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Kṛṣṇa

(10,769 words)

Kṛṣṇa (lit. black, dark blue, dark) is one of most important and popular gods in Hinduism, venerated from early times as a clan god, an epic hero, and the God of the *Bhagavadgītā* and the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*, and later worshipped in various devotional traditions and regional cults. He is at the center of various legendary traditions, theological interpretations, and distinctive forms of cult and ritual, as well as a number of religious communities, whose followers direct their religious aspirations towards him.

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Origins, Earliest Evidence

In contrast to other deities that became prominent in classical Hinduism, but like the goddess Durgā, ***Kṛṣṇa*** does not feature prominently in vedic texts. This has stimulated various interpretations of the origins of the god and the legendary traditions dealing with him. Not only have the different among traditions dealing with ***Kṛṣṇa*** resulted in his being called a "composite divinity" (Vaudeville, 1975, 92), but also the fact that he appears under different names – such as Vāsudeva, Hari, or Govinda – emphasizes different aspects of his provenance. Much debated among scholars is the question of whether ***Kṛṣṇa*** is one deity or single mythical character who appears differently in different contexts (Biardeau, 1976, 204ff.) or whether one needs, on the basis of his different names, to distinguish different Kṛṣṇas who were only later forged into one persona (Tadpatrikar, 1929). Some scholars suggest that the emergence of the god is connected to a process in which a clan (or tribal) and then epic hero is deified,

culminating in the theology of the *Bhagavadgītā* (Härtel, 1987). Perhaps the oldest reference to ***Kṛṣṇa*** is *Chāndogyopaniṣad* 3.17 (7th–5th cents. BCE) in which ***Kṛṣṇa*** Devakīputra, the "Son of Devakī" (who is also Kṛṣṇa's mother in the epic and puranic texts), appears as a pupil of the upanishadic teacher Ghora Āṅgirasa. In this passage, ***Kṛṣṇa*** is instructed on the similarities between sacrificial activities and daily life. Although some scholars (e.g. Preciado-Solis, 1984, 24ff.) suggest a historical connection between the upanishadic and the epic ***Kṛṣṇa***, there is not sufficient evidence for such a hypothesis (De, 1942). There are other passages in which a ***Kṛṣṇa*** is mentioned in the early vedic texts: *Ṛgveda* 8.85.3–4 refers to ***Kṛṣṇa*** as the composer of the hymn, while *Kauṣitakibrāhmaṇa* 30.9 mentions a ***Kṛṣṇa*** Āṅgirasa, who might be connected to the passage in the *Chāndogyopaniṣad*. *Ṛgveda* 8.96.13–15 was interpreted by some scholars as evidence of a rivalry between ***Kṛṣṇa*** and Indra – which is obvious in later epic and puranic texts – already in the earliest sources. However, a closer analysis of the passage does not support this claim (Preciado–Solis, 1984, 12–17).

Another issue concerns the name and identity of ***Kṛṣṇa*** as Vāsudeva. Some scholars suggest that the name Vāsudeva-***Kṛṣṇa*** points to his having been a member of a Kṣatriya clan of the Vṛṣṇis or Yādavas based in the cities of Mathurā and then Dvārakā (now Dwarka). He often appears and acts together with his brother Saṃkarṣaṇa-Balarāma. In this connection, the name Vāsudeva is traditionally explained as a patronymic and used as such in epic and puranic texts, thus linking him with his Vṛṣṇi father Vasudeva. From a philological point of view, this explanation seems doubtful, and there are strong arguments to support the view that Vāsudeva is originally the name of a god in his own right whose relationship to the vedic ritual tradition is unclear, but who became identified with ***Kṛṣṇa***. H. Jacobi (1924) argues that Vāsudeva means "God of the Riches" or "God of All." It seems that Vāsudeva-***Kṛṣṇa*** shares certain features with the vedic gods Viṣṇu and Nārāyaṇa, which might have contributed to his becoming identified with them in later texts. Indicative of this development is the juxtaposition of the three gods in a *mantra* formula in the *Mahānārāyaṇopaniṣad* (10.1.6). There are various suggestions as to what name of the god "***Kṛṣṇa***" ("Black," "Dark Blue") may refer to regarding what this color or the dark complexion ascribed to the god may indicate. According to *Mahābhārata* 3.187.31, for instance, the god appears in a different color in each world-age and therefore as black in the final age. Other interpretations suggest that "black" or "dark" refers to the god's "hidden" identity as the dark half of the month and the darkness of the new moon (von Simson, 1984, 216). The color or complexion is also emphasized when the god is addressed as Śyāma ("Night Blue") or Śyāmasundara ("Beautiful Night Blue"). This name is used quite frequently in the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* and in medieval devotional poetry.

We receive a clearer picture of Kṛṣṇa's place in the Brahmanical literature when he emerges as a central character in the *Mahābhārata* epic, in which he is addressed with several names and epithets. ***Kṛṣṇa*** and Vāsudeva are the names used most frequently in the epic, while names connecting him to the "cowherd god" tradition like Govinda or Gopāla are rare (Brockington,

2007). He is depicted as a mysterious hero and intimate friend of Arjuna, one of the five Pāṇḍava brothers who retrieve the kingdom they have lost earlier to their relatives, the Kauravas, after a devastating war. In the *Bhagavadgītā* their relationship comes to represent the ideal of *bhakti*, based on a relationship of *sākhya* (comrade and friendship). Their association is already mentioned in the *Aṣṭādhyayī*, the grammar of Pāṇini (c. 5th cent. BCE; see language and linguistics). In *Aṣṭādhyayī* 4.3.98, Pāṇini addresses the question of how those who feel devotion towards the pair Vāsudeva-Arjuna (joined using the dual case) should be called. The question of whether *bhakti* should already be given a religious connotation was debated among scholars without coming to a definite conclusion (see Preciado-Solis, 1984, 27f.). The important difference is introduced in the *Bhagavadgītā*, in which *bhakti* is given a theological interpretation, but it seems likely that the passage points to the epic tradition, which associates ***Kṛṣṇa*** and Arjuna without denying the relationship with Balarāma, although this recedes into the background (Bigger, 1997). The epic bards explored this relationship further by identifying them with the *ṛṣi*s Nārāyaṇa and Nara (Biardeau, 1991), which may point to the interest of some epic composers in identifying ***Kṛṣṇa*** and Nārāyaṇa, as can also be seen in the *Nārāyaṇīyaparvan* of the epic (*MBh*. 12.321–339; see essays in Schreiner, 1997). This text is perhaps the oldest exposition of the doctrines of the Vaiṣṇava Pāñcarātra school, which teaches the manifestation of the six divine qualities and powers of Viṣṇu-Nārāyaṇa in the form of the "four *vyūha*s," literally formations, each of them represented by a member of the Vṛṣṇi clan – that is, Vāsudeva (embodying all six qualities) and his brothers Saṃkarṣaṇa, Pradyumna, and Aniruddha, each representing the combination of two divine qualities.

Kṛṣṇa in the *Mahābhārata*

The *Mahābhārata* not only demonstrates the oscillation between legends and their religious interpretation and between the heroic and the divine, but also seems to bring together several strands of legendary or mythic traditions. The depiction of ***Kṛṣṇa*** in the epic demonstrates a familiarity with the legends about the hero-god, centering on the conflict with Kṛṣṇa's uncle Kaṃsa, king of Mathurā, and the subsequent migration to Dvārakā, where the clan meets its destruction. This tradition of stories seems to be rather old, as evidence in Patañjali's *Mahābhāṣya* (3.1.26), Buddhist and Jaina texts, and the *Arthaśāstra* of Kauṭilya (1.6.10; 14.3.44) demonstrates.

