About 300 A.D. a mutation occurred in the mythology of Krishna that was radical in the extreme. The central section of the Harivaṃśa, which was composed at about that time, narrated in chapters 47-78 the story of the infancy and youth of Krishna, which had never been told in Hindu literature before. The implicit theology of these tales was as new as the narratives themselves. The age of adoration of Krishna as a sportive being—as a doer of līlās—had begun.

Perhaps because the abruptness of this development has not been fully appreciated, efforts to explain it have been superficial. Scholars have not failed to notice that the Krishnas of the Harivaṃśa is a new kind of Krishna. They have looked, rather casually, for possible earlier sources of a cowherd divinity. But the contrasts in theology have not startled anyone sufficiently to set off a full-scale investigation into a dramatic phenomenon of religious change.

*Scholars have proposed the whole of the first four centuries AD as possible dating for the Harivaṃśa. It cannot be placed in mature Gupta times, however, because the Kālayavana episode reflects a time when the power of Hellenistic states still carried a sting. Professor Ingalls' analysis that it stands in poetic style between the Rāmāyana and Kālidāsa warns us away from the extremes of this range of centuries. The work itself protests about a time when petty kings with standing armies waste the country. ( ) For these reasons the date 300 A.D. offered by P.L. Vaidya, editor of the critical edition (Intro., p. xxxix), seems a fairly accurate approximation.
That the Harivamśa’s revolution in Krishna-worship should attract no special notice was precisely the intention of its author. In his introduction, (Adhyaya 1:5-15), he looks back upon a recently-completed Mahābhārata with polite gratitude toward its narrators, and says that he wishes only to add a congenial addendum to remedy the epic’s silence on the history of the family of Krishna. Hindu revisionist technique has always introduced innovations as quietly and seamlessly as possible.* Their obfuscation of difference has sometimes fogged the perception of scholars as well as of the orthodox.

A deeper reason for lack of study of the rise of the Gopāla cult, however, is history’s extreme poverty of information about India in the third century A.D., the time in which the outlook of the Harivamśa was formed. Joanna van Lohuizen de-Leeuw in her *The Scythic Age* (p. ___) calls it "the dark age of Indian history," its darkness illuminated by no inscriptions, by very little art, and by scarcely any literary documents, surely ascribable to the age. With the advantage of insights into the issues of that century derived from an earlier study of the Kālayavana/ theme,** however, I am going to venture into that "void" in search of insight into the overturn in Krishnaism.

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**Forthcoming in Doris Srinivasan, ed., volume on the cultural history of ancient Mathurā.
It may be that even my present hearers need some sharpening of their perception of the difference between the prehistoric pictures of Krishna that were dominant before and after our dividing line of the third century A.D.

Up until that time, from the fifth century B.C. when our first glimmering of knowledge of Krishna-worship begins, the worship of this god is fairly intelligible in Durckheim's terms: Krishnaism is a social and civic religion, moral in its interests, and a rallying-point for responsible social groups devoted to the survival of main-line Hindu culture. The cult's crusade is against all those movements Hindu or non-Hindu that erode the society and break down its institutions. As Krishnaism in these centuries draws wider and wider segments of the population into this enterprise of consolidation, the names of the religion become more diverse. First it is the Sattvata dharma, the distinctive faith of the Sattvata tribe; then the Bhagavata faith, the faith of those who worship Krishna as Bhagavan of the Lord; and then, most inclusively, the Vaishnava faith, when the sect had attained the status of a Vedic religion devoted to a form of the orthodox god Vishnu. Throughout, there was a continuity in the function of the religion and in its conception of deity.
Of the most remote period, we know only that the worship of Krishna Vāsudeva was known as the tribal faith of the Sāttvata or Vrishni people, centered upon their god who was at the same time tribal chief, tribal teacher and tribal deity. Whatever else the religion was, it was a group religion, having a function in supporting the identity and unity of a people who were very successful in rising in status and influence.

A second period can be perceived, identifiable with the first several centuries of the formation of the great epic called the Mahābhārata, in which the Sāttvatas have not only risen from low status to the rank of Kshatriyas, but they have also spread acceptance of their faith so successfully that there are very few in their North Indian courtly circles who does not recognize the divinity of Krishna Vāsudeva, their god, at some level of other of honor.

A third period in the development of early Krishnaism began when the sect began to attract not only the military elite, but brahmans, bringing the more adaptive members of the old Vedic priesthood into the service of Krishnaism in its thinking and writing. The first fruit of this coalition was the Bhagavadgītā—in effect, a great sermon, asking sensitivity to the needs of society in a time when world-weariness is drawing the gifted young into lifelong monastic retreat —Vedantic, Buddhist and other. Krishna's teaching in the Bhagavadgītā
is directed to Arjuna, representative warrior, who is about to drop his duties in disgust and leave for the forest as a wandering beggar (2:5b). Holding up the idea of *lokasaṃgraha* (3:20, 25)—holding the world together—Krishna urges Arjuna to remain steadfast in his duties, because the sacred renunciation that is necessary for salvation is not the renunciation of work, but the renunciation of self-interest. He himself as God works desirelessly in the world, not only as creator of the earth and its statues and its duties, but as periodic redeemer who descends again and again to purge the earth of evil-doers and to re-establish righteousness (4:1-15).

