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A WORD TO READERS

One who picks up and opens an unknown book, opens more than a book. To a new material, a mind is open, too. The subsequent discoveries of that mind may be rich.

Reader, you have in all likelihood taken just such a step, into a realm that will have great novelty for you. I applaud your curiosity, and assure you that the field that you have entered is not dull. What you will now encounter will be striking in at least three ways.

First, this book will give you full access to a poem that has been loved in India for a thousand years. It has recently received recognition as one of the literary classics of the world... Set in the beautifully-written Bhāgavata Purāna extensive lyric poem called "The Five Chapters on the *Rāsa*," (referring to the *Rāsa* dance of the god Krishna), called in its original Sanskrit the *Rāsapañcādhyāyī* From the moment of the completion of the purāna sometime in the ninth century, India itself has delighted in this poem and viewed it as a masterpiece. In most of the centuries of its circulation it was available in manuscript only. It was therefore expensive. Nevertheless it was a best-seller. We know that fact not through any press reports, but through the quick and massive diffusion of the manuscript to every corner of literate India. In every language area, and in almost every circle of Hindu faith, the learned acquired and preserved copies of the Bhāgavata Purāna --the whole manuscript, or, excerpted, the portion on the *rāsa* dance. Even today, these manuscripts survive in old Indian libraries in unmatched numbers, everywhere. We know also that these copies were much-read or heard, and their contents were well-remembered. The evidence lies in the correctness of the surviving text, compared to the corrupt texts of other purānas. The fate of most purānas has been to be copied carelessly and, worse, bloated with scheming interpolations. Not so, the Bhāgavata. Distorters of its text were detected and corrected by vigilant and well-versed audiences. It was defended as a treasure.. Already in 1030 A.D. this Bhāgavata was named to Al-Beruni in a list of the eighteen orthodox puranas. Today, with Hindus, that is its status--a sacred scripture.

As distinct from Indian evaluation, the outside world has ventured little serious opinion about the Bhāgavata Purāna until now.. There were reasons for this taciturnity. Some western writers were repelled by the erotic nature of some of its contents; others were not learned enough in the Sanskrit of its poetry to offer confident judgments. Well-considered literary discussion was discouraged also by a lack of any but perfunctory translations into English. About other puranas--cruder in their language and their thought--scholars' comments were frank and full and seldom complimentary. But the Bhāgavata Purāna was perceived to be different and not easy to judge. Characteristically, the scholars of many generations dealt with *this* purāna in only a few positive words, and passed on quietly to other more assessible writings.

Sanskrit studies in the extra-Indian world has now left its infancy behind. Spending the years needed in language study, students have become competent readers in many new fields, including the Bhāgavata Purāṇa. The metric science of the purāṇa's poetry is now understood. The poet's language is perceived now to be a cultivated diction, often using courtly figures of speech such as the bards of Indian kings were wont to use. Touches of the revered language of the Vedas are noticed in it, and the mellifluous flow of the poet's sound effects are appreciated. The personal genius of the author (whom we still cannot name) is now recognized. Connoisseurs increasingly acknowledge that we have here a poem that is entitled to world esteem. The summary evaluation of a notable authority, Professor Daniel Ingalls of Harvard, can be cited here:

"For all its traditional lore and traditional piety, and despite its frequent archaisms, the Bhagavata remains, especially in its tenth book, the most enchanting poem ever written." (*Krishna: Myths, Rites, and Attitudes*, ed. Milton Singer, Honolulu, East-West Center, 1966, p. vi.)

This rating is high, but it comes from a professor who has had extraordinary experience as teacher of the Bhāgavata Purāṇa to university students--(including our translator, Dr. Schweig.)

Enquirers whose interest lies in the literary qualities of the Bhāgavata Purāṇa have, above, Professor Ingalls' obvious leave to study it for its literary qualities alone, if they like. For literary investigators, the first step, naturally, is to orient themselves to the poem through reading in good translations. The universal difficulty of producing a great translation of a great poem has been a special hardship in the case of the Bhagavata. The only older translation that is still cherished by literary students in particular is M. Hauvette-Besnault's translation into French done in 1865 and published in the fifth volume of Eugene Burnouf's *Le Bhagavata Purana* (Paris, 1898, 1992). Dr. Schweig's sensitive literal translation into English now takes the lead. It is expert, up-to-date, exceptionally lucid, and not excelled in literary quality by any other.

