

Introduction

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Krishna is undoubtedly one of the most beloved deities of Hindu India. As a pan-Indian deity, his worship takes on distinctive forms and unique flavors that today dominate entire regions all over the subcontinent—Radha Krishna of Braj in North India, Jagannath in Orissa to the east, Shrinathji in Rajasthan and Ranchor in Gujarat to the west, Vitobha in Maharashtra in central India, Udupi Krishna in Karnataka and Guruvayor in Kerala in the South, to name but a few. Even in the West, one need only visit an art museum with a decent collection of Indian art and iconography to encounter representations of this deity in a variety of media, or attend a performance of classical Indian dance, where there is every chance that a scene from Krishna's life will be enacted, or browse the selections of devotional songs in any Indian grocery store to gain a sense of how embedded this deity is in the religious landscape of South Asia. His presence there can be attested for at least two and a half millennia.

Considered to be an incarnation of the Vedic deity Vishnu, who emerges in the later Vedic period as the supreme being, or, for some sects, as the supreme source being himself, Krishna is most readily encountered in the literary traditions of South Asia. The two great epics of India both feature incarnations of Vishnu—Rama in the *Ramayana*, and Krishna in the *Mahabharata*. While he is not the protagonist of the *Mahabharata*, the epic highlights a divine Krishna throughout its narrative at pivotal moments (see Hildebeitel, chapter 1 here), and includes a sizeable appendix, the *Harivamsha*, dedicated exclusively to his life and incarnation (see Lorenz, chapter 3 here). Within the *Mahabharata* is embedded the famous *Bhagavad*

Gita, the best known and most often translated Hindu text, which is a theological discourse delivered by Krishna to his friend and disciple Arjuna (see Minor, chapter 2 here). While it has been argued that the text's prominence may have been somewhat enhanced in the colonial period,¹ anyone over the last twelve centuries or so interested in founding a new line of Vedanta—the school of philosophical thought that has emerged as the most influential and definitive of “Hinduism”²—was expected to write a commentary on the *Gita* as one of the three main textual sources of scriptural authority.³ Indeed, all the principal commentators of the Vedanta who founded new schools of thought were Vaishnavas, devoted to Vishnu and his incarnations (or, at least, in the case of Shankara, accepted Krishna as *Ishvara*, God; see Nelson, Clooney, Sharma, Dasa and Barz, chapters 13–17 here). Krishna's influence, then, as will be evidenced in the pages of this book, has permeated every aspect of Hindu religious, aesthetic, cultural, literary and intellectual life.

The worship of Krishna as a divine figure can be traced back to well before the Common Era (the earliest evidence pertaining to the figure of Vishnu, of whom Krishna is generally held to be an incarnation, need not detain us here).⁴ There is no obvious reference to Krishna in the *Rigveda*, the oldest Indic text, dated to circa 1500 B.C.E., although the name does appear a handful of times in the hymns⁵ (a few scholars have unconvincingly tried to connect these instances with him, or with some proto-figure from whom he evolved).⁶ Most instances of the word *krishna* in the *Rigveda*, however, are simply in its meaning as the adjective “black.” It is in the late Vedic period, as represented by the *Chandogya Upanishad*, a philosophical text of around the sixth century B.C.E., that we find the first plausible—but still questionable—reference to the Puranic Krishna. This reference (3.17) has provoked considerable discussion as to whether or not it refers to an older portrayal of the Puranic Krishna, but this ultimately remains inconclusive.⁷

Less questionable references, however, emerge subsequent to this point in time. In Yaska's *Nirukta*, an etymological dictionary of around the fifth century B.C.E., there is a reference to the Shyamantaka jewel in the possession of Akrura, a motif from a well-known Krishna story.⁸ There is a brief reference to Krishna under his patronymic of Vasudeva in the famous Sanskrit grammar, the *Ashtadhyayi* of Panini, dated around the fourth century B.C.E., which is important because, given similar references in other texts of this period, it may indicate that the author considered Krishna a divine being.⁹ In the *Baudayana Dharma Sutra*,¹⁰ also of around the fourth century B.C.E., there is an invocation to Vishnu using twelve names including Keshava, Govinda, and Damodara, which are names associated with Vishnu in the form of Krishna, thereby pointing to the latter's divine status in this very period. These names also reveal an awareness of several stories that are fully developed in later texts,¹¹ as do, in the same period, a number of references in the *Arthashastra*, a Machiavellian political treatise. Along the same lines, in the *Mahānārāyaṇa*

Upanishad of the *Taittiriya Aranyaka*, around the third century B.C.E., a *gayatri mantra* associates Vasudeva with Narayana and Vishnu.¹² Another significant source of references prior to the Common Era is Patanjali, the commentator on the famous grammar of Panini in the second century B.C.E. In his commentary (3.1.26), Patanjali mentions one of the most important episodes in Krishna's life, *Kamsavadha*, the killing of Kamsa, as represented in tales and theatrical performances, adding that the events were considered to have taken place long ago. Patanjali further makes a number of other clear references to Krishna and his associates as they are known in later texts.¹³

Krishna surfaces at key junctures of the *Mahabharata* narrative, and much has been written about his role as a divine figure in the epic (see Hiltebeitel, 1979, for a summary of views). There has long been a difference of opinion regarding the date of the core of the *Mahabharata*, with opinions ranging from the traditional one of 3100 B.C.E. to the fourth century C.E. (see Brockington, 1998, for a summary of views). A number of scholars date the core of the epic to the ninth century B.C.E. and almost all hold it to be at least as old as the fourth century B.C.E.¹⁴ Enclosed within the *Mahabharata*, of course, is the well-known *Bhagavad Gita* spoken by Krishna to Arjuna on the battlefield of Kurukshetra, a text that is also assigned various dates by scholars. (Minor, chapter 2 here, opts for 150 B.C.E.; see his 1982 exegetical commentary for a discussion of differing views.) Here Krishna unambiguously declares himself to be the supreme being throughout the entire text.¹⁵

