which can be enjoyed by the gourmet, so the various emotions expressed through the disparate elements of a skilful play or piece of literature – the actors, protagonists, dialogue, character interaction, language, gestures, emotional expressions, scenery, and other ingredients of drama or poetry – combine together to be experienced and enjoyed by aesthetic connoisseurs as *rasa*. For the remainder of this section, we will note a few such literary features of the text, with a view to exposing the reader to some sense of the text as a poem.⁸⁰

The author of the Bhāgavata has made generous use of 'natural description' (*svabhāvokti*), and the entire story bears evidence of his skill in this regard. In *kāvya* (poetry) a poet describes natural settings not as a historian or geographer would, but in order to enhance the *rasa*, as the following exceptionally beautiful example illustrates:

Even *Bhagavān*, God himself, beholding those nights, with autumnal jasmine [*mallikā*] flowers blossoming, called upon his divine power of *yogamāyā*, and turned his thoughts towards enjoying love.

At that time, the moon, king of the constellations, arose in the east, covering the face of the heavens with its copper-coloured soothing rays. It wiped away the cares of the onlookers, like a

lover who has been absent for a long time wipes away the cares of his beloved.

Seeing that full disc, herald of the white night-lilies, reddened with fresh vermilion powder, its splendour like the face of Lakṣmī, the goddess of fortune, and seeing the forest coloured by its silky rays, Kṛṣṇa played [his flute] softly, capturing the hearts of the beautiful-eyed women. (X.29.1-3)

People are likewise depicted in vivid detail:

Yaśodā churned, swaying back and forth. Her bracelets were moving on her arms, which were tired from pulling the rope, and her earrings were swinging to and fro. *Mālatī* [jasmine] flowers dropped from her hair, and her face, with its beautiful eyebrows, was sweating. She wore a linen cloth bound by a girdle on her broad sloping hips, and her quivering breasts were leaking milk out of affection for her son. (X.9.3)

This description is quite elaborate, and not only brings to life the figure, dress and activities of Yaśodā, but reveals her state of mind. Skill in representing emotional states is obviously important for generating *rasa*, and the Bhāgavata has some superb verses in this regard, such as the following lines describing the state of mind of the *gopīs*:

Hearing Govinda [Kṛṣṇa] speak these unwelcome words, the dejected *gopīs* had their aspirations dashed and were inconsolable in their distress.

They stood silently, their red *bimba*-fruit-coloured lips faded by their sighs, and the vermilion powder on their breasts smeared by the mascara carried by their tears. Casting down their faces out of sorrow and scratching the ground with their feet, they became weighed down by extreme unhappiness. (X.29.28-9)

Inanimate natural objects are also commonly endowed with feelings in the tenth book, a literary device known as 'pathetic fallacy' in western literature. The Bhāgavata has some beautiful

examples of this in the songs of the *gopīs*, noted earlier, as well as in those of Kṛṣṇa's wives, the queens of Dvārakā, who also utter some of the most exquisite lines in the text:

'*Bho! Bho!* You thunder continuously, O ocean. You are not able to sleep, and have fallen into a state of insomnia. Or have your personal possessions been taken away by Mukunda [Kṛṣṇa]?⁵¹ You have entered the state in which we find ourselves – it is impossible to overcome.

O moon! You have been seized by powerful consumption, and do not dispel the darkness with your rays! Have you forgotten the words of Mukunda [Kṛṣṇa] like we have? *Bho!* You appear to us to be dumbstruck! . . .

O noble-minded mountain, supporter of the earth, you do not move, you do not speak! Are you thinking about some grave matter or, alas, do you yearn to place the lotus feet of the son of Nanda on your breast, as we do?

O rivers, wives of the ocean! Alas, your lakes are dry and you are much reduced. Desiring your Lord, your beauty in the form of lotuses has vanished now. You are just like us: our hearts have been stolen, and we are quite withered due to being deprived of the loving glance of Kṛṣṇa, the Lord of Madhu.' (X.90.17-23)

In addition to its ability to evoke *rasa*, good poetry, in Hindu aesthetics, is distinguished by its *alaṅkāras*, embellishments, or literary adornments. Defined variously by theorists as beauty (*Vāmana*), that which adds grace to poetry (*Daṇḍī*), and the poetic equivalent of ornaments on the body of a person (*Mam-maṭa*), *alaṅkāra* has been conceptualized as taking many forms. Understandably, many *alaṅkāras* can only be appreciated in the original Sanskrit, and the following examples can simply serve to alert the reader that the author of the tenth book is expertly adopting sophisticated poetic techniques, especially in the *pañcādhyāya*, the five chapters of the tenth book dedicated to Kṛṣṇa's amorous pastimes with the *gopīs*.

