

Krishna—Who ?

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Vyāsa, the poet-philosopher of Ancient India (whether one or many is immaterial for our present purpose) has embedded the story of the life of Kṛṣṇa in the *Mahābhārata*. The account, in some of its details, has undergone considerable development in the *Hari-vaṅśa* and the *Bhāgavata*, and still later in works of the *Bhakti* schools of the first and second halves of Mediæval India.

That Kṛṣṇa was a great historical personage who lived about the time of the Mahābhārata War, is a solid historical fact which none can possibly deny. Equally obvious, however, is the other half of the truth that Vyāsa, the author of the *Mahābhārata*, was not a historian or biographer in the modern sense of the word, but a poet-philosopher who has taught philosophy through poetry created out of historical facts and poetic imagination. The latter has run riot in the early and later mediæval accounts of Kṛṣṇa's life, which reflect the poetic taste of the age and not the life of Kṛṣṇa as it was actually lived.

Revolted against what appears to be morally degrading in the accounts, Bankim Chandra Chatterji made an elaborate attempt at extricating the historical nucleus of Kṛṣṇa's life from its later accretions. His work is characterized by careful study and close reasoning, and deserves to be appreciated as a powerful reply to certain critics of the Hindu religion. His rationalistic mind, however, could not probe the deeper feelings which inspire this kind of literature, and consequently, in pruning down the life of Kṛṣṇa, he threw away many valuable incidents in the story. As a result, he failed to explain the wonderful hold which for

countless ages the Kṛṣṇa legend has possessed on the Hindu mind. With a deeper insight into the realities of the situation, Sir George Grierson writes:—

“Hence the Soul's devotion to the Deity is pictured by Rādhā's self-abandonment to her beloved Kṛṣṇa, and all the hot blood of oriental passion is encouraged to pour forth one mighty flood of praise and prayer to the Infinite Creator, who waits with loving, outstretched arms to receive the worshipper into his bosom, and to convey him safely to eternal rest across the seemingly shoreless Ocean of Existence. Yet I am persuaded that no indecent thought entered their minds; and to those who would protest, as I have often heard the protest made, against using the images of the *lūpanar* in dealing with the most sacred mysteries of the Soul, I can only answer:—

“*Wer den Dichter will verstehen
Muss in Dichter's lande gehen?*” *

—Sir Grierson, the author of “The Literature of Hindustan”, in his Introduction to the “Satsaiya of Biharilal”.

Just as, in the interest of morality and pure religion, Bankim had tried to release the historical nucleus from the later accretions, so earlier writers, notably those of the Chaitanya and Vallabha schools, had attempted to discover deep spiritual truths in the love-story of Kṛṣṇa and Rādhā and had written learned commentaries on portions of the *Bhāgavata*, for example, the *Rāsa-pañchādhyāyī*. Such explanations, though wholly satisfactory to the old generation of pandits, do not carry

* One who wishes to understand the poet must go to the poet's land.

conviction to modern scholars, who regard them as more ingenious than true.

Yet, there can be no doubt that ancient Itihāsas and Purāṇas, while they record some historical facts, are mainly concerned with presenting religious and philosophic truths in artistic form. The picture of Naṭarāja embodying harmony of terrible movement with that of perfect rest, of Saraswatī seated on a white swan, *Viṇā* in hand, of Nārāyaṇa resting on the ocean, with Lakṣmi at His feet and Brahmā sitting on a lotus which has sprung from His navel—these are all expressions in Art of those truths.

Similarly, a mass of spiritual truths is lurking behind the poetical imagery of the Kṛṣṇa legend. Let us try to bring it to light by following a new method, viz. that of utilizing connected literature for discovering the real meaning, instead of the old one of dissecting words into sounds and syllables and attaching fanciful meanings to them, e. g.—

“कृषिभूवाचकः शब्दः णश्च निर्वृतिवाचकः ।
तयोरैक्यं परं ब्रह्म कृष्ण इत्यभिधीयते ॥”

Here are a few facts which are well-known and may well be regarded as basic for the purpose of our inquiry:—

1. Kṛṣṇa is a ‘पूर्णवितार’ of Viṣṇu, that is, to adopt the language of Christian divines used in regard to Jesus, “the fulness of Godhead bodily expressed.”
2. He is a friend of Arjuna.
3. He drove Arjuna's chariot in the great battle of Kurukṣetra between the Kauravas and the Pāṇḍavas, but himself took no part in the fight.