After the time of the *Bhagavadgītā* the Bhāgavata movement drew into itself many groups of kindred social outlook. Brahmans who honored the Vedic Vishnu entered the movement, reinforcing the Bhāgavata’s picture of a serious world-concerned deity the lore of the most compassionate of the Vedic deities who had descended as a dwarf to recover the earth from the demons to provide safe abode for humanity. Before the third century A.D. these descents for the assistance of dwellers in the world had become many. A sect called the Pāñcarātrins were absorbed, a group honoring brahmans and the Vedas, who were earnestly devoted to a special code of social ethics that stressed non-violence toward all living creatures. As centuries went on the critical threat to the central Hindu social tradition
changed. Indigenous religious heresies waned in power. The worldly outlooks of conquering houses who ruled much of North India from 184 B.C. to about 220 A.D. the third century A.D. became the social enemy. Throughout, the place and function of what we shall now call the Vaishnava faith remained the same. Led by brahmans, it rallied all lovers of the Hindu virtues to resist all disintegrating forces, holding before their eyes the Krishna of the Bhagavadgītā, steadfast in his cosmic work and offering salvation through disinterested faithfulness of believers who would let the dharmāstras be their guide (Bhagavadgīta 16:23f). This is the circumstantial Krishna on which some of the latest writers of epic, materials look back—the authors of the Narāyaniya (Mbh. 12.336.49) and the Anugīta (Mbh. 14.16.5), who mention the Bhagavadgīta by name at a time not far from the second century A.D. There is no notice then in Sanskrit literature, anywhere, that a different view of Krishna is in formation.

Now we move forward to the other side of our chronological line. The gap in time is not great. The gap in time is not great. The author looks back upon the Mahābhārata as a finished work, but as a work only recently completed. He views himself as in the immediate succession of its composers. We would not need to take this claim seriously, but all our other information backs it. His Harivamśa has always been accepted as a postscript by the...
all circles specializing in the transmission of the epic. His Vaishnava faith is continuous in its almost all of its distinguishing marks with the sect of our prior information. The Vaishnava concordat with brahmanism is conspicuous in his teaching. He enjoins the honoring and supporting of brahmans, the performing of Vedic sacrifices, and the humble performance of one's caste work. He is concerned that all persons—and kings in particular—should be faithful in their duties and defend the sacred law of the dharmaśāstras. He stresses Krishna's identity with Vishnu. He continues to enlarge the list of Vishnu's avatars. (HV____) He speaks for an ongoing Vaishnava community whose special features, if any, do not involve any radical separation from the Vaishnavas of earlier times.

These continuities only highlight the magnitude of the Harivaṃśa's radical innovations in mythology and theology. Chapters 47 through 78 of the Harivaṃśa—the very heart of the work—narrate in detail material that has never appeared in literature before—the story of the birth and youthful exploits of Krishna. The new narratives are accompanied by an even more dramatic change in conception of the typical interests and attitudes of the deity. In these tales the theology of līlā or the divine sportiveness has its mythological beginnings.
The saga begins with Krishna's birth in the prison of a jealous king who wants to kill him. He is whisked away to a cowherd settlement and is raised by foster parents, Nanda and Yasodā. The child's reckless energy and astounding powers keeps these parents at their wits' end. Laid under the family wagon for a nap, the infant kicks the cart to bits and is found laughing under its debris.

When he became able to creep, his mother tied him to a heavy wooden mortar to stop his crawling into filthy places—and the child dragged the mortar into a grove and uprooted two great Arjuna trees. A demoness tried to kill him by nursing him with a poisoned nipple and he ended her life with one bite. Acts of jaunty heroism became habitual with him as he grew older. He jumped coolly into the waters of a dangerous water-serpent and danced on its seven heads until it promised to go away and leave the riverbanks safe and pure again. He and his brother Balarāma, running about like two frisky young bulls, encountered and killed the demon Pralamba who, in the shape of a donkey, had prevented the cowherds from eating the fruit of a garden of date-palms. Keśi, a horse-demon, is killed. These horrible demons always loom over the divine infant, monstrous in size and dreadful in their malice, yet he always disposes of them effortlessly by exercise of his marvellous hidden powers. His parents fret; his playmates always tell them how lucky they are to have such a remarkable son. Krishna pulls off
amusing swindles—as when he convinces the cowherds that they should make their annual food-offering to Mount Govardhana rather than to Indra—and then, entering into the mountain, he eats all the food himself. When the angered rain-god all but drowns the cowherds with days of unbroken rain, Krishna takes his people under the shelter of an "umbrella" created by picking up the mountain and holding it aloft for seven days until the rain-god could rain no more. Sometimes Krishna's pranks were not innocent—as when he sent forth from his body packs of wolves to plague the cowherds until they were ready to move their settlement from an old range that had become uninteresting to him. Once on a moonlight night of autumn his ramblings in the forest included a tryst with the amorous cowherd girls with much singing and dancing and uninhibited love-making—but the episode is terse as told in the Harivamśa. Finally, as a half-grown boy, Krishna returns to his birthplace and kills the tyrant king who had often tried to kill him. But Krishna refuses to take the throne himself, saying that he prefers the freedom of wandering at will in the woodland among the cows.