The most common *alaṅkāra* is *rūpaka*, the simile. Similes are too numerous to need exemplification – there are about 1,800

of them throughout the Purāṇa (Prasad, 1984) – nearly one in every ten verses – and they are especially visible in the tenth book. Nature is frequently invoked as the *upamāna*, the object of comparison; in the description of autumn in chapter 20 of the present text, for example, every verse from 4 onwards contains similes, and the passage is remarkable because nature is used to deliver a moral discourse on life. Perhaps the most common similes in Book X feature the lotus – lotus eyes, lotus face, lotus feet, etc. Some of these similes reveal a distinct skill of composition:

The boys of Vraja sat in many rows encircling Kṛṣṇa, with their faces turned towards him. Their eyes were wide with joy, and they glowed like petals round the pericarp of a lotus flower. (X.13.8)

Alaṅkāras can take many forms: *yamaka* (chime), for example, although sometimes considered to be somewhat artificial and laboured, is an *alaṅkāra* that consists of the repetition in a verse of the same word (or similar sequence of letters), but in different meanings.

*vilokya dūṣitām kṛṣṇām kṛṣṇaḥ kṛṣṇābinā vibhub
tasyā viśuddhim anvicchan sarpaṁ tam udavāsayat.* (X.16.1)

‘After seeing the [river] Yamunā [Kṛṣṇā] polluted by the black [kṛṣṇa] snake, Kṛṣṇa, the Almighty Lord, desired to purify it, and so banished that serpent.’ The word Kṛṣṇa is used three times consecutively in this passage to denote the river Yamunā, the black snake, and Kṛṣṇa himself. Another interesting *alaṅkāra* is *virodhābhāsa*, or contradiction, when two things appear, on one level, to be contradictory, yet in fact they are not. For example, Pradyumna is described as *anaṅga aṅgayutaḥ*, ‘the reincarnate Kāma himself’. In Sanskrit, there is an apparent contradiction in terms between the name of Kāma as *an-aṅga*, literally, the one without limbs, and the term used for embodied or reincarnated, *aṅga-yutaḥ*, literally, endowed with limbs (Pradyumna was a reincarnation of Kāma, who was sometimes

called *an-aṅga*, because his body was once consumed by the fire of Śiva’s anger). *Virodhābhāsa* is also invoked to remark that Kṛṣṇa, who is the eternal unborn, undergoes birth (e.g. X.3.5). Another *alaṅkāra* is *bhrāntimān* (the mistaken), when something is perceived as being other than it is, such as in the following beautiful example:

Peacocks danced there on the diverse pinnacles of the houses. Seeing the aloewood incense billowing forth from the holes [in the latticed windows], dear Parikṣit, they thought them to be clouds and cried out. (X.69.12)

Dhvani (suggestion) is another essential feature of good poetry that has been discussed extensively by the theoreticians. Mammaṭa’s *Kāvya-prakāśa* (1.4) states that poetry is at its most distinctive when the expressed meaning of a word or phrase is superseded by its suggested one. Indeed, just as the *Sāhityadarpaṇa* considered *rasa* to be the soul of poetry, according to another literary treatise, Ānandavardhana’s *Dhvanyāloka* (1.1), *dhvani* is to be considered *kāvyaśātmā* (the soul of poetry). The *Bhāgavata*’s tenth book has numerous instances of *dhvani*, the recognition and appreciation of which require a certain level of literary sophistication in the reader or listener.

Consider the following verses in chapter 47 where the *gopīs*, in the madness of their love when separated from Kṛṣṇa, chastise a bee, thinking it to be Kṛṣṇa’s messenger:

The *gopī* said:

12. ‘O keeper of honey, your friend is a cheat. Don’t touch our feet with your whiskers – they are [tinged] with the *kuṅkum* powder from the garlands in disarray on the breasts of our female rivals. Let the Lord of the Madhu dynasty carry the remnants [prasāda]⁸² of those haughty women [himself]. One who employs a messenger such as you would be ridiculed in the assembly of the Yadus.

13. He made us drink the bewildering nectar of his lips once, and then abandoned us – just like you immediately abandon flowers. How can the lotus-like goddess of fortune keep serving his lotus

feet? Surely her mind has also been stolen by the flattery of Uttamaśloka [Kṛṣṇa].

14. Why do you sing about that ancient One, the ruler of the Yadus, here in front of us, O six-legged one – we who are homeless? Let your fondness for Kṛṣṇa, that friend of the unconquerable Arjuna, be sung to his women companions. Since they are his beloveds, the pain in their breasts has been removed – let them provide you with what you desire.' (X.47.12–14)

The term used for bee in verse 14, *ṣaḍaṅghri*, means six-limbed (that is, a six-legged creature). Since four-legged animals are considered to be ignorant in comparison to two-legged humans, referring to the bee as six-legged implies the bee's even greater stupidity (hence, the *gopīs* add that anyone employing a messenger such as a bee would be the subject of ridicule in the assembly of the Yadus). The idea is that anyone who is a friend of the fickle Kṛṣṇa is very foolish indeed. Moreover, in verse 12 Kṛṣṇa is referred to by his name of Madhupati, the Lord of the Madhus, and the bee by another name, *madhupa*, the keeper of honey. The implication here is that just as the bees abandon flowers once they have tasted their nectar, so Kṛṣṇa has abandoned the *gopīs* after enjoying them (this play of words between Madhupati and *madhupa* is another example of the *alaṅkāra* of *yamaka* [chime], noted above). The tenth book of the Bhāgavata is rich with such literary features.