In terms of sources outside of the subcontinent prior to the Common Era, Megasthenes, a Seleucid ambassador to the court of the Indian emperor Chandragupta Maurya at the end of the fourth century B.C.E., provides interesting evidence from ancient Greek sources relevant to the early history of the divine Krishna. Megasthenes wrote a book called *Indika*, the original of which has not been preserved, but it was quoted extensively by other ancient classical writers whose works are extant.¹⁶ According to Arrian, Diodorus, and Strabo, Megasthenes described an Indian tribe called the Sourasenoī, who especially worshipped Herakles in their land, and this land had two great cities, Methora and Kleisobora, and a navigable river, the Jobares. As was common in the ancient period, the Greeks sometimes described foreign gods in terms of their own divinities, and there is little doubt that the Sourasenoī refers to the Shurasenas, a branch of the Yadu dynasty to which Krishna belonged; Herakles to Krishna, or Hari-Krishna; Methora to Mathura, where Krishna was born; Kleisobora to Krishna *pura*, meaning “the city of Krishna”; and the Jobares to the Yamuna, the famous river in the Krishna story. Quintus Curtius also mentions that when Alexander the Great confronted Porus, Porus's soldiers were carrying an image of Herakles in their vanguard.

Early Buddhist sources also provide evidence of the worship of Krishna prior to the Common Era. The *Niddesa*, one of the books of the Pali canon of the fourth century B.C.E., speaks somewhat derogatorily of those devoted to

Vasudeva (Krishna) and Baladeva (Krishna's brother) (Bhandarkar, 1913, 3). The Buddhist *Ghata Jataka* text also mentions characters from the Krishna story, albeit in a somewhat garbled fashion, suggesting confused reminiscence of the legend (38).¹⁷ That both early Buddhist and Jain sources saw fit to appropriate these legends in some form or *fashionpoints* to their presence and significance on the religious landscape of this period.¹⁸

The earliest archaeological evidence of Krishna as a divine being is the Besnagar, or Heliodorus column in Besnagar, northwest Madhya Pradesh, dated to around 100 B.C.E. The inscription is particularly noteworthy because it reveals that a foreigner had been converted to the Krishna religion by this period—Heliodorus was a Greek. The column, dedicated to Garuda, the eagle carrier of Vishnu and of Krishna, bears an inscription in which Heliodorus calls himself a *bhagavata* (devotee of Vasudeva Krishna).

That the Krishna tradition was prominent enough to attract a powerful foreign envoy in the first century B.C.E. might suggest that it had already developed deep roots by this time. In addition to this, there are a number of other inscriptions referring to Vasudeva Krishna prior to the Common Era by Indian sponsors of the tradition.¹⁹

Moving forward into the Common Era, while inscriptions during the Kushana period of around the first to third century C.E. point to the continuity of Krishna worship, it is during this period that we find the first iconographic representations of Krishna: one bas-relief in stone found near Mathura dated to the early first century C.E. shows Krishna being carried across the river Yamuna after his birth, and another found in nearby Jatipara and dated to the second century C.E. depicts him lifting Mount Govardhan, a theme that also surfaces on a representation in a fort in Rajasthan around this time (both these stories are narrated in chapter 4, here). Further archaeological and epigraphic evidence surfaces increasingly in the Gupta period, which lasted from the fourth century until the middle of the seventh century C.E.

By the Gupta period, the worship of Krishna was widespread across the subcontinent. Epigraphic and numismatic evidence indicates that most of the Gupta sovereigns, while patronizing a number of different Hindu sects, were devout Vaishnavas; and a number of the Guptas referred to themselves as *paramabhagavatas*, “topmost devotees of Bhagavan,” another title used to refer to Krishna.²⁰ It is during this period that the Puranic literary genre attained the final stages of its compilation, and it is in these texts that the story of Krishna reaches its fullest expression.

The word *purana*, in Sanskrit, signifies “that which took place previously,” that is, ancient lore. Several *Puranas* list the total number of *Puranas* as eighteen, and these texts, as we have them today, are essentially a vast repository of stories about kingship; the gods and their devotees; sectarian theologies; traditional cosmologies; popular religious beliefs concerning pilgrimages, holy places, and religious rites; and *yogic* practices—the popular Hinduism of India

today essentially stems from the *Puranas* rather than the old Vedic corpus of texts. The three chief gods in the *Puranas* are Brahma, the secondary creator,²¹ Shiva, the destroyer, and Vishnu, the maintainer, and a number of stories speak of the competition between these three for ultimate supremacy. Brahma is never, in actuality, a serious candidate, and the main rivalry in the *Puranas* is played out between the two transcendent lords Vishnu and Shiva.²² Despite the usually playful rivalry between Vishnu and Shiva, much in the *Puranas* point to the fact that it is Vishnu who as a rule occupies a position of preeminence in the earlier texts (Rocher, 1986, 105; Gonda, 1954, 194).²³

Although Vishnu is a purely transcendent deity, he is generally said to have ten principal earthly incarnations²⁴ which appear according to time and place, some of them in animal form;²⁵ one of them is Krishna, and the stories of these different incarnations are related in detail in the various *Puranas*. While it is the *Bhagavata Purana* that occupies itself most particularly with the incarnation of Krishna, the Krishna story also occurs in significant detail in other *Puranas*, particularly the *Vishnu Purana*, *Padma Purana*, and the later *Brahma Vaivarta Purana*, and it is in this genre of literature that the stories and legends that developed around his incarnation find their fullest expression. There is little doubt that the earliest material from the older sections of the *Puranas* goes back to the Vedic age,²⁶ but most scholars hold that the finalized form of the material in most of the eighteen major *Puranas* as we find them today reached its completion by the Gupta period.²⁷

