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Source: *History of Religions*, May, 1986, Vol. 25, No. 4, Religion and Change: ASSR Anniversary Volume (May, 1986), pp. 296-317

Published by: The University of Chicago Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1062622>

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Norvin Hein

A REVOLUTION IN  
KṚṢṆAISM: THE CULT  
OF GOPĀLA

Beginning about A.D. 300 a mutation occurred in Vaiṣṇava mythology in which the ideals of the Kṛṣṇa worshipers were turned upside down. The *Harivaṃśa Purāṇa*, which was composed at about that time, related in thirty-one chapters (chaps. 47–78) the childhood of Kṛṣṇa that he had spent among the cowherds.<sup>1</sup> The tales had never been told in Hindu literature before. As new as the narratives themselves was their implicit theology. The old adoration of Kṛṣṇa as moral preceptor went into a long quiescence. The age of Kṛṣṇa as sportive being—as a doer of *līlās*—had begun. It has not ended even now. The great sects that dominate Vaiṣṇava religious life in North India today worship Kṛṣṇa as Gopāla, the cowherd boy.

This transformation in Kṛṣṇaism raises deep questions about why and how religions change. Little analytical effort has been focused upon this particular metamorphosis, however. One of the reasons for silence has been an extreme poverty of information about the age that produced the *Harivaṃśa*. The period between the disintegration of the Kuṣāna Empire and the establishment of the Gupta

<sup>1</sup> In dating the *Harivaṃśa* the surmises of scholars have ranged over the whole of the first four centuries A.D. The estimate of A.D. 300 offered by P. L. Vaidya, editor of the critical edition, has a new solidity (*The Harivaṃśa* [Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1969], 1:xxxix). The date agrees well with the political world envisioned by the author and with Daniel Ingalls's analysis that the *Harivaṃśa* stands between the Rāmāyaṇa and Kālīdāsa in poetic style.

peace (ca. A.D. 175–320) is a dark age in Indian history, illuminated by no inscriptions, by very little art, and by scarcely any datable literary documents.<sup>2</sup> Another factor that has shielded this transition from scrutiny has been the Hindu writer's habit of concealing or minimizing his innovations.<sup>3</sup> It was precisely the intention of the author of the *Harivaṃśa* that his revolution in mythology should not startle anybody. In his first chapter (1:5–15) he praises his bardic predecessors who have recently completed the *Mahābhārata* and explains that he is appending only a congenial addendum to bring into the saga the history of the family of Kṛṣṇa. His quiet revisionism was successful: the radical difference between the sober moral counselor of the great epic and the scallawag of the *purāṇas* has not troubled the pious Hindu.

For these or other reasons, many readers may not be fully aware of the contrast between the earlier and the later Kṛṣṇa, so we shall look into the dimension of the change to be explained.

The worship of Kṛṣṇa Vāsudeva as a divine chieftain seems to have gone on in a certain rural circle even before the compilation of the earliest form of the epic. In the earliest literary references, this Kṛṣṇa is already the remembered leader and the religious preceptor and the God of gods of the Vṛṣṇi or Sāttvata people of North India, a rustic tribe of plebeian social status. Whatever other functions may have been involved in this earliest worship of Kṛṣṇa, his cult had a civic function in identifying, unifying, and energizing the ambitious Sāttvata folk.

A subsequent phase is perceptible in old strata of the *Mahābhārata* that seem to precede the *Bhagavadgītā*. We find that the Sāttvatas have risen from their low original status to the rank of warriors or *kṣatriyas* in general estimation, and their religion has risen to prominence with them. Though the faith is still called, often, the Sāttvatadharma, it is now a tribal religion by origin only. It has become the personal religion of many members of the North Indian knightly circles, and there are few among the military elite who do not include Kṛṣṇa in some position or other in the pantheon that they honor.

By the time when the epic had reached the point of mid-formation, the cult of Kṛṣṇa had begun to attract members of India's other and highest aristocracy, that of the Sanskrit-speaking brahmins. At first

<sup>2</sup> Joanna van Lohuizen de-Leeuw, *The "Scythic" Age* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1949), p. 320.

<sup>3</sup> On such devices see my "Hindu Formulas for the Facilitation of Change," in *Traditions in Contact and Change*, Selected Proceedings of the XIVth Congress of the International Association for the History of Religions, ed. Peter Slater and Donald Wiebe (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 1983), pp. 39–52.

it was only the especially adaptive members of that old Vedic priesthood who entered the intellectual and literary service of Kṛṣṇaism, but the alliance widened, and the absorption of the elite introduced into the cult the concerns and worries of the Indo-Aryan social leadership that had become distressed, during the Mauryan age, by secessions into nonbrāhmanical religions and by the flight of disaffected householders from their civil duties into the monastic life. The Bhagavadgītā was the first literary fruit of this new position of Kṛṣṇaism as a faith for an entire society. The work is essentially a great sermon calling the alienated young back to their duties in the brahmanical social order. In it Kṛṣṇa argues that the renunciation that brings salvation is not the repudiation of the world's work but the elimination of self-interest while remaining steadfast in one's earthly duties. He presents himself as a God who forever is working desirelessly in the universe himself, not only as the world's creator, but also as its periodic redeemer who again and again descends to earth to curb evil and to reestablish righteousness (4:1–15).

Before the Mahābhārata was finished, the Kṛṣṇa religion of the Bhagavadgītā had drawn into its movement numerous and varied groups that shared a common interest in stabilizing the social order through acceptance of the social morality of the brahmins. The Sātvata religion receives a more inclusive name as Bhāgavatism—the religion devoted to Bhagavān or Kṛṣṇa. Bhāgavatism absorbed the sect of the Pāñcarātrins who honored brahmins and the Vedas but who refrained scrupulously from taking life in ritual or in diet. Entering the Kṛṣṇaite religion in increasing numbers, brahmins undertook to give Kṛṣṇa worship the status of an orthodox Vedic religion by identifying Kṛṣṇa with the Ṛgvedic god Viṣṇu. Viṣṇu's ancient saving act of striding out to recover the earth from the demons now became an act of Kṛṣṇa also. Similar stories were soon told about other compassionate acts by which this world-concerned god had saved humanity from various perils. Before the epic was completed such *avatāras* or divine descents had become at least seven in number, and the faith had received its most comprehensive and dignified name: the Vaiṣṇava or Viṣṇuite religion. It had become a major national faith. Always a religion of the socially concerned, Kṛṣṇaism for six hundred years had rallied the defenders of the social order effectively not only against the individualism that threatens every culture but against the monastic indifference to social needs that was a particularly destructive factor in the life of the epic age. The precept of Kṛṣṇaism was, “Let the *śāstras* be your guide” (Bhagavadgītā 16:24).