Beyond its high literary value, this new translation gives you access to a major form of modern Hinduism that worships Krishna as Gopāla, the cowherd youth. The power and importance of this movement within Hinduism has not yet been fully perceived. It has a significant following, now, outside of India also. It has long been overshadowed in world awareness by India's Advaita monism, that is commonly presented as Hinduism's main stream. We know the advaita teaching that individual persons, human or divine, are unreal as such, and that all such illusory persons, when they know the truth, will vanish in the impersonal divine Absolute. The worshippers of Krishna as Bhagavān or personal Lord are that powerful monism's strongest modern competitors. They are worthy of special notice. A study of the Bhāgavata Purāṇa as literature alone, is legitimate, but it will not plumb that scripture's depth.

Before Bhāgavata Purāṇa began to exercise its force and create denominations, the word "Bhāgavata" alone had been a clear and sufficient single name for a minority religious group of ardent theists. Already a thousand years old in 900 A.D., that community had shown literary power in producing the *Bhagavadgītā* and several purāṇas. By the middle of the first millenium, the community had made a major shift from worship of the Krishna of the *Bhagavadgītā* and gave

its primary attention to worship of a younger Krishna as described in a new mythology about Krishna's childhood. Addressing this Krishna Gopāla, the Bhāgavata Purāṇa when written soon inspired such a complex growth of varied movements that neither the Bhāgavata name nor any single name now includes all Krishna-devotees. Bhāgavatas are most often identified now by mention of their varied sects, founded by particular preceptors such as Nimbārka, Vallabha, or Chaitanya. The term "Vaishṇava" is often applied to them all-- correctly, but "Vaishṇava" -- too wide a term-- includes more than Krishnaites.. We have no word but the awkward word "Krishnaism" to designate all those Vaishṇavas who use as their basic scripture precisely the poem we have at hand here now. Never counted, the immensity of their movement has been suggested by police estimates of the number of the pilgrims that flood their holy city of Mathura in a calendar year. Two million ardent Krishna-devotees, they say, come in July, to celebrate Krishna's birth, and later, on a full-moon night of autumn, to celebrate Krishna's dancing of the *Rāsa*.

World-wide, old religious communities remember quite selectively the various ages of their history. They rehearse, again and again, those special experiences or fictions of their past that they regard as critical. These narrations become paradigms-- mental dwelling-places and shapers of their thought. Jews remember above all the Exodus. Christians of New Testament time, and all later times, ponder the story of the passion of Jesus. In their thought about *this* history, marked by the cross, much of their thought about *all* history evolves. Buddhists remember especially the saga of the night of the enlightenment of the Buddha; ubiquitous small images of the enlightened Buddha, serene under the Bodhi tree, are everywhere tokens of the displayer's Buddhist identity. The painting at the front of this book, of Krishna leading the circle of the *rasa*, is comparable-- a sign of participation in the circle of Krishna-worship. It has been a powerful emblem, awakening favorite memories that have affected the community's intellectual development.. Each generation dwelt mentally in this story. From the Five Chapters on the Rasa Dance as starting point, surge after surge of new thinking emerged in the Bhāgavata community in the second millenium of its history. Ancient India had conceived, in what remained for a long time a very modest development in theology, that God's motive in creating the world could only have been his sportiveness, his *līlā*. In the Bhāgavata Purāṇa, sportiveness became a major idea and ideal, that in later times expanded into one area after another of Krishnaitic thinking and practice.. (See "*līlā*" in *Encyclopedia of Religion, Chicago, 1984*). Belief in the sportiveness of god suggested a hope of a degree of liberation in area after area of life where persons, bound by the laws of caste, had suffered severe restrictions. The term "*līlā*" took a place beside the old term "dharma" or duty, as a rival principle for the general governance of life. Now there is even a new Hindu social ethics that proposes a life of duty that can be lived righteously and selflessly but also sportively. In theology, God himself was now conceived to be playful not only in his acts of creation, but also in sportive recreations. In the realm of religious meditation (a matter of much importance and complexity in Indian religions), mental rehearsal of the sports of Krishna as told in the Bhāgavata Purāṇa became the most common theme in the systematic introspections of the Bhagavatas.. In conceptions of salvation, old heavens were exchanged for Krishna's special celestial Cow-world where, devotees now hope, they may become eternal witnesses of Krishna's ever-ongoing transcendental sports. The prospect of evanishment in the Absolute appeal thenceforth to even fewer devotees of Krishna. The Vaishnava religious theater has installed an enactment of the *Rāsa*

dance of Krishna as a sacral element that initiates every performance of the *Rāsīlīā*. Throughout India today, some two dozen troupes of these professional mystery players spread the gospel of Krishna's sports. As a reader of this book you are standing at the wellspring of the modern Krishnaite faith. This *Rāsaṅcādhyaī* provides a spot of great advantage for beginning a study of this growing religion. Know this poem, and you will know the rudiments of an important Hindu outlook.