The characters of the Bhāgavata are all historical (in the sense that their stories are extensively described in the Mahābhārata and other Purāṇas, especially the Viṣṇu Purāṇa and Harivaṃśa), and hence the author is portraying them from within the well-known parameters of traditional history. The characters are fatalists, and almost all are gifted with a sophisticated philosophical outlook. Even creatures such as the serpent Kāliya are quite lucid, and the eulogy of the serpent's wives to Kṛṣṇa is philosophically elaborate, and succinctly summarizes the main contours of the philosophy of the Bhāgavata (X.16.34–53).

I hope these brief illustrations have given the reader some sense that, in addition to its theological and other distinguishing qualities, the Bhāgavata can be appreciated simply on its literary

merits, and, from this perspective alone, deserves close attention. This discussion has focused on the merits of the text – known as *gunas*, distinctive qualities – but, as with any piece of literature, faults can be found. The word for these is *dosas*, debilitating distractions, or deficiencies that destroy distinctiveness in poetry. For example, excessive exaggeration is a *doṣa* – the poet may be trying too hard for distinction, with more energy than skill, and the language may become too ornate, or so erudite that it requires philosophical clarification (one of the qualities of good poetry is *prasāda*, or clarity). Or the language may be clumsy, so that the play on words is compromised.⁸³ The identification of both *gunas* and *doṣas* requires a certain level of erudition, and there is as much room for differences of opinion among Sanskrit literati as among connoisseurs of any other literary tradition. One can find laboured verses in the tenth book, and sections so terse and incomprehensible that commentators differ considerably as to their meaning. And there are the regular faults inevitable in any text of such size, such as the distortion of words to fulfil the necessities of metre. But, overall, the tenth book of the Bhāgavata ranks as an outstanding product of Sanskrit literature. Perhaps more significantly, it has inspired more derivative literature, poetry, drama, dance, theatre and art than any other text in the history of Sanskrit literature, with the possible exception of the Rāmāyaṇa.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

However one reads the Bhāgavata – as scripture, epic, poetry, theology, philosophy or literature – one should keep in mind, as one embarks upon reading the text, that it claims to be sacred history. For most western scholars, the tenth book is likely to be read as a mythological or religio-allegorical story composed to impart a specific set of philosophical views, theological beliefs and socio-cultural values. But it is important to bear in mind that Kṛṣṇa is not viewed as a symbolic figure by his devotees – or, if the Bhāgavata's depiction of Kṛṣṇa's earthly *līlā* is to be considered allegorical in so far as it points to an ultimate,

transcendent blissful state of divine interaction between the perfected soul and a personal God, then, for the devotee, it is historically real allegory. From the perspective of generations of devotees all over the Indian subcontinent across the ages who have imbibed and perpetuated the story in so many different forms, the incarnation of Kṛṣṇa is not a myth: 'the life of Krishna to the Hindu . . . is as historical as the life of Jesus the Christ to the Christian' (Abhedananda, 1967: 31). However our modern, rational, post-enlightenment sensitivities might prefer to intellectualize and interpret the story, one should not forget that the Bhāgavata itself claims to be a record of the events that transpired when the absolute Godhead personally appeared in the world, a real-life divine being – the supreme being, no less – who broke into human time, space and history, and performed superhuman deeds.

Moreover, as a text, the Bhāgavata presents itself not just as a record of sacred history, but as a literary substitute for Kṛṣṇa after his departure from the world – the *vāṇmayāvatāra*, or literary incarnation of God. Therefore, as noted earlier, just as those who were fortunate enough to encounter Kṛṣṇa personally when he was on earth were awarded liberation, the concluding verses of the entire Purāṇa claim that those born after the departure of Kṛṣṇa to his abode who are fortunate enough to encounter the Bhāgavata Purāṇa, listen to it, read it and contemplate it constantly with a devoted heart, will likewise attain liberation (XII.13.18).

Whether one reads the text as literary allegory or real-life allegory, with a view to liberation or out of cultural curiosity, it is hard to resist the appeal of the blue, lotus-eyed Lord. The irresistible call of Kṛṣṇa's flute has enticed numerous Hindus (and, more recently, people all over the world)⁸⁴ to sacrifice everything in order to attain his lotus feet, and drawn countless more throughout the ages to participate in the process of *bhakti yoga*. The tenth book of the Bhāgavata has inspired generations of artists, dramatists, musicians, poets, singers, writers, dancers, sculptors, architects and temple-patrons across the centuries. Its stories are well known to every Hindu household across the length and breadth of the Indian subcontinent, and celebrated

in regional festivals all year round. As such, the lotus-eyed Lord merits a unique and illustrious presence on the religious landscape of the world's great traditions, and the Bhāgavata a distinguished place among the masterpieces of world literature.