Amid the cows is where most Vaishnavas thereafter preferred to find Krishna in their thoughts, from the time of the Harivamśa until the present day. The myths of Krishna-Gopāla, the cowherd Krishna, have been the growing edge of the Krishnaite mythology,
and his childhood līlās or sports have been the determinative material in shaping new theological conceptions of the nature and activity of the god.

The childhood tales are retold a little later—we almost dare say, a little later in the 4th century A.D.—in the Vishnu Purāna, where the author expands them, frames them in strong Vaishnava doctrinal teaching, and brings to the level of conscious doctrine the view that Krishna's acts are sports. The Harivaṃśa had described particularly acts as sportive, new Krishna himself as a sportive god, and his doings as an infant are. His manusvālī, his human sports, all of a kind, are sportive.* It is clearer that his acts can be perverse: he pulls the cows' tails (Wilson, p. 407), he turns them loose when they can make trouble, he deliberately disobeys the commands of his mother (p. 497). Krishna's flirtations with the cowherd girls are retold in the twelfth chapter of the Vishnu Purāṇa in much greater detail and with plainer indications reference to their erotic nature.

An antinomian strain in the conception of Krishna becomes clearer and clearer as we learn more and more about Krishna's misbehavior in later literature—the Tamil songs of the Alvars whose composition begins in the fifth or sixth centuries A.D., and in the Sāṃskṛta Bhāgavata Purāṇa, of about the ninth. In these references in the hymns of the Alvars we perceive for the first time that Krishna has become a thief—a household butter
thief. An incorrigible child, he inevitably locates the pots containing his mother's curds and butter and feeds himself and friends, leaving messes and destruction. He does not behave better when away from home. Completing this theme from later literature, we can report that he raids empty houses without compunction, making specious alibis when caught. When dragged home by neighbor women and accused before his mother, he makes ingenious false defenses that get him off scot-free. When a little older, Krishna resorts to a kind of highway robbery to fill his belly with his favorite edibles: he poses on the road as a toll-collector, and lightens the cowherd women of a portion of their head-burdens as they carry their milk and butter to market in Mathurā. The complete register of these crimes need not be told because Jack Hawley has told it all in his Krishna the Butter Thief, published this year. (Princeton U. Press, 1983).

But the worst about Krishna's lawlessness has hardly been suggested. I refer to his escapades with the cowherd women. The story of his night with the Gopīs continued to grow, even though promiscuous sex is and has been a greater scandal in India than in the West. The Alvars knew the tale, and they treasured it. A new climax came in the Bhāgavata Purāṇa, in which a merely preliminary narration told of how he stole the clothes of the gopis when he came upon them bathing in the river, and of how he took their garments into a treetop and did not
return them to their owners until the girls came
before him in stark nudity and made obeiss ance.
A little later in the book, five entire chapters (10:29-33)
are devoted to Krishna’s calling the cowherd women
from their homes with his flute, and to the details
of his rāsa dance with them and of their erotic sports.
Krishna’s amorous acts with the gopis have become
his principal līlā, a myth revelatory of the deepest
secrets of Krishnaite devotion, a focus ever after
for devout meditation.

In the twelfth century, in the Gitagovinda
of Jayadeva, the principal object of Krishna’s affection
has become a favorite among the cowherd girls whose
name is Rādhā. Her importance grew with the centuries.
She became a goddess, then a polar feminine principle
within the godhead of Krishna himself. The love-
making between the two became cosmic. The highest
spiritual aspiration of many modern Krishnaites has
become the attainment, by the grace of the deity and
through meditations in which the role is adopted of
a servant-attendant on the divine pair, of discrete
glimpses of the nightly meetings of Krishna and Rādhā
in the bowers. Spiritual guides teach aspirants how to become
how to adopt the person of a particular attending
gopi, and in imagination, through her eyes, contemplate
every detail of the divine flirtation and congress
through every watch of the day and night.* And the
Bengal school, which has made the arousal and sublima-
tion of erotic feeling into a high science, itself insists

S.K. De, Early History of the Vaishnava Faith & Movement
in Bengal (Calcutta, General Printing & Publishers, 1942).
that the relation between Rādhā and Krishna must not be understood to be the love-making of husband and wife, but an adulterous relationship!