When and why ***Kṛṣṇa***, the central character in these stories, came to be included in the epic tradition is unclear. On the one hand, it has been argued that the original epic did not know of ***Kṛṣṇa*** since the episodes connected with him are not necessary for developing the epic plot (Holtzmann, 1892–1895). On the other hand, in the transmitted epic ***Kṛṣṇa*** is one of the central characters, and even his numerous absences from the narrative have been regarded as enhancing this centrality (Hiltebeitel, 1976). Although there are different views of the textual history of the epic, it remains true that its final redactors attempted to clarify neither the

relationship among the different aspects of the ***Kṛṣṇa*** legend nor the ambiguity between the human and divine features of the hero, for instance, by effacing all passages dealing with the human ***Kṛṣṇa***. It seems that such ambiguities are deeply ingrained in the epic narrative, which allows a spreading out of different layers and markers of symbolic, mythological, philosophical, and sociopolitical associations, which contributed to keeping the epic alive until today. In the case of ***Kṛṣṇa***, this ambiguity stayed with him and became an issue in subsequent literary production (e.g. in the dramas ascribed to Bhāsa, 1st–2nd cents. CE) and in later theological interpretations. In the text of the critical edition, there are different ways in which the epic bards depict, discuss, and sometimes play with the oscillation between the human and nonhuman realms, such as recounting genealogies, acquiring divine weapons, and receiving instructions and visions of gods. One of the most explicit statements on the relationship between the human and nonhuman realms can be found in a list in the first book of the epic that discloses the true identity of the epic characters as being "partial embodiments" (*aṃśāvatāra*) of gods, demigods, and demons. In this list (which may belong to the latest additions to the epic), ***Kṛṣṇa*** is identified as being a partial embodiment of the god Nārāyaṇa (*MBh.* 1.61.90), while Arjuna, his closest ally in the epic, is made the son of Indra, the king of the vedic gods (*MBh.* 1.61.84). The alliance and friendship between Arjuna and ***Kṛṣṇa*** is explored in the epic on different levels. While it seems to have started as a comradeship (*sākhya*), very early in the epic narrative, it is also depicted in the idiom of kinship. This oscillation between friendship, political and military alliance, and kinship is an important aspect of the depiction of the relationship between ***Kṛṣṇa*** and the Pāṇḍavas throughout the epic.

Kṛṣṇa enters the epic plot when he observes how Arjuna wins the princess Draupadī as his wife, whom he eventually has to share with other brothers. After the marriage of Draupadī with all five Pāṇḍava brothers, Arjuna sets out for a tour through the sacred forests. There he meets ***Kṛṣṇa*** near Dvārakā and participates in the celebrations of a mountain festival, in the course of which he falls in love with Kṛṣṇa's sister Subhadrā. Following Kṛṣṇa's advice, that abduction would be the appropriate form of marriage, Arjuna takes Subhadrā with him. This causes distress amongst the Vṛṣṇis, who can only be prevented by ***Kṛṣṇa*** from taking revenge. The setting of this episode points to the pastoral background of the Vṛṣṇi clan and its strong connection to the forest, which is fully elaborated in the later texts, such as the *Harivaṃśa*. The epic bards point to this tradition when Subhadrā is introduced to Draupadī wearing a milkmaid's dress. This marriage confirms an affinal kinship tie, which is referred to in the epic when Kuntī, the mother of the Pāṇḍavas, is introduced as the sister of Vasudeva, the father of ***Kṛṣṇa*** (*MBh.* 1.104.1–5; 5.88.60–65). ***Kṛṣṇa*** takes an interest in the prosperity of the Pāṇḍavas and helps establish their royal residence of Indraprastha. This is emphasized in the story of the burning of the Khāṇḍava Forest together with all its inhabitants, a task that Agni, the god of the vedic sacrificial fire, asks ***Kṛṣṇa*** and Arjuna to accomplish. In doing so, they both win divine weapons that become their emblems as embodying a divine power: ***Kṛṣṇa*** receives his disc from Agni and his club from Varuṇa, while Arjuna is given the Gāṇḍiva bow. One of the survivors of

the conflagration is the *asura* or demon Maya, who is then employed to build the royal assembly hall of Yudhiṣṭhira, the eldest Pāṇḍava. When ***Kṛṣṇa*** makes plans for the performance of Yudhiṣṭhira's royal consecration (*rājasūya*), he points out that this will only be successful when Jarāsaṃdha, the mighty king of the eastern kingdom of Magadha, is defeated. At this point, the story of the Vṛṣṇi clan's previous settlement around Mathurā is woven into the epic. ***Kṛṣṇa*** recounts Jarāsaṃdha's previous raids of the western regions, which caused many clans and peoples to escape to other regions. He reports that his uncle Kaṃsa had forged an alliance with Jarāsaṃdha by giving two of his sisters in marriage. As a consequence, the uncle had to be killed in order to avoid further quarrels within the clan. Jarāsaṃdha is characterized as a staunch follower of the god Śiva, to whom he plans to sacrifice hundred kings. The successful expedition to Magadha and the killing of Jarāsaṃdha remove the sole obstacle preventing Yudhiṣṭhira's consecration. However, when the ceremony is about to be completed and ***Kṛṣṇa*** performs the actual unction (*abhiṣeka*) of Yudhiṣṭhira, Śiśupāla, a former ally of Jarāsaṃdha, protests and accuses ***Kṛṣṇa*** of being of low pedigree and dubious character. In the course of this incident, Kṛṣṇa's divine nature is praised by one of the patriarchs, and subsequently Śiśupāla's head is cut off by Kṛṣṇa's disc. There are numerous other litanies in which Kṛṣṇa's divinity is praised or revealed by epic characters (e.g. *MBh.* 3.13.10–36; 6.61.30–64.18).

Having returned to Dvārakā after the coronation, ***Kṛṣṇa*** is not present when the Pāṇḍavas lose everything to their cousin Duryodhana in the fatal game of dice, and they are forced to live for 12 years in exile and 1 year in disguise. However, some versions of the epic include an incident (to be found in the appendix to the critical edition) that gained prominence in later versions of the epic: when Draupadī is dragged into the assembly hall after Yudhiṣṭhira had staked and lost her in the game of dice, Duryodhana and one of his brothers abuse her and try to strip off her clothes. Draupadī prays to ***Kṛṣṇa*** for help, and, miraculously, her dress is renewed. This incident points to the special connection between the two epic characters, to which Draupadī's other name, ***Kṛṣṇā***, also hints (see Hiltebeitel, 1976). Apart from some brief encounters during their exile in the forest, ***Kṛṣṇa*** again appears center stage in the fifth book of the epic, when he is approached by both of the conflicting parties regarding the return of the kingdom at the end of the Pāṇḍavas' exile. When both Arjuna and his enemy and cousin Duryodhana visit ***Kṛṣṇa*** in order to make him an ally, he offers support to both of them, stressing his "impartiality." While Duryodhana chooses his troops, the *nārāyaṇa*s, Arjuna chooses ***Kṛṣṇa*** himself, although the latter refuses to actively engage in combat. Therefore, ***Kṛṣṇa*** stays with the Pāṇḍavas until the end of the war, first as their ambassador to Duryodhana, who, without much hope, tries to negotiate a peaceful solution, then as Arjuna's charioteer and councilor. Time and again Kṛṣṇa's advice is needed, not only when Arjuna doubts the propriety of fighting against relatives at the beginning of the battle (which results in the famous *Bhagavadgītā*), but also when his opponents appear invincible and cannot be defeated by following the rules of honorable combat.