A third notable part of your experience with the Five Chapters on the *Rāsa* will be an encounter with its erotic imagery. The poem depicts Krishna's encounter with his devotees, the cowherd women of Braj, in an ecstatic dance that culminates in sexual union with them. The story is available below, and need not be told here. Our focus will be on critical reactions to the story--the appraisals of Bhagavatas and others--including yourself. The question will be, "What values do you deem the author of the Bhāgavata Purāṇa to have been upholding? A religious faith, or very sensual and secular values?"

When the Bhagavata Purana was first distributed, its widespread acceptance and early canonization indicate that India in general was not offended by the sexual element in its content. A few great teachers did refrain from using the purāṇa, and in our text itself (10.33.26-35) one interlocutor expressed some disturbance of mind because Krishna's touching of other men's wives is contrary to Hindu moral law. The author responded in a manner that satisfied the Bhāgavata questioner:

The sexual acts of the Lord, our text explains, were not of the ordinary human kind. The usual man is driven in sex by lust and desire for enjoyment. Not so, the Lord. He has no wants. He is already the possessor of all things and therefore has in him no reason for the rise of any personal desire, no need to seduce and possess anybody. So his loving amours have as motive only his affection for his devotees and his wish that they should share in the enjoyment of his selfless sports. These acts having been desireless, they entailed no demerit. (The thinking is the *Bhagavadgītā's*). They did not involve the sin of adultery. The author adds that for any ordinary man, full of desire, it would be utterly ruinous to imitate the sex-acts of Krishna. He must not do this, even in his daydreams! For many Hindus who might have been uneasy at first about the innocence of Krishna's acts, this original and scriptural reassurance seems to have been sufficient. For centuries, vehement Hindu objections were not heard.

But in time non-Hindus heard of the dance, and they did not hear or did not heed this apologia. What they heard was the story of a shocking orgy. Muslims took it as something worse than a simple bawdy story. To speak of a divine copulation was to belittle the sovereign God of the Universe who is utterly different from all natural beings. Indeed He created the universe by one simple word of command. He had no son, and no wife, and needed none. How could He be insulted more grossly than by claiming that his creating was a mere procreating, like that of animals? Friendly conversation with these blasphemers? No!

Though the attitude of Christians and Jews to sexuality in religious thought is not so clearly nor so vehemently expressed, one perceives in the Biblical religions a conviction that sex is one

thing and religion is another, and that, when sexuality invades religion, purity ends and authenticity departs. Taking these western religions together, one perceives a common protest that a contamination, at least, of true religion was to be seen in the Bhāgavata tale and in these Bhāgavatas, and that no gain could come of consorting with these people in spiritual matters. For a long while, the teachers of Krishnaism were not sought out for information or for dialogue. And these Hindu teachers, on their part, found in foreign spokesmen none who were capable of understanding their mysteries or qualified for confidential instruction. Silence prevailed. Though Krishnaites were of monotheistic belief and dealt with questions that troubled the west, western leaders turned for discussions with Hindus rather to the teachers of the Advaita monism, treating it as the heart of Hinduism.

In a new age, people the world over are less content than formerly with silence between religions. We have here an aggravated case of non-communication, based upon a suspicion that Krishnaism is not a tradition of religious faith but of glorification of sex. Nowadays, responding to the new time and the new means of understanding religions that our age provides, I trust that you are willing at least to reconsider our these negative old impressions.

When you have read for yourself the pages that follow and are ready for generalizations about the cult of Krishna, I think you will still be observing, quite factually, that sexuality is indeed an important matter in the concerns of these Krishna-worshippers. They do not suppress sex, they do not minimize it. The question is not whether the Bhagavata tradition is erotic or not. It is. And so the the old question of whether it can be authentic religion also, haunts us again. Is not this material simply sensual? that is, literature written and cultivated for the promotion and enjoyment of sex and nothing more? It would belong, then, to a category of secular literature that we call pornographic.