By this time, the Krishna of the Bhagavadgītā, looking down from the Highest Step of Vishnu upon these goings-on among his later devotees, must very well have overturned his celestial flower-chariot in astonishment at what he saw. I have not been scandalizing, but sketching the earlier and the later a very sharp change. The cult of the child-Krishna shares a name with the earlier religion, but an astounding turnaround has occurred in the nature of a religious faith. (Whether the rise of Christianity within Judaism, or the rise of Islam against its Jewish-Christian background, involved a more radical transformation, is a reasonable question. All indications point to a continuity of religious community. It was the religion that had changed.

Why?

Scholars have not been entirely oblivious of this change in conception of Krishna, and they have made a few attempts at explanation in terms of 19th-century-notions-of-the-evolution-and-diffusion of-religions.

he explained, was a borrowing from Christianity, which is the original source in the human scene of the idea of the divinity of childhood. The name "Krishna" is an Indian transformation of the word "Christ;" in India Harod's massacre of the innocents became the murder of the children of Devaki by Kaśe; John the Baptist became Krishna's brother Balarāma; the headsmen are common to both birth stories. Fifty years earlier Albrecht Weber had collated these correspondences carefully in his Berlin Academy paper Über die Krishnajanmāśṭami (Krishna's Geburtsfest) and had ventured the view that the Mediterranean Christmas festival had migrated eastward. Kennedy transformed Weber's hunch into a historical theory by naming the instruments of this migration: the carriers, he claimed, were a migratory group of herdspeople called the Gujars, who came into India (he said) with the Huns in the fifth century, came into India from their former home in Central Asia where Christian churches were known to have been flourishing. Kennedy's proposition was helped by his dating of the Harivāpa and Vishnu Puranas—and the beginnings of the Gopāla cult—as late as the sixth century A.D. Sir R. G. Bhandarkar in 1913 welcomed the idea of a Christian assumption of responsibility for the Gopāla cult (in his Vaiṣṇavism, Śaivism, and Minor Religious Systems). He strengthened the theory by proposing as bearers of the lore of the Christ-child a people known earlier in Indian records: the Abhīras, who are mentioned in the Mahābhārata, and thus possible
contributors of material to a more soberly dated Harivamsa, correctly chanted.

Arthur Berriedale Keith really destroyed the theory of borrowing from Christianity in an article in the Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society in 1908 ("The Child Krishna," pp. 169-75), in which he pointed out that the story of the killing of Kansa—a part of the childhood cycle—was already current in India in the second century B.C., as evidenced in several references to it in the Mahabhasya of Patañjali. Keith might have added that the notion of transmission of Christian lore by either Gujars or Abhiras was a daydream. There is no evidence that either tribe ever lived outside of India, no record of the entry of either into India, nor of their having been in ancient days the cowherds of the Mathurā countryside, nor of their having ever been Christians or worshippers of Krishna Gopāla either, for that matter. [All references to Abhiras in Hindu literature hold them in abhorrence, and some record hostility between them and the family of Krishna. See Bhagwansingh Suryavamshi, The Abhiras, Their History and Culture (Baroda, U. of Baroda, 1962).]

The theory of a Christiān origin of Gopāla did not prosper. Nor has any other.

A theory had to be proposed by someone that the cult of Krishna the cowherd had the Vedas as its source. The propounder was Professor Hemachandra Raychaudhuri, who published in 1920 his Materials
for the Study of the Early History of the Vaishnava Sect (U. of Calcutta, 1920). The Vedic literature, he pointed out, already calls Vishna a Gopā or Herdsman (RV 1.22.18) who has in his abode many-horned and swiftly-moving cows. Vishnu is also called (1.155.6) a youth who is no longer a child. The Baudhāyana Dharmasūtra calls Krishna Govinda, and Dāmodara (25.24)—terms that are prominent in the later Gopāla literature.* This pastoral god of the Vedas was preserved and developed, say Raychaudhuri, by some tribe like the Abhīras.

Posterity seems to have judged that a theory that assumes the Vedic scholarship of herdsmen—and that leaps back over a millenium of silence to find the inspiration of the Gopāla cult—does not explain mauh.

After fifty years, Charlotte Vaudeville of the Sorbonne has had the courage to pick up, again, the problem of the origin of the cowherd god.** In those parts of her sophisticated investigations in which she struggles with this problem, she sorts out several cycles of childhood stories with separate origins—cycles having to do with Krishna's birth, his lifting of Govardhana and subduing of Kāliya, stories involving his brother Balārāma, the erotic tales, and those on the slaying of Kaṃsa. All were originally rooted, she thinks, in prehistoric cults.

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of the Mathūra countryside, associated with pre-Aryan
godlings and divinities.