The Guptas were also patrons of the aesthetic art forms of India, in which themes from the Krishna story would come to feature so prominently in later periods—indeed, the Gupta epoch is often viewed as something of a golden era for literature, dramaturgy, sculpture, art, architecture, and other aesthetic expressions. While not much has survived in terms of Gupta architecture, the birth of Krishna is depicted on a panel featuring Vishnu's ten incarnations in the oldest surviving temple of this era, the Dashavatara temple at Deogarh, from the beginning of the sixth century C.E. (Dandekar, 1982, 159). The earliest extensive drama of the Krishna story that has survived, the *Balacharita*, by the playwright Bhasa, was also written in the Gupta period sometime around the fourth century C.E. (Kunbae, 1968, 2), while the earliest extant poetry bearing references to Krishna motifs goes back a century earlier still, penned by the poet Hala.

In the South, Krishna, under the name Mayon, is found in some of the earliest Tamil texts the *cankam* poetic corpus, which surfaces after the turn of the Common Era. By the third century, Krishnaism had gained access to the two royal courts of Kanchi and Maturai in the lands of Tamilnadu (Hardy, 1983), and by the middle of the first millennium of the common era had firmly embedded itself on the popular religious landscape of the South, albeit conforming to Southern sentiments and literary conventions. Subsequently, devotion to Krishna finds particular prominence in the devotional poetry of

the Alvars between the sixth through tenth century C.E. The South, in fact, placed its own distinctive stamp on the Krishna tradition, both aesthetically and, particularly in later times, intellectually, much of which has yet to receive the scholarly attention it deserves.²⁸ In short, Krishna can first be identified as a divine being at the tail end of the Vedic period, in the early centuries B.C.E., and heralds the rise of a new theistic religion based on loving devotion to a personal God, which soon spread across the entire subcontinent to pervade every aspect of Hindu religious, cultural, intellectual, and aesthetic life. This volume has been put together in an attempt to capture some of these myriad ways the Krishna tradition has surfaced in the literature of the subcontinent from the earliest written sources up to the sixteenth century.

The various contributions herein have been divided—unavoidably somewhat arbitrarily—into four parts for the purpose of attempting to provide some kind of organizational coherence to the volume. Part I focuses on the classical primary texts in which Krishna is featured, by which I intend pan-Hindu Sanskrit (as opposed to regional, vernacular, or sectarian) texts, which serve as source material for derivative literature such as poetry or theological treatises. The volume opens with the *Mahabharata*, which is generally accepted as the oldest text that features Krishna on any scale. In the *Mahabharata* we find Krishna machinating to bring about the destruction of the hosts of armies that were wreaking havoc on the earth—God with a mission. We also find a controversial Krishna, prepared to break the codes of *dharma*, righteous conduct, in order to protect his *bhakta* (devotee), Arjuna. Although Krishna's role in the epic as statesman and friend of the five Pandavas is pivotal to the development of the narrative, he is not the protagonist of the story; but he appears at essential nodes, goading the chain of events to their inexorable conclusion. Alf Hiltebeitel's translation and extensive contextualization of an episode, featuring the tragic hero Karna (chapter 1 here), is one of the most poignant sections of the narrative, and gives a good sense of the shrewd diplomatic Krishna of the epic, lurking behind the scenes while the main characters play out their predetermined roles, only to emerge periodically to ensure that events unfold according to a grand and divine master plan.

Embedded within the *Mahabharata*, as noted, is the *Bhagavad Gita*, which has emerged in the modern period as Hinduism's best known text. Here, we find Krishna in the role of teacher enlightening his friend and devotee Arjuna as Arjuna is undergoing a moment of personal crisis. In the *Gita* we have a conscious effort to subsume a number of important theological expressions on the religious landscape of ancient India under the spiritual cachet of Krishna as the supreme personal Being. We see here outlined the early phases of the devotional but intellectualized path of *bhakti*, the path of *yoga* based on a loving relationship between the devotee and Krishna. Robert N. Minor's contribution (chapter 2 here) includes some of the most important verses of the text asserting the supremacy of Krishna as absolute godhead, and the path

of devotion, *bhakti*, as the highest process of *yoga* and the pinnacle of human existence.

There are three primary sources for Krishna's early life, the *Harivamsha*, the *Vishnu Purana*, and the *Bhagavata Purana*. Of the three, it is the *Harivamsha*, an appendix to the *Mahabharata*, that some scholars consider to be the oldest account. Ekkehard Lorenz's extracts from this text (chapter 3 here) provide a vivid sense of the world of a cowherding community in early historic India: the cow-dung, the bullfights, the simple-hearted cowherding people, the precariousness of life—even the overexploited landscape. The rustic and earthy quality of the *Harivamsha* contrasts noticeably with the literary polish and theological sophistication of the *Bhagavata Purana*, which was to emerge as the unparalleled Krishna text in terms of popular appeal; to appreciate the distinct flavor of the two texts, Lorenz's translation of Krishna's interaction with the *gopis*, the women cowherds, can be read alongside the treatment of this topic in the selections from the *Bhagavata* in Graham Schweig's contribution (chapter 18 here).

The *Bhagavata* (as the *Bhagavata Purana* is sometimes called) has undoubtedly been by far the most important work in the Krishna tradition, at least over the last millennium or so, and is the scripture par excellence of the Krishnaite schools. Its importance can be amply seen by the immense influence it has exerted, along with the *Ramayana*, on the aesthetic culture of India—dance, drama, theatre, poetry, art, and so on—up to the present day (or even by simply considering the fact that the majority of the contributions to this volume are predicated on its narratives). In the Braj section of the tenth book of the *Bhagavata Purana*, we see God, not as statesman or teacher, as in the *Mahabharata* or *Gita*, but God as a child absorbed in play, *lila*—stealing butter, hiding from his mother, frolicking with the cowherd-girls. My selections (chapter 4 here) encompass the source narrative for some of the most beloved and popular *lilas*, pastimes, of Krishna as a mischievous but irresistible cowherd boy of Braj.