The deaths of the four marshals of Duryodhana's army and of Duryodhana himself during the battle are brought about by means of tricks and by breaking the rules of the warrior code (*kṣatriyadharma*). Kṛṣṇa's counsel not only outrages his opponents, because of its implicit acceptance of immoral behavior, but also results in his being cursed. This criticism turns the victory of the Pāṇḍavas into a dubious achievement and makes Kṛṣṇa's role ambiguous in later interpretations of the epic. However, these doubts and dilemmas are already addressed in the epic, which makes ***Kṛṣṇa*** not only an invincible fighter as the wielder of discus and club, but also a teacher of *dharma* and an expert in the course of time (*kāla*) and destiny (*daiva*), which in his view (voiced at several points in the epic, including the *Bhagavadgītā*) cannot be controlled, but only recognized and enacted. ***Kṛṣṇa*** would also argue that the course of *dharma* is "deep" or even "opaque" (*gahana*) and may not always mean following the rules of conduct that go along with it. *Dharma* is "subtle" (*sūkṣma*), and the results of an act are not always as expected. As an expert of "hidden" or "higher" causes, ***Kṛṣṇa*** justifies certain infringements necessary for guaranteeing the Pāṇḍavas' victory. At many points in the epic, this "hidden" course is associated with either divine scheming or destiny (*daiva*); in some instances, it is explicitly connected with ***Kṛṣṇa***, who is then recognized as the divine force behind all the events, the hidden cause of the war that lays the foundations for reestablishing a much threatened order. The most famous and influential of these explanations is the *Bhagavadgītā*, containing the famous conversation between Arjuna and ***Kṛṣṇa*** at the beginning of the battle. It includes the self-revelation of ***Kṛṣṇa*** as the one and only highest god, who protects the world and his devotees when they follow his way of being, which means living like a detached *yogin* and acting for the welfare of all beings and for the sake of one's ultimate liberation in the realm of ***Kṛṣṇa***, the highest self (see Malinar, 2007). Vāsudeva-***Kṛṣṇa*** is depicted not only as guaranteeing liberation from the world, but also as its creator and protector, as the universal cosmic god and sovereign. This is demonstrated in Arjuna's vision of the god in chapter 11, which shows him as the sovereign with four arms, holding a club and disc (his usual iconographical emblems), as well as in his multiple, universal form (*viśvarūpa*) consisting of all beings. While the *Bhagavadgītā* offers a theological explanation for the divinity of ***Kṛṣṇa*** that is also recognized elsewhere in the epic, it is not only a didactic text in its own right, but also connected in many respects to the epic narrative, as can be seen in the culmination of Kṛṣṇa's revelation as Kāla ("Deadly Time") swallowing up the warriors arrayed at Kurukṣetra. ***Kṛṣṇa*** is here made the ruler of fatal time in that it becomes one of his embodiments to destroy the enemies of the cosmic order, which needs to be protected as God's creation.

While the themes of the true but hidden divine nature of ***Kṛṣṇa*** and of the loving devotion (*bhakti*) to him are also explored elsewhere in the epic, his divinity and his teachings were not accepted unanimously. It seems that some (possibly Brahmanical) authors not only took exception to the ritual latitude allowed in the context of *bhakti*, but also were skeptical of the practicability of assuming yogic detachment while performing one's social responsibilities (see the dialogue between King Janaka and the mendicant Sulabhā). The *Anugītā*, presented as a

"recapitulation" of the *Bhagavadgītā* to a forgetful Arjuna (*MBh.* 14.16–50), shows no signs of praising ***Kṛṣṇa*** as a god. The epic narrative that follows the *Bhagavadgītā* continues to depict ***Kṛṣṇa*** as a hero while occasionally declaring his divinity. This is also demonstrated in the story of Kṛṣṇa's miraculous rescue of Parikṣit, Arjuna's grandson and the only surviving future heir of the Pāṇḍava throne, who has been attacked by vengeful enemies while still in his mother's womb. ***Kṛṣṇa*** resurrects the mortally wounded embryo through an "act of truth" (*satyakrīyā*) and thereby guarantees the continuation of the dynasty. This incident has become a favorite topic in the later Purāṇas, which stress the divinity of ***Kṛṣṇa*** and turn Parikṣit into a very special devotee (Malinar, 2005). After the battle, the women of the killed warriors are shown lamenting their fate, and Duryodhana's mother Gāndhārī curses ***Kṛṣṇa*** that his clan will soon meet destruction because he did not prevent the war. ***Kṛṣṇa*** reacts with indifference since he himself will be a driving force behind the downfall of his clan in Dvārakā. The narrative threads connecting ***Kṛṣṇa*** to different mythologies and identities converge for the last time in book 15 of the epic, the *Mausalaparvan*, which relates Kṛṣṇa's return to Dvārakā and his involvement in the destruction of the Vṛṣṇi clan, which he already anticipates as the "expert in the course of time and destiny." Unable to stop his drunken relatives from killing one another, ***Kṛṣṇa*** decides not to resist destiny, but to even propel it, which again corroborates his connection with matters of fate and the often limited chances of human intervention, as well as with yogic detachment and liberating insight. After the city of Dvārakā has been flooded by the ocean in the aftermath of the Vṛṣṇis' destruction, ***Kṛṣṇa*** sets out to the forest to await his death, which meets him in the form a hunter's arrow that pierces the sole of his foot, the only spot where ***Kṛṣṇa*** is vulnerable, because he did not rub it with a magic fluid once given to him by the sage Durvāsas. Entering yogic composure, ***Kṛṣṇa*** dies the death of a *yogin*, detached from and untouched by the turmoil that usually possesses the body when it is about to be abandoned by the immortal self. According to tradition, the death of ***Kṛṣṇa*** marks the beginning of the final world-age, the *kaliyuga*, in which law and cosmic order, already severely damaged in the previous age (the *dvāparayuga*), will deteriorate beyond recognition (see cosmic cycles).

Although there are some epic passages in which ***Kṛṣṇa*** is considered to be identical with the god Viṣṇu or is addressed as Viṣṇu, this identification, making ***Kṛṣṇa*** an embodiment (*avatāra*) of Viṣṇu, seems to have been a later development. The earliest sources, in which ***Kṛṣṇa*** becomes part of a Vaiṣṇaiva genealogy and which turn him into one of the various embodiments of Viṣṇu, are the *Harivaṃśa* (2nd–3rd cents. CE) and the *Viṣṇupurāṇa* (3rd–4th cents. CE). Although the cults and legends of Viṣṇu and ***Kṛṣṇa*** at this stage need to be distinguished from each other, it seems that the two gods were rather close, which may point to deliberate attempts to align them, probably coming from different religious backgrounds (vedic in the case of Viṣṇu; epic-heroic in case of Vāsudeva-***Kṛṣṇa***). However, on the basis of the extant evidence, it is very difficult to come to any definite conclusion with regard to the early relationship between the two. Therefore, it seems misleading to regard ***Kṛṣṇa*** in general as an *avatāra* of Viṣṇu even in the earliest sources. It is important to note that these developments resulted neither in eclipsing

Kṛṣṇa as an epic hero nor in denying his worship as the "highest god." Rather, at each new stage, the previous tradition was not abandoned completely, but often kept, although adjusted to new contexts. Therefore, while on the one hand, processes of deification resulted in the emergence of new cults and theologies, on the other hand, certain traditions were kept and developed further in subsequent Kṛṣṇaitic texts and religious communities. However, seen from the theological and mythological angle presented in the texts, we are dealing with a process of heroization. In the epic and the *Harivaṃśa*, the human appearance of ***Kṛṣṇa*** is regarded as an earthly embodiment of the divine that is necessary to reestablish order (*dharma*) in times of crisis by propagating loyalty and devotion (*bhakti*) to the highest god as the creator and protector of the created world.