There is probably a good deal of truth in
Professor Maudevill's connections between Gopāla and
little-known ancient yakshas, divine serpents, hill
spirits and tree-spirits—but little proof. Even
if her demonstrations were conclusive, however,
at the end we would know only where the creators
of the Gopāla cult gathered up their materials.
We would know how the cult of Gopāla was created,
but not why, and we would have attained no inkling
of an understanding of its vitality and power.

Only a 19th-century historian of religion could
believe that by tracing a historical religion back
to a supposed starting-point one can capture the
essential nature of the religion and the key to
all subsequent developments in its history. If
one traces the new-born Krishna and his mother back
to the Madonna Lactans of Byzantine murals, really,
what has one learned? If one is trying to understand
the rise of Gopāla-worship in America, what has one
accomplished in learning that it "sprang from" Bengal
Vaishnavism as introduced by Swami A. C. Bhaktivināda
in 1965? One has learned when, and whence, but not
why.

In making my own attempt to answer that question
I shall forego the matter of remote origins and be
content to show that, before the author of the Harivāmaṁśa
retold these stories in Sanskrit, they had already been told in a less dignified circle on the margins of the awareness of the composers of the Mahābhārata. For several centuries at least. The best evidence is found in the scene of Šiśupāla's verbal attack upon Krishna in Mahābhārata 2:38.4–9. There the "mācha" Šiśupāla pours his contempt upon Krishna's childhood exploits, mentioning them by name. In editing this book of the Epic for the critical edition Franklin Edgerton has found the lines to be early and authentic. In them, Šiśupāla rails at the "warrior deeds" that are Krishna's claim to fame: that he killed a bird named Putanā, that he upset a cart, and ate a lot of food, and lifted an ant-hill of a mountain, and slew a house (aśva) and a bull (Virabha). (The last two references are to the killing of the demons Keśi and Ariṣṭa.) Krishna's childhood feats were known. The evidence of this passage is supported by occasional name-dropping elsewhere in authentic passages in the Epic in which the honorifics applied to Krishna recognize feats that belong to his childhood: Keśināśīdana in Bhagavadgītā 18.1, Kesihantī in Mahābhārata 2:35.2, Keśīśūdana in 2:30.11. Also, two sculptural representations of infancy stories have been found, and dated to a time before the Harivaṃśa. The Mathurā Museum has a relief of the Killing of Keśi on a weight-stone that is assigned to the Kusāna period. And another Mathurā Museum piece

is No. 17:1344—a relief in which a man walks beside a river carrying a baby on his head in a shallow basket. Even Charlotte Vaudeville, who has her own unique understanding of this relief, agrees with previous interpreters in seeing here a representation of the child Krishna being carried to his refuge in the village of the cowherds.*

Another demonstration that there was an early and widespread lore regarding the childhood of Krishna may be seen in the Ghata Jātaka of the Pali canon of the Buddhists.** The Jātaka tells its own strange version of the birth of Krishna and the death of Kamsa, yet in a version that has many clear ties with the narrative told in the Harivaṃśa. Though the date of this Jātaka cannot be determined, it is likely to be early; and at any rate it shows how varied, and therefore of what old growth, the Gopāla legend was, at a fairly antique time. The fact that this version is in a vernacular language, and in the literary form of a tale, appears to point to the oral folk tale as the transmitter of the Gopāla stories before the author of the Harivaṃśa brought them together in Sanskrit. Professor Ingalls supports this view in his

Vaudeville, "Krṣṇa "Aspects du Mythe de Krṣṇa-Gopāla..." op. cit.; p. 746; Hawley, op. cit., p. 338 bibl.; Srinivasan, op. cit., p. 127. Srinivasan's objections to the prevailing identification of the scene have been met by Hawley and Vaudeville.

observation that the Harivamśa narrative includes no quotations, no references to earlier authorities, and that it has the seamless texture of materials that is being reduced to writing from oral sources for the first time.*

The stories existed, somewhere in folklore. Apparently there were Sanskrit-speakers, who, like Śiśupāla, were contemptuous of these stories; others, like the composers of the Mahābhārata, merely stood aloof from them--knowing them, but not willing to be their transmitters.

A time came when that aloofness changed—when Sanskrit-speakers heard those stories gladly, and the Harivamśa was written. And after that, the stories of Gopāla were told and told again, and became the stories that Krishna-worshippers really wanted to hear.

WHY?