Though we understand why readers of old drew a line here and set the Bhagavatas outside the pale, a century and more of oriental studies enables us to make a better-informed appraisal. We know much now about special undercurrents in Hindu thinking and literature, and we have new insights into Indian social history that give us better perception of the ideals that were actually dominant in ordinary Hindu life. Two deficits in the cultural background of early western scholars made it difficult for them to understand Indian eroticism in its connections with Indian interests that were not erotic. The first shortcoming was the comparative superficiality of western experience with the mystical life. The second was ignorance about the complicated and hidden devices of Indian literary metaphor. We know a great deal more about yoga now, and about the regions within human consciousness that India's advanced mystics explored. We have heard of rare states of consciousness that the yogis induced in themselves, that they felt helpless to describe save in the language of sex experience. The Bhāgavatas, though practioners of devotional Hinduismk, knew of the experiences of the yogis, and even practiced some disciplines of extended meditation themselves. They, too, were sometimes elated by sudden inner illuminations of which no record could be found save in the ancient mainline yogic literatureof the land. In Dr. Schweig's translation, in 10.32.8, we have the testimony of a woman who, with her hair standing on end, has had such an experience, joyful but numinous. And she refers to the honored mystics of old, who by ancient record had had such experience, and uses the known example to sanctify

what she has undergone.. She explains the second part of her experience thus:

She became elated with
bodily riplings of joy,
as the body of a yogi
is overcome with bliss.

In the first half of the verse, which you may read for yourself, she states her own surrealistic and very feminine conceptualization of the mystical event as it was occurring. It was a momentary fancy and it was hers: a fancy of a unique sexual contact with Krishna. The conceptualization was not derived from the yogi of her comparison: yogis are male, historically and grammatically. (A thought aside: the unknown author of the Bhāgavata Purāṇa must have been a woman!) My real interest of the moment, however, is only in pointing out a type of experience not originally erotic, that became erotic in a reconception. Eroticism is not something necessarily original. It arises. And is not necessarily fastfixed. It is an interpretation, and an interpretation can be transient.

We turn now to consider the power of metaphor, also, to effect transformations between erotics and religion.. We have in the narrative of the Five Chapters on the Rasa a series of brief sketches: the wives of cowherds are in their homes, the notes of the flute draw them, they leave for the forest, they join in love-play. The Indian tradition allows the worldly to take these glimpses as flat statements of things seen, and nothing more. But the more advanced in spirituality have an option. They understand, with the culture, that even events can be symbols, whereby simple events can refer to other and more important events. The higher affirmations of the story just told can then be understood thus. The cowherd women represent *all* devotees.. The sounds of the flute are God's intimation to them that He does indeed exist, and calls them to meeting with himself. The gopis respond (they are *model* devotees..) "Going to the forest" is India's decisive act of world-abandonment, the turn to the religious life. The cowherd wives then offer to god the highest sacrifice a Hindu woman can offer: surrender of all, in the form of adultery, which brings in India utter ruin. The Lord received them in loving union. The story thus far is a promise to all devotees: those who respond thus to the flute will surely be given the response of God's love. These sex-stories began, and they end, in something other than sex. , This is not a pornographic story, though it is a story full of reference to sex..

Such is the meaning that I see. The author of the poem has not breathed a word of this interpretation. Indian poets do not dull their symbols with didactics. They let those understand, who can. So, the transcending of sex that I see here, is my supposition--a correct one I believe, but I cannot conclude with "Q.E.D.". I have not proved here that this is not merely a bawdy story, nor can I prove by analysis of metaphor that the central point of this poetry is spiritual. Skeptics can still say, "The story is lewd, and I can go no further with you.

But I can prove that the Bhagavata community did not understand and use this poem as lewd literature, to support a libidinous community life. We turn to a handful of known facts about

the social history of the Bhagavatas over a thousand years. In the view of its community the meaning of the poem was not carnal.