In any case, it seems that the emergence of the worship and theological interpretation of ***Kṛṣṇa*** is based on ancient legends that deal with a conflict within the Yādava or Vṛṣṇi clan, causing its migration from its homeland in the region of Mathurā to the city of Dvārakā, where it finally meets its destruction. This legend of the destruction is centered on ***Kṛṣṇa*** and his brother Balarāma and is connected to legendary traditions that report the killing of the brothers' uncle, Kaṃsa, who had usurped Mathurā. The popularity of these legends is also demonstrated in their having been adopted and interpreted in early Buddhist and Jaina sources. The Buddhist *Ghatajātaka*, like the version in the Jaina *Aṃtagaḍadasāo*, tells the story of the conflict between ***Kṛṣṇa*** and Kaṃsa and the migration to Dvārakā. In both texts, ***Kṛṣṇa*** is turned into a lay follower of Buddhist and Jaina beliefs, respectively. Other Jaina sources include the figure of Vāsudeva in its teachings about the history of the cosmos and the appearances of the different *jina*s (or *tīrthaṅkara*s). In texts such as the *Harivaṃśapurāṇa* of Jinasena (8th cent. CE) or the *Triṣaṣṭiśalākapuruṣacarita* of Hemacandra (12th cent.), Kṛṣṇa's story is usually paired with the biography of the *jina* Neminātha, whose role resembles the position of ***Kṛṣṇa*** as a teacher of *dharma* in the *Mahābhārata*. As a consequence, ***Kṛṣṇa*** is depicted as an "extra ordinary person," a typical Jaina layman and king, who is opposed by a "counter-Vāsudeva" (*prativāsudeva*), the king Jarāsaṃdha (Bauer, 2005).

Harivaṃśa and the Early Puranas

The cycle of legends about ***Kṛṣṇa*** and his brother Balarāma was added to the *Mahābhārata* in the form of the *Harivaṃśa* (c. 2nd–3rd cents. CE) as a supplement (*khila*). Although probably to be dated to the 3rd century CE, the legendary tradition is much older. Evidence for this comes from Patañjali, the grammarian (c. 3rd cent. BCE), who refers in his *Mahābhāṣya* to theatrical performances of the fight between ***Kṛṣṇa*** and Kaṃsa (on Pāṇini 3.1.26). Closely connected to the *Harivaṃśa* are the versions of Kṛṣṇa's life in the *Viṣṇupurāṇa* and *Brahmapurāṇa* and in the *Balacārita*, a play ascribed to Bhāsa (Ruben, 1943; Couture, 1992). These texts also include what is perhaps yet another mythic and cultic tradition centered on the cowherd god ***Kṛṣṇa***-Gopāla among the Abhiras (herdsmen) in the region of Vraja (today Braj). In this tradition, ***Kṛṣṇa*** is

depicted as a pastoral hero and god who not only saves the Abhiras from natural disasters and demonic creatures but also, as the elusive seducer of the women of Vraja, embodies the pleasure and pain of love and attraction, a topic that came to be fully explored in the devotional traditions following the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*. The extant *Harivaṃśa* (i.e. the critical edition) is divided into three books.

The first (chs. 1–45), called the *Harivaṃśaparvan* (Book of the Lineage of Hari), traces the genealogy of ***Kṛṣṇa*** and his clan back to the beginnings of creation and thus embeds it in a larger cosmological and mythological framework. This includes an account of the different embodiments (*avatāra*s) of the god Viṣṇu, including ***Kṛṣṇa***. In this way, he is embedded in the theological framework of Vaiṣṇaiva theology as fulfilling the god's task of protecting order (*dharma*) and destroying the demonic forces that threaten the earth. The text thus starts when the god Viṣṇu answers the plight of the distressed gods to remove the demons by giving them a black and a white hair, which will turn into ***Kṛṣṇa*** and Balarāma, respectively.

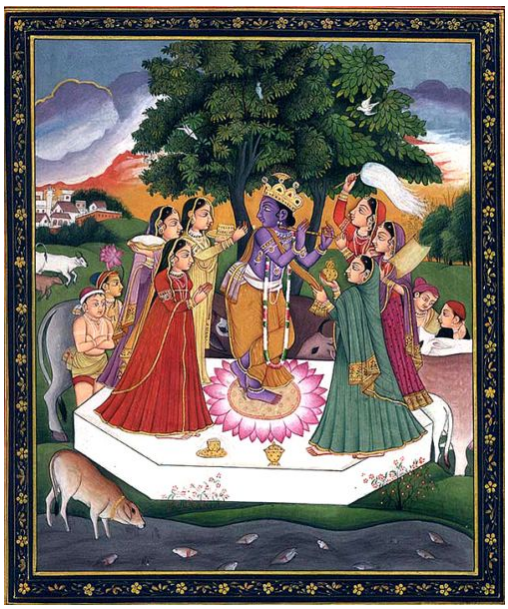

Fig. 1: ***Kṛṣṇa*** worshipped by the women of Vraja during the nightly *rāsa* dance (miniature painting, Rajasthan, c. 18th cent.).

The second (chs. 46–113), the *Viṣṇuparvan* (Book of Viṣṇu), relates the actual story of the earthly activities of the two brothers and starts with a complex birth story, which also establishes the connection between ***Kṛṣṇa***-Gopāla or Govinda of Vraja, the cowherd god, and Vāsudeva-***Kṛṣṇa*** of Dvārakā. When Kaṃsa, the king of Mathurā, learns of the prophecy that he will be killed by a child born of his sister Devakī, he orders that she be imprisoned together with her husband Vasudeva and that all their offspring be killed. Balarāma and ***Kṛṣṇa*** are both saved through a miraculous exchange. While still an embryo, Balarāma is removed from Devakī's womb and placed in the body of Rohiṇī, another wife of Vasudeva. The exchange is carried out by Nidrā, the goddess of yogic sleep, who then enters the womb of the cowherdess Yaśodā in order to be born at the same time as Devakī's next child, ***Kṛṣṇa***. In the night of their birth, the children are exchanged. While ***Kṛṣṇa*** grows up with his foster parents in Vraja, Nidrā is killed by Kaṃsa, but appears to him as a goddess announcing his downfall. The important role accorded to a goddess in the birth story is also corroborated in other incidents, including the appearance of a female power – called Nidrā and Ekānaṃśā, respectively – who is occasionally also addressed as the sister of ***Kṛṣṇa*** and Balarāma (Couture & Schmid, 2001). This can be seen as indicative of a triad of Vṛṣṇi deities, which is also attested by iconographic evidence, and of Kṛṣṇa's connection with myths of the mountain goddess killing the buffalo-demon Mahiṣāsura (for depiction of the goddess Durgā as Mahiṣāsuramardinī, see Schmid, 2003–2004). As a result of the rescue

operation, the brothers grow up among the cowherds of Vraja. Much of the *Harivaṃśa* deals with the childhood and youth of the two brothers, and consists of a sequence of heroic exploits and the killing of demons, as well as of sports and childish pranks. Some of these incidents also feature in early iconographic representations, as is the case with the killing of the poisonous serpent Kāliya (*kāliyadamana*) living in the river Yamunā and threatening the inhabitants of Vraja. Another famous episode, the lifting of Govardhana Mountain (*govardhanadharaṇa*), even more dramatically establishes Kṛṣṇa's role as divine protector of the cowherds. ***Kṛṣṇa*** advises the cowherds (*gopa*s) not to celebrate the annual autumn festival for Indra, the vedic king of the gods and rain god, but rather to worship the cows and the mountains. In retaliation, Indra sends torrential rain that threatens to flood Vraja. In order to protect the *gopa*s, ***Kṛṣṇa*** lifts up the mountain in the form of a huge umbrella, and Indra withdraws defeated, though not before acknowledging ***Kṛṣṇa*** as an Upendra (younger Indra). Indra also asks ***Kṛṣṇa*** to protect his son Arjuna, a request that connects these events to the *Mahābhārata* story. After the victory over Indra, ***Kṛṣṇa*** spends the autumnal nights dancing with the milkmaids (*gopī*s). The erotic overtones of this incident are not explored theologically in the *Harivaṃśa*, in contrast with their influential treatment in the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*. The story of the youth of ***Kṛṣṇa*** and Balarāma culminates in the killing of Kaṃsa and the conquest of Mathurā as the city of Vṛṣniṣ. ***Kṛṣṇa*** is not consecrated as a king. Since Kaṃsa had married two sisters of the Maghadha king Jarāsaṃdha, the latter attacks the new king of Mathurā. At the same time, a king called Kalayāvana ("Dark Foreigner" or "Dark Greek") wages war against the Vṛṇis as a consequence of their having offended his father, the sage Gargya, earlier. In this situation ***Kṛṣṇa*** decides to move his clan to Dvārakā, the newly built city on the western coast. The *Harivaṃśa* continues with an account of the events in the new home, especially of the marriage of ***Kṛṣṇa*** with Rukmiṇī and Satyabhāmā and others, including the 16,100 women he rescues from the demon king Naraka.

