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*DANCE  
OF DIVINE  
LOVE*

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The Rāsa Līlā of Krishna from  
the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*,  
India's Classic Sacred Love Story  
Introduced, Translated, and Illuminated

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GRAHAM M. SCHWEIG

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## Foreword

This book will give you access to a poem that has been loved in India for over a thousand years. It is the long lyric poem called the Rāsa-Pāñcādhyāyī, “The Five Chapters on the Rāsa,” the word Rāsa referring to Krishna’s dance with his female devotees. A long and distinctive poem preserved in the tenth book of the beautifully written *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, its present form was completed, at the latest, by the ninth century. Very early the entire Purāṇa, with its precious insert, received all-India fame, as attested by the great number of manuscript copies that are found even today in the old libraries of every region. It was a best-seller. It is known that these copies were much read and well remembered. The proof lies in the unanimity and correctness of the surviving texts, compared with the spoiled texts of most Purāṇas, which have suffered from careless copying and have been bloated with graceless interpolations. Not so for the *Bhāgavata*. It was defended from corruptions by its ardent, vigilant, and well-versed audiences. As early as 1030 A.D. the name of the *Bhāgavata* was given to al-Biruni in a list of the eighteen authentic and orthodox Purāṇas. Today that is still its status among Hindus—a sacred scripture.

In contrast with India’s resonant appreciation of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, the outside world has ventured little appraisal of it until recently. There were reasons for this taciturnity. Some Western writers were stunned and repelled by the erotic factor in its contents. Others were silenced by the difficulty of its language, which made confident judgments risky. Well-considered literary discussions were also discouraged by a lack of any but perfunctory translations into English. About other Purāṇas—cruder in their language and their thought—scholars’ comments were frank and full and seldom complimentary. But the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* was perceived to be different and not easy to judge. Generations of scholars dealt with *this* Purāṇa in a few positive words, and passed on quietly to discuss other Indian writings that were easier to assess.

Today, Sanskrit studies are no longer in their infancy in the extra-Indian world. Students of Sanskrit now know and pay the price for competence in that language, and have become skilled workers in many new fields, including the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*. The metric science of the Purāṇa’s poetry is 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 its legendary author, known as Vyāsa, is now recognized and acclaimed. Connoisseurs increasingly acknowledge that we have here a poem that is entitled to world esteem. A notable evaluation is that of Professor Daniel H. H. Ingalls of Harvard: "For all its traditional lore and traditional piety, and despite its frequent archaisms, the *Bhāgavata* remains, especially in its tenth book, the most enchanting poem ever written."<sup>1</sup> This rating is high, but it comes from an authority with long experience as teacher of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* to university students—including our translator, Dr. Schweig.

Even students of modern competence face the ancient and ever-present difficulty in producing from a great poem a great literary translation. Help is not available, as in the case of some classic texts, from a long succession of respectable English translators of good if not great talent. The only older translation that is praiseworthy for its literary quality is M. Hauvette-Besnault's translation into French done in 1865 and published in the fifth volume of Eugene Burnouf's *Le Bhāgavata Purana* (Paris, 1898, 1981ff.). Dr. Schweig's sensitive literal translation into English now takes the lead. It is up-to-date, expert, and exceptionally lucid.

With the appearance of this major translation, a milestone will be passed in the world's acquaintance with the Sanskrit poetry of Krishna-centered Vaishnavism. In a thousand years, Krishna-worshipping communities produced in Sanskrit two lyric poems of supreme quality: the *Gītagovinda* of Jayadeva, and the *Rāsa-Pañcādhyāyī* that we have at hand. The unsatisfying nature of the early translations of both caused critics to doubt that the difficulties of translating either of them would ever be met. But, twenty-five years ago, Barbara Stoler Miller produced the *Love Song of the Dark Lord: Jayadeva's Gītagovinda* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977) to such acclaim that experts declared that the way to Jayadeva had been opened. This should be the year of a proclamation of like importance: that the world has access now to both of the masterpieces of an entire poetic tradition.