Looking at this civic faith in its situation of about A.D. 200 from the outside, scarcely any observer would suppose that any such

religion could lose its primacy in the life of an advanced civilization. But this is what happened. The Kṛṣṇa Vāsudeva of the great epic was not repudiated nor entirely forgotten, but simply left aside. With the closure of the Mahābhārata, the lore of Kṛṣṇa the moral teacher ceased its creative growth. The Bhagavadgītā had no successor as a moral scripture of the Kṛṣṇa cult. A different Kṛṣṇaism developed from new roots. In purāṇa after purāṇa and in an ocean of vernacular literature that keeps millions in thrall to the present day, the creativity of Kṛṣṇa worshipers has been turned to the elaboration of the lore of Bālakṛṣṇa or the child Kṛṣṇa, called also Gopāla, the cowherd. This is the Kṛṣṇa whose story, about A.D. 300, begins its literary history in the Harivaṃśa. We are in a position now to appreciate its newness.

The Harivaṃśa's new Kṛṣṇa saga begins with Kṛṣṇa's birth in the prison of the jealous King Kaṃsa. To ensure the safety of his reign Kaṃsa has killed all of Kṛṣṇa's siblings one by one at their birth, and now he wishes to kill Kṛṣṇa also. For safety the baby is whisked away to a cowherd settlement where he is raised by humble foster parents. The child soon displays amazing powers and a reckless energy that keeps these new parents at their wits' end. When laid in the shade of the family wagon for a nap, little Kṛṣṇa kicks the cart to bits and sits laughing amid its wreckage. When baby Kṛṣṇa begins to creep, he crawls into all manner of filthy and forbidden places. To restrain him his foster mother ties him to a heavy wooden mortar—which he promptly drags into a neighboring grove and against two mighty trees that he then pulls down. While he is still a suckling, a demoness tries to kill him by offering him a poisoned nipple—and with one great pull on her breast the child sucks the life out of her. Growing older, the child faces many a dreadful peril with a jaunty fearlessness. As if in play he jumps into a pool inhabited by a poison-spewing serpent and dances on its seven heads until it promises to go away and leave the riverbanks to the peaceful possession of the cattle. Kṛṣṇa and his brother Balarāma run about like two frisky young bulls, killing demons like Pralamba who, in the form of a donkey, had been keeping the cowherds from enjoying the fruits of an orchard. Malicious demons that are monstrous in size overshadow the divine infant again and again in confrontations that seem hopeless, but Kṛṣṇa disposes of them easily by marvellous exercise of his hidden powers. Kṛṣṇa's parents keep fretting and warning, and their neighbors keep telling them how lucky they are to have such a remarkable son.

The child pulls off amusing swindles. He persuades the cowherds to divert their annual food offering from Indra and to present it instead to the sacred Mount Govardhana. Then, entering the mountain,

Kṛṣṇa eats the great heap of food himself. When the angered rain god then tries to punish the cowherds by drowning them in floods of unceasing rain, Kṛṣṇa saves them by taking them under the umbrella of Mount Govardhana itself, which he picks up and balances on his little finger. Progressively, his pranks become less innocent. Weary of the particular pasture land in which his people are encamped, Kṛṣṇa sends forth from his body packs of wolves that harass the herds until the herdsmen gladly pack up and move their settlement away. And once on a moonlit night Kṛṣṇa lures the girls of the cowherd clan into the forest by the magic playing of his flute, and an amorous tryst follows with much singing and dancing and uninhibited lovemaking. The episode is terse as told in the *Harivaṃśa*. Finally Kṛṣṇa returns to his birthplace as a half-grown boy and kills the tyrant king who had tried to destroy him when a babe. But Kṛṣṇa refuses to succeed the tyrant on the throne, saying that he prefers the freedom of wandering as he likes, in the woodland and among the cows.

And amid the cows is where Vaiṣṇavas thereafter have always preferred to find Kṛṣṇa when thinking of him. The mythology of the cowherd boy has been the growing edge of Kṛṣṇaite literature.

The *Harivaṃśa* was not an expression of the faith of some new sectarian group, discontinuous with the Kṛṣṇaite movement known in the *Mahābhārata*. The guardians of the *Mahābhārata* incorporated the *Harivaṃśa* into their manuscripts as a true appendix to the great epic, thus accepting the author's claim that he stood in the succession of the epic poets. History knows no bitter remnant of old believers, token of some sectarian split. The *Harivaṃśa* shows continuity with the epic cult of Kṛṣṇa in important matters. Kṛṣṇa's identity with Viṣṇu continues to be affirmed. Thinking on Viṣṇu's incarnations continues and expands.<sup>4</sup> The old concordat with the brahmans is maintained, and esteem for the Vedic sacrifices continues. The *Harivaṃśa*, too, is concerned that all believers shall live by their own caste livelihoods and that kings shall compel obedience to the sacred law of the *dharmasāstras*. Addressed to a new time rather than to a new people, the *Harivaṃśa* contributes to the life of an ongoing Vaiṣṇava community.

A little later—that is, a little later in the fourth or possibly the fifth century—these childhood tales were retold in the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa*, where they are expanded a little and set in frameworks of Vaiṣṇava catechetical teaching. An important theological development is the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa*'s raising to the level of a conscious doctrine the understanding that Kṛṣṇa's acts are *sports*. The *Harivaṃśa* merely

<sup>4</sup> *Harivaṃśa*, *adhyayas* 30–31.

revels in Kṛṣṇa's sportive acts, the Viṣṇu Purāṇa goes on to speak of Kṛṣṇa as a sportive god. His doings on earth as a whole are his *manuṣyalīlā*, his human sports, and we are to understand that his acts, all of a kind and wherever they may be performed, are sportive.<sup>5</sup> In the new purāṇa more stress is laid on the riotousness of Kṛṣṇa's spirit. He pulls the cows' tails and loosens their tethers with deliberate intention to disrupt the evening milking. He flatly disobeys the commands of his mother. His scandalous amours with the cowherd girls are retold in much greater detail and with plainer reference to their erotic naughtiness.