Part II consists of regional literary expressions—Assam, Orissa, Gujarat, Rajasthan, Maharashtra, and Tamil Nadu—all except one in non-Sanskritic vernaculars of India, with a view to representing the Krishna traditions in the various regions and languages of the subcontinent (selections from Bengali are presented in the section on praxis). We start with the two prose pieces, the first of which is the Oriyan *Mahabharata*. Although the Oriyan Krishna tradition, like much regional material, has yet to receive the academic attention it deserves, it contributes unique material to the Krishna worship of the subcontinent. Orissa is famed for its Jagannath temple, where a form of Krishna is revered passionately by almost all Hindus in the state; the temple also attracts millions of pilgrims from all over India, especially for the annual *Ratha-yatra* chariot procession. Local traditions link this deity with the Krishna of the *Puranas* and the epic in intriguing ways: specifically, the Oriyan *Mahabharata*,

written by Sarala Dasa in vernacular in the fifteenth century, connects the origin of the Jagannath deity with the physical form cast off by Krishna in classical sources prior to his return to his divine abode. Bijoy M. Misra's contribution (chapter 5 here) presents the Oriyan version of the *mausala parva*, the sixteenth book of the *Mahabharata*, a fascinating regional rendition of the events that transpired after Krishna decided to relinquish his earthly incarnation.

In the next contribution (chapter 6 here), William L. Smith provides another East Indian sample of Krishna literature in the form of a play in the vernacular Assamese language. As is the case with most of the regional poets, Shankaradeva, a prolific and multilingual author, is enormously popular in a particular linguistic region, in this case the East Indian state of Assam, where almost every village is associated with one of the hundreds of monasteries and religious structures stemming from him and his specific form of Krishna devotion. Unlike other founders of Vaishnava lineages, however, Shankaradeva was not a Brahmin—indeed, he underwent persecution at the hands of the Brahmins, a very common motif in hagiographies of the devotional traditions—nor did he attempt to formulate a philosophical system. Perhaps his main contribution to his region was rendering some of the most important Sanskrit texts into Assamese, adding his own personal touch and innovative flavorings to the product. The play is a humorous and mildly irreverent rendition of two scenes from the *Bhagavata Purana*, where we find a henpecked Krishna berated and manipulated by his wife Satyabhama.

The remaining contributions in Part II are poems. These are headed by the Alvars, the earliest Vaishnava devotee saints who left extensive devotional poetry for posterity. As a group, they set the tone for the *bhakti* (devotional) traditions in general, by transcending gender and caste and by writing in the vernacular, in this case the Tamil language of the South. Their writings in the collective are given the highest veneration by the Shri Vaishnava lineage, a sect especially associated with the theologian Ramanuja, whose writings (presented in chapter 14) are indeed referred to as the fifth *Veda*.³⁰ Krishna, as can be seen in Vasudha Narayanan's selections (chapter 7 here), is viewed more as one facet of Vishnu in these poems than as a distinct incarnation; he is, furthermore, depicted with a specific southern aesthetic and within a South Indian regional landscape.

Scholars sometimes like to speak of three "families" of ecstatic devotee poets dedicated to Vishnu and his incarnations—the earlier southern one of the Alvars, featured in chapter 7, stemming from the sixth century C.E.; the northern one, represented later in Part II, which includes Sur, Mira, and other notables of around the sixteenth century from Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan; and an intervening one from the central Indian state of Maharashtra. Vidyut Aklujkar's contribution (chapter 8 here) consists of samples from these latter Marathi *sants*, as they are called, a group spanning a period from the thirteenth to sixteenth century C.E. Devoted to the deity Krishna in the form of

Vitobha at Pandharpur, the poet-saints of Maharashtra absorbed themselves in the exploits of the Krishna of Braj and, like the other saints, wrote heartfelt poetry that has been savored by people in the region for centuries. In contradistinction to the later devotee poets who were to follow them in the North and highlighted the amorous Krishna of the *gopis*, the poetry of the Maharashtra saints reveals a delightful devotion to God in the mood of *sakhya*, friendship. Here, we find an immediately engaging Krishna, complete with a runny nose, as he wrestles with his friends, or being humored by them when he sulks about not getting his way!

Moving up chronologically and geographically to the north of the subcontinent, perhaps the best known and beloved poet of Krishna in the homeland of the tradition, Braj—indeed in the Hindi-speaking belt in general—is Surdas, whose songs are today blasted over loudspeakers at religious events all over this area. John Stratton Hawley's contribution (chapter 9 here) provides an excellent glimpse into the magic of this poetry and its powerful ability to pull the reader or, in its more traditional context, listener into the world of divine *lila*, pastime, with its rich imagery and narrative strategies, such that one can almost experience the narrative as participant. These selections present us with some of the best-loved motifs of this genre—Krishna's birth, his appetite for butter, the tongue-in-cheek criticisms of his admirers, his seductive flute, and his amorous activities.