NOTES

1. There are two other important sources containing the story of Kṛṣṇa's life: the Harivaṃśa, a sizeable appendix to the Mahābhārata, and another Purāṇa, the Viṣṇu Purāṇa. Scholars (e.g. Sheth, 1984, and Matchett, 2001) generally consider the Harivaṃśa to be the older of these sources, followed by the Viṣṇu Purāṇa and then the Bhāgavata Purāṇa. However, at least over the last millennium, the Bhāgavata Purāṇa has eclipsed these other two sources in popularity, as attested by the sheer number of commentaries written on this text. This will be discussed further below.
2. Present-day Vraj is located between Delhi and Agra in the state of Uttar Pradesh, in the northwest of the Indian subcontinent.
3. Bonazzoli (1979) has determined that the actual number of verses in the Purāṇas is, indeed, almost 400,000.
4. Brahmā 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 with a finite life-span.
5. Indeed, followers of this Purāṇa claimed that it is the Devi Bhāgavata that is referred to by the reference to 'the Bhāgavata' in the list of eighteen Purāṇas (see Brown, 1983; and Bryant, 2002).
6. See Rocher (1986: 105) and Gonda (1954: 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-centred texts attribute to Śiva the roles of creator and preserver, in the broader Purāṇic scheme he is the destroyer.
7. Thus, in the Bhāgavata, Viṣṇu, in addition to being able to become manifest in unlimited other identical Viṣṇu forms (e.g. chapter 13 of the present text), produces from himself the form of Śiva for a specific function – to perform the task of destruction at the end of the universe (Book X, chapter 71, verse 8; Book I, chapter 2,

verse 23 – hereafter, for this text, X.71.8 etc.); and into the Goddess, Devī, or Śakti, for another function – to reveal the actual stuff of the universe, *prakṛti*, and perform other tasks such as cover the souls with illusion in her capacity of *Māyā* (see p. xxvii). Viṣṇu also produces the *jīvas*, or *ātmās* (souls), who populate the world, and he can also empower certain *jīvas* to perform extraordinary tasks, such as those performed by Brahmā, who creates the actual forms in the world out of *prakṛti*. Such *jīvas* are considered empowered incarnations.

8. See X.88.3–5, where Śiva is associated with the *guṇas* and material prosperity, while Viṣṇu is associated with transcendence and the state beyond the *guṇas*.
9. The Bhāgavata Purāṇa, while mentioning twenty-two principal incarnations, states that they are actually innumerable (I.3.26).
10. There are some minor variations between lists, chiefly in connection with the Buddha.
11. Madhva, in the thirteenth century, refers to some commentaries that are not presently available, as does Jīva Gosvāmī in the sixteenth century.
12. An English translation of the Viṣṇu Purāṇa by H. H. Wilson also appeared in 1840.
13. The Bhāgavata is said to have 18,000 verses, both in its own colophons, and in other Purāṇas. In fact it has 16,256.
14. *Bhagavān*, as will be discussed further on p. xix, literally means possessor of *bhaga*, fame, majesty or prosperity. While it is a title sometimes used for other gods, and even on occasion powerful mortals, when used with Kṛṣṇa it means God. Bhagavad Gītā means the song of God, and Bhāgavata Purāṇa means the story, legend or history of God.
15. The *kaliyuga* is the last and most degenerate of the four world ages in terms of human religiosity. Purāṇic narrative holds that, prior to this age, people's intellectual abilities were such that they could easily remember the sacred texts, and thus there was no reason to codify them or preserve them in writing. At the onset of the fourth age, however, people's ability to remember began to wane, and so Vyāsa compiled both the Vedas and the Purāṇas, and committed them to writing.
16. Examples in the Bhāgavata include the stories of Purūravas and Urvaśī (LX.14.15ff.), and of Indra and Vṛtra (V.10–14).
17. For overviews of the development of the Kṛṣṇa tradition see Bhandarkar (1913); Jaiswal (1967); Raychaudhuri (1975); and Preciado-Solis (1984). The earliest evidence pertaining to the

figure of Viṣṇu need not detain us here, but for an overview of Viṣṇu in the Vedic period see Gonda (1954).

18. See Preciado-Solis (1984) for an overview.
19. The reference is plausible because it describes Kṛṣṇa as Devakīputra, the son of Devakī, who is indeed Kṛṣṇa's mother in the Purāṇas; while the names Kṛṣṇa and Devakī may not have been uncommon in this period, their combination as mother and son certainly reduces the odds of a chance correspondence. But the correspondence nonetheless remains questionable, because this Upaniṣadic Kṛṣṇa is the recipient of some esoteric teachings from the sage Ghorā Ṇgirasa. There are no stories connecting the Purāṇic and Epic Kṛṣṇa (whose boyhood teacher was Sāndīpani Muni, and whose family *guru* was Garga Muni) with Ghorā Ṇgirasa, or with such teachings.
20. These include: Yāska's Nirukta, an etymological dictionary of *circa* the fifth century BCE; the famous Sanskrit grammar, the Aṣṭādhyāyī of Pāṇini, dated *circa* the fourth century BCE; the Baudhāyana Dharma Sūtra, *circa* the fourth century BCE; the Arthaśāstra, also *circa* fourth century BCE; and the Mahānārāyaṇa Upaniṣad of the Taittirīya Āraṇyaka, *circa* third century BCE.
21. These references have been culled by Dahlquist (1962).
22. See Preciado-Solis (1984) for references.
23. Although the term *Bhagavān* is mostly associated with Kṛṣṇa, it is also used in the tenth book for Śiva (X.62.5; X.89.3), and even for other powerful but not supreme beings such as Kṛṣṇa's eagle carrier Garuḍa (X.17.5); the powerful sages Vyāsa (X.87.48) and Nārada (X.36.16); the narrators Sūta (X.52.19) and Śuka (X.75.1–2; X.80.1); Kṛṣṇa's son Pradyumna (X.55.20); and even for a lowly *brāhmaṇa* (X.89.30).
24. The 'n' of *Bhagavān* is transformed into the 'd' and 'ta' in 'Bhagavad' and 'Bhāgavata' respectively, for grammatical reasons; likewise with the difference in vowel length between 'a' and 'ā'.
25. As noted earlier, the Harivaṃśa, which also narrates the story of Kṛṣṇa, is a sizeable appendix to the Mahābhārata.
26. Thus Rāmānuja, an important Vaiṣṇava theologian, prioritized the Viṣṇu Purāṇa and does not even refer to the Bhāgavata despite the fact that it seems highly unlikely that he was unaware of it (Bryant, 2002: 52–3).
27. Although there were six schools of orthodox thought in ancient India (and they all survive in various forms at the present day), it has been Vedānta that has emerged as the school that has had the

