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## Children and childhood in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* and its theatrical traditions

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## Children and childhood in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* and its theatrical traditions

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CHILDREN AND CHILDHOOD IN THE *BHAGAVATA PURANA* AND ITS THEATRICAL  
TRADITIONS

By

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by,  
Makoto Takata

An Honors Thesis presented in partial fulfillment of Departmental Honors in

Religious Studies

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## Introduction

The Hindu Scripture *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* tells the story of Kṛṣṇa, the Supreme God come down to earth as a divine child, whose cheeky pranks and subversive misbehavior are elevated into the highest and most esoteric revelation of the divine, capturing the imagination of the faithful far more than the adult Kṛṣṇa, the cunning warrior and speaker of the *Bhagavad-gītā*, who is more well known in the West. This seems in contrast with the rest of the text, which seems to adopt a consistent attitude that disparages both childhood and family life. I argue that in traditional Brajavāsī dramas about Kṛṣṇa, the child actors that make up the casts are thought to embody Kṛṣṇa's childhood play in ways that adult actors do not have access to, which reconciles these perspectives in the popular tradition.

In her introduction to the “Hinduism” chapter of *Children and Childhood and World Religions*, Laurie L. Patton describes two ways in which children are viewed within the broad scope of Hindu tradition:

First, the idea that a child is ‘ritually formed’ as he or she goes through the various stages of becoming an adult; and second, the idea of the child as closer to the divine, especially in mythological and iconographic traditions. In many texts, there is an interaction between these two ideas, where the human child can contain some divine within, and gods can be depicted as very human children (Patton, 218)

My analysis largely hinges on the interplay of these two perspectives in the text of and the tradition inspired by the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*.

The categories of “childhood” and “adulthood” are fluid and are defined differently across cultures and religious traditions. Childhood isn’t given a specific

definition within the *Bhāgavata* itself, but its characters follow guidelines set in the *Dharmaśāstra* texts such as *Manusmṛiti* with regards to life cycle rituals (*saṃskāra*). Many rituals are prescribed for children by these texts, such as the naming ceremony, the first hair cutting, and the first time circumambulating the house. Of the particular significance here is the first of the major *saṃskārās*, the sacred thread ceremony (*upanayana*), in which a child, having previously been primarily in the care of their parents, begins to serve a guru, who teaches them the Vedas and subjects necessary to their particular *varṇa*. Patton characterizes the sacred thread ceremony as a passageway from childhood to adulthood, where the child is “re-born” into the study of the Veda, transforming the child into a “twice born” (*dvijā*).

It is literally a second birth, a birth from the Veda... Sāvitrī (Gāyatrī) the impeller, is said to be the child’s mother, and his actual teacher is said to be the father, because he enables the student to perform rites. Until then, he is not a “ritual” person, but a “pre-ritual” person. (220)

The second birth process signifies a passage into de-facto adulthood, where one moves away from a life in the care of parents to begin pursuit of the four aims of life (*puruṣārtha*). For the purposes of this analysis, we will use the condition of a “pre ritual” person as an equivalent for the modern label of “childhood”, for instances where ancient life-cycle standards are adhered to, such as within the text of the *Bhāgavata* itself, as opposed to modern settings, where such scriptural standards are not observed in the same way.

### **Kapila and Chitraketu: The Curse of Birth**

The *Bhāgavata*'s first instructive words on childhood come from Kapila. A partial incarnation of Viṣṇu and son of the *rishi* Kadarma, descended in order to expound the *Sankhya* philosophical system, Kapila is the speaker of one of the lengthier philosophical dialogues in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, the 3rd *skandha*'s *Kapila Upadeśa*, spoken to his mother, Devahūti. Describing how the *jīva* is bound in *samsāra* through attachments to fruitive action, Kapila details the repulsive and painful process by which children are born into the world, describing the child "(staying) in an abominable, hollow place, full of urine and feces, a breeding place of worms"(3.31.5-6). The text gives particular emphasis to the notion that the pains of birth are a punishment for karma:

Like a bird in a cage, he is unable to make free movements...he recollects his actions done in the last hundred births and suffers endless pain...In repentance... he praises the Lord who has confined him to the womb... (the *jīva* says) That "the Lord has shown me this condition is befitting, for I am wicked." (3.31.7-21)

Kapila's description of childhood itself is no less savage. Having endured the confinement of the womb, the child is born, "(falling) down into a pool of blood and urine...(moving) like a worm in feces...being fed by persons who cannot understand the needs of another,... made to lie down on a dirty bed rendered troublesome by worms born of sweat" (3.32.34-26). Made despondent and frustrated by the sufferings of childhood, Kapila says that he grows up to become angry and embittered:

In this way having suffered the miseries in childhood, (in youth) he becomes down-cast with grief at the inability to attain the desired object.