The text concludes with the third book, the *Bhaviṣyaparvan* (Book of the Future), which connects it to the *Mahābhārata* by dealing with the lineage of Janamejaya (the king during whose sacrifice the epic is narrated) and the advent of the final world-age, the *kaliyuga*. Although the first book of the text places ***Kṛṣṇa*** in a sequence of Viṣṇu's embodiments, this feature is not emphasized very much in the second book, which instead deals with the miraculous deeds and incomprehensible nature of the god and the hero.

The account of Kṛṣṇa's life in the *Harivaṃśa* has many resemblances to stories in the *Viṣṇupurāṇa* and *Brahmapurāṇa* (Matchett, 2001). As a consequence, the questions of a common source for the "original" ***Kṛṣṇa*** story, the textual history that may connect all three texts, and their relationship to contemporary Jaina and Buddhist texts such as the *Ghatajātaka* have been much debated. Scholars have also pointed to possible historical contexts of the ***Kṛṣṇa*** story, such as invasions by Indo-Greek kings from the West. The emergence and importance of ***Kṛṣṇa*** as a god and hero in many textual sources between the 3rd century BCE and the 4th century CE is also corroborated by archaeological evidence that documents many of the

different aspects of the figure of ***Kṛṣṇa*** discussed earlier.

Early Iconographic, Epigraphic, and Numismatic Evidence

Early evidence is available for Vāsudeva-***Kṛṣṇa*** and his elder brother Saṃkarṣaṇa-Balarāma being venerated together as heroes or deities of the Vṛṣṇi clan. The earliest is a coin, which was found during excavations at Ai Khanoum (in Afghanistan), showing images of both brothers (Filliozat, 1972). It was minted during the reign of the Indo-Greek king Agathokles (c. 180–165 BCE). Both figures are represented with two arms, ***Kṛṣṇa*** holding a disc and conch, Saṃkarṣaṇa a mace and plough, iconographic emblems that also characterize them later. In addition there is epigraphic evidence from the 1st century BCE, as for instance the two inscriptions found in Ghosundi and Hathibada, Chhitorgarh district, Rajasthan, which refer to a place of worship where Saṃkarṣaṇa and Vāsudeva are jointly worshipped as "invincible lords of the universe" (*anihatabhyām sarveśvarabhyām*; see Sircar, 1965, 90–91). Other iconographic and textual sources depict the two brothers together with a goddess who is interpreted variously as a sister or spouse, thus representing a powerful Vṛṣṇi triad of deities in its own right (see Couture & Schmid, 2002). The earliest images of this triad can be dated to between the 1st and 3rd centuries CE and stem from the Mathura region. The iconography of the triad is described in iconographical texts such as the *Viṣṇudharmottarapurāṇa* (3.85.71) and *Bṛhatsaṃhitā* (58.37). The worship of ***Kṛṣṇa*** together with his sister and brother is also the characteristic feature of the cult of the Jagannātha triad in the temple city of Puri in Orissa.

The tradition of worshipping ***Kṛṣṇa*** along with his Vṛṣṇi siblings continued, but was transformed into manifestations of Viṣṇu in the context of later Pāñcarātra theology as the four divine "formations" of divine qualities (*caturvyūha*). Evidence for this development is provided, for instance, in passages of the *Nārāyaṇīyaparvan* of the *Mahābhārata*. The separate cult of Vāsudeva-***Kṛṣṇa***, propagated in the *Bhagavadgītā* and elsewhere in the *Mahābhārata*, is also corroborated by iconographic and epigraphic evidence, such as the Besnagar inscriptions (2nd cent. BCE, Madhya Pradesh), which praise Vāsudeva as "god of the gods" (*devadeva*), or the inscription at Kothi (c. 1st cent. BCE, near Mathura). In addition there exist several sculptures of a deity with four arms holding a disc, conch, and club; these have been ascribed to the Mathura school of artists, which flourished shortly before and during the Kushana dynasty. The latest date assumed for the extant sculptural remains is the 1st century CE, by which time the iconography of a four-armed deity had been fully developed (Härtel, 1987; Srinivasan, 1991). The earliest available depictions of the stories of Govardhana Mountain and the killing of the serpent Kāliya can be dated to the late Kushana period (3rd cent. CE) and continue under the Guptas (4th–6th cents. CE). They point to the importance of ***Kṛṣṇa***-Govinda, the god of Vraja. The first pictorial narratives of the ***Kṛṣṇa*** story have been found in southern Indian rock temples at Badami and Pattadakal (6th–7th cents. CE, Karnataka; see Vaudeville, 1975).

South Indian Traditions and the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*

The epic and puranic stories of ***Kṛṣṇa*** are located in north and northwest India, and the theological interpretation according to which he is the 'highest god' in the *Bhagavadgītā* focuses on his royal as well as yogic-ascetic aspects. This also influenced the view of *bhakti* or devotion as being linked to ascetic practices and ritual duties in relation to a god, who is accessible in his worldly form as the overlord of all beings, but who needs to be sought by his followers as the transcendent, "highest self." Still, there are other features of the god that became prominent in the further development of Kṛṣṇaitic traditions, which relate to the pastoral aspects of ***Kṛṣṇa*** as Govinda or Gopāla, the cowherd god as a protector of peoples and cattle and as the beloved "player of the flute." The emphasis on the beauty of the landscape, the irresistible appeal of the youthful hero, and the romantic desire he arouses in those around him has resulted in the development of distinct devotional traditions that explore these different dimensions of the god's presence on earth as revealing pathways to liberation. One culmination of this development is the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*. In tracing the origin and date of this text, scholars have pointed to South Indian poetic and religious traditions that are familiar with aspects of the ***Kṛṣṇa*** legend in which a new emotionality was introduced into the worship of this god. An important link is the Tamil god Māyōn (evidence for the cult is available from the beginning of the Common Era), who shows many similarities with ***Kṛṣṇa*** (or indeed *is* ***Kṛṣṇa***), such as his same dark complexion and his depiction as cowherd god dallying with the women in a beautiful and sensual landscape. In this connection, a nightly dance and a fight with seven bulls are mentioned, and one cowherd girl – called Piṉṉai or Napiṉṉai, – who has already been referred to in the early Tamil court epics *Cilappatikāram* (5th cent. CE) and *Maṇimēkalai*, receives prominence (see Hudson, 1982). The shift to a new devotional emphasis seems to have taken place in the poetry of the Vaiṣṇava Āḻvār saints (6th–9th cents. CE), in which the different aspects of the love relationship between the god and his consort are explored further, and a new theme emerges: "love in separation" (*viraha*), which is further developed in later medieval *bhakti* traditions. One South Indian text that explores these erotic aspects further is *Kṛṣṇakarṇāmṛta* by Vilvamaṅgala (c. 12th cent.). It seems that the chapters in the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* on Kṛṣṇa's sojourn in Vraja can be regarded as an adaptation of the devotional poetry of the Āḻvār saints (Hardy, 1983). In this tradition, aspects of ***Kṛṣṇa*** and Viṣṇu are fused. In later Vaiṣṇava philosophical and religious schools, such as in Śrīvaiṣṇavism based on the teachings of the philosopher Rāmānuja (11th cent.), ***Kṛṣṇa*** is theologically subordinated to Viṣṇu as one of his embodiments.