most influence on philosophical thought over the last millennium (this school will be discussed more fully on pp. xliii–xliv). Therefore, the founders of the most enduring new schools of thought over the last millennium have primarily been Vedāntis – interpreters of the Vedānta. Vedāntis have traditionally given special recognition to the *praṣṭhāna traya*, and any new theology was expected to account for itself from within the parameters of these primary sources. While the Gītā is undoubtedly a Kṛṣṇa-centred text, the Upaniṣads and Vedānta Sūtras do not even mention Kṛṣṇa (except, questionably, for the brief cryptic reference in the Chāndogya Upaniṣad mentioned earlier), hence Vallabha's inclination to expand the corpus to include the Bhāgavata.

28. The concept of *aṁśa* can be used in connection with other personal aspects of Godhead such as the goddess: Rukmiṇī, one of Kṛṣṇa's wives, is called an *aṁśa* of Śrī, the goddess of fortune, in this text.
29. There are, in fact, other verses in the tenth book which specifically refer to Kṛṣṇa as an *aṁśa*. In X.38.32 and X.41.46, both Kṛṣṇa and his brother Balarāma are together described as having descended as *aṁśas*. In X.89.59, Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna are referred to by Viṣṇu himself as *kalāvatīrṇau*, 'incarnated as *kalaś* [partial incarnations]'. In X.20.48, Kṛṣṇa and Balarāma, again together, are referred to as *kalābhyām bareḥ* '[partial incarnations] of Hari', where Hari refers to Viṣṇu. See chapter 2, note 1 for related discussion and Sheth (1982) for a fuller treatment of this issue, and the means taken by the commentators of the Kṛṣṇa sects to account for such statements. Such tension, understandably, allows the Viṣṇu sects to insist that Viṣṇu is the supreme, and Kṛṣṇa Viṣṇu's *aṁśa*. These seemingly conflicting statements also support the view of those who see the text as consisting of chronological strata rather than being a consistent whole.
30. In Sanskrit, unlike classical Greek or Latin, there is a separate case called the instrumental, which denotes, among other things, the means or manner by which an action is accomplished.
31. Every action plants a seed, in Indic thought, and this seed eventually bears the fruit of a corresponding reaction. Since actions with their inherent reactions are generated at every instant, and the fruit of these reactions provokes further actions with new seeds of reactions, the planting and coming to fruition of *karma* is unlimited, and spills over from one lifetime to the next. Hence *samsāra*, the cycle of birth and death, is potentially eternal, and the

- goal of most Indic religious and philosophical systems is to break free from this self-perpetuating situation and attain liberation.
32. *Jīva* is the term usually used for the soul in the context of its bondage in matter and in *samsāra*, the cycle of birth and death, and *ātmā* the term used for the soul in the context of its pure ultimate nature as the innermost eternal self, the source of consciousness. A further term, *puruṣa*, is also used for *ātmā*.
 33. E.g., X.1.25; X.14.9; X.16.58; X.23.51; X.37.23; X.38.11; X.40.23; X.47.30; X.48.27; X.49.29, etc.
 34. The regular term *māyā* is occasionally also used interchangeably with *yogamāyā*.
 35. At times, however, Kṛṣṇa's associates seem to express some awareness of Kṛṣṇa's real nature (X.3.12ff.; X.8.19ff.; X.19.14; X.28.11; X.29.41; .85.18).
 36. Even though the residents of Vraj and even Kṛṣṇa himself are lulled in these ways by *yogamāyā* for the sake of enjoying *līlā*, the author of the Bhāgavata takes pains to keep the reader, at least, reminded of Kṛṣṇa's supremacy, by frequently interjecting such asides as: 'The two boys, 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).
 37. The Kṛṣṇa-centred 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* that determines and arranges the scenery, landscape and activities in this divine realm. As will be discussed below, *brahman* is not an impersonal, formless 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 this world of *prakṛti*, but of *brahman*, which is described as consisting of *sat*, *cit* and *ānanda* – eternity, knowledge and bliss. These medieval commentators refer to *yogamāyā* as Kṛṣṇa's 'internal' power of illusion, active in the internal realm of *brahman*, which serves Kṛṣṇa by facilitating his personal *līlā*, as opposed to Kṛṣṇa's 'external' power of *māyā*, active in the external realm of *samsāra*, which serves him by facilitating the world of birth and death.
 38. The word *yoga* comes from the root *yuj*, 'to join', and is cognate with the English verb 'to yoke'. The term means 'union with the divine', or a spiritual path, and there are a number of different *yoga* systems outlined in different Hindu texts. The Bhagavata

