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Līlā

(3,602 words)

Līlā, as with many rich Hindu terms and concepts, defies any easy or direct translation into English. It is a Sanskrit noun often translated well as simply “play,” and it is also translated as “sport,” or “pastime.” The idea of *līlā* is a key concept engaged by the major religious traditions of Hinduism in order to identify the innate nature and playfulness of the divine in relation to the cosmos, or the divine movements or acts that are expressive of the most interior dimensions of ultimate reality. Additionally, the word can also refer to the saintly or divine behavior or activities of humans who are considered to be exalted personages or sages, though the word and its conception are found first describing the nature of divine being.

Originally the idea of *līlā* appears in the Vedas as the word *krīḍā*, referring to the “playfulness” or “sportiveness” of divinities. Other words expressing similar, or identical, or related ideas can be found in later sacred Sanskrit literature, words such as *vilāsa*, *vihāra*, *keli*, *karman*, *ceṣṭā*, and so on. Moreover, the word *līlā* is often coupled with the name of a major deity, indicating a specific *līlā* on which such a divine drama is centered. The *līlās* of the deity Viṣṇu are recognized, and his divine manifestations of Kṛṣṇa and Rāma are known as “*kṛṣṇalīlā*” and “*rāmalīlā*,” respectively (see also drama). The deity of Śiva also has his *līlās* of cosmic dissolution, and many other divinely extraordinary acts, such as drinking an ocean of poison, are referred to by the word. Also Devī, or the feminine manifestations of the divine, are referred to as *līlās*. Even great sages and holy persons are said to have their own set of special acts or *līlās*. The name of a leading figure in a *līlā* other than a deity, or the name according to a particular type of *līlā*, can also be modifying or coupled with the word.

In Hindu cosmologies, *līlā* refers to the “cosmic play” of the divine in the periodic creation and dissolution of the universe, and in the unending perpetuation of the cycle of the two. In Hindu theologies, it refers to the “dramas” of the divine as described in sacred narratives in which various forms of “play” between the divinity and divine personages take place. In Indian poetics, the meanings of “grace,” “charm,” “beauty,” or “loveliness” are intended, meanings that also aptly describe something of either the cosmic or theological senses of the word. The word also refers

to the pilgrimage dramas in which *līlās* are reenacted, performed, and celebrated in holy places and meditated upon deeply by devout *bhaktas*. In more abstract terms, *līlā* refers to the ultimate and intimate revelation of the unlimitedly playful character and beautiful movements of the infinite within the finite in order to spontaneously express and freely expand its unlimitedly blissful essence yet without limiting the unlimited nature of the infinite.

A comprehensive definition of the term might read like the following: *līlā* (a) arises directly from the blissful, playful, and loving nature of the divine (b) located within the innermost realm of the divine and coming from either the nondescriptive nonpersonified *brahman* or the descriptive personified *brahman* (c) as a movement of various ultimate energies or supernatural acts within the divine and/or cosmic realms that “play” themselves out (d) without external cause and without any purpose whatsoever other than for the sake of divine self-expression manifesting as a spontaneous but continuously unfolding revelation of supreme creativity (e) that reveals aspects of the divine “drama” to humans or conceals aspects of the divine “drama” from humans, (f) the former to teach souls and to attract them to a form of liberation and the latter to keep souls within the endless turnings of birth and rebirth (*saṃsāra*).

The word *līlā* first appears in the *Vedāntasūtra*. In describing the nature of *līlā*, divine playfulness is said to come about essentially without any purpose or motive, as playfulness is observed to be in this world:

For the divine possesses the state of having no purpose [in the matter of creation]. However, *līlā* or “play,” as in this world, arises independently of all other connections. (*VedS.* 2.1.32-33)

The implications of this Sūtra text is that there is on some level a deeper existential correspondence and affective affinity between the “play” within divine relationships and the “play” within human relationships, thus implying that this world is emblematic of the divine world. The concept of *līlā*, then, along these lines, would suggest that the playful events of this world contain elements or characteristics of *līlā* that become meaningful. And further, what is at least tacitly expressed here is that playfulness carries with it a sense of selflessness, in that play itself subsumes the player in the movement and momentum of playfulness, and that play is for its own sake and for the love of playing. While there is fundamentally this selfless or purposeless quality of *līlā*, there is at the same time, as I shall discuss below, a divine purpose or divine desire or intent that is often revealed.