The *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* has become one of the most important and even canonical texts in Kṛsṇaiṭic religious traditions because it presents the foundations of a religious life centered on devotion. There is some scholarly consensus that the text should be dated to around the 9th century CE, when it was composed in southern India, or at least by authors familiar with South Indian devotional poetry (Hardy, 1983). The *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* is perhaps the most poetic of all

Purāṇas and has many linguistic features that point to a deliberate attempt to align it with the older vedic texts, as can also be seen when it is presented as the "essence" of the Vedas and Upaniṣads (van Buitenen, 1966). It consists of 12 books (*skandha*s), of which those dealing with Kṛṣṇa's life are the longest (books 10 and 11). The text starts by establishing a narrative frame that links it on different levels to the *Mahābhārata* by making, for instance, King Parīkṣit, who had been rescued by ***Kṛṣṇa*** in the epic, the listener to the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*, which is recited to him by Śuka, one of the sons of Vyāsa, the composer of the epic. The *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* is narrated during Parīkṣit's final hours in order to prepare him for death, which means for him, as for any other loving devotee, liberation (*mokṣa*) in or with ***Kṛṣṇa***, the highest god and absolute being (Malinar, 2005). One of the preconditions for this liberation is the ability to direct one's thoughts towards the god at the hour of death, in which one is supported by the recitation of the text. The *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* offers its own account of the *Mahābhārata* by focusing on those episodes that emphasize Kṛṣṇa's divinity. Arjuna's alliance with ***Kṛṣṇa*** recedes into the background, as can also be seen in the fact that there is no allusion to the *Bhagavadgītā* (although there are some quotations from the text); instead, the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* presents its own "*Gītā*" in the 11th book, when ***Kṛṣṇa*** gives instructions to the sage Uddhava (*Uddhavagītā*). Like the *Viṣṇupurāṇa* and *Harivaṃśa*, Kṛṣṇa's story is placed in a genealogy and cosmology (books 2–5) and presented as an embodiment of Viṣṇu. However, this is qualified by the central position that is accorded to ***Kṛṣṇa*** as being God himself (Bhagavān Svayam). Moreover, the teachings and the text of the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* are said to be a "form" (*tanu*) of the god ***Kṛṣṇa*** after his disappearance from the world following the *Mahābhārata* war and the events in Vraja, which took place in the *dvāparayuga*, the third of four world-ages. This temporal framework is detailed in books 8 and 9, which turn the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* into a token of Kṛṣṇa's continuing presence in the current *kaliyuga*, in which the cosmic order has disintegrated even further. Therefore, it provides an outline of theological doctrine and religious practice and, perhaps most importantly for the devotional life (*bhakti*), an account of Kṛṣṇa's previous sojourn on earth. The text also contains much information on the rules and practices implied in a life dedicated to *bhakti* as summarized, for instance, in *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* 7.5.23–24 in the nine characteristics of devotion (*bhaktilakṣaṇa*), which include learning about god, singing songs in his praise, being mindful of his presence, worshipping his feet, worshipping his image, paying homage, being god's servant (*dāsya*), being his loyal companion (*sākhya*), and offering up oneself (*ātmanivedana*). This list refers to forms of worship as well as attitudes in which devotion should develop, that is, what elsewhere is called *bhāva* (mode of being, sentiment). Later *bhakti* traditions center on the definition, evaluation, and interpretation of these different modes, which have resulted in major theological distinctions among the religious traditions. In all of these, the distinct human dimension of ***Kṛṣṇa*** is the point of departure for *bhakti* practices, which all emulate and ultimately transform human relationships – such as friendship – into a religious pathway. Apart from the overall importance of the legends and myths of ***Kṛṣṇa***, this human dimension of the god lends him a specific divine identity that still nourishes Kṛṣṇaitic religious traditions today. Seen from the perspective of the history of reception, perhaps the most important part of the

Bhāgavatapurāṇa is its account of Kṛṣṇa's sojourn in Vraja, Mathurā, and Dvārakā in books 10 and 11. While the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* presents this well-known story by drawing especially on not only the *Viṣṇupurāṇa* but also the *Harivaṃśa*, the theme of *bhakti* is worked into the stories in a coherent way. This can also be seen in the new stories that are included in the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*, such as the episode of the child ***Kṛṣṇa*** stealing butter, which results in his mother being granted a vision of the cosmos in his mouth. This episode is central to those devotional practices that focus on the "Baby ***Kṛṣṇa***," which have acquired much popularity (see Hawley, 1983). The other, perhaps most influential, episode is the story of the nightly "*rāsa* dance," which shows ***Kṛṣṇa*** dallying with the milkmaids of Vraja (*Bh*āgP. 10.29–33).

This episode establishes Kṛṣṇa's reputation as the divine lover who attracts even respectable, married women while being married in Dvārakā to his wife Rukmiṇī, the first of his eight principal wives. This episode of the nightly dance became most influential in later medieval *bhakti* traditions (but has also been regarded with skepticism by rival schools) and has been interpreted as an allegorical depiction of the complex relationship between ***Kṛṣṇa***, the highest god and absolute self (*paramātman*), and the individual beings, the embodied selves (*jīva*) being united with and yet separated from him. Among the different ways of worshipping and approaching the god, love (*prema*) is regarded as the highest form, since it demands a complete surrender to the often incomprehensible ways of god. On the theological level, *bhakti* doctrines are based on the distinction between the individual self and god and the quest for union. In some passages these are blended with monistic teachings about the ultimate unity and identity of all beings in ***Kṛṣṇa***, who is time and again declared to be *brahman*, the impersonal absolute of the monistic Advaita Vedānta philosophy. The mediation of these two doctrines has resulted in various interpretations of the relationship between *bhakti* and Advaita philosophy in the different schools. While the text does not elaborate a coherent, overarching philosophy as its doctrinal framework, this is done in an influential commentary on the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* by Śrīdharasvāmin (c. 13th cent.).

Medieval *Bhakti* Communities and Regional Traditions

While the *Bhagavadgītā* and the depiction of ***Kṛṣṇa*** as a cosmic sovereign were a central concern of many commentarial and theological interpretations, the devotional aspect and the mythical accounts of Kṛṣṇa's life as detailed in the *Harivaṃśa* and the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* were especially emphasized in the medieval *bhakti* traditions. While referring to a common stock of texts and traditions, these traditions have distinct regional and often local features and emphasize different aspects of the god (see articles in Beck, 2005; Bryant, 2007). New texts (often in the vernacular languages of the region) and teachers emerge and acquire prominence in different communities. The regional centers of the Kṛṣṇaitic communities develop around the ancient sacred centers, the region of Mathura, especially Vraja-Vrindavan, and Dwarka, as well as Puri in eastern India. With the emergence of new communities, one witnesses the rise of sacred

centers such as Nabadwip in Bengal, Pandharpur in Maharashtra, or the Guruvāyur Temple in Kerala. While some communities emphasize more the "royal" or "householder" aspects of ***Kṛṣṇa*** and his being a devout husband, for others Kṛṣṇa's depiction as a god of cowherds (*gopa*s) and their wives (*gopī*s) became the point of departure for devotional poetry embedding the spiritual quest into a narrative and landscape of romantic love (*prema*). Following the stories of ***Kṛṣṇa*** in the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*, especially his sporting with the *gopī*s as portrayed in the chapter on the nightly *rāsa* dance, the religious quest was interpreted in new aesthetic and erotic idioms focusing on the turmoil caused by loving an always unattainable yet temporarily present god. This development gains shape in the form of theological treatises such as the *Nāradabhaktisūtra* and *Śāṇḍīlyabhaktisūtra* and the emergence of prominent teachers and saints, some of whom came to be the founders of religious communities (*sampradāya*s).