1. That Kṛṣṇa is conceived as an incarnation of Viṣṇu or God is understandable in the light of the Vedic

religion. His peculiar physique and dress easily connect him with that ancient god. He is a full incarnation of Viṣṇu, the omnipresent and immanent God (from ‘विश् to enter), whose body is the blue sky (नीलवपुः) with four arms representing the four directions (चतुर्भुजः) and clad in a beautiful yellow garment (पीताम्बरः) consisting of the golden rays of the sun.

2. That he is a friend (सखा) of Arjuna, is the most important part of our evidence. Its genesis we can trace step by step from the *R̥k-Sūktas* down to the *Mahābhārata*. Viṣṇu and Indra of the *R̥k-Sūktas* are the originals of Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna respectively, and so they are also described in the *Mahābhārata*—where Kṛṣṇa appears as an *Avatāra* of Viṣṇu, and Arjuna is said to have been miraculously placed in his mother's womb by Indra.

That Kṛṣṇa is a friend of Arjuna is the counterpart of the Vedic statement that Viṣṇu is a constant companion and friend of Indra (‘इन्द्रस्य युज्यः सखा’) and helps him in his battles.

In the Upaniṣads, the same ancient gods—Viṣṇu and Indra—clearly appear as God and Man (*Paramātmā* and *Jīvātmā*), Viṣṇu signifying the omnipresent and immanent God who helps Indra, the human soul, who expresses himself through senses and organs (*Indriyas*), in the latter's battles with Asuras or evil passions. The following verse of the *R̥k-Saṃhitā* (I. 164—20), which refers to the friendship of the two, recurs in the *Muṇḍaka* and *Śvetāśvatara* Upaniṣads (Mu. Upa. III. i. 1 and Śve. Upa. IV. 6):—

द्वा सुपर्णा सयुजा सखाया समानं वृक्षं परिषस्वजते ।
तयोरन्यः पिप्पलं स्वाद्वत्त्यनश्नन्नन्यो अभिचाकशीति ॥

In later mythology these “constant companions” are represented as Nara and Nārāyaṇa, who perform *tapas* on the

Himalayas for the good of Bhārata-Vārṣa. *Nara* means Man—the human soul, and *Nārāyaṇa* means the goal or atōde of mankind—

नराणां समूहः नारम्, तस्य अयनम् ।

cf. नर शब्देन चराचरात्मकं शरीरजातमुच्यते।

तत्र नित्यसन्निहिताश्चिदाभासा जीवा नारा इति निरुच्यन्ते ।

तेषामयनमाश्रयो नियमकोऽन्तर्यामी नारायण इति ।

(Ārandagiri on Śā Bhā on *Bhagavadgītā* I. 1)

—and the epic of the *Mahābhārata* opens with the mandate that the 'Jaya'—the story of the victory of Good over Evil—should be recited after making obeisance to Nārāyaṇa and Nara, whose Avatāras are Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna, the two main characters of the epic.

Thus we have a regular, unbroken line of connection between Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna at one end and Viṣṇu and Indra at the other, embodying in the philosophy of Upaniṣads and later Hinduism the two great postulates of Philosophy, namely, God and Man, *Paramātmā* and *Jīvātmā*.

3. That Śrī Kṛṣṇa should be represented as driving the chariot of Arjuna,—a duty normally assigned to persons of the Sūta class—is not a little surprising. But it is easily understandable if we bear in mind that Śrī Kṛṣṇa is the *Paramātmā* and Arjuna the *Jīvātmā*, and recall the famous metaphor in the passage "आत्मानं रथिनं विद्धि", etc. (Kaṭha Upa. III. iii. 4). Borrowing the main idea from this metaphor, the author of the *Mahābhārata* makes God the charioteer of Man in the latter's fight with Evil. Moreover, it should be noted that the reason why Kṛṣṇa drives the chariot but takes no active part in the battle is in accordance with the doctrine of theistic Sāṅkhya—the dominant philosophy of the *Mahābhārata* and the Purāṇas,—which regards God as transcendental (असङ्ग) and above activity (अकर्तृ).