My own effort to answer this question involves a general theory of religion that I have found helpful in explaining the dynamics of religious change:

the understanding that religious cults focus always upon areas of anxieties in the life of a people where factors almost beyond control are endangering what are felt to be vital necessities. Where disaster is an imminent possibility, there religion comes into play, invoking extra-human power or the support of a superhuman order. Professor Ralph Linton, who

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*Daniel H. R. Ingalls, "The Harivamśa as a Mahākāvya," in Mélanges d'Indienisme à la Memoire de René Rémi, p. 394.
once graced Columbia's Department of Anthropology made this point in lectures in my course in Primitive Religions: the Malagasy tribe that is utterly dependent upon rice has no rice-god: their rice-crop had never been known to fail. Elsewhere there were rice-gods and rice-rites—and natural dangers that made the rice harvest ever unsure. In the Trobriand Islands in some places the hurricane deity received constant cultic attention—while on the lee side of the same island, worship of the wind-god was perfunctory of non-existent. Religion focuses upon sore spots where human beings worry, scarcely able to cope with distress regarding critical matters. There worshippers look to the superhuman for support.

Advanced religions are not different: their rites and their lore focus on areas where they can scarcely cope—where there is weakness, want, hurt, distress and anxiety.

This was true of the older Krishnaimism: the threat of Disorder—the threat of having to live in a fallen, disintegrated and brutalized world or in a world organized on distasteful principles—that was the bugaboo of the writer of the Bhagavadgītā, which he worked against by invoking the world-concerned God who was the civic head of the universe so to speak, working for the welfare of all creatures himself, and calling for faithfulness to duty and the needs of society. He will support and save those...
those who stand by their posts and promote lokaśamāraṇa.

I need not repeat my sketch of social concern in the earlier Krishnāism. How faithful a-later Krishnāism was to that ideal, after the Bhagavad-gītā, in the centuries of the later epic, is something that I must point out, however, because it was the very social effectiveness of Vaishnava religion that necessitated a transformation in the faith.

What one sees in the materials of the later epic is a continuous drive, under Vaishnava religious auspices, to construct and weld and cement an unshakable neo-Vedic world—or, if not really Vedic, then at least a world-approved by the Vedic priesthood that was not Buddhist or Hellenistic or materialist but Hindu. Making common cause with a rejuvenated and chastened brahman class, the worshippers of Krishnā led a swelling counter-reformation against all the deprecators of the Vedic tradition and against all the rejectors of the neo-vedic social life that was being formulated in the dharmaśastras. Increasingly, the enemy was the king or emperor of foreign extraction—usually Buddhist or renegade Saiva in religion—who cared little for brahmans or for dharmaśastras. They neither performed Vedic rituals nor compelled compliance with the growing corpus of Hindu sacred law.

Late in the second century A.D. the issue of cultural dominance became a real one. The great
Kuṣāṇa empire began to fall apart, leaving a flotsam of petty states ruled generally by kings of foreign family and worldly outlook, and a population made poor and miserable by the burden of many standing armies. Under the circumstances, voices became shrill. The issue of the third century in Sanskrit literature became a typically Krishnaitie drive for order—now, a drive for brahmanical order, and for acceptance of brahman tutelage in the universal observance of social codes formulated by the brahmans.

Beginning even in the Maurya times, an aspect of the Hindu reaction to pressure had been the codification of the Hindu social tradition. The Laws of Manu had appeared before the end of the Kuṣāṇa time. Now, amidst the struggles of a dark age, a crescendo was reached in the writing of the law book of Yājñavalkya and the Vishnusmriti and the Nāradasmriti. The lands in which these codes were honored became the lands that were considered to constitute the Indian nation, rather than any area set by natural boundaries: the conception is visible in a geographical pronouncement found in Vishnu Purana 2:38:

"On the east of Bharata dwell the Kirātas, On the west, the Yavanas; In the center reside Brahmanas, Kṣatriyasa Vaisyas and Śudras, occupied in their respective duties of sacrifice, arms, trade, and service."

(Tr. H.H. Wilson; cf Garudaśūrana 55:5, Varanasi, Chowkamba, 1954; Markandeya Purana tr. Pargiter, 47:8.)

The peoples that do not conform to the duties of caste are no part of Bharata, but foreigners.
Several epic references to political situations reflect the bitterness of this struggle of the indigenous against the foreign or barbaric. Mahābhārata 3.186.29 polemicizes rulers who are Yavanas, Śakas, Andhras and others—wicked overlords who punish wrongly, lie deliberately, and allow even the brahmins kshatriyas and vaishyas to ignore their own proper caste occupations. What makes these outsiders degraded and unfit to rule, says Mahābhārata 13.33.10, is their disregard of the advice of brahmins. The author of Mahābhārata 12.65.13ff addresses kings who now have such people among their subjects. Hindu kings, he says, should compel such mlechas to perform Vedic sacrifices and to give fees and gifts to brahmins, and should make them show respect for Aryan kings, parents, gurus, ācāryas and other authority figures. Residents of India who are of foreign origin or culture are not only being toppled from rule, but they are being absorbed, under pressure, into ranks of the caste order provided by the dharmaśāstras. A passage of the Harivaṃśa speaks of this reform in kingship as now often an accomplished fact: good kings, says 41.1-11, always heed the Vedas, sacrificed to gods and ancestors, appease Indra to insure rain, and know the dharmaśāstras. And they never go to war, says 15.49ff., without worshipping fire and brahmins and getting a brahman blessing for their enterprise.