Nancy Martin (chapter 10 here) contributes a selection of poetry by a woman devotee of Krishna—a not isolated but nonetheless somewhat rare occurrence in Indic traditions. Mirabai is the best known and loved of the women saints devoted to Krishna, at least in the north of the subcontinent, due in large measure to the compelling nature of her story and her songs, which transcend gender, caste, and class. Considering Krishna to be her only spouse, Mira refused to consummate her marriage in the real world to her royal husband; her subsequent suffering and triumph over all adversities due to her unshakeable love for Krishna find expression in her own hagiography, as well as in the corpus of poetry that developed around her name. Mira's relationship with her worshipful Lord is *madhurya*, conjugal—that between a lover and the beloved—combining the flavors of union and separation, and the intensity of her voice sometimes blurs the boundaries of author and subject matter, the *gopis*, lovers of Krishna. She thus serves as a bridge between Krishna's idyllic and transcendent divine realm of Goloka and the immediate world of angry husbands, malicious and slandering family, and gossiping neighbors.

Narasimha Mehta's poetry, featured in the next contribution, focuses on an aspect of Krishna that generally receives much less attention outside of his home state of Gujarat. In traditional narrative, Krishna actually spent most of his adult life in Dvaraka, one of traditional Gujarat's coastal cities, which he established as his earthly capital. While it has generally been the youthful Krishna of Braj who has captivated the devotional imagination of his devotees,

it is this Dvaraka Krishna who is reflected in Narasimha's poetry. Like Surdas and Mirabai, Narasimha is a solitary figure who remained independent from sectarian identification in life and (unlike Surdas) from posthumous sectarian appropriation as well. He, too, was persecuted by the Brahmins—as noted, this is a more or less standard motif in devotional hagiographies in general—and his immersion in the *lila* of Krishna has caused him, like his more famous counterparts elsewhere, to be beloved by almost every Gujarati, Hindu or non-Hindu. Neelima Shukla-Bhatt's contribution (chapter 11 here) thus provides a regional expression of Krishna devotion, which, like other sources in this volume, merits a greater audience than it has generally received.

Steven P. Hopkins's contribution (chapter 12 here) concludes Part II by providing a perspective of Krishna in the refined Sanskrit poetic tradition, specifically in the poetry of Vedanta Deshika in the medieval period in South Asia. Arguably second in importance only to Ramanuja himself in the Shri Vaishnava lineage, Vedanta Deshika, as philosopher, poet, multilingual literary connoisseur, and *acharya*, or spiritual head of a religious community, was one of the numerous prodigies of Indian intellectual culture peppering the landscape of premodern India that remain as awe-inspiring today as they must have been in their time. His poem, the *Gopalavimshati*, translated here, combines the local literary conventions and landscape of Tamil poetry with the aesthetic prestige and command of classical Sanskrit. Here we find the lines between Krishna and Vishnu blurred, as is not uncommon in Tamil poetry, affording us a vivid glimpse of how Krishna is worshiped in the Tamil genre of *stotra*, or "praise" poetry.

Part III is dedicated to philosophy and theology, and the first three chapters examine the role of Krishna in the work of the earlier three great Vedantic exegetes, Shankara, Ramanuja, and Madhva, all intellectual colossi from the south of India. Lance E. Nelson (chapter 13 here) discusses the ontological position of Krishna as *Ishvara*, the personal supreme Lord, in Shankara's system of nondual thought, *advaita*, which was propagated by him in the ninth century of the Common Era. While the notions of a personal God, the individual soul, and the world are all ultimately false appearances erroneously superimposed out of ignorance upon an undifferentiated absolute truth, *Brahman*, for Shankara, Krishna's lordship and transcendence, from the perspective of conventional reality, is as real as the existence of any other entity or object in conventional reality. Shankara's defense of the existence of *Ishvara*, and acceptance of his grace as essential for liberation, thus demonstrate serious theistic intent, albeit a theism that must eventually be discarded as one approaches the level of ultimate "transtheistic" reality. Nelson's contribution includes selections from a later adherent of this school, Madhusudana Sarasvati, who combines fervent devotion to Krishna with the *advaita* presuppositions of this sect.

Later Vedantins were to debate Shankara vigorously, since, as the most influential Vedantic commentators, he was to set the terms of the discussion to which all subsequent Vedantic exegetes had to respond in order to establish their own metaphysical specifics. For Ramanuja, who lived a couple of centuries after Shankara (eleventh to twelfth centuries C.E.), *Ishvara* was eternally real, not a false superimposition on *Brahman*; indeed, *Ishvara* is the highest aspect of *Brahman*, whom Ramanuja correlated with the personal deity Narayana/Vishnu. While acknowledging the nondual nature of the absolute, as evidenced in the label he assigned his own system, *vishistha-advaita*, "differentiated nonduality," Ramanuja nonetheless opposed Shankara's basic premises by holding that *Brahman* as Narayana contained eternally real and individual conscious souls as well as unconscious matter as parts of himself, thus rejecting the notion that these are all false appearances. Ramanuja to a great extent plays the role of apologist to the devotional tradition, incorporating it into mainstream philosophical discourse by writing commentaries on principle texts, and thus assuring it a level of status and prestige in intellectual circles. Francis X. Clooney's selections from the *Gita* (chapter 14 here) outline Ramanuja's and the subsequent commentarial tradition's theological defense of Narayana's incarnation into the world as Krishna, and convey the flavor of the exegetical, logical, and apologetic tenor of Ramanuja's philosophical writings, and that of his successors.

Madhva, a century later, is the third, chronologically, of the three great Vedantic exegetes. In his theology, the differences among the soul, Vishnu, and the world receive more emphasis than in the theology of Ramanuja. Both agree, however, that Krishna is an incarnation of Vishnu, even as Krishna is worshiped by lay Madhvas above all other incarnations and is the central deity in the Madhva stronghold in Udipi in South India. As Sharma's sample translations indicate, Madhva, like Ramanuja, opposed various aspects of Shankara's nondualistic thought, focusing particularly on the ontological status of ignorance, which Shankara posited as the underlying cause of the illusory superimpositions that appear to create the differentiated world of objects, as the Achilles heel of the *advaita* school. Deepak Sarma's contribution (chapter 15 here) gives a basic and brief introduction to Madhva's theology and his critique of the *advaita* viewpoint, examines the role of Krishna in this system, and then provides sample translations to illustrate both these areas.