In the further unfolding of Gopāla literature the aspect of lawlessness became more and more prominent, particularly in the tradition of the Bhāgavata Purāṇa, which has become the great scriptural source for later versions of the tales. One class of stories relates Kṛṣṇa's exploits as a thief. In time his attainments became grand larcenies, but he began as a child as an ordinary pantry raider. Unfailingly he finds the place where his mother secures her pots of curd and of butter. Kṛṣṇa pulls the pots down, feeds himself and friends, throws quantities of food wantonly about and leaves havoc behind him. He behaves no better in neighbors' houses than in his own. Finding a woman's house unwatched he loots its pantry without compunction, and when caught redhanded by the returning housewife he makes specious alibis. Dragged home and accused before his mother, he makes ingenious false explanations that get him off scot free before that lenient court. Incurable, Kṛṣṇa begins a little later to fill his belly with his favorite edibles by a kind of highway robbery. Posing as a toll collector, he exacts from the cowherd women a portion of their headloads as they carry their milk and butter to market in Mathurā. The theme of Kṛṣṇa's robberies becomes prominent in the Tamil hymns of the Alvars beginning about A.D. 500, and its growth has never ceased. The full record of these crimes need not be told because John Stratton Hawley has told it all in his *Krishna the Butter Thief*.<sup>6</sup>

The worst of Kṛṣṇa's lawlessness has hardly been mentioned. I refer to his escapades with the cowherd women under the autumn moon. The story of that night grew in favor continually, even though promiscuous orgies are outrageously scandalous in India. The saintly Alvars knew the tale and treasured it. A preliminary incident relates

<sup>5</sup> *Viṣṇupurāṇam* 5:1-21, ed. Jivānanda Vidyāsāgara (Calcutta: Sarasvati Press, 1882); H. H. Wilson, trans., *The Vishnu Purana* (Calcutta: Punthi Pustak, 1972), pp. 394-444.

<sup>6</sup> John Stratton Hawley, *Krishna the Butter Thief* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1983).

how Kṛṣṇa came upon the cowherd girls while they were bathing in the river. He stole their clothes, climbed into a tree, and refused all entreaties until the girls came up out of the water and made obeisance before him in stark nudity. The Bhāgavata Purāṇa, which has become the most sacred of all scriptures to worshipers of Gopāla, follows the story of the theft of clothing with five entire chapters (10:29–33) on Kṛṣṇa's moonlight dance with the cowherd women and the erotic sports that followed. The myths there told have become the supreme focus for the meditations of the devout and the depository of the most treasured profundities of Kṛṣṇaite devotion.

In the twelfth century, in the *Gītāgovinda* of Jayadeva, the principal object of Kṛṣṇa's affection in this dance became a favorite cowherd girl whose name was Rādhā. Her importance grew with the centuries. She became a goddess, then the eternal feminine principle within the godhead of Kṛṣṇa himself. The lovemaking between the two became cosmic. In the meditational life of many modern Kṛṣṇaites the aspirant takes on, in thought, the role of a servant who attends upon the deities in their meeting. His hope is that he may be blessed with visions of their lovemaking in the bowers. Spiritual guides teach meditators how, in imagination, to play the role of a particular companion and to witness through that attendant's eyes every detail of the flirtation and congress of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa through every watch of the day and night.<sup>7</sup> And the Bengal School, which has developed into an especially high science the arousal and sublimation of erotic feeling, insists that the relation between Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa must be understood to be adulterous and not the lovemaking of husband and wife.

I am not scandalizing but making the point that Kṛṣṇaism did indeed change. The late charioteer of the Bhagavadgītā, looking down from the highest step of Viṣṇu upon these latter goings-on among his devotees, must surely have upset his celestial flower chariot in astonishment at what he saw. The religion of Gopāla Kṛṣṇa shares with the older Kṛṣṇaism a name and a theological vocabulary, but the appearance of Christianity within Judaism was not a more radical development, nor the rise of Islam in the matrix of Judaism and Christianity. By all ordinary criteria it is a new religion. What happened? Why the shift to this religion of a child-god?

Though intimidated by the complexity of this problem, scholars have not been blind to its importance, and a few have made attempts at explanation.

<sup>7</sup> Sushil Kumar De, *Early History of the Vaiṣṇava Faith and Movement in Bengal* (Calcutta: General Printers & Publishers, 1942), pp. 130–32, 167–70, 454–64.

The earliest theory known to me was offered by J. Kennedy in several articles published in the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* beginning in 1907.<sup>8</sup> Its minimal plausibility depended upon his very late dating of the Harivaṃśa. The child Kṛṣṇa, he explained, made his appearance in India as a borrowing from Christianity. In the human scene the Christian tradition has been the original source of the idea of the divinity of childhood. The name Kṛṣṇa is an Indian transformation of the word “Christ.” Herod’s massacre of the innocents became in India the murder of the children of Devakī by King Kāṃsa. John the Baptist became Kṛṣṇa’s brother Balarāma. The herdsmen are common to both birth stories. Fifty years earlier Albrecht Weber had taken note of these correspondences in a Berlin Academy presentation called “Über die Kṛishṇajanmāshṭamī (Kṛishṇa’s Geburtsfest),” and had ventured the opinion that the Mediterranean Christmas festival had migrated eastward.<sup>9</sup> Kennedy transformed Weber’s hunch into a historical theory by describing the route and identifying the carriers of this Christmas lore: it was brought to India from Central Asia, where Christian churches were known to have been flourishing in the fifth century A.D., by a migratory group of herdsmen called the Gujars who entered India with the invading Huns.

Hindu reformers who came out of the Victorian age were ready to share the credit for the creation of the Gopāla cult. In 1913, in his *Vaiṣṇavism, Śaivism, and Minor Religious Systems*, Sir R. G. Bhandarkar welcomed Kennedy’s theory of Christian origins and improved upon it by proposing as importers a more likely group of migrants than the Gujars. The carriers, he said, were the Ābhīras, a people already mentioned in the Mahābhārata and thus more credible as contributors to the Harivaṃśa when the Harivaṃśa is correctly dated.<sup>10</sup>

This theory of a Christian origin of the child Kṛṣṇa was undermined as early as 1908 by Arthur Berriedale Keith in an article “The Child Krishna” in the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*.<sup>11</sup> Keith pointed out that the story of the killing of Kāṃsa—a part of the

<sup>8</sup> J. Kennedy, “The Child Krishna, Christianity, and the Gujars,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* (1907), pp. 951–91, “The Child Krishna and His Critics,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* (1913), pp. 501–21.

<sup>9</sup> Albrecht Weber, “Über die Kṛishṇajanmāshṭamī (Kṛishṇa’s Geburtsfest),” *Abhandlungen der Königl. Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin* (1867), pp. 217–366.

<sup>10</sup> R. G. Bhandarkar, *Vaiṣṇavism, Śaivism, and Minor Religious Systems*, Grundriss der indoarischen Philologie und Altertumskunde 3.6 (Strassburg: K. J. Trübner, 1913; Varanasi: Indological Book House, 1965), chap. 9, pp. 35–38.