The critics of Śrī Kṛṣṇa's character forget that Kṛṣṇa in the *Mahābhārata* is God Himself and his conduct is nothing more than a description of God's ways in the Universe. To take an example, he is often criticized for misleading Yudhiṣṭhira into telling a lie when Droṇa asked Yudhiṣṭhira whether the former's son, by name Aśwatthāmā, which was also the name of a certain elephant, had been killed. Now, let us ask—who tempts man? This raises the whole problem of Evil. The dualism of two independent powers, God and Satan, is philosophically unsatisfactory. Evil has, therefore, to be regarded as evanescent and only a means for testing the virtue of man. The passage in the *Mahābhārata* where the incident is narrated is intended to be no more than a record of the arguments pro and con which tore the mind of Yudhiṣṭhira. Thus, for example, Yudhiṣṭhira thought to himself whether it would not be wrong of him to place his whole army into the jaws of Death by this single act of self-righteousness, which was really spiritual pride. He told a lie; but the inexorable law of Retribution was there, and he had to suffer the consequence in the shape of a visit to hell after death. The poet clears the ground for this lapse on the part of Yudhiṣṭhira by the plea that Droṇa had no right to expect truthfulness on the battle-field after he had exchanged his Brahmanahood for the life of a Kṣatriya—in which at a crisis like this lying was excusable.* All these considerations swayed the mind of Yudhiṣṭhira, who honestly believed that he was acting rightly, and thus mistook his inclination for the voice of God.

Kṛṣṇa's life in Gokula is separated by some modern scholars from his later life, the former being treated as an addendum made to the story of the

* This is a sarcasm on war, which Vyasa seems to regard as futile. (See *Dharmayalopa* on *Mahābhārata* as a poem of *Santa Rasa*), which has *Nirveda* for its *Sthāyī-bhāva*.

Mahābhārata under the influence of Christianity. Even such an eminent and level-headed scholar like Sir R. G. Bhandarkar has supported this view. He assigns the *Harivaṃśa*, in which Kṛṣṇa's life in Gokula appears for the first time, to the third century A. D., * and the first settlement of the Ābhīras, a tribe of cowherds, near Mathura to the first century. I think the date of the first immigration of Ābhīras must be pushed back to an earlier century, when they were still looked upon as a tribe of robbers (दस्युः) who had nothing to do with Kṛṣṇa and had no hesitation in attacking the Yādava ladies while they were being escorted by Arjuna from Dwārakā to Kurukṣetra. The cowherd tribe of Nanda and Yaśodā in whose home Kṛṣṇa was brought up must be distinguished from that of the Ābhīras, and such identification of the two as we find in some of the accounts must be regarded as due to confusion between the various tribes of cowherds.

In any case we are not concerned here with the date of 'Cowherd Kṛṣṇa' but with the question of the origin of the cowherd idea of Kṛṣṇa—which I do not think was suggested by the Christian idea of Christ as 'shepherd' of his souls, but by the text of the *R̥gveda-Saṃhitā*: cf.

त्रीणि पदा विचक्रमे विष्णुर्गोपा

अदाभ्यः अतो धर्माणि धारयन् ।

विष्णोः कर्माणि पश्यत् यतो व्रतानि

पस्पशे इन्द्रस्य युज्यः सखा ॥

—where Viṣṇu, the original of Kṛṣṇa, is described as an 'invincible cowherd'—and later passages where Āditya (and Viṣṇu is one of the Ādityas) is said

* This date is fixed on the strength of the occurrence of the word *Dinara* (*denarius*). But the *Adhyaya* in which it occurs is evidently a later addition. For it is abnormally long (consisting of 125 slokas), as compared with the neighbouring *Adhyayas*, and has no connection with those *Adhyayas*, while, on the contrary, the latter are distinctly connected with each other.

to be a cowherd (आदित्यो गोपा). Similarly, the idea of Gokula on Earth and Goloka in Heaven is taken from that of the R̥gvedic world of Viṣṇu where there are 'many-horned and unresting cows' —यत्र गावो भूरिशृङ्गा अयासः' (R̥g I. 154. 6).