Moving forward to the sixteenth century and the theologies of what are sometimes referred to as the Krishnaite schools, we find the emergence of organized Krishna lineages that reversed the commonly held relationship between Vishnu and Krishna, positing Krishna as the source of Vishnu rather than a derivative incarnation of Vishnu. In the six *Sandarbhās* of Jiva Gosvamin, featured in Satyanarayana Dasa's contribution (chapter 16 here), we see the Krishna tradition of the Chaitanya line branching out of the popular

emotionalism that often characterized the sect, and harnessing Vedantic categories to systematize its understanding of the relationship of Krishna as supreme being with the world and the souls embedded within it in accordance with the standard philosophical terms and concepts of the day. As Ramanuja had done a few centuries earlier for the intellectualized *bhakti* of the Vishnu tradition, Jiva aspired to bring the emotionalized *bhakti* of the Krishna tradition into dialogue with the more established philosophical schools of his time, in conformity with the epistemological and metaphysical categories of the day, and thus confer status and authority on the budding Krishna lineage.

Rupa Gosvamin was the uncle of Jiva, and also had a significant influence on the Krishna devotionalism in the North. As a predominant figure among the theoreticians in the Chaitanya or Gaudiya lineage, and as a direct student of Chaitanya, Rupa's reconfiguring of the *rasa* theory of classical Indian literary aesthetics into a uniquely Krishnaite theology is still vitally influential in the Braj area today. Chaitanya and his followers theologically reconfigured *rasa* to denote various flavors of love of Krishna, subdividing it into five specific types or modes in which this love manifested—the highest, for Rupa, being *madhurya*, the conjugal. One can thus interact with God as one's lover in Gaudiya theology, and Rupa concerned himself with detailing the various stages and symptoms in the development of such love, as well as the means to attain it. David Haberman presents (chapter 17 here) in this regard one of the most important chapters of Rupa's seminal text, the *Bhaktirasamritasindu*, "Ocean of Nectar of the *Rasa* of Devotion."

In the final chapter of Part III, Graham Schweig examines the feminine dimension in Krishna theology. In the heartland of Krishna devotion, the Braj area of India, the worship of Krishna independent of the worship of his consort Radha is inconceivable—indeed, some Krishna communities direct more devotional attention to Radha than Krishna. By far the most popular motif in artistic and literary expressions of Krishna-*lila*, as several of the contributions to this volume exemplify, is Krishna's relationship with the *gopis*, the cowherd-women of Braj, and this mode of conjugal *bhakti* is upheld by several Krishna sects as the apex of love of God. Schweig first considers the androgynous qualities of Krishna himself, and then presents passages from the *Bhagavata Purana* featuring Krishna's interactions both with his royal queens in Dvaraka and with the *gopis* of Braj. A selection follows of poetic expressions of Radha-Krishna love poetry in various genres. Schweig concludes with a delightful selection on the topic of Yogamaya, Krishna's divine illusory potency, without whom there would be no *lila*.

Part IV is dedicated to praxis and hagiography. Richard Barz's contribution (chapter 19 here) bridges from part III by first outlining the basic contours of the *shuddhadvaita*, the "pure nonduality" devotionalized Vedantic philosophy as conceived by the sixteenth-century teacher Vallabha, and then highlighting some of the distinctive features of the devotional path of *bhakti*

associated with this school, known as the *Pushtimarga*. Vallabha, a contemporary of Chaitanya, is one of the major formulators of *bhakti* thought, and his followers, with their distinctive red sectarian forehead markings, are today mostly clustered in parts of Gujarat, Rajasthan, and the Gokul area of Braj. The preeminent vernacular text for this lineage is the *Chaurasi Vaishnavan ki Varta*, which consists of noteworthy episodes in the lives of eighty-four exemplary practitioners of the *Pushtimarga*. Barz presents us with the account of Kumbhadas, whose down-to-earth, no-nonsense personality has made him an accessible role model to members of the sect, thus providing the volume with one sample of the multifaceted hagiographical traditions that have built up around well-known and less well-known saints devoted to Krishna across the centuries.

From the perspectives of the same *Pushtimarga* community stemming from Vallabha, as Paul Arney notes in the next chapter, the real purpose of devotional ideology is not to know the deity intellectually but to effect an inner transformation that will enable the devotee to experience, relate to, and interact with the ultimate truth in a highly personal and esoteric manner. This interaction is effected for Vaishnavas in general through a relationship between the devotee and Krishna in his *svarupa*, or deity form. Such praxis is an indispensable part of Vaishnava devotional life, both public and private, and the *pushtimarga* community has developed the practice of *seva*, or service to the *svarupa*, to a degree perhaps unsurpassed in both immediacy and lavishness even among other Vaishnava communities. Arney translates a sixteenth-century manual of precepts and practice that instructs followers of this lineage in the duties of *seva*, allowing a glimpse into this profoundly intimate and all-consuming relationship between God as deity and devotee as servant.

Another fundamental aspect of Krishna praxis is pilgrimage. Places where incarnations or epiphanies of Vishnu appeared in the physical realm are repositories of transformative divine forces, and act as magnets for devotees, as spiritual progress on the path of devotion may be exponentially increased by residence in such places, or by visiting them at particular times of the year. Paul Sherbow (chapter 21 here) provides selections from the *Puranas* and derivative literature glorifying the birthplace of Krishna in Mathura and other sites associated with his earthly incarnation, highlighting the times of year when pilgrimage to such sites is especially beneficial.