<sup>11</sup> Arthur Berriedale Keith, “The Child Krishna,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* (1908), pp. 169–75.

childhood cycle—was already being celebrated in India in the second century B.C., as evidenced in several references to the event in the *Mahābhāṣya* of Patañjali. Keith might have added that any notion of Gujars or Ābhīras as bringers of Christian lore from abroad is purely suppositional. There is no actual information about any residence of either group in Central Asia or anywhere else outside of India, nor is there any historical evidence that Gujars or Ābhīras were ever Christian or had Christian contacts, or friendly contacts with Kṛṣṇa worshipers either, for that matter.<sup>12</sup> Hindu literature holds the Ābhīras in abhorrence. *Mahābhārata* 3.186.29 counts them among the sinful peoples who ignore the rules of caste, and 16.8.45–65 relates their atrocious treatment of the family of Kṛṣṇa after he passed away. An aspirant to brahmanical orthodoxy like the author of the *Harivaṃśa* is exceedingly unlikely to have been open to religious interchanges with Ābhīras. The idea that the cult of Gopāla was a foreign import crumbled under scrutiny.

It occurred inevitably to someone that the religion of the cowherd had the Veda as its source. The propounder of this view was Hemachandra Raychaudhuri, who argued the Vedic origin of the Gopāla cult in his *Materials for the Study of the Early History of the Vaiṣṇava Sect*, published in 1920. Raychaudhuri saw evidence of the worship of a child-deity in the Vedic age in Ṛgveda 1.155.6's mention of Viṣṇu as a youth who is no longer a child, and in the reference in Ṛgveda 1.154.6 to Viṣṇu's abode as a place of many-horned and swiftly moving cows. The Baudhāyana Dharmasūtra 2.5.24, he said, shows very early use of the names Dāmodara and Govinda that are popular names of the child Kṛṣṇa in the later Gopāla literature. The Vedic cult of this pastoral god was preserved and developed, said Raychaudhuri, by some tribe like the Ābhīras.<sup>13</sup> But subsequent scholarship has not been willing to leap back over a thousand years of silence to find the source of the Gopāla cult in such insubstantial materials as these.

After half a century, Charlotte Vaudeville of the Sorbonne has had the courage to take up, again, the question of the origin of the cowherd god.<sup>14</sup> She sorts out several cycles of stories that appear to

<sup>12</sup> See Bhagwansingh Suryavamshi, *The Abhiras, Their History and Culture* (Baroda: University of Baroda, 1962).

<sup>13</sup> Hemachandra Raychaudhuri, *Materials for the Study of the Early History of the Vaiṣṇava Sect* (Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1920), pp. 33, 45, 85–92.

<sup>14</sup> Charlotte Vaudeville, "Aspects du Mythe de Kṛṣṇa-Gopāla dans l'Inde ancienne," in *Mélanges d'Indianisme à la mémoire de Louis Renou* (Paris: E. du Boccard, 1958), pp. 737–61, "Braj Lost and Found," *Indo-Iranian Journal* 18 (1979): 195–213, and "The Govardhan Myth in Northern India," *Indo-Iranian Journal* 22 (1980): 1–45.

have separate origins—cycles having to do with Kṛṣṇa's birth, his lifting of Mount Govardhana and subduing Kāliya, stories involving his brother Balarāma, and a saga on the slaying of Kaṃsa. All had their sources, she thinks, in various cults of pre-Aryan godlings that thrived in the Mathurā region in prehistoric times.

Vaudeville is no doubt right in many of the connections that she draws between Gopāla and little-known ancient *yakṣas*, divine serpents, hill spirits, and tree dryads. Her lines of argument probably do reveal where the creators of the Gopāla cult gathered up some of their materials. A nineteenth-century historian of religion would be content with that accomplishment, understanding that by tracing a cult back to the earliest sources of its materials one has penetrated the secret of the rise of the religion and of subsequent developments in its history. But in understanding whence a cult got its substance one has not yet understood why it was formed, nor attained any inkling, necessarily, of its nascent vitality and power. If, following, Weber, we could actually trace the newborn Kṛṣṇa and his mother back to the Madonna Lactans of Byzantine murals, what grasp of the dynamics of Gopāla worship would one obtain thereby? How much does one understand about the rise of the Hari Krishna movement in America when one has ascertained that its history began in 1965 in Manhattan with Swami A. C. Bhaktivedanta's sitting down for the singing of *kīrttans* in Tompkins Square Park?

My own pursuit of the why will require much probing into the dark period that preceded the formation of the Harivaṃśa. The first study will look into the *kind* of innovation that was involved in the sudden appearance of the Gopāla stories in all the respectability of Sanskrit poetry. The Harivaṃśa's verse tales were not a bardic creation ex nihilo. Lore about Kṛṣṇa's childhood had been in circulation in some unlettered circle for several centuries, and India's literary elite was aware of the material, though Sanskrit speakers viewed it with some disdain. The best evidence for this statement is found in Mahābhārata 2.38.4–9, where Śiśupāla is heaping insults on his enemy Kṛṣṇa, impugning particularly his claims to kṣatriya status. He rails at the "heroic warrior deeds" that are Kṛṣṇa's apparent claim to knightly fame: that he upset a cart, that he slew a female bird named Putanā, that he ate a lot of food, and lifted up an anthill of a mountain, and that he killed a horse and a bull. The last references are to Kṛṣṇa's exploits in killing the demons Keśi and Ariṣṭa. Franklin Edgerton in his critical editing of book 2 found this passage to be authentic. Rajendra I. Nanavati in a recent dissertation on the incidental tales of the Indian epics gives us reason to place it before the secondary expansion of the Mahābhārata: he says that such summary treatments

of the whole early career of a hero are characteristic of the earlier not the later epic.<sup>15</sup> Knowledge of the Keśi story is shown also in epithets applied casually to Kṛṣṇa here and there elsewhere in the epic: *Keśihanṭr* in 2.36.2, *Keśisūdhana* in 2.30.11, and *Keśiniṣūdana* in Bhagavadgītā 18.1. Also, several sculptural representations of infancy stories have been placed before the Harivaṃśa's time by serious dating. On a weight-stone belonging to the Mathurā Museum there is a relief of the killing of Keśi that is assigned to the Kuṣāna period.<sup>16</sup> The same museum has another 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 sculpture, agrees that it represents the carrying of the child Kṛṣṇa to safety in the village of the cowherds.<sup>17</sup>

Buddhist literature preserves in the Ghata Jātaka of the Pālī Canon other indications that the childhood stories of Kṛṣṇa were widespread at an early time.<sup>18</sup> This Jātaka tells its own strange version of the birth of Kṛṣṇa and the death of Kaṃsa, yet its narrative has many clear ties with the story told in the Harivaṃśa. The Ghata Jātaka is not clearly datable as older than the Harivaṃśa, but it is not medieval in date, and the complexities that it includes with the more familiar elements of the story show the childhood legends to be an old growth, many branched, and not likely to have begun with the Harivaṃśa. The fact that the Pālī version has the form of a prose tale points to the oral folk legend as the probable medium of the Gopāla lore before it was cast into Sanskrit verse by the author of the Harivaṃśa. The understanding is supported by Daniel Ingalls's observation that the Harivaṃśa quotes no literary predecessors, makes no reference to earlier authorities, and has the seamless structure of a text that reduces oral material to writing for the first time.<sup>19</sup>

In sum, the exploits of Gopāla were part of Indian folklore well before A.D. 300. Sanskrit speakers like Śiśupāla knew them but scorned them. The composers of the Mahābhārata were familiar with them but were not willing to be their transmitters. A time came when

<sup>15</sup> Rajendra I. Nanavati, *Secondary Tales of the Two Great Epics*, L. D. Series 88 (Ahmedabad: L. D. Institute of Indology, 1982), p. 169.