The central idea of *Rāsa* or dance of Kṛṣṇa and Gopis, which we find in the *Bhāgavata*, is a symbolical representation of the Vedic idea of the Sun (-God) as the center of the Universe, 'the soul of the world animate and inanimate' ('सूर्य आत्मा जगत्सत्सुषुप्तश्च') from whom the whole Universe has burst forth like a song (उद्गीथ). What a sublime and at the same time beautiful metaphor ! Man's relation with God and also that of the Cosmos with its divine centre could not have been described better.

And be it remembered that all along, throughout the *Adhyāya*, and elsewhere, Kṛṣṇa is repeatedly described as retaining his *brahmacharya*. Here again we have the old Sāṅkhya doctrine that *Puruṣa* is *Asanga* and *Akartā* in the midst of the senses. The same Sāṅkhya is preached through the parable of Kubjā—the ugly woman who has been in the service of Evil. It teaches that *Prakṛti* tempts Man by false decorations put on a body which is 'in three parts crooked', i. e., the three principles of *Sattva*, *Rajas* and *Tamas*. But she is made straight and beautiful by Kṛṣṇa who restores her to साम्यावस्था, and the lesson of the whole parable is the same as that taught in the *Bhagavad-gītā*, that it is not in renouncing *Prakṛti* but in using her in the service of God that Man is truly God-like. However much we may dislike the parable, there is no mistaking its underlying meaning. It is the Sāṅkhya metaphor of *nartakī*—the dancing girl—which has probably suggested the metaphor. The parable, however, has been modified so as to fit in with the teaching of the *Bhagavad-gītā*, which differs, as is well-known, from that of the ascetic Sāṅkhya.

In conclusion, let us sum up the teachings of the *Pūrvārḍha* of the *Daśama Skandha* of the *Bhāgavata* in the light of the philosophical and religious significance of the life of Kṛṣṇa:—

1. Superstitious beliefs regarding the origin of infants' diseases is not religion (The story of Pūtanā).
2. Ritualism which is divorced from charity and sympathy with the poor and the hungry is not religion (The story of the priests at the sacrifice).
3. God makes no distinction of race, class or sex and appreciates Love more than learning (Gopas and Gopis versus the Brahmanas).
4. God is not high up in the sky, but is immanent in our daily life (*Govardhana-Puja* as against *Indra-makha*).
5. God is greater than gods—Brahmā, Indra, Varuṇa, and Kāmadeva (see the respective *Adhyāyas* in Book X. and remember that there was a regular Kāma-worship in India at one time).
6. Nothing is hidden from Him (The girls at the bathing ghat who were observing Kātyayani-vrata). Compare in this connec-

tion Plato's myth of the naked souls in *Gorgias* in J. A. Stewart's *Myths of Plato* P. 117.

7. He is the centre of the Universe not only as central Force but as central Love (The *Rāsa*).
8. The highest morality is not asceticism, as it is ordinarily understood, but asceticism in the midst of active life (*Nivṛtti* in *Pravṛtti*).

These are no small contributions to the science and art of religion, for which we are really indebted to Śūka.

How could such a Kṛṣṇa be an object of our *Bhakti*? My answer is: this is the only Kṛṣṇa, the traditional Kṛṣṇa, that we know, and he has become the object of man's deepest and intensest *Bhakti*. The Kṛṣṇa that his devotee loves and worships is neither the purely human—the historical—Kṛṣṇa; for it is impossible to worship a *human* being, howsoever much we may admire him; nor is he purely the transcendental God who is beyond human knowledge and therefore beyond human worship. The God whom man can worship and does worship is precisely the Kṛṣṇa we have reverently sketched above.

‘कृष्णात् परं किमपि तत्त्वमहं न जाने ।’