Almost every religious school of thought within Hinduism incorporates a conception of *līlā*. However, there are variations among different philosophical schools or specific theologies in the ways they understand *līlā* as part of the essential nature of the divine. In the Advaita Vedānta traditions that have a nondualistic vision of the world and ultimate reality, *līlā*

is only as real as a mirage. Many conceptions of nondualism, which present *brahman*, the ultimate reality, as nondescriptive and nonpersonal, cannot admit anything to its vision that will ultimately erode a unitive vision of oneness. Thus any function of *līlā*, no matter how much it may be celebrated in such thought, is eventually an ontological falsity.

The essentializing emanationist vision of the descriptive personal *brahman*, which can take the form of specific deities in whom an absolute divine status is recognized, conceives *līlā* as a constituent part of the divine. The descriptive supreme *brahman* manifests as (a) Śiva, often with his divine feminine counterpart of Śakti as Pārvatī, in both anthropomorphic and non-anthropomorphic presentations; (b) various manifestations of Devī or the Goddess, independently of a supreme masculine divinity, in Śākta traditions; and (c) those traditions centered upon Viṣṇu or Kṛṣṇa with a highly theistic, intimately personal and descriptive conception of *brahman*, conceives *līlā* as the ultimate revelational display of the divine essence of the godhead. This third highly theistic focus especially has been seen as having efficacious capacities to bring liberation to humans.

For certain Vaiṣṇava traditions, *līlā* becomes essential. The part of Hinduism that appears to dwell and most elaborately focus upon *līlā* in sacred revelational texts, in theological thought, and in the greatest variety of dramatic and artistic expression can be found within the traditions of Vaiṣṇavism. Some scholars have pointed out that it is particularly in Vaiṣṇava literature, and the traditions that are based on them as sacred revelation, that the idea of *līlā* is perhaps most celebrated and developed theologically.

Much of the *Bhagavadgītā* centers upon the notion of *acting*, both human and divine. Human acts become sacred only when connected to the divine and divine acts. Good and bad actions, or selfish actions that keep humans bound to this world, yogic and sacrificial actions that liberate, are discussed. Divine acts, however, as well as all the “players” within such divine acts, constitute *līlā*. The acts of divinity in *līlā* neither bind or liberate; in the *Bhagavadgītā*, these acts are purely for their own sake, but they are also for sustaining the cosmos, or for descending to this earthly plane to establish *dharma*. Kṛṣṇa states,

For me, O Pārtha,
there is nothing
whatsoever to be enacted
in the three worlds,
Nor is there anything
not attained that
is to be attained
even so, I engage in action. (*BhG.* 3.22)

Unlike humans, divinity is not required to act, not forced to act, and there is no necessity to act. There is nothing for the divine to attain, as everything is already contained in and by the divine, thus expressing that these acts are purely for their own sake. Yet, divinity acts to give humans the example of acting:

Indeed, if ever I should not
engage in action untiringly,
Human beings everywhere
would follow my path, O Pārtha. (*BhG.* 3.23)

Thus there is purpose to Kṛṣṇa's purposeless divine acts. And it is to this world that the divine descends in various *avatāra* forms:

Indeed, whenever there is
a decline of *dharma*,
O Bhārata,
And an emerging
of what opposes *dharma* -
at that time I send forth my self.
For protection of the virtuous
and for destruction of evil acts,
For the purpose of establishing *dharma*,
I become fully manifest age after age. (*BhG.* 4.7-8)

Divinity's purpose for descending personally in this world is to establish *dharma* for protection and for establishing ethical order. Moreover, the whole cosmos and all beings are dependent on Kṛṣṇa's actions:

These worlds would perish
if I should not perform action,
And I would be the cause of chaos
I would destroy these procreated beings. (*BhG.* 3.24)

While Kṛṣṇa is the source of everything, the cosmos, the world, and the realm of the divine, he himself manifests personally in this world that he sustains as the very source of cosmic forces:

As the one without birth,
 the everpresent self,
 as the supreme
 Lord of beings
 Presiding over
 my own nature,
 I become fully
 manifest by *māyā*,
 the very power of my self. (*BhG.* 4.6)

I am not revealed to everyone,
 being concealed by
 the divine power of *yoga*,
yogamāyā.
 This bewildered world
 does not recognize me
 as the unborn and everpresent. (*BhG.* 7.25)

Thus Kṛṣṇa acts purely without any purpose whatsoever, yet he also acts with various cosmic, protective, ethical, and existential purposes as well. The paradoxical combination of purposeless and purposeful intentions in *līlā* is expressive of complete detachment from all else on the part of the divinity, and also acts out of supreme loving compassion for all beings. But there is yet a third purpose of *līlā* that arises out of the loving nature of the divine, even a divine passion. As has been demonstrated above, *māyā* both conceals and reveals the divine acts or *līlās* of Kṛṣṇa. However, in the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*, in the famed five-chapter story known as the *Rāsalīlā* (Divine Drama or *Līlā* of the *Rāsa* Dance), Kṛṣṇa himself takes refuge in *yogamāyā*. The following is the first verse of this *līlā*, and the only verse in the whole *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* that expresses Kṛṣṇa's personal dependence on *yogamāyā*:

Even the beloved Lord,
 seeing those nights
 in autumn filled with
 blooming jasmine flowers,
 Turned his mind toward
 love's delights,
 fully taking refuge in
yogamāyā's illusive powers. (*BhāgP.* 10.29.1)

For later Vaiṣṇava traditions, the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* becomes the sacred text par excellence. A

puranic text of many thousands of verses in 12 books and over 335 chapters consisting of many stories about exemplary Kṛṣṇa *bhaktas*, it is one story or *līlā* of Kṛṣṇa specifically with his most devoted beloveds, the cowherd maidens of Vraja, that stands out as the highest of all. The cowherd maidens or *gopīs* are celebrated as the greatest of all *bhaktas*. It is from some key verses of this famous *līlā* that we can learn much about the nature of *līlā*. The narrator of the *līlā*, the sage Śuka, emphasizes in his explanations how the divinity is complete and possesses all pleasure within, and yet for the purpose of pleasing and delighting the *bhaktas*, divine *līlās* are enacted. There exists a divine paradox: there is on the one hand a divine fullness, an absolute completeness, and on the other hand, a divine yearning and longing, and paradoxically a kind of divine incompleteness: a need to nourish souls. Kṛṣṇa “is perfectly fulfilled in all desires and pure within himself” (*BhāgP.* 10.33.26). Yet the divine yearns for the love of souls and delights in it: “He, the beloved Lord, knowing all pleasure within himself, delighted in loving them in this divine play (*līlā*)” (*BhāgP.* 10.33.20). Again, this is the paradoxical theme that is emphasized: “He, who himself possesses all pleasure, took pleasure in amorous love, playing like the king of elephants” (*BhāgP.* 10.33.24). The narrator of the *rāsālīlā* explains that Kṛṣṇa allows himself to submit to love even though he is perfectly fulfilled:

Thus he allowed himself to be subdued by those nights made so brilliant by the rays of the moon...He was perfectly fulfilled in all desires and pure within himself; while with that group of maidens so passionately attached to him. (*BhāgP.* 10.33.26)

For the divine, on the one hand, *līlā* expresses the absolute fullness of his own self, and on the other hand, it expresses a divine passion and yearning for those other souls with whom he can share a kind of divine intimacy; both are displayed in *līlā*. The tacit message here is that even as supremely and endlessly full the divine heart may be, it yet passionately longs for the hearts of others, hearts that are offered selflessly and completely out of pure love for the divine in *bhakti*. The following verse expresses how Kṛṣṇa gets swept up into his *līlā* of love with the *gopīs*:

Thus with his hands
touching them in embraces,
With broad playful smiles
and affectionate glances,
The Lord of Ramā delighted in
loving the fair maidens of Vraja
Just as a small child plays
with his own reflection. (*BhāgP.* 10.33.17)

Behind the verb “plays” in this translation is the Sanskrit word *vibhrama*, which means “the to-and-fro movement.” The interplay between the players, Kṛṣṇa, and the *gopīs*, or the interplay

between the force of the playing and the players themselves. The simile used here to describe the nature of this play or *līlā* is that of a child with his reflection, the effortless and absorbing interplay between the object and its reflection, back and forth. There is an unlimited or unbounded quality of *līlā*, for nothing restricts or limits the divine. It is explained that “the supreme lord, who accepts various revealed forms according to his own supreme desire, also acts freely” (*BhāgP.* 10.33.35). And the divine, according to the narrator of the *rāsalīlā*, is “indwelling within all embodied beings as the internal witness” (*BhāgP.* 10.33.36). The cowherd women or the *gopīs* themselves, out of awe for Kṛṣṇa while intensely longing for him, deny his most intimate humanlike manifestation as the “son of a *gopī*” in order to recognize Kṛṣṇa’s powerful capacity and role as the witness in the heart of all beings, as the divine protector, and as the descent of the divine in this world:

Clearly you are not the son of a *gopī*;
 you are the witness
 Residing in the hearts
 of all embodied beings.
 When Vikhanas prayed to you
 for protection of the universe,
 O friend, you appeared
 in the dynasty of the Sātvatas. (*BhāgP.* 10.31.4)

The dual role as both the indwelling lord within the hearts of living beings along with an outer role is a common theme:

He who dwells within the *gopīs*
 and within their husbands,
 indeed, within all embodied beings
 As the internal witness,
 also acts in this world
 through his divine dramas,
 by assuming various forms. (*BhāgP.* 10.33.36)

But the manifestation of *līlā* also becomes an act of grace, and an act of love for the *bhaktas*:

In order to show
special favor to his devotees,
he reveals his personal
human-like form.
Upon hearing
how he affectionately
enacts his divine plays (*krīḍās*)
in this manner,
one becomes fully devoted to him. (*BhāgP.* 10.33.37)

Here the hearing of the *līlā* is also emphasized. A *bhakta* becomes “fully devoted” to the divine upon hearing how the lord shares his acts of love in the *rāsalīlā*. This verse in particular stresses how *līlā* arises out of divine affection and reciprocation with the love coming from his *bhakta*. The salvific power of *līlā* is extolled in such texts, as has been expressed in verses above. The *Bhagavadgītā* also emphasizes this idea. Just hearing, reciting, and knowing the *līlās* of the divinity can grant one salvation:

One who thus truly knows
the birth and acts
of my divine being,
Upon relinquishing the body,
does not come to another birth
such a person comes to me, O Arjuna. (*BhG.* 4.9)

Here Kṛṣṇa asserts that knowledge of his “birth and acts” (*janmakarma*) grants souls salvation. Indeed, the contemplation of the divine acts of the lord, or his *līlās*, is powerful for the *bhakta*. The last benedictory verse of the *rāsalīlā* chapters promises purification of the heart:

This is the divine play of Viṣṇu
with the fair maidens of Vraja.
One who is filled with faith,
who hears or describes this play,
Having regained the highest
devotion for the beloved Lord,
Has lust, the disease of the heart,
quickly removed without delay
such a person is peaceful and wise. (*BhāgP.* 10.33.40)