- Gītā, for example, discusses several *yoga* paths including *jñāna yoga*, the path of knowledge; *karma yoga*, the path of action; and *bhakti yoga*, the path of devotion.
39. X.11.33; X.35.1; X.35.26; X.47.54; X.69.39. The term is used more frequently in the instrumental case (see note 30 above).
 40. Along these lines, in Book X, 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 eyes in the observing of the saints, who constitute the body of your Lordship' (X.10.38).
 41. Patañjali's is the classical text outlining the eight steps of the psychosomatic *yogic* process of realizing the *puruṣa*, the term used in this text for the innermost self (*ātmā*). His is one of the six schools of Hindu philosophy that will be discussed on pp. xxxix ff.
 42. Congregational chanting, *kīrtana* and *bhajana*, in the Kṛṣṇa tradition, generally consists of a lead singer singing some simple devotional hymn, or a name or series of names of Kṛṣṇa (such as Hari, Govinda, Vāsudeva, etc.), part or all of which are then repeated back in unison by the congregation. Personal *mantra* meditation involves softly repeating to oneself a *mantra* containing Kṛṣṇa's names, using standard meditational practices in order to focus the mind on the *mantra* without distractions; 'om namo bhāgavate vāsudevāya', which is the opening invocation of the Bhāgavata, 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.
 43. Patañjali uses the term *puruṣa* for the soul, or innermost conscious self, in his Yoga Sūtras, where the Upaniṣads and Vedānta Sūtras prefer the term *ātmā*.
 44. These five types of liberation are: *sārūpya*, having the same form as the Lord; *sārṣṭī*, having the same opulence as the Lord; *sālōkya*, living in the same abode as the Lord; *sāmīpya*, living close to the Lord; and *sāyujya*, merging with the Lord. Several of these are referred to in the present text of the Bhāgavata (X.12.38; X.41.42; X.44.39; X.90.47).
 45. The trees in Kṛṣṇa's abode provide the residents of that realm with any item asked for.

46. The residents of Kṛṣṇa's abode travel in vehicles that traverse the sky.
47. The other three schools are the Mīmāṃsā school, which formulated a rationale for perpetuating the old Vedic sacrificial rites; the Nyāya school, which excelled in developing rules of logic so that the debates between the various schools could be conducted according to conventions about what constituted valid argument; and the Vaiśeṣika school, which provided a metaphysics that perceived the created world as ultimately consisting of the combination of various eternal categories such as atoms.
48. See Sheridan (1983 and 1986) and Dasgupta (1922). The sage Īśvarakṛṣṇa, who wrote the Sāṅkhya Kārikās, has no connection with the Kṛṣṇa of the Bhāgavata (although the latter is also referred to as *Īśvara*, 'controller' or 'Lord').
49. These cover such things as: prescribed duty and its mode of performance, worship, diet, charity, sacrifice, austerity, knowledge, activity, understanding, determination, attainment of happiness, and future birth. See also chapter 4, note 11 in the present text.
50. See, in this connection, chapter 4, note 10 in the present text.
51. The analogy of milk only holds good in terms of the production of by-products. Where *prakṛti* differs from milk is that it and the substances evolving from it maintain their own separate identity while simultaneously producing further substances (unlike milk, which is itself fully transformed when producing yogurt).
52. In the Sāṅkhya of Īśvarakṛṣṇa, intelligence is the first product of *prakṛti*, and ego is a derivative of intelligence. Also, mind, the five senses and the organs of action come from the interaction of ego and *sattva*; ego and *rajas* do not give rise to products (the five subtle elements come from ego and *taṃas* in both these systems).
53. Creation is cyclical in Purāṇic Hinduism.
54. E.g. Madhva's commentary on the Bhāgavata (I.1.1) as well as Jīva Gosvāmi's *Tattva Sandarbha* (10).
55. The example typically given by Śāṅkara's school to illustrate the concept of 'superimposition' is that of the snake and the rope. A person walking along at dusk sees a rope lying on the road, and mistakes it for a snake. Superimposing the idea of a snake upon what is in reality a rope, the person experiences fear and other negative reactions born of illusion (which are dispelled as soon as the rope is seen for what it is). Likewise, this world is in reality *brahman*, but because of illusion we superimpose the world of forms and dualities upon it, and thus experience fear and other