<sup>16</sup> Mathurā Museum, no. 58.446. See Hawley, p. 339; and Doris Srinivasan, "Early Krishna Icons: The Case of Mathura," in *Kalādarshana: American Studies in the Art of India*, ed. Joanna Williams (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1981), p. 747.

<sup>17</sup> Vaudeville, "Aspects du Mythe de Kṛṣṇa-Gopāla . . .," p. 746; Hawley, p. 338; Srinivasan, p. 127 (her objections to the prevailing identification have been met by Hawley and Vaudeville).

<sup>18</sup> V. Fausboll, ed., *The Jātaka* (London: Trübner & Co., 1887), 4:79–89.

<sup>19</sup> Daniel H. R. Ingalls, "The Harivaṃśa as a Mahākāvya," in *Mélanges d'Indianisme à la mémoire de Louis Renou* (n. 14 above), p. 394.

that aloofness changed—when Sanskrit speakers heard those stories gladly and the *Harivaṃśa* gave them a central place. After the *Harivaṃśa* they entered into an unchecked literary proliferation. They became the Kṛṣṇa stories that Kṛṣṇa worshipers really wanted to hear.

Why?

We need not suppose that only one factor has been operative in establishing the popularity of a myth. Most stories are many faceted, and any tale that has been told and told again has been retold for many idiosyncratic reasons. But stories that have been so loved by millions that they have become a general cultural possession draw their popularity principally from some shared element in a people's common life. The problem of meaning for individual persons can be complex, but we shall be looking for mass meanings, that could be felt so widely in a population that they could be responsible for transforming the repute and social currency of the Gopāla stories.

My reasonings on the problem of cause will become more intelligible if I pause to explain a certain theory of religion that I have found helpful in understanding the dynamics of religious change. It is the view that religious cults, when they are living faiths, focus always upon areas of anxiety where the felt necessities of a people's life are threatened by factors over which the worshiping community has no secure control. Where pain is felt or feared, and normal means of mastery seem inadequate, there religion comes into play, invoking extrahuman power or the support of a superhuman order. I absorbed this analysis at the feet of Ralph Linton. In an anthropology course in the study of primitive religions he made the observation that the Malagasy tribe, that depended on its rice crop for its food, worshiped 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 exposed places the hurricane deity receives constant cultic attention—while on the lee side of the same island, worship of the wind god is perfunctory or nonexistent. Religion focuses upon sore spots, upon tense areas where people chafe and worry, scarcely able to cope. Advanced religions are not different. Their living forms arise where there is weakness and hurt.

The weakness that lay at the heart of the earlier Kṛṣṇaism was a decay of morale that threatened brahmanical society's disintegration. The alienated young were in massive flight to monastic retreats of many sorts, ignoring the needs of society. The departure of the sensitive left a neglected world dominated by persons acting out of base motivations. The author of the *Bhagavadgītā* invokes against

this bugaboo a working and world-concerned God who will not deprive of salvation those who are steadfast and selfless in their dedication to social duty. In proclaiming its gospel of *karmayoga* or disciplined work the Bhagavadgītā raised a banner behind which the traditional leadership organized a march against the brahmanical social order's disdainers, whether Vedic or non-Vedic, foreign or domestic. The concern remains and the crusade continues to the end of the epic age and beyond, but it is vital to our present investigation that we perceive how successful early Kṛṣṇaism was, finally, in closing the schisms in Indian society and in turning the original anxieties of the cult into problems of small concern.

In the time of the Bhagavadgītā the upsetters of brahmanical order were probably Buddhist and Jain monastics and ascetics and the Vedic tradition's own upaniṣadic secessionists. In the time of the later epic those movements may still be a source of uneasiness, but brahman resentment is focused particularly upon disrespectful regimes of foreign origin that support such troublemakers and who refuse to enforce or observe the brahmanical religious law. Mahābhārata 3.186.29 polemicizes against wicked princes—Yavanas, Śakas, Āndhras, and others—who administer justice wrongly from a brahman point of view and who allow even the responsible classes of their realms to flout the rules regarding the proper livelihoods of their castes. Mahābhārata 13.33.10 says that their rejection of the advice of brahmans is what makes them unfit to rule. By the end of the epic time the name "Yavana" had become a convenient shorthand term for referring to all the annoying outsiders of the western borderlands. Historically "Yavana" (Ionian) meant "Greek," but by about A.D. 200 Greek ethnic identity had become so blurred in India that the term could be conveniently applied to the whole amalgam of nonconforming peoples who preserved some residue of Indo-Greek polity or values.<sup>20</sup> Mahābhārata 12.65.13 ff. speaks of Hindu kings who now have Yavanas under their rule and advises them to compel such barbarians to perform the Vedic sacrifices and give gifts to brahmans and to make them show respect toward kings, parents, gurus, and other Aryan authority figures. We perceive here that those who had been following foreign norms of life in India are losing their autonomy. A counterattack has been launched to compel them to submit to brahman leadership and to adopt brahmanical practices. With the

<sup>20</sup> For further details on such cultural Yavanas, see my "Kālayavana, a Clue to Mathurā's Cultural Self-Perception," in the forthcoming *Mathurā: The Cultural Heritage*, ed. Doris Srinivasan (New Delhi: Manohar Book Service, 1986).

end of the epic we lose track of further developments, for a time, in the darkness of the third century A.D.

When we pick up the thread of social history again in the Harivaṃśa and in the Gupta inscriptions, the battle with Yavanism is over. The essential history of events in the intervening void can be surmised. A coalition of forces under the tutelage of brahmins had fought bitter campaigns that reduced the land to chaos for a time, yet in the end terminated all championship, military or verbal, of nonindigenous styles of life. The consummation of victory was the establishment in A.D. 320 of the very brahmanical and very powerful dynasty of the Guptas. Gupta expansion continued until the Gupta Empire stretched from sea to sea. The triumph was as much a rise to power of brahmins as of an eastern warrior clan. Skandagupta in his Bhitari Inscription shows his line's characteristic deference toward brahmins. Mentioning the great deeds of Samudragupta in eliminating all rivals and performing the Aśvamedha sacrifice, he describes this glorious ancestor as "the very axe [of Paraśurāma] at the end of the Kṛta-yuga, who was the giver of millions of lawfully-acquired cows and coins,"<sup>21</sup> The recipients of such largess were of course the brahmins of the realm. The arbitrament of the sword had ended a long struggle for leadership and had created at last a national concentration of power and a simplicity of control, and freedom for the blooming of a distinctive civilization.