The final contribution to Part IV focuses on the power of Krishna's sacred names. Although the centrality and power of sacred sound has been perhaps the most enduring and ubiquitous aspect of the Indic traditions stemming from the Vedic age, perhaps none have placed more stress on the holy names than the Chaitanya Vaishnava tradition. Chaitanya took quite seriously the Puranic idea that chanting the divine names is the proper form of religious practice for the current age, and his followers developed an elaborate theology wherein Krishna's names are seen as a perpetually accessible sonic *avatara*, or

sound incarnation, of Krishna. Neal Delmonico presents selections (chapter 22 here) primarily from Bengali sources (with some Puranic samplings in Sanskrit) on this sect's theological understanding of Krishna in vibratory form. Since the history of this tradition is filled with the stories of saints who have experienced ecstatic symptoms and trance states in the context of *kirtana* (congregational chanting), some hagiographical material is included in these selections to illustrate chanting as praxis.

Again, clearly there is much that is arbitrary in the categorization of these contributions into these four parts, and I offer it merely as a simplistic organizational schema in an attempt to impose some sort of order on the volume. A number of the authors featured here wrote in a variety of genres—Vallabha could have been included in the philosophy section, as could Vedanta Deshika; Rupa wrote plays and poetry; and so on. And obviously there are countless expressions of the multifaceted Krishna tradition that perforce do not grace these pages at all—esoteric *pancharatra* ritual texts, Bengali poetry, Kerala puppet plays, women's folk songs from the villages of India, and a myriad more—due to the usual constraints of edited volumes in terms of size and the availability and willingness of specialists to contribute in such desirable areas. Nonetheless, if something of the range, complexity, richness, and charm of this captivating figure, and the myriad ways his presence has been preserved and handed down through the generations, has been portrayed in these pages, or if they inspire the reader to explore and uncover further facets and meanings of the multifarious Krishna tradition, then the book has attained its goals.

NOTES

1. See Sharpe, 1989, for discussion.
2. Vedanta emerged from the post-Vedic period as the most influential of the six classical Hindu schools of philosophical thought.
3. The other two sources in the *prasthanaya trayā* were the Upanishads and the Vedanta.
4. For a history of early Vishnu worship, see Gonda (1954).
5. There is a *rishi*-sage, the father of one Vishvaka, by the name of Krishna, who composed hymn 8.85 and dedicated it to the Ashvins. In hymn 1.101, there is a reference to *krishnagarbha*, which is understood by the commentator Sayana as “fetuses in the pregnant women of the *asura* [demon] Krishna,” and by the medieval commentator Skandasvamin, as “fortified places of the *asura* [demon] Krishna.” In hymn 2.20.7, a synonymous compound, *krishnayoni*, is used.
6. For example, in hymn 8.96.13–15, there is a battle of Indra against an army of ten thousand led by Krishna Drapsa, which a number of earlier commentators saw as a reference to a pre-Aryan Krishna battling the Indra deity of the intruding Indo-Aryan tribes.
7. The reference is plausible because it describes Krishna as Devakiputra, the son of Devaki, who is indeed Krishna's mother in the later tradition, but the

correspondence nonetheless remains questionable, because this Upanishadic Krishna is the recipient of some esoteric teachings from the sage Ghora Angirasa, and there are no stories connecting the later Puranic and epic Krishna with Ghora Angirasa, or with such teachings. Krishna's boyhood teacher was Sandipani Muni, and his family guru was Garga Muni.

8. See, for example, *Bhagavata Purana* 10.56–57.

9. In *Ashtadhyayi* 4.3.98, the *sutra* (aphorism) “*vasudevarjunabhyah vun*” is presented, where ‘*vun*’ is given as a special affix to denote *bhakti*. for Vasudeva (a name of Krishna) and Arjuna. The fact that this aphorism referred to *bhakti* (devotion) provoked a debate among scholars as to whether the term *bhakti* had the same connotations in this early period as it did later, and therefore whether it was evidence that Krishna was considered to be a divine being in the fourth century B.C.E. Certainly Patanjali, Panini's commentator in around the second century B.C.E., accepts the reference in this sense when he says that Vasudeva, as mentioned in this verse, is “worshipful.” While some scholars felt that the matter was not incontrovertible, there are clearer references to Krishna's divinity in contemporaneous texts, which add some support the view of those who consider Panini to be intending a divine being. Panini also mentions the tribes associated with Krishna—the Andhakas and Vrishnis.

10. *Dharma-Sutras* are texts outlining the requirements of *dharma*, the variegated socioreligious duties of the different castes.

11. “Keshava” is a name of Krishna meaning “the killer of the Keshi demon,” from a story described in Puranic texts; Govinda means “tender of the cows” and points to Krishna's entire childhood in Braj; and Damodara means “he whose belly is bound,” from another story in the Puranic texts.

12. The same *mantra* appears in the much earlier *Yajur Veda* without mentioning Vasudeva. Narayana is another name for Vishnu in traditional Vaishnavism.

13. These include the fact that Krishna was an enemy of his maternal uncle Kamsa (2.3.36) and the fact that Vasudeva (a name of Krishna) killed Kamsa. There are also references to: Krishna and Sankarshana (2.2.24); Janardana (a name of Krishna, 6.3.6); a palace or temple of the lord of *dhana*, wealth (Kubera); Rama, and Keshava (a name of Krishna); followers of Akrura and of Vasudeva (a name of Krishna, 4.2.104); tribes associated with Krishna—the Andhakas, Vrishnis, and Kurus; as well as the names Ugrasena, Vasudeva, and Baladeva (1.1.114; references and further discussion in Preciado-Solis, 1984, 23).

14. Certainly the full one-hundred-thousand-verse epic predates the sixth century C.E., since it is mentioned in a land-grant at this time.