At this time a new figure gains prominence who has not been mentioned in the older texts: Rādhā. She now comes to be depicted as Kṛṣṇa's favorite *gopī* in Vraja and is turned into his divine consort, who, like ***Kṛṣṇa***, displays distinct human features and also becomes the subject of elaborate theological interpretations. In some of these, she is turned into the symbol of any individual soul's (*jīva*) longing for union with god or into a particular form of god's creative power (*śakti*), the "power that causes rapture" (*hlādinīśakti*). The complex interplay between ***Kṛṣṇa*** and his female alter ego is considered to be based on instances of temporary gratification and union followed by long periods of absence, which result in increased "longing caused by absence" (*viraha*) on the part of the deserted consort. The sound of Kṛṣṇa's flute becomes the emblem of this interplay of the absence and presence of the divine on earth, as well as of the transcendent aspect of pure love, which is not based on a selfish appropriation of the other, but on unconditional surrender. One of the most influential texts to explore the love-play between Rādhā and ***Kṛṣṇa*** is Jayadeva's *Gītagovinda* (late 12th cent., composed in Bengal), which sets the paradigm for emulating the aesthetics and sentiments of love within the framework of religious practices. In so doing, the classification of different forms of "enjoyment" or "aesthetic experience" (*rasa*), which developed in Indian poetics on the basis of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* (a treatise on performing arts; c. 1st cent. BCE), was used to express and arouse devotional sentiments (*rasa*s) in the audience. New types of *rasa* were developed – such as *bhaktirasa*, the sentiment of devotion – and given a theological interpretation. One of the conceptual links that allows this realignment is the fact that, in aesthetic as well as in religious discourse, the precondition for experiencing *rasa* is to achieve a non-egotistic attitude towards the enjoyed object (see De, 1961).

This new theology received one of its most comprehensive elaborations in the religious communities following the saint-teacher Caitanya (1486–1533), who had been brought up in a Brahmanical family in Bengal. He taught the cultivation of a highly ecstatic devotion to ***Kṛṣṇa*** as the purpose of religious life. According to tradition, Caitanya's teaching is focused on reciting the name of the god (*saṃkīrtana* or *japa*), which was propagated by him to be the only way to

salvation in the present age of decline, the *kaliyuga*. This is also emphasized in the only text ascribed to him, a devotional poem comprising eight stanzas (*Śikṣāṣṭaka*). In the theological and hagiographical texts of his community of followers, the Madhva Gaureśvara Sampradāya (also known as the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavas), worship and spiritual aspirations are directed not only at ***Kṛṣṇa***, but also at his consort, the goddess Rādhā. In an explicit realignment with Kṛṣṇa's former appearance as depicted in the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*, Caitanya is turned into the conjoined embodiment of ***Kṛṣṇa*** and Rādhā in the *kaliyuga*, which began when ***Kṛṣṇa*** disappeared from Vraja. Important for the theological formulation of Caitanyaite *bhakti* are the works of the so-called *gosvāmī*s, such as the *Bhaktirasāmṛtasindhu* by Rūpa Gosvāmī (c. 1470–1557), in which the different sentiments of devotion (*bhāva*) are explained in great detail by drawing upon notions of Indian aesthetics. Apart from the two *bhāva*s mentioned in the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*, the mood of being god's servant or slave (*dāsya*) and of being his friend (*sākhya*), three others are taught that are also accepted by other religious communities: viewing oneself as a parent or child (*vātsalya*), approaching the god like a beloved one (*mādhurya*), and the peaceful mood (*śānta*) of meditating on god. According to the Caitanya tradition, *bhakti* culminates in worshipping him as the divine lover while being less emphatic with regard to Kṛṣṇa's majestic aspect, his *aiśvarya* character, which emphasizes his position as a cosmic sovereign protecting the earth from evildoers and his being married to his wife Rukmiṇī in Dvārakā. The relationship of Rādhā to ***Kṛṣṇa*** is regarded as the highest form of *bhakti* because Rādhā's love is characterized by the risks of an extramarital relationship. This interpretation has caused theological debate and was rejected, or at least not endorsed, by the other Kṛṣṇaitic traditions. The major sacred centers of this tradition are located in Vrindavan, the region of Braj, Nabadwip, Caitanya's birthplace, and Puri, where it flourishes in temples and monastic institutions (*maṭha*s; see monasteries).

There is an important difference between the Kṛṣṇaitic communities located in Vrindavan and those of Bengal because the latter tend to focus more on the worship of Caitanya, who is regarded as the joined embodiment of Rādhā and ***Kṛṣṇa***, whereas many devotees in Vrindavan worship ***Kṛṣṇa*** and Rādhā directly and also regard them as being married. Some followers worship Rādhā as the highest being and subordinate ***Kṛṣṇa*** to her theologically, as is the case in the Rādhāvallabha Sampradāya or Puṣṭimārga founded by Hit Harivaṃś (1502–1552) in Vrindavan. Conversely, the followers of the saint and teacher Vallabha (1479–1531) rely exclusively on the unpredictable grace (*anugraha*) of the god ***Kṛṣṇa*** (see Barz, 1976). They follow the Puṣṭimārga ("Path of Prosperity") in which surrender to god is regarded as the precondition for the purification of the embodied self and its union with ***Kṛṣṇa***. Vallabha was born in a Telugu Brahmin family and trained as a Brahman scholar. In contrast to Caitanya, who left no extensive theological treatises, Vallabha was a prolific writer who explained his views in his commentary on the *Brahmasūtra*, as well as in independent works. He taught "pure monism" (Śuddhādvaita), which, in contrast to the monistic doctrines of the Śaṅkara school, does not allow for any illusionary aspect of god. Vallabha offered his own theological mediation between the doctrine of devotion (*bhakti*) and monistic philosophy (Advaita) by refuting scholarly traditions

established by Śaṅkara, Rāmānuja, and others. Vallabha distinguishes among different types of the "embodied self" (*jīva*), of which the *puṣṭijīva* is the highest because it is already devoted to ***Kṛṣṇa*** as being manifested in his body. Therefore, devotional service (*sevā*) is accorded a central role in religious practice, which implies the complete relinquishing of all one's possessions to god. In following the doctrine of different devotional sentiments, the parental relationship (*vātsalyabhāva*) has become the favorite form of *bhakti* in this community. At the center of worship is the lord's image, which is regarded by the followers of Vallabha not as a consecrated icon, but as the "real form" (*svarūpa*) of god. The image of Govardhananāthajī, now at Nathdwara (Rajasthan), is the most important because it is regarded as having originally belonged to Vallabha. The image and its worship are entrusted to a spiritual lineage of teachers consisting of the male members of Vallabha's family. In contrast to other *sampradāya*s, the spiritual leaders are not ascetic renouncers, but married householders who also confer initiation onto the community. The householder and family values are also emphasized in the Vārkarī Sampradāy, a devotional tradition of Maharashtra, in which ***Kṛṣṇa*** is worshipped as Viṭṭhal, standing on a square slab in the temple of Pandharpur (see Novetzke, 2005). He is venerated as the father (Viṭhobā) and mother (Viṭhāī) of his devotees, and the sentiment of *vātsalya*, the parental or filial mood, is accorded a central role. As a consequence, his connection to Dwarka and his being married to Rukmiṇī, Satyabhāmā, and eventually also Rādhā are stressed. The worship of Viṭṭhal is traced back to saint-devotees from different social ranks, such as Nāmdev (1270–1350), a low-caste tailor, depicted as embodying complete devotion, and Jñāndev (around 1290), a Brahmanical scholar associated with the Nāth *yogī* tradition (see Nāth Sampradāya), who provided a theological formulation of the cult in his commentary on the *Bhagavadgītā*, the *Jñāneśvarī*. Two other important saints are Eknāth (1548–1600) and Tukārām (1608–1650). At the center of the religious practice is the annual pilgrimage to Pandharpur, which unites pilgrims and devotees from all over Maharashtra. Apart from these communities, the Kṛṣṇaitic tradition also recognizes individual saints and teachers (also called Sants). Among the most prominent and influential of these is Mīrābāī (c. 1500–1565), born, according to tradition, as a Rajput princess who renounced family life by poetically declaring ***Kṛṣṇa*** to be her only husband, to whom she dedicated herself in ascetic worship. Also widely renowned is Sūrdās (16th cent.), whose poetry focuses on the exploits of the child ***Kṛṣṇa*** (such as the "Butter Thief") and on Rādhā as the ideal consort.