Modern brahmin historiography perceives the establishment of the Gupta Empire as a liberating development and as the beginning of an era of unprecedented tolerance and freedom.<sup>22</sup> A. K. Narain's article "Religious Policy and Toleration in Ancient India with Particular Reference to the Gupta Age" is the most recent and most convincing presentation of that view.<sup>23</sup> In many important respects Gupta rule did bring freedoms to the people of India: freedom from the oppressions of petty warlords, freedom from official violence, freedom from economic waste, freedom for constructive cultural efforts, freedom of travel and of trade, and freedom of religious thought. Historians have failed to mark, however, the many other ways in which the Gupta Age brought upon the population a widespread elimination of options,

<sup>21</sup> Parameshwari Lal Gupta, *The Imperial Guptas* (Varanasi: Vishwavidyalaya Prakashan, 1974), p. 39 ff.

<sup>22</sup> See, e.g., R. N. Dandekar, "Some Aspects of Gupta Civilization," in *Prof. P. K. Gode Commemoration Volume*, ed. H. L. Hariyappa and M. M. Patkar (Poona: Oriental Book Agency, 1960), pp. 50–62.

<sup>23</sup> A. K. Narain, "Religious Policy and Toleration in Ancient India with Particular Reference to the Gupta Age," in *Essays in Gupta Culture*, ed. Bardwell L. Smith (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1983), pp. 17–51.

a narrowing of alternatives, a subjection of life to unyielding requirements, and the beginning of a sense of bondage.

In the critical matter of caste rules the Gupta tolerance had sharp limits. The enforcement of the *varṇāśrama dharma* had been the cry of a brahmanical crusade for centuries. An aggressive and coercive attitude in that matter continues to pervade the brahman purāṇic writings in the Gupta age.<sup>24</sup> The moderating influence of wise rulers could ensure the toleration of doctrinal heretics, but social heretics were another matter. Support of the *dharmaśāstras* was a sine qua non of brahman participation in the political cause of the Guptas, and their administration could not omit enforcement of the brahman religious law. All citizens were required to conform, now, to a social orthodoxy that many had been able to evade or resist. Samudragupta in his Allahabad Pillar Inscription proclaims himself to be “a supporter of the true meaning of the *śāstras*, *śāstra-tattvārthabharttuḥ*,” and boasts of a close relationship with the learned.<sup>25</sup> Skandagupta gives assurance in his Junagarh Rock Inscription that “while this king is reigning verily no man among his subjects falls away from *dharma*.”<sup>26</sup> A certain Mahārāja Droṇasiṃha describes himself as one “who has as his law the rules and ordinances instituted by Manu and other (sages).”<sup>27</sup>

Henceforth the laws of caste will be backed up by political policies and actions of a new consistency and firmness. Royal endowments in the form of rent-producing village lands are settled upon groups of brahmans to support them in lives devoted to Hindu learning.<sup>28</sup> Sanskrit, which had been the language of brahmans and religion, became now also the language of civil administration, of inscriptions and of coins. A new impetus is given to the creation and interpretation of *dharmaśāstras*, and there are indications in this literature that its scholars are habitués of the courts of the state. The *śāstras* and commentaries of the age take into their scope the matter of procedures to be followed in formal trials. Old clerical preachments are recast into the form of statute law for the action of courts. The justices of

<sup>24</sup> Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty, “The Image of the Heretic in the Gupta Puranas,” in Smith, ed., pp. 122–27.

<sup>25</sup> Gupta, p. 6, line 5.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 32, line 6.

<sup>27</sup> John Faithful Fleet, *Inscriptions of the Early Gupta Kings and Their Successors*, Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum, vol. 3 (Varanasi: Indological Book House, 1970), no. 38, p. 168.

<sup>28</sup> A. S. Altekar, “Agrahāra Villages as Centres of Learning,” in *The Vākātaka-Gupta Age*, ed. R. C. Majumdar and A. S. Altekar (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1967), pp. 397–98.

the courts are always brahmans.<sup>29</sup> Compliance with *dharmasāstra* regulations on the life of the castes was probably the general rule in actual practice, in the opinion of U. N. Ghosal.<sup>30</sup> Minority ethnic groups submitted to brahmans, underwent ritual purifications, and were assigned ranks and livelihoods in the ladder of the Hindu castes.

The new rigor of social regulation was in part the product of more efficient enforcement of old prohibitions. But the principle of hierarchy, now firmly established, soon expressed itself in more elaborate caste distinctions, in a widening of differences in dignity and privilege, and in increased impediments to intercaste fellowship. A loss of discretionary power was suffered even by kings. Legislation by decree, which had been a royal prerogative as recently as the writing of the *Arthaśāstra* of Kauṭilya, was no longer recognized. Social regulation became the sphere of the *dharmasāstras* and their brahman interpreters. Kings in the classical age became the enforcers, not the makers, of law, the heads of limited states whose function was the perpetuation of tradition.

The *dharmasāstras* of the time describe the permissible livelihoods of each caste with a new definiteness. With equal clarity they spell out the penalties for violation of those limits. Exclusion from society is usually involved. The lot of outcastes becomes a severe segregation. Intercaste marriages incur new penalties: the offspring of improper matches no longer retain the rank of even the humbler parent but fall into the cesspool of pariah-hood. Rules for the subordination of women receive mature codal expression. Prepubescence is established as the time for the marriage of girls. *Satīs* are praised increasingly in the lawbooks and in inscriptions.<sup>31</sup> The joint family evidences itself in Indian life, with its many restrictions upon individual freedom of decision and action.<sup>32</sup> Restrictions upon minglings and marryings were to become even more limiting in post-Gupta times, but the further developments would be only the tightening of the bolts on a structure of steel. By the end of the Gupta period, brahman thought and brahman power alliances had completed the structure of a classic world. The essential quality of life in brahmanical civilization would not change.

<sup>29</sup> Dandekar, p. 57.

<sup>30</sup> U. N. Ghosal in *The Classical Age*, ed. R. C. Majumdar, History and Culture of the Indian People, vol. 3 (Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1954), p. 555; see also his essay on law and legal institutions in vol. 2, *The Age of Imperial Unity* (1951), pp. 343–59.

<sup>31</sup> Majumdar, ed., p. 567; Fleet, pp. 92–93.

<sup>32</sup> Romila Thapar, *History of India* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1966), p. 153.