15. The *Shvetashvatara Upanishad* (3.1–4), which is slightly older than the *Gita*, identifies Rudra as the supreme Lord who creates and annihilates the worlds, and, earlier still, Vishnu is declared to be the Vedic sacrifice (e.g. *Shatapatha Brahmana* 5.2.3.6) thus suggesting his supremacy in this period. But these are relatively passing references, and the *Gita* represents the first time a deity makes such a claim about himself throughout a text encompassing over seven hundred verses.

16. These references have been culled by Dahlquist (1962).

17. The text presents Vasudeva and his brothers as the sons of Kamsa's sister Devagabbha (Devaki) who were handed over to a man called Andhakavenhu (which seems to be a compound of Andhaka and Vrishni, two kindred Yadava tribes) and his

wife Nandagopa (a compound of Nanda and Gopa, or Yashoda) who were attendants of Devagabbha. The Jatakas are stories about the Buddha's previous lives. However, although The Buddhist Pitaka texts of the fourth c.B.E. contain Jataka legends, and bas-reliefs from the third century B.C.E. illustrate a number of Jataka stories, scholars do not consider all the Jatakas to have been written at the same time.

18. See Jacobi (1988) for the Jain borrowings, and Lüders (1904) for the Buddhist ones.

19. Two inscriptions in the state of Rajasthan of the first century B.C.E. bear the same text referring to a temple of Sankarshana and Vasudeva. Another Garuda column from Besnagar, dated c. 100 B.C.E., refers to a temple of Bhagavat and a king called Bhagavata. From central India, also in the first century B.C.E., an inscription by Queen Naganika in the Nanaghat cave is preserved that mentions Sankarshana and Vasudeva, along with other deities, in its opening invocation. Eleven kilometers from Mathura, Krishna's birthplace, a sculpture in a well in Mora records the installation of the "five heroes of the Vrishnis" in a stone temple. Also from Mathura, another inscription records the erection of a railing and doorway for a temple of Bhagavat Vasudeva, both just at the turn of the Common Era (c. 10-25 C.E.).

20. Although *bhagavan* is not a title exclusive to Krishna, it is the term used to refer to him in the quintessential Krishna-centered texts, the *Bhagavad Gita* and the *Bhagavata Purana*, as can be seen from their titles.

21. Brahma is the creator of all the forms in the universe in the sense of being their engineer, but he is not the creator of the primordial universal stuff itself. He is born from the lotus stemming from Vishnu's navel.

22. A later Purana, the *Devi Bhagavata Purana*, marks the ascendancy into the Puranic genre of Devi, the Goddess, as the supreme matrix.

23. Vishnu is generally associated with the *guna* of *sattva*, the influence of goodness and enlightenment, and Shiva with that of *tamas*, the influence of ignorance and bondage. Shiva claims fewer Puranas than Vishnu—the Linga, Skanda, and Shiva are primarily Shaivite—and, according to Rocher (1986), each of these have encountered difficulties being accepted as a Mahapurana, or principle Purana. Moreover, it is Vishnu who dominates in the Puranas that are considered to be earlier. Even if the later texts dedicated to Shiva attribute to him the roles of creator and preserver, in the broader Puranic scheme, he is the destroyer. It should be noted that followers of both traditions accept and extol the supreme, absolute, and transcendent nature of the other deity but claim their deity to be the source of the other, a noteworthy feature of Hindu monotheism.

24. The *Bhagavata Purana*, while mentioning twenty-two principal incarnations, says that they are actually innumerable (1.3.26).

25. The commonly accepted list of these incarnations in the Puranas is as follows: Matsya, the fish; Kurma, the tortoise; Varaha, the boar; Narasimha, the man-lion; Vamana, the dwarf; Parasurama, the warrior; Rama, the prince; Krishna, the cowherd-boy (the incarnation for the present day and age); Buddha, the founder of Buddhism; and Kalki, the future warrior incarnation who will ride a white horse and terminate the present world age of the Kali-yuga.

26. Many of the Vedic hymns assume common knowledge of bygone persons and events to which they briefly allude and which would have been remembered

through tradition, and some of these are also mentioned in the Puranas. As early as the *Atharvaveda* of 1000 B.C.E., there is a reference to "the Purana" in addition to the *Vedas* (5.19.9). The *Chandogya Upanishad*, around the sixth century B.C.E., also explicitly refers to the Purana (3.4.1-2; 7.1.2 & 4) as one in a list of texts, as does the fourth century B.C.E. *Arthashastra* text of Kautilya and a number of Dharmashastra texts. The *Mahabharata*, which took its final form before the fifth century C.E. but, like the Puranas, contains material going well back into the first half of the first millennium B.C.E., is peppered with references to the Puranas and, indeed, even calls itself a Purana.

27. The Puranas are a fluid body of literature that went on transforming along the centuries through the process of transmission and adaptation. There is abundant evidence for this: there are differences in language between different sections of the text; while there are early references to archaic Vedic narratives, some of the stories in the texts are manifestly late, and deal with incidents occurring in later historical time, some of them cast as prophetic; different and sometimes inconsistent doctrines sometimes coexist in the same Purana; sometimes the same story is repeated in different places in the same text; and the very fact that many Puranas refer to eighteen Puranas indicates that such references must have been inserted after the eighteen Puranas had already been divided. One reason for concluding that the Puranas had attained their written form by the Gupta period is that neither the later dynasties nor later famous rulers, such as Harsha in the seventh century C.E., occur in the king lists contained in the texts.

28. The three most influential theologians of the Vedanta tradition over the centuries, all represented in part III of this volume, were from the South.

29. See Chakravarti (1876), Bhandarkar (1913), Bhattacharya (1928), Jaiswal (1967), Raychaudhuri (1920), and Preciado-Solis (1984) for overviews of the issue with further references.

30. The earliest Indic sacred texts are the four *Vedas*, which, nominally at least, are assigned the highest epistemological value by most Hindu sects.

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PART I

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