Beyond the literary excellence that it shares with the *Gītagovinda*, our "Five Chapters on the Rāsa" has a great additional role as shaper of the course of Hindu religion. Born out of the life of a strong sect that

1. Foreword in *Krishna: Myths, Rites, and Attitudes*, edited by Milton Singer (Honolulu: East-West Center, 1996), p. vi.

in the ninth century was already more than a millennium old, this poem, during the next thousand years, was itself the mother of many new religious movements. Once all the persons of this Purāṇa's faith could be identified effectively by calling them Bhāgavatas. But these Gopāla-worshippers grew in various lines, and now precise reference requires the names of their denominations. Yet a usefulness remains in the single vague term Krishnaism, which recognizes a certain unity in them all. Today the faith has a significant following outside of India as well. The prominence within Hinduism of the worship of Krishna as Gopāla, the cowherd youth, has not yet received due recognition. In the world's awareness it was long overshadowed by India's *advaita* monism that has commonly been presented in the past as the mainstream of religious India. We know well 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 now that powerful monism's strongest modern competitors. The immensity of their movement—never measured by any census—is suggested only in police estimates of the number of pilgrims that in a given year flood their holy city of Mathurā. Two million devotees, they say, come within a year, on a monsoon day to celebrate Krishna's birth or on a full-moon night of autumn to hear or tell or see rehearsals of the story of Krishna's dancing of the Rāsa. That story's power, as paradigm, is beyond calculation.

Worldwide, old religious communities remember quite selectively the various ages of their history. They retrace in memory, again and again, those special experiences, real or imagined, that shaped their people. These famous narratives become their catechetical schools, their mental dwelling places, and the workshops of their collective thought. Jews remember above all the Exodus. Christians of New Testament times 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 never forget the night of the enlightenment of the Buddha and the emergence of the prime Buddhist truths. Small images of the Buddha, serene under the Bodhi tree, betoken everywhere the Buddhist identity of the displayer. The painting at the front of this book, of Krishna leading the dancers of the Rāsa, is such a paradigmatic presentation of a faith, a shaper of the faith, and a token of the presence of a believer.

The *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* was, by the love and use that it received, the reformulator of the ancient Bhāgavata faith. "The Five Chapters on the

Rāsa” in particular provided a new mental world, and new ideas that became very potent. The one word that most refreshed a jaded community was the old but unexploited word *līlā* or “sport” (see the word in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, New York: Macmillan, 1987). The idea was that any act done by the one Lord of all the universes was, by reason of His already possessing all, an act done without self-interest, sinless, and an act of grace. Such joyful and spontaneous sportiveness impelled God’s creation of the world. In time this idea of divine sport had many impacts: in encouraging a new spirit in social ethics, for instance. Here we shall discuss only its effect on thought about sexuality, a matter on which the “Five Chapters” will compel all readers to reflect. Any possible sex-like act of God, the thinkers held, would necessarily be as free of self-interest as his creation of worlds. God, who already has all and enjoys all, could not possibly in love be motivated by lust, or commit the offense of seduction or rape. God’s erotic sports are gracious acts of shared joy, granted out of love for his devotees.

The developers of this thought are of course deep readers of “The Five Chapters on the Rāsa” and defenders of the purity of the Rāsa dance. Justification of human promiscuity was far from their intentions. Not desireless but rather lustful, such behavior was deemed to be sinful, and anyone even dreaming of imitating the acts of Krishna should expect ruination (BhP10:33.30). What ordinary believers in Krishna were entitled to do was to contemplate and celebrate the blameless and beautiful acts of Krishna. Celebration of all of Krishna’s deeds had in fact been required long ago, in *Bhagavad Gītā* 4:9 and 10:9, verses that command devotees to enlighten each other with joyous narration of Krishna’s marvelous acts. This duty and pleasure the devotees of the new age now took up, with “The Five Chapters on the Rāsa” in hand or in mind. They brought about a revolution, for instance, in the content of the meditational disciplines of Krishna worshipers. Even the theistic bhakti traditions had their yogic practices, and directors of the inner life. But the content of Krishnaite introspection became, now, something extraordinary. In the older and central yoga, one of the very first demands, asked of any beginner, was to root out every vestige of erotic thought. With the meditators on Krishna, to the contrary, the queen of all the moods of meditation became the *madhura*, the romantic mood, that hopes for experience of the deity in an erotic relationship. The revered saints of these spiritual seekers were not ascetics but the very nubile Gopīs, the cowherd women of Vraja. The story of Krishna and the cowherd women became the prime literature of meditation. Writers fulfilled a great de-

mand for the story, told in innumerable Sanskrit manuscripts, in vernacular translations and retellings. The erotic aspects of the stories were no longer resisted but deliberately evoked and dwelt on in the mind. Even devotees' conception of salvation was eroticized: the ancient paradises—Kailāsa, even Vaikuṅṭha—lost their charm. Devotees aspired now to reach the cow-world Goloka, highest heaven of all, the heaven of Krishna, where the blessed Gopīs are assembled, and Krishna in his eternal sporting-place calls departed devotees to savor eternally the blameless deeds described in scripture.