Religious Practice

While there are many features that connect the different Kṛṣṇaitic traditions to other Hindu theological and ritual traditions – for example, shared canonical texts or devotional practices such as communal *kīrtan* singing – the cult of ***Kṛṣṇa*** has many regional variations and forms that are also mirrored in the festival traditions, such as the worship of the Jagannāth triad in Puri or the pilgrimage to Viṭṭhal at Pandharpur. While at some places the ritual manuals used for the worship of ***Kṛṣṇa*** are those of the ritual schools of the Vaiṣṇava traditions, especially the

Pāñcarātra tradition, the individual communities have developed their own forms of worship, such as the daily worship consisting of eight ritual services, and have composed new manuals, often by drawing on Pāñcarātra and other tantric manuals such as the *Kramadīpikā*. One of these is as the *Haribhaktivilāsa* of Gopāla Bhaṭṭa (16th cent.), which is popular especially among Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavas (Joshi, 1959; Valpey, 2006). One of the characteristic features of most Kṛṣṇaitic traditions is the strong connection established in both devotional practices and poetry with the landscape in which the stories of ***Kṛṣṇa*** are embedded. The region of Braj, for instance, with the village of Vrindavan at its center, is one of the most important pilgrimage centers in Kṛṣṇaism. Pilgrimage here means to memorize and reenact the earthly sojourn of ***Kṛṣṇa***, his "divine play" (*līlā*), by means of different forms of worship, meditation, or *kīrtan* performance (see Entwistle, 1987). The aim of this "memorization of the divine play" (*līlāsmaraṇa*) is actually to visualize the activities of the god and participate in them as a devoted observer. Apart from the different places of Kṛṣṇa's activities, the "sacred field" (*kṣetra*) of Vrindavan comprises a large number of temples and religous institutions (*maṭha*s, *āśrama*s) of the different religious communities. With the strong emphasis on the vernacular language and regional traditions within the different *bhakti* communities, Brajbhasa, the language of the region of Mathura and Braj, acquired prominence among the poet-saints, which resulted in the production of a rich corpus of literature that gained canonical status in its own right.

Moreover, there are a variety of ***Kṛṣṇa*** cults on the local level of villages and social groups, each with its own practices and interpretations of the divinity of the god. Thus, in some places the image of ***Kṛṣṇa*** is worshipped as a *ṭhākura*, a "village chief" who gives audiences and meets other "chiefs" at festival seasons. This may point to the sociopolitical role of the deities in village relationships, of which the gods are part and on which they also depend. Some festivals are celebrated by devotees of ***Kṛṣṇa*** in many places and can thus be regarded as "pan-Indian," although their importance, date, and form may vary in the different localities. One of them is Kṛṣṇa's birthday (*kṛṣṇajanmāṣṭamī*), celebrated in August–September. Also widely celebrated is the *rāsalīlā* festival, a reenactment of Kṛṣṇa's sojourn at Vraja, and the story of Rādhā and ***Kṛṣṇa*** in July–August. The *annakūṭa* festival in October–November commemorates the first worship of Govardhana Mountain, which was raised up by ***Kṛṣṇa*** to protect the cowherds from Indra's wrath, and *kārttikapūjā* in October-November, a festival celebrated mostly by women who perform a *vrata*, a special observance that includes fasting, night watch, and memorizing the god's life, culminating in his marriage to Tulsī ("Holy Basil") at the full-moon night (*kārttikapūrṇimā*; Pintchman, 2005). *Holī*, the spring festival, is also connected to ***Kṛṣṇa*** and Balarama at many places and is the occasion for carnivalesque activities, such as body painting, reversals of gender and other social roles, mock fighting, teasing, and drinking. Some of the incidents of the ***Kṛṣṇa*** and Balarāma legends are performed. A widespread festival, especially popular in rural areas, is the "swing festival" (*jhūlana* or *ḍola*) in February–March. Here the images of Rādhā and ***Kṛṣṇa*** are taken outside the temple or the house shrine and placed on a swing for their enjoyment.

Modern Developments

While many Kṛṣṇaitic *bhakti* communities made attempts at reform after being exposed to criticism in the colonial period, this development is perhaps most noticeable with regard to the Caitanya community of Bengal. Reform of this community started with Kedarnath Datta, known as Bhaktivinode Thakura (1836–1914). Being part of a circle of scholars and intellectuals dedicated to the revitalization of Indian and Bengali culture (the so-called Bengali Renaissance), he turned to the scriptures of the Caitanya tradition and attempted to reconcile its theological doctrines with modern views. His work was continued by his son Bimal Prasad Datta, known as Bhaktisiddhanta Saraswati (1874–1936), who organized missionary activities within and outside of India and also sent his disciples to Europe and Southeast Asia. In 1966, one of his missionaries, Bhaktivedanta Prabhupada, founded the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), which became a worldwide movement with a large following in Western countries. The acceptance of modern perspectives, such as the quest for historical facts, also resulted in the discovery of the original birthplace of Caitanya in the village Mayapur (west Bengal) and the subsequent establishment of many new temples and pilgrims' hostels. In the same period, the ***Kṛṣṇa*** of the *Bhagavadgītā* was given renewed attention by reformers or revitalizers of Hinduism when the teaching of *karmayoga*, the "detached performance of duty," was provided with modern interpretations, such as rendering "service" (*sevā*) to the community or the emerging Indian nation.

The introduction of new mass media in the late 19th and 20th centuries also resulted in new representations of the god. Depictions of the child ***Kṛṣṇa*** have become quite popular in poster art and advertisements. His representation as a supreme but elusive lover in both marital and extramarital contexts, and the story of his youth and his relationship with pastoral and rural settings, became themes in Bollywood movies as early as 1918 (*Shri Krishna Janma*). One of the latest developments is the animated musical feature film *Krishna* (2006). The rather dramatic and often difficult love relationship between ***Kṛṣṇa*** and Rādhā serves as a template for many love stories in Bollywood movies, as well as in the lyrics of film songs. Although the importance of Kṛṣṇa's depiction as the flute player seems to outweigh his majestic and even martial aspects as a killer of demons or his being the god of the *Bhagavadgītā*, these features have also received attention from the mass media. This can be seen in his presence in the serialized TV version of the *Mahābhārata* epic (directed by B.R. Chopra) from the 1980s, which includes three episodes from the *Bhagavadgītā* (Malinar, 1995). All these developments demonstrate the importance and vitality of ***Kṛṣṇa*** and his cult in many places and regions of contemporary India and among Hindus all over the world.

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