The triumph of Guptas and brahmans was also the triumph of the old Kṛṣṇa cult. Of the twelve Gupta rulers known to history, at least nine, in their inscriptions or coins or seals, proclaim themselves to be *paramabhāgavatas*, supreme devotees of Bhagavān or Kṛṣṇa. Gupta rulers recognize other deities occasionally, but their persistent use of the *cakra* and Garuḍa emblems on their coins confirms the fundamentally Vaiṣṇava orientation of the dynasty.<sup>33</sup> With the rise of the Guptas the worship of Kṛṣṇa became, if not a state religion, a secure and favored faith. Denials of Kṛṣṇa's identity with Viṣṇu are no longer heard. After seven hundred years the public religion of the Sāttvata tribe had become, through its high social effectiveness, the foremost religion of a great and stable empire based upon a congenial religious law. Kṛṣṇa had long been the eternal protector of the sacred law (*śāśvatadharmagoptā*, Bhagavadgītā 11.18). It seemed that the relevance and prominence of the Kṛṣṇa of the Bhagavadgītā would continue indefinitely. But the divine chariot driver did not enter into his kingdom. Dominance fell, instead, to Gopāla and the religion of Kṛṣṇa as a child. We must try to understand that development in terms of the theory at our command.

I have adopted the principle that a community's religion focuses upon its distresses. The Indian distresses must be different now. *Lokasamgraha*, the holding together of the world, is not the problem. The sinews of society are tight. The rub is something else. There are phases in human cultural history when disorder is far from the principal cause of misery. In the Gupta age and thereafter the most excruciating problem in Hindu living was the triumph of order itself. Human beings love order absolutely only in its absolute absence. Order, when attained, restricts. And the Hindu caste order restricted with a thoroughness seldom seen in any system before or since. What the members of this society groaned about was something that they called bondage, and what they longed for was something that they called freedom; *mukti* or *mokṣa*, "liberation," was their name for salvation itself. Bound by their estate in life, bound by innumerable conventions, their revolutionary impulses were also bound by belief that their own past acts were holding them justly in their bondage. Only a personal eschaton could possibly bring freedom.

In the meantime, those who were entrapped in the routines of caste duty found little to raise their spirits, any more, in contemplation of the work god of the Bhagavadgītā. Kṛṣṇa the social moralist had done his work too well. Is it any wonder that he was allowed to take his leave? And is it strange that Hindu fancy began to take delight in

<sup>33</sup> Narain (n. 23 above), pp. 34–44.

another Kṛṣṇa—young, irresponsible, a reckless smasher of pots, an impetuous romancer, free as the wind? Those living in the strait-jacket of orthodox Hinduism have made various efforts to catalog the various aspects of Kṛṣṇa's charm. The list of the *rasas* or flavors of their adoration is sometimes long, but stress always rests on the *vātsalya* and the *mādhurya rasas*, the moods of worship associated with Kṛṣṇa's infancy and with his amours.

The adoration of Kṛṣṇa as a toddler and small boy has been a major joy to Hindus. The most eloquent celebration of holy childhood in any language, anywhere, is found in the extensive poetic work of Sūr Dās of the sixteenth century, who responded to Kṛṣṇa primarily in his infant form. His Hindī poems are basic liturgical literature for North Indian Kṛṣṇa worship today. Occidentals do not easily understand the attractiveness of this cult of the holy child. It has a formal similarity to Christian adoration of the Christ child, but the comparison is not illuminating. The adoration of the baby Jesus is a transient matter without the deep dimensions of the hold of the child Kṛṣṇa upon Hindus. I shall try to illuminate this Hindu fascination by showing its connection with that special distress of classical Hinduism, the hurt of bondage.

We have noticed the plight of Hindu adults. Whether men or women they are enmeshed in the controls of sacred law and custom. They suffer other restraints that are more personal. Ordinarily they spend not only their youth but the prime of life under the domination of still-living fathers and mothers-in-law. Even where tradition allows freedom of choice, it is often freedom for a collective choice, or for a choice to be made by an authority figure. This domination by forces both personal and impersonal is rationalized so effectively by religious doctrines that feelings of injustice are not involved, but the Hindu life is weighed down nevertheless by the tedium of a confined existence. Spontaneity and autonomy are values that are ardently longed for. The chafing is more painful by reason of the fact that the Hindu male—and even the Hindu woman—remembers a time when life was not so.

Sociologists have always noticed the exceptional freedom, permissiveness, and affection that surround the Hindu child up to the age of seven or eight. Sons, particularly, are doted upon and disciplined gently or not at all. "Even when a woman has several sons," says David Mandelbaum, "she cherishes and protects and indulges them all to a degree not usually known in the western world."<sup>34</sup> This

<sup>34</sup> David G. Mandelbaum, "The Family in India," in *The Family, Its Function and Destiny*, ed. Ruth Nanda Anshen, rev. ed. (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1959), p. 180.

privileged status of the Hindu child is as old as the culture of caste, having its scriptural base in the Gautamadharmasūtra.<sup>35</sup> The beginning of chapter 2 of that work makes it clear that a child not yet old enough to undergo the *upanayana* or initiation ceremony has no duties, ritual or other. In behavior, speech, and eating it may do as it pleases. It may relieve itself when and where it likes. Simple wiping and washing are all that its cleanliness requires. Purifications and expiations are not incumbent on a child, nor can the touch of a child defile anyone. Robert Lingat judges this *sūtra* to be not later than 400 B.C. and calls it the earliest of the literary works of Hindu religious law.<sup>36</sup> The legal books of the next two thousand years omit prescriptions for the behavior of children—in works that otherwise cover the whole of life with a fine net of codal requirements. Haradatta in his sixteenth-century commentary on the scripture cited continues to affirm this freedom of the child as a current actuality of his day. The picture is brought up to date by modern sociological reports. Small infants sleep with their mothers, nursing at will by day or by night. Breast-feeding often continues to the age of four or five.<sup>37</sup> The child is waited upon with devotion and patience. Toilet training, which is effected without reproaches, comes very late. Children go to bed when they are ready, they play in any state of dress or undress, they are seldom coerced or thwarted. The mother's protection and support are unconditional. The child's grandparents and adult maternal relatives make its indulgence complete. Even though daughters are somewhat less favored, they participate substantially in the freedom and favor that belong to the child in the traditional Hindu family setting. Morris Carstairs relates a popular saying quoted by an informant, "Bālak aur Bādshā barābar haiṅ" ("Infant and emperor, they're equal!").<sup>38</sup>

The Indian child does not remain a Bādshāh. With the *upanayana* rite or its equivalent in time, a boom descends. The boy becomes a participant in his father's world and its disciplines apply. He cannot act any longer according to his whim. "Must" applies to almost all his acts. Daughters undergo an even sharper transition. When married they must go from the warm permissiveness of their parental homes to servitude under the strict eye of the senior women in their

<sup>35</sup> *The Sacred Laws of the Aryas*, trans. Georg Bühler, Sacred Books of the East, vol. 2, 1879 (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1965), pp. xliii, 183–84 (Gautama 2.1–5).