It is not surprising that the flood of eroticism in Krishnaite literature and life has caused some outsiders to see these worshipers as a libertine community, praising and probably practicing promiscuity in sexual matters. It is indeed to be observed that the orthodox Hindu society was, after the triumph of caste in the Gupta age, one of the most restrictive in the world in sexual matters, and that, by the time of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, tantric groups had arisen that were in rebellion against the severe moral codes. In secluded places they were said to hold lawless congress in meetings comparable in some ways to the gathering for the Rāsa. Were these Bhāgavatas not social rebels of the same kind?

Not at all, according to our best records. No report is known, made by either friend or foe, that Bhāgavatas ever performed the Rāsa as carnal act, either as holy rite or in folk festivals. The *Bhāgavata*'s prohibition appears to have been observed. Even in the gossip of outsiders these believers are never connected with the tantrics. From the time of the *Bhagavad Gītā*, civic concern had been prominent in their literature. Their relationships with the dominant brahmins and kshatriyas, arbiters of Hindu society, were not hostile. The Bhāgavata community was part of the establishment, we would say, and through the thousand years following the writing of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, they were clearly supporters rather than opponents of the orthodox morality. When a prurient literature did appear—the Ratī school of Hindi poetry that thrived for several centuries and starred even Krishna as roué—it had to find its patrons in the very secular and worldly royal courts of north India, not among devotees. At the end of a millennium of the ever-increasing influence of Krishna worship, Hindu society retains its puritan character, more because of than in spite of Krishna worship.

The community's intention to support the established morality is in fact stated clearly in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* itself. In the very last verse of "The Five Chapters on the Rāsa," we are at that point in Sanskrit

writings when authors address their faithful readers in a sentimental conclusion. Commonly they celebrate the greatness of the book just written, then give assurance regarding the magnificent rewards that will inevitably come to patient readers or hearers. It is an effusive moment and the promises are great: expiation of all sins, vast spiritual merit, ascent to heavenly realms, in the end final liberation, and commonly, in the meantime, diverse material benefits of no mean dimension. In striking contrast is the simplicity of the promise uttered by the author of this work. Read *Bhāgavata*'s verse 10.33.40 (herein as act 5 verse 40) for yourself. Only one assurance is given: the person who has heard this story will attain high devotion to the Lord, and then, sobered, he will quickly throw off lust, the disease of the heart.

In no other work have I seen this conclusion. It is not a thoughtless formula but a personal utterance for a special occasion. Its simplicity bespeaks sincerity. The intention that sustained the author in writing the entire poem is before us. Just how hearing this story will throw off lust may not be clear to everybody. There is some mystery here. But no culture on earth is not compelled by human nature to face in some degree the tensions that the *Bhāgavata* addresses. For all, there is something here to learn. At very least, we have in this lyric poem the literary wellspring of a major faith. For study of it, there is no better starting point than this.

The verses are eloquently expressive, but they are not simple, and even a mastery of Sanskrit grammar does not solve all of the riddles that they present to outsiders. To lay forth the meanings of these lines is not an easy task for anybody. By reason of the many uncertainties, even scholars who know Sanskrit well have shrunk from publishing their translations. Professor Schweig, who has had a personal interest in the devotional Vaishnava tradition, has pondered the *Rāsa-Pañcādhyāyī* for eight years. As an academic student of Indian culture and religion, his search has been for the original meanings of the author. He has contemplated the insights of Western experts and traditional Indian interpreters as well. He has paid the price of certainty, and he puts before you, boldly, to the best of his ability and maybe to the limit of possibility, what the poet intended to say.

The story is before you. Know this poem, and you will know something of the spirit of Indian civilization.

Norvin Hein  
Professor Emeritus of Comparative Religion  
Yale University