- negative consequences such as the cycle of birth and death. This, in parallel fashion, can be dispelled by right knowledge.
56. The term *māyā* is sometimes used in the Bhāgavata to refer to *prakṛti* (matter), and sometimes to the power of illusion. For Śaṅkara, the two are one and the same – *prakṛti* is *māyā*.
 57. Nimbārka's school was called *dvaitādvaita*, 'dualism in non-dualism', Vallabha's, *śuddhādvaita* or 'pure non-dualism'; and Caitanya's, *acintyabhedābheda*, 'inconceivable difference and non-difference'.
 58. 'The powers of such things as the vital airs, and of the creators of the universe, are powers of the supreme being, because they are dependent [on him], as well as different [from him]' (X.85.6). There are numerous references in the tenth book to *māyā*'s existence as Kṛṣṇa's *śakti* (X.1.25; X.14.22; X.16.58; X.23.51; X.37.23; X.38.11; X.40.23; X.47.30; X.48.27; X.49.29; X.70.37; etc.).
 59. While in opposition to Śaṅkara by holding *śakti* (and her different manifestations of *māyā* and *prakṛti*) to be real, most goddess-based *Śākta* sects and some Śiva-based Śaivite schools hold that, to reach the enlightened state, the *jīva* must transcend all notions of separate individuality and realize its absolute oneness with and non-difference from Devī or Śiva.
 60. These forms are made from pure *sattva*, which is synonymous with *brahman* in Book X.
 61. See X.12.33; X.74.45; and X.78.9–10 for examples of *sāyujya*.
 62. This is particularly so in the second, third and eleventh books.
 63. E.g. Dasgupta (1922). However a number of scholars have argued that, of all the Purāṇas, the Bhāgavata is the only one that displays the consistency of style that might point to a single author.
 64. Elsewhere in Book X, it is stated that unlike gods and sacred places, which only purify after some time, a mere glance from a *brāhmaṇa* purifies instantly. Ultimately, by worshipping the *brāhmaṇas*, Kṛṣṇa himself is worshipped (X.86.57), since they are the best of all living beings by birth (X.86.53). An entire story proclaims the evils and negative *karmic* consequences accruing from stealing a *brāhmaṇa*'s property (X.64.32–43).
 65. The worst censure is reserved for those *kṣatriyas* who attempt to deprive the *brāhmaṇas* of their property (X.64.32–8; X.89.29); indeed, even if others do so in the kingdoms under their jurisdiction, kings are 'like actors dressed up as kings who exist simply to support themselves' (X.89.29).
 66. The term Āryan, despite the extremely unfortunate history of its

- appropriation in Europe, is an ancient Sanskrit word which refers to the followers of the Vedic culture.
67. See Dasgupta (1922: vol. IV, 3–9) for a discussion of *dharma* in the context of the Bhāgavata.
 68. See chapter 23, note 9.
 69. See chapter 23, note 10.
 70. See chapter 23, note 10.
 71. For a discussion of the theology of the five *gopi* chapters see Schweig (forthcoming); for a discussion of the tension in the commentaries over the theologizing of this section of the narrative see Sheth (1982).
 72. Although some later Rāma sects were affected by the theologies of the sixteenth-century Kṛṣṇa sects.
 73. These include the Nirukta, a traditional etymological work; the Upavedas, supplements to the Vedas – on medicine, archery, music and arms; and the six *vedāṅgas*, limbs of the Vedas – on astronomy, etymology, phonetics, grammar, metre and knowledge of the sacrificial ceremonies.
 74. Terms from the Nyāya and Vaiśeṣika schools are also used, and there are references to the Mīmāṃsā School and a wide variety of other systems such as the Pāñcarātra.
 75. I have been unable to locate the origin of this maxim, although it is quoted repeatedly, without reference, in much of the secondary scholarship on the text from India. I thus infer that it is of relatively recent coinage.
 76. According to the Sāhityadarpana, to qualify as an epic a work must have: a hero who is divine or of noble *kṣatriya* lineage; a principal *rasa*, mood or sentiment, which is either amorous, neutral or heroic, the other *rasas* being supplementary to it; a plot based on history; one or all of the four *puruṣārthas*, or goals of life (religious duty, material prosperity, sensual enjoyment and liberation from the cycle of birth and death), as its object; a beginning with an invocation to a deity, a benediction, or simply with the mention of the subject matter (and sometimes a preamble censuring the wicked and extolling the righteous); more than eight canto divisions, which are neither too long nor too short; one particular metre, although it should end in a different metre (sometimes, however, a variety of metres are used); and the subject matter of a following canto, division, indicated at the end of the preceding canto. Moreover, an epic should contain descriptions of the sun, the moon, day, night, morning, evening, twilight, darkness, the ocean, the mountains, woods, hunting, seasons,

enjoyment and separation of lovers, sages, celestial regions, cities, Vedic sacrifices, military expeditions, marriages, counsels and the birth of a son. These are to be described in accordance with the occasion, and in conjunction with relevant incidents and circumstances. The entire work is to be named after the poet, the hero, or the story, and each individual canto division is to be named according to its principal subject matter.