<sup>36</sup> Robert Lingat, *The Classical Law of India*, trans. J. Duncan M. Derrett (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), pp. 19–20.

<sup>37</sup> S. C. Dube, *Indian Village* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1953), p. 149.

<sup>38</sup> G. Morris Carstairs, *The Twice-Born* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1967), p. 64.

husbands' households. There is little hope, realistically, that life on earth, for male or female, will ever restore more than a fraction of their one-time freedom. Their paradise lies in the past.

Under these circumstances, Hindu reveries of childhood are a contemplation that blesses and heals. Hindus find a measure of restoration in turning in thought not only to their own childhood but also to other childhoods that are open to their imaginative participation. They find a liberation in the liberty of their own children, raising them with the traditional indulgence and participating vicariously in the freedom that has become so scarce in their own adult lives. The worship of the child Kṛṣṇa has the same healing power. The projection of the worshiper's self into the sportiveness of the god need not be conscious to be effective. Celebration of the child Kṛṣṇa's untrammelled antics brings refreshment up out of obscure memories of happier times, just as the drawing of a bow over the top strings of a *sāraṅgī* rouses a sweet resonance from the unstruck strings below.<sup>39</sup>

Occidentals, too, know the restorative power of memories of a happy childhood:

Backward, turn backward,  
O Time, in your flight,  
Make me a child again  
just for tonight!<sup>40</sup>

For us the refreshment is mainly an enjoyment again, in fantasy, of the protection, security, and affection that once was ours, qualities all too scarce in our competitive and insecure adult lives. For the Hindu the most precious repossession is freedom, spontaneity, and the sportive quality of life that was so hurtfully suppressed in transition to adulthood. The Hindu quest for freedom became religious because freedom, personified, became a god.

The rise of the worship of the erotic Kṛṣṇa in the *mādhurya rasa* can be understood, also, as a response to a societal pinch that became more galling during the classical age. In a society that awarded and justified its privileges on the basis of heredity, it was exceptionally important that public genealogies be seen as true genealogies. Hence

<sup>39</sup> It is J. L. Masson who has suggested the application of these basically Freudian ideas to the interpretation of the Gopāla myths, in "The Childhood of Kṛṣṇa: Some Psychoanalytical Observations," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 94 (1974): 454–57. He rests his claim on the universal validity of Freud's observations. The proposal is strengthened, I trust, by consideration of the unusual social background of Kṛṣṇa worshipers past and present.

<sup>40</sup> Elizabeth Akers [Allen], "Rock Me to Sleep," *Poems* (Boston: Ticknor & Fields, 1867), p. 190.

the mating of all members was hedged in by strict bars upon sexual connections of any kind that crossed the lines of *varṇa* caste and clan. To those who suffered these restraints on the expression of some of the deepest of human feelings, the noble Kṛṣṇa of the Bhagavadgītā, preaching decorum from his chariot, had little to say that could alleviate the strain. But the divine lover-boy had real appeal who, devil-may-care, flirted and seduced just as he pleased. Acceptable outlet for painful repression is provided by contemplations of the erotic sports of Gopāla, sanctified as holy meditations. Devotion to this sportive god can be expected to bring one in the end to Kṛṣṇa's supernal cow world to participate forever in the god's own romantic sports. There every aspect of the collared life will vanish in a life of pure spontaneity.

The Hindu fascination with Kṛṣṇa's loves as specifically adulterous betrays the position of these myths as a counterpart to lives severely restricted in social actuality. Our Victorian forbears saw these tales as scandalous proof of Hindu indifference to morality. E. Washburne Hopkins perceived the rise of the Gopāla cult as no more than a debasement of original Kṛṣṇaism into a religion of vulgar sensuality.<sup>41</sup> The truth is quite the opposite. Even the Bengal Vaiṣṇavas, whose teachers fill their own minds and those of their pupils with systematic meditations on the sexual dalliances of Kṛṣṇa, are puritans in practice. S. K. De, after long study of their pious attention to the copulations of Kṛṣṇa and Rādhā, observed with some surprise that the saints and leaders of the sect condemn overt sexuality. Often ascetic in their personal lives, they do not slight the Hindu moral code nor question it at any point.<sup>42</sup> East of Suez is not really the realm where there are no Ten Commandments—as the late hippies found who flocked to India expecting to fall into the arms of a culture of sexual naturalism. The exuberant eroticism of the cult of the child Kṛṣṇa does not divinize the flesh; it applies the resources of religion to tensions created by obedience to cultural restraints of exceptional severity.

Born as counterpart to a puritanism, the erotic Kṛṣṇaite religion seems not to be at home in any other frame. Where it spreads, if it does not find a puritanism, it creates one. Moving into the hippie scene in New York in 1965, Swami A. C. Bhaktivedanta drew in youths who wanted above all to express their cultural disaffection by embracing an exotic religion. But they sought expression, also, for a view that natural impulses are holy. The Swami squelched that notion

<sup>41</sup> E. Washburne Hopkins, *The Ethics of India* (1924; reprint, Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikot Press, 1968), p. 200.

<sup>42</sup> De (n. 7 above), pp. 419–21.

quickly. His disciples accept the four-caste system and the supremacy of brahmins. They give over to their guru their wealth, their work, the freedom of their minds, and the freedom to marry as they wish. They surrender every expression of their sexuality. When married by the consent of their teacher, their sexual freedom extends to intercourse once a month on the day of highest probability of conception. When permitted child bearing ends, the couple's sex life ends also.<sup>43</sup> A better scheme for building up erotic tension could hardly be devised. It is also a scheme, however, for exploding sexual energy—the more the better—in ways harmless to the values and institutions of Hindu society. Such tension—a characteristic product of existence in orthodox Hindu culture patterns—is the base on which the erotic Kṛṣṇa myths arise, and survive and thrive.

One cannot write "Q.E.D." at the conclusion of such an inquiry as this. Even when one studies modern religious change and the factors involved are before our eyes, opacities remain. Our view of this ancient Indian development rests on a new understanding of Gupta-age social history that has not been tested by criticism. Yet one must attempt to understand even ancient developments, by applying the data and the principles that are available. It accords best with our historical information to believe that the religion of Gopāla is substantially a religion of people who suffer under extraordinary restraint and that it came into prominence in the third and fourth centuries A.D. because India was experiencing at that time the culmination of the power of a resurgent brahman leadership.

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<sup>43</sup> *New York Times* (October 10, 1966; September 6, 1972; February 27, 1973).