In 320 A.D. this pressure for a Hindu reunification came to fruition in the rise of the very Hindu empire
of the Guptas. Each succeeding Gupta ruler added conquests until the Gupta lands stretched from sea to sea. Krishna was generally the personal deity of these emperors: four of the seven great rulers of the line are described in their inscriptions as paramabhaṅgavata; Supreme Bhāgavata. With the establishment of the Vaishnava faith came the victory of the causes long associated with Vishnuism. Emperors began their reigns with the legitimization provided by performance of the royal coronation sacrifices. Sanskrit became the language of state as well as of religion—the language of records, inscriptions and coins. Royal endowments in the form of the land of rent-producing villages (agrahāras) were settled upon groups of brahmins for their support in lives dedicated to the promotion of Hindu learning. Minority ethnic groups submitted to brahmins, underwent purifications, and were given livelihoods in the hierarchy of the Hindu castes. The composition and study and application of dharmāsthas went on with even greater seriousness because their norms that were once stated as preachments were being re-stated with juridical precision. A new attention to courtroom procedure in the dharmāsthas of the Gupta Age shows that the courts of the state were enforcing the brahmanical rules. The judges were always brahmins.


The brahmanical society that emerged in the Gupta age was clear in its demands and firm in its discipline. Its pattern was that of a carefully-ranked hierarchy of varnas and occupational sub-castes. The guardians of the system were the brahman class, whose authority and superiority are inculcated constantly in the dharma literature. The work proper to the various castes is stated clearly, and the penalties for non-performance—usually exclusion from society. The children of inter-caste marriages no longer retain the rank of either parent, but fall into the ranks of the unclean. Untouchability in its mature historic form makes its appearance. Rules for the subordination of women receive full and enduring expression. The age for the marriage of girls is set at a time prior to puberty. The first mention of sati appears in dharma writings. The joint family makes its appearance, with its many restraints upon individual freedom. In later times the bolts of this structure will be tightened and some further restrictions will be added to limitations on occupation, marriage, and social contexts. But the brahman resurgence had expunged the laxities encouraged by foreigners and heretics, and the classical social system of India had reached maturity. The essential quality of life would not change for many centuries.
This is the India that put the Bhagavadgītā on the back shelf, to stay there until the 19th century. This is the India that welcomed the stories of the mischievous Gopāla, and gave them respectability, and listened to them ever after with delight. How could a civilized people turn their backs upon the vision of the moral world-supporting God, śvayāh śāvatadharmagupta, "immortal guardian of the eternal dharma."? I asked this question earlier, half in seriousness. Now, in the light of historical circumstances, the answer seems obvious. (If I have done my work properly, perhaps I can quit now and say no more.)

I have said that a religion focuses upon a people's deservations. The God of the Bhagavadgītā had done his work, then, and taken his leave. Lokasamgraha, the integrity of the world, was no longer an acute problem. Order has a high theoretical value, but enough is enough. There are situations in the development of human culture when disorder is far from the principal cause of anxiety and misery. And in the Gupta age and thereafter the most dreadful problem in Hindu living was something else. It was the triumph of order itself. Human beings love order absolutely only in its absolute absence. Order attained, always restricts. And the Hindu caste order restricted with a thoroughness that few systems have known before or sânce. What the people
of this society groaned of was something that they called "bondage;" and what they ardently longed for was something that they called "freedom": mukti or moksha—"liberation"—was their name for salvation itself. Bound by their estate in life, bound by innumerable conventions, because they saw these bondages as rooted at a deeper level in the bonds of their own karma that were of their own making, justice required them to endure and await the deserved liberation of an eschatological enlightenment.

In the meantime, contemplation of the work-god of the Bhagavadgītā had little to offer that could raise the spirits of those entrapped in the dull routines of caste duty. But the little Krishna who was free as the wind and a reckless smasher of pots was another matter. For those whose matings were hedged in with considerations of varṇa, jāti and gotra, in a system that would break down in fact if lines of heredity were not rigidly channelled, the epic Krishna on his chariot had nothing to say that could charm. Another matter was the contemplation of divine lover-boy who, devil-may-care, made love just as he pleased. Sanctioned as holy meditations, contemplations of the erotic sports of Krishna soothed a deep unhappiness of this tense social system. Such devotions to this sportive god could, by divine grace, lead even to eternal liberation in Krishna's supernal Cow-world, there to participate one's self, forever, in those same eternal romantic
sports, every aspect of the former collared life would
vanish in a life of pure spontaneity.

The Hindu fascination with Krishna's loves as adulterous acts finds part of its explanation as balm for severe repression. Our Victorian ancestors saw the Hindu tales as scandalous proof of indifference to morality in Hindu religion and society. The truth about their meaning is quite the opposite. East of Suez is simply not the place where there ain't no Ten Commandments. Remember the shock of the late Hippies who betook themselves to India expecting to be welcomed into the original home of sexual naturalism. The Hindu commandments are not ten, but legion.