Note first that history has no inkling of any actual repetition on earth of the sex-rite attributed to Krishna, either as a folk custom or a solemn ritual of this community. If long-term rebels against orthodox sex codes had created the poem, some steps would have been taken, in time, to extend their ethics into actual practice. Real dissenters from Hindu moral codes were well-known in India in the ninth century: the tantrists, whose practices seemed akin to Krishna's with the gopis. Tantrists were known to gathered at night in secluded places to form their circles of human pairs and put their teachings into actual practice. Not the Bhagavatas. No enemy of the Bhagavatas, even in malicious rumors, connected the Bhagavatas with the tantrics or claimed that they repeated Krishna's *rasa* in sexual fact. There was a public awareness, then, that Tantrics and Bhagavatas were different. The absence from the first of any orgiastic practice among the Bhagavatas indicates that they took seriously 10.33.4's ban on ordinary people's even thinking of copying Krishna's actions, and the scripture's threat of utter ruin for those who do. The directors of the Raslila troupes of the present day, who preface all their dramas with theatrical representation of the dances of the *rasa*, make the point that they are presenting an imitations (*anukaran*) of the *lilas* of Krishna, and not the *lilas* themselves. And to certify the absence of sexuality in their plays they employ in the female roles in their plays only boys, and for double certainty only little boys below the age of puberty.

History remembers the Bhagavatas as a complex sectarian people, socially ambitious, who rose steadily in dignity from rather humble origins through Sanskritization, positive relations with priests and warriors and through expressed respect for the Vedas. Careful moderation in social behavior was characteristic of them. They were allies of the priestly and military aristocracies. By the time of the writing of the Bhagavata Purana they had become a socially-conscious and respectable middle-class group, defenders with few exceptions of the rules of the fully-established caste system. That system's codes of sexual morality were among the most restrictive in the world. Severe prohibitions were necessary by reason of the fact that the society distributed all dignity and privilege on the basis of one's birth, and justice could be claimed for that hereditary system only if lines of paternal descent were accurate as claimed. Promiscuity could not be allowed. The Bhagavatas themselves accepted the society's heavy tabus, and at the same time became powerful exemplars and teachers, through a growing religion, of Hindu society's necessary sexual morality. For a thousand years the Krishna-worshippers grew in numbers and social influence and at the end Hindu sexual morality was as restrictive as at the beginning. This major religion, despite its eroticism or perhaps through its eroticism, was more supportive than subversive of that firm thousand-year social order.

In the course of time a truly prurient literature appeared, starring Krishna as roue. The totally secular *Rīti* tradition in Hindi poetry appeared in North India in Krishna-knowing circles but, significantly, not in circles of Bhagavata teachers. Its centers were not at temples but at Hindu courts. Beginning in the sixteenth century a vast *ruti* literature was produced celebrating the sexual qualifications and skills of heroines and heroes including particularly Krishna. *Rīti* poets produced a vast literature over several centuries, celebrating the erotic perfections and

seductive skills of many heroines and heroes, including Krishna, in relations that had nothing to do with bhakti or religious devotion. These poets had won their hearers where they could. That it was not in the circles or at the theaters of the Bhagavata teachers, is significant.

On the question of what the author of the *Rasapancadhyayi* really intended to promote by his poem, the final verse of the Five Chapters on the *Rāsa* (10.34.40) is truly conclusive. Coming to the finale of his compositional labors was for puranic writers a serious moment with its own stylistic requisites, sometimes effusive. Authors often offered estimates of what accomplished in the just-finished literary effort. More common were assurances of the ample benefits that readers or hearers would surely attain by reason of careful attention throughout the book.. The rewards promised were generous: most common, the accumulation of great merit. Then expiation of all sins. Ascension on death to heavenly realms is commonly promised, and as often, eternal salvation itself. On the way to salvation, very many quite practical bonuses are commonly promised also. Against this usual lavishness at this point, the simplicity of the author of this poem is striking. He makes only one promise: the person who has heard his story will attain high devotion to the Lord and then, sober, he will quickly throw off lust, the disease of the heart.

Placed at a point where by convention a profusion of promises flow, this promise is unique in its simplicity. I have seen it nowhere else. It is not a thoughtless byword then, slipping half-consciously off the tongue. He lets his single promise stand in its isolation, perhaps to make sure it is heard. I can think of no ground for doubting that we have here a sincere statement of the intention that sustained the author in the writing of the entire poem.

Just how the disease of lust is overcome by the hearing of this story about the young women of Vraja may not be entirely clear, but we have seen some indication above that its effect was to support rather than to corrupt public morals. There is something to be learned here. Plainly, a dialogue with these gentle people would be fascinating--on sex, and no doubt on other topics. This cold separation of the past should be ended. The old notion that the Bhagavata Purana and the Bhagavatas may infect us with venery need not hold us back any longer.