In certain Vaiṣṇava practices, known as *līlāsmaraṇa* (“remembrance of Kṛṣṇa’s *līlās*”), the *bhakta* meditates deeply on certain *līlās* to which he or she is especially attracted in order to enter into a yogic-like state by which one enters into these particular eternal acts of the divinity. D. Haberman asserts that it is the Caitanya school or Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavas who developed this practice of *līlāsmaraṇa*. D. Haberman’s description of *līlāsmaraṇa* is as follows:

Smarāṇa, specifically for the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavas, is a meditative technique of visualizing in the mind of the *līlā* of Kṛṣṇa and his retinue of intimate companions in the enchanting land of Vraja. This technique is there usually referred to as *līlāsmaraṇa*. The practice involved visualizing a particular dramatic scene of Vraja in great detail, establishing its setting (*deśa*), time (*kāla*), and characters (*pātra*). *Mantras* are employed to assist the visualization. The practitioners memorize the descriptions of the various *līlās* in an impressively elaborate manner, using maps and diagrams to locate the more important *līlā* activities. The mind is to be withdrawn from the ordinary world and completely concentrated on and absorbed in the *līlā* of Vraja. When this process is perfected, the cosmic drama appears directly before the eyes of the practitioner, granting visual access to the world of ultimate meaning. (Haberman, 1988, 126)

The basis for this *līlāsmaraṇa*, as described above, is found in the behavior of the *gopīs* themselves. When feeling themselves apart from Kṛṣṇa, after Kṛṣṇa suddenly disappeared from them, the longing for his presence became so intense that they began to imitate and enact Kṛṣṇa’s *līlās*. Through such concentration on the *līlās* or divine acts of Kṛṣṇa, the *gopīs* felt as though they were one with Kṛṣṇa and fully absorbed in meditation on him:

Their minds were
filled with thoughts of him;
they spoke about him constantly;
their movements
were no longer their own
for they were fully absorbed in him.
While praising
his qualities in song
they forgot their homes;
indeed, they even forgot themselves. (*BhāgP.* 10.30.43)

This absorption experienced by the *gopīs* when they act out and imitate the *līlās* of Kṛṣṇa understandably also become the basis of the pilgrimage dramas, known as *rāslīlā*. This slightly truncated form of the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* passage, as *rāsalīlā*, denotes the performances of many

of Kṛṣṇa's *līlās* as related in the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*, and not just the story of the *rāsa* dance or *līlā* itself, though the latter plays a special role in these performances:

A *rāslīlā* is not a re-enactment of the *rās* alone. The performance of this dance is always its first element, of central importance because it is a ritual celebration of Kṛṣṇa's most gracious deed, meaningful to devotees however often it may be seen; but the presentation continues, dramatizing an important supplementary tale as well. Thus, every *rāslīlā* consists of an initial dance followed by a one-act play based on any one of the multitude of Kṛṣṇa's *līlās*. The entire performance receives its name from its prior element, the *rās*, its most sacred component and its recurrent feature. (Hein, 1972, 129)

As essentially a dramatic manifestation of the interior dimensions of divine intimacy within this world or the spiritual world, or expressed in pilgrimage dramas on the earthly plane, or as an essential dimension of Hindu theology or cosmology or Vedānta philosophy, *līlā* expresses something vital about the spirit of humanity and divinity: the concept of *līlā* in Hindu traditions bespeaks the playful, beautiful, and heartfelt nature of true personhood, or *puruṣa*, either as souls liberated from or bound to this world, or as the ultimate person *puruṣottama*. The supreme whole manifests itself within a portion of itself, either as the divine world or this physical world, in order to “play” a part on a stage, with other special souls, that originates in and is sustained by the divine. On this stage, the innermost playful, joyful, and beautiful nature of the supreme whole is displayed and made possible by the positive function of *māyā*, according to theistic Hindu traditions. In *līlā*, the divine forgets its power and greatness as sustainer of all the universes, and souls forget their finitude and limited existence as they play their parts in the divine *līlā*, and both the divinity and souls lose themselves utterly in the intimate, joyful, and blissful movements of the play. However the conception of *līlā* is understood, the devout Hindu delights in the vision projected in *līlā*.

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