Even the Bengal Vaishnavas, whose teachers fill their own minds and those of their pupils with systematic meditations on the sexual dalliances of Krishna, are Puritans in practice. S. K. De, after long and not uncritical analysis of Gauḍīya schemes of meditation on the copulations of Rādhā and Krishna, notes with some surprise that the teachers he has known in his studies appear to lead blameless lives. (__________)

The exuberant eroticism of the Krishnaite lore is quite another thing from Hindu divinization of sex. It is an application of the resources of religion to difficult tensions created by cultural restraints of exceptional severity, a system for exploding and expending sexual energy in ways that are harmless to the values of Hindu society.
Born as a counterpart of sexual puritanism, I doubt that the erotic aspects of the religion of Krishna Gopāla can survive in any other frame. The evidence: where such Krishnaism spreads, if it does not find a puritanism, it creates one. It.

Moving into the hippie scene here in New York City in 1965, Swami A.C. Bhaktivedanta drew in youths who wanted above all to express their alienation by embracing a new cultural religion, but who believed also that whatever was natural was blessed. The Swami changed that. His disciples accept the four-caste system and the supremacy of brahmans, and they give over to their guru their wealth, their work, the freedom of their minds, and the freedom to marry as they please. When married with the consent of their teacher, their freedom extends to intercourse once a month on the day of highest probability of conception. When permitted childbearing ends, sex life ends also. A better scheme for generating insufferable tension could hardly be devised. It is the base, however, on which the erotic Krishṇa myths can survive in life, and thrive.

There appears to be time for a final note on the special relevance to Hindu need of the cult of Krishna as truly a child and not as lover...of worship in the vātsalya rather than the mādhurya rasa. The adoration of Krishna as toddler and small boy is a major theme of Hindu sentiment. In the sixteenth century Sūr Dās, foremost poet in Hindī, responded to Krishna primarily in this infant form, and left to posterity in his Sūr Sāgar the most extensive and sensitive celebration of Holy childhood, perhaps, that has ever been written in any language. These poems of Sūr Dās are basic liturgical literature for North Indian Krishna-worship today.

Western students have not been able to empathize well with the feeling of this cult. Despite the formal similarity with the adoration of the Christ-child, mentioned earlier in this paper, the comparison is not illuminating nor explanatory. The adoration of the Christ-child is a transient matter, a momentary pose, without any hold upon Christians that can be compared to the depth of meaning that Hindus see in the child Krishna. So I shall point out a special connection between the worship of this child and that special Hindu distress, the hurt of "bondage."

The plight of the Hindu adult, enwrapped in total religious prescription, has been discussed sufficiently. Even in areas where tradition allows
some freedom of choice, the freedom is often a freedom for collective choice, or for decision by authoritative figures, and men can live to hoard-headedness under the domination of their aged fathers. This experience of total control is time when his life was not so.

Sociologists today remark constantly upon the exceptional liberty, the exceptional permissiveness and affection that surround the Hindu boy, in particular until he reaches what is considered to be the age of responsibility. He is doted upon by his mother. (He is her great claim to distinction.) Females wait upon him. Few rules apply to him. He is disciplined gently, or not at all. Then, suddenly, the boom is lowered on him--ideally after the performance of the Upanayana initiation into adulthood. Suddenly he is in his father's world. He can not act according to his whim. The word "must" enters into almost all his acts; and thus his life is spent. The status and prospects of most men offer little hope that release from bondage will come later in this life. Their Paradise lies in the past. The contemplation of childhood is a happy contemplation that blesses and heals. Hindus find this liberation not only in the contemplation of their own remembered childhood, but in other ideal childhoods that are open to their imaginative participation. Identifying with their own children,
they defend the tradition of childhood liberty in their raising, and participate vicariously in the freedom that is now so scarce in their adult lives. The worship of the child Krishna has the same healing power. The projection of the worshipper's self into the god is not direct, but the rehearsal of the baby Krishna's untrammeled sports stirs up half-conscious recollection of a happier time, as drawing the bow over the top strings of a sarangi evokes the resonation of the unstruck strings below.

We know something, ourselves, about the benign power of memories of a happy childhood:
"Turn backward, turn backward, O Time in thy flight; Make me a boy again, just for tonight."

For occidentals, the charm that remembered childhood casts over us is predominantly the enjoyment again in fantasy of the protection, security, and affection that once were ours--qualities that are conspicuously lacking in our competitive adult world. For the Hindu, the blessing repossessed is above all freedom, spontaneity, the sportive possibility in living--the quality that is so hurtfully suppressed in the straightjacket in which he lives, that the longing for freedom has become a religious matter, and the personification of freedom has become a god.