77. See Vyas (1974) for discussion.
78. According to Vyas (1974), only the poet Māgha has used more metres in the history of Sanskrit poetics – as a point of comparison, the well-known poets Kālidāsa, Bhāravi and Śriharṣa use nineteen different metres.
79. See chapter 30, note 1.
80. See Prasad (1984) for further discussion.
81. See chapter 90, note 4.
82. See chapter 47, note 5.
83. Moreover, the theoretician Bhāmaha's literary treatise, the *Kāvya-lankāra*, considers *vaidika* words, archaic Vedicisms, to be a fault, and the Bhāgavata is conspicuously replete with these (see Bryant, 2002, for a discussion of the implications of these archaisms).
84. The Hare Krishna Movement, registered as ISKCON – the International Society of Krishna Consciousness – and its growing number of disaffiliated off-shoots is a monotheistic Kṛṣṇa-centred tradition stemming from the Caitanya school of Vaiṣṇavism that has branches all over the world (see Bryant, 2004).

Note on Translation and Method

I use the Chaukhambā Sanskrit Prathīṣṭhān's edition of the Bhāgavata Purāṇa for this translation, since it is probably the most commonly used in India. There are very few differences in the manuscripts I have examined (with the exception of Vijayadhvaja's text).

I have adopted a literal translation of the text, with a few minor exceptions noted below:

1. I have supplied proper names for pronouns where their referents are unclear in an English translation. Sanskrit prose in translation is otherwise replete with what would be considered 'dangling pronouns'.
2. I have retained all epithets, since these are often used deliberately in specific contexts to which they add nuances of meaning. At the same time, since this translation is for the educated but non-specialized public, I have also added the most common generic name for personalities after these epithets, even if these do not occur in the original (e.g. I have translated 'Parīkṣit, son of Bharata' for 'son of Bharata', etc.). Since there are a considerable number of epithets for Kṛṣṇa used frequently throughout the text, such as Hari, Acyuta, Mukunda, etc., I have inserted the name Kṛṣṇa after them in square brackets for the first five occurrences of each epithet, after which I assume the reader will have become familiar with them. These names are listed in bold in the glossary for ease of reference. On occasion I add an explanatory phrase (e.g. Śrī, the goddess of fortune, for Śrī, etc.). I provide the literal meaning for these epithets in notes upon their first occurrence.
3. I have retained the Sanskrit for a few words that are by now

standard or quasi-common in the English language and words that, in my opinion, are destined or deserve to become so (e.g. *karma*, *yoga*, *samsāra*, *bhakti*, *dharma*, etc.).

4. I have retained the Sanskrit for a very few words for which there exists no adequate or convenient English word or phrase (e.g. *guṇa*, *sattva*, *rajas*, *tamas*). Explanations for these are provided in the introduction, notes or glossary.

5. The verses are often replete with long strings of laudatory epithets in the vocative and I sometimes represent these in the nominative (e.g., 'Your majesty never fades', for 'O you whose majesty never fades').

6. I have construed some of the passive constructions, for which Sanskrit has such a proclivity, into the active voice: 'The forest was entered into by Kṛṣṇa' does not make for the smoothest reading in English!

7. On occasion I have interjected into the text a few clarificatory words that are not in the original Sanskrit. I have kept such additions to the absolute minimum, only providing them if the meaning is otherwise unclear, or if the syntax demands them. I indicate that these insertions are my own by placing them in square brackets.

8. As is described in the introductory paragraphs to chapter 1, the Bhāgavata is recited by the sage Sūta to the sages assembled in the forest of Naimiṣa. Sūta is actually narrating what he had heard from the lips of Śuka when the latter had related the Bhāgavata to king Parīkṣit in the presence of another assembly of sages, including Sūta. As a narrative within a narrative, the tenth book is primarily set as a dialogue between Śuka and king Parīkṣit, although on occasion Sūta directly addresses the sages at Naimiṣa. Śuka's narration, in turn, contains numerous other dialogues between personalities involved in the events he is describing, so there are multiple layers of narrative. Technically speaking, single quotation marks should be used only for the dialogue between Sūta and the sages at Naimiṣa, which is where the present Bhāgavata is set, but Sūta personally interjects so infrequently that I have also used single quotation marks for the dialogue between Śuka and king Parīkṣit, since this encompasses perhaps 99 per cent of the actual frame dialogue present in the

text. For dialogues within this dialogue I use double quotation marks.

9. The ninety chapters of Book X deal exclusively with the story of Kṛṣṇa, with the exception of Kṛṣṇa's departure from this world, which is described in Book XI. I therefore include in the present translation the four chapters from Book XI that describe this. Book XI also contains a lengthy philosophical discourse of over twenty chapters spoken by Kṛṣṇa to Uddhava, known as the Uddhava Gītā. I have included only the last chapter from this, since it presents Kṛṣṇa's ultimate and final instructions.

10. I have attempted to draw almost all of the examples to various theological or literary points in the introduction from the tenth book of the Bhāgavata, although on occasion I have drawn on other essential verses from other books. These quotations are listed according to book, chapter and verse number (e.g. X.25.15).

11. This translation is meant both for the educated lay reader and the specialist. With these two readerships in mind, I have relegated all technical information to endnotes, where they can be accessed by the latter without burdening the former.

12. I have frequently provided clarifications of difficult passages in notes from the fourteenth-century commentary written by Śrīdhara Svāmī. This is the earliest extant commentary, and held in high regard by subsequent commentators from all schools.

13. There are a number of verses in the text that are almost identical with or very similar to verses from the Gītā, and, on occasion, the Upaniṣads. I provide these latter verses from these other texts in notes for the interested reader.