He flares up with rage out of ignorance. His pride and anger go on increasing with the growth of his body, He, being passionate, fights passionate persons like him, and he meets his end. (3.31.28-29)

In the realm of *māyā*, childhood is shown to be a symptom of the endless rebirths as a result of attachment to temporary sense gratification, and thus fraught with suffering.

The story of King Chitreketu in the 6th *skandha*, provides a grim account of the *Bhāgavata*'s deep anxieties related to family life. The King desires a son, but despairs that each of his ten million wives is unable to produce children, "by chance" (6.14.11). Chitraketu acquires a boon from the sage Aṅgirā by which he is able to have a child by his favorite wife, Kryptaduti. The unnamed child inspires such hatred and envy amongst the other childless wives that they plot to poison him. When Kryptaduti discovers her dead son, she and Chitraketu are overwhelmed with grief, along with the now remorseful bevy of other queens. Aṅgirā consoles them with words of the impermanence of human relationships, "As grains of sand come together and separate by the force of the stream of water, so are embodied beings brought together and separated by time" (6.15.3). Through a boon from the sage Nārada, the soul of Chitraketu's son re-enters into his body, and he comes back to life. When asked by Nārada to greet his parents, he replies:

In what life were these my father and mother, while I was revolving in the cycle of births?...Just as commodities like gold...change hands from one customer to another and one place to another similarly a *jīva* wanders from one species of existence to another. The relation of a *jīva* who has entered the womb of a particular species is transient... The sense of belongingness

lasts so long as and only with him who is associated with him due to his *karma*. (6.16.4-8)

These examples are not meant to illustrate that the *Bhāgavata* rejects householder life altogether; Nārada’s instructions to Yudhiṣṭhira in Skandha 7 provide instructions on *bhakti* tailored to those in the *gṛhastha āśrama*; rather, I wish to suggest that the authors of the text were very conscious of the anxiety surrounding the perpetuation of earthly life and its relationship to cultivating *bhakti*.

### **The Kumārās , Prahlāda, and Dhruva: Un-childlike Children**

Despite these mixed feelings about earthly family life, many of the *Bhāgavata*’s major stories feature children as prominent characters, and often as the voice of *dharma* amidst a cast of corrupt, demonic adults. None of these characters, however, seem to resemble actual children or qualities that might be considered “childlike”, but act as representatives of *dharma* in a very “adult” way. The three examples I’ve pulled from, the Four Kumārās , Dhruva, and Prahlāda , demonstrate this differently, but much of what is deemed remarkable about them by the text is how they are *not* like children, in the way described above by Kapila.

When Viṣṇu gives the creator deity Brahma the task of producing the universe in *skandha* three, the first beings He produces are four child sages, Sanātana , Sanaka, Sanandana, and Sanat-kumāra, known as the Four Kumārās (lit. “boy/male child”). They are described as four *brāhmaṇa* children, born with enlightenment and perfect Brahminical sensibilities. When requested by their father, Brahmā, to populate the world, they, disgusted at the thought of involving themselves in worldly affairs, refuse (3.12.5). Instead, they leave their progenitor and go wandering throughout the universe “without

any particular desire" (3.15.12), and eventually decide to visit the eternal abode of Lord Viṣṇu in Vaikuṅṭha. When they happen upon Jaya and Vijaya, the two divine gatekeepers of Viṣṇu's realm, they are rejected:

(Jaya and Vijaya) looked at the four nude sages who, despite their age,  
looked five years old and had realized the real nature of the Soul.

Laughing (disrespectfully) at their prowess, they prevented (the sages)  
both by their cane, even though the sages should not have been treated so.

(3.15.30)

A.C. Bhaktivedānta Svāmī, in his commentary on the above verse, asserts that the Kumāra's "age" refers to their status as the first created beings, stating that "all embodied beings, even lord Śiva, are born later and are therefore younger than the Kumārās". In this passage, their appearance as children is in spite of their status as sages, not because of it. Though the Kumārās do remain as children ostensibly to preserve their commitment to eternal celibacy, they possess a character and realization that the text implies is un-childlike.

The text goes further in the characterization of its child figures, defining their good qualities by their un-childlike nature. A prominent example is Dhruva in the 4th *sakndha*, son of King Uttānapāda. When climbing up onto his father's lap to play with him, Dhruva is plucked down by Suruci, his step mother, the King's first wife. Suruci chastises Dhruva, telling him that, as the son of the King's second wife, he will not inherit the throne, and thus is not worthy of the privilege of sitting on the King's lap. She tells him, "If you desire the King's throne, propitiate the Lord by penance, and by His grace, get yourself born in my womb" (4.8.13). Advised by his birth mother, Suniti, he

retires to the forest to do austerities to please Viṣṇu in order to gain the throne, even though he is “only five years old” (4.8.65).

It is interesting to note that Dhruva’s family life parallels Kapila's description of childhood earlier in the text, defined by frustration at the discovery of the unattainability of desires. It is described that Dhruva, on hearing the words of his step-mother, “like a serpent beaten with a stick (heaves) heavy sighs of anger” (4.8.14) similarly to Kapila’s hypothetical petulant child, described earlier. It could be said that the instructions of Suniti to pray to Viṣṇu are the only thing that prevents Dhruva from following Kapila’s forecast for childhood further, “(fighting) passionate persons like him and (meeting) his end.” Family life is also treated in this story in a similarly dysfunctional matter for Chitraketu and his jealous queens, fraught with jealousy and anxiety over succession.

Dhruva is visited by Nārada, who is amazed to see a child performing *tapasyā*.

Nārada remarks on Dhruva’s age, commenting that:

"Oh, how wonderful is the spirit of the *kṣatriyaḥ*, who cannot put up with a loss of respect, for even though Dhruva is but a child, he has taken to heart the vile speech of his step-mother...We do not find that (the sense of) honor or dishonor is developed now (at this early stage) in a child (like you), who is naturally fond of play and other such things."(4.8.26-27)

Nārada here states effectively that Dhruva’s childlike nature has been overridden by his nature as a *kṣatriya*, and his age is frequently alluded to in the text as a wonder; Dhruva’s virtue comes, at least in part, from his rejection of things considered childlike, both in terms of his worldly pursuits, as alluded to by Nārada, and of his childlike anger, elaborated on by Kapila.

Prahlāda , another un-childlike child, plays a pivotal role in one of the most famous tales of the *avatārs*, that of Narāsiṃha, Viṣṇu’s man-lion incarnation. He is born as the son of Hiranyaśipu, one of the demonic incarnations of Viṣṇu’s doorkeepers, an demonic king who, like many in the *Bhāgavata*, becomes so powerful that he takes over the whole universe. He is so feared that, when the Gods attempt to subdue his power, they capture his wife Kayādhu, and attempt to kill her and the child in her womb, to exterminate Hiranyaśipu’s line. They are prevented by the sage Nārada who declares, “The child within this woman’s womb is faultless and sinless. Indeed, he is a great devotee... and you will not be able to kill him”(7.7.10). Nārada tells Kayādhu to stay in his āśrama until her son is born, and instructs her in *bhakti* and *dharma*, or rather, instructs Prahlāda in her womb; it is stated that the memory of “that teaching, however, faded away in the case of (his) mother... due to her being (after all) a woman” (7.7.16).

Prahlāda , however, imbibes and remembers the teachings wholeheartedly, and is born an exceedingly pious child, much to the fury of his megalomaniac father, with whom Prahlāda has an even more dysfunctional relationship than Dhruva and Uttānapāda. Incensed at Prahlāda ’s piety, Hiranyaśipu devises elaborate means to kill him, including a pit of snakes and a push over a cliff, during which he remains protected by Viṣṇu. When he is eventually sent to learn from the demonic anti-guru Shukrācārya in order to cure him of his *bhakti*, Prahlāda acts in turn as an instructor to his demonic schoolmates, putting heavy emphasis on the futility of birth in the world:

The span of human life is a hundred years, only...twenty years are lost when he is ignorant in childhood and is absorbed in play in boyhood and twenty or more years are wasted when his body is full of senility and is

rendered unfit... the careless fellow, deeply attached to his family does not realize that his turn of existence in this world is being wasted away, and that the purpose of his life is being thwarted. (7.6.6-14)

Prahlāda ,despite being five years old, instructs his classmates in almost exactly the same way that Kapila instructs Devahūti in the third *skandha*, disparaging both childhood and its seemingly frivolous pursuits of play and enjoyment, and the pitfalls of the attachment inherent in family life.

It is interesting to note that both Prahlāda and Dhruva are not in any sense “ritual persons”, and yet through their actions they act as de-facto twice-borns. The *Manusmṛiti* describes the *brahmacārī āśrama* to be defined by service to the guru and ascetic disciplines, declaring, “when a twice born.. (practices) he is surely practicing the fiercest ascetic toil down to the very tips of his nails.” (2.167). Dhruva and Prahlāda, both five years old, are well below the prescribed age of 8 for *kṣatriyaḥ* entering twice-born stage (*M.S* 2.36), and yet, both of them, because of their advanced spiritual consciousness, have been given a de-facto “second birth” by Nārada, their guru. This is particularly evident in the case of Dhruva, to whom Nārada imparts the mantra *om namo bhagavate vāsudevāya* for use in his meditation, a rite usually reserved for those who take the formal *dīkṣā* initiation when they undertake the second birth<sup>1</sup>. Both Dhruva and Prahlāda, through their unusual initiations into spiritual life, reject, or skip over, childhood itself, fraught with attachments, difficulties, and suffering, in favor of directly undertaking the work of transformation into post-ritual persons and, subsequently, of liberation.

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<sup>1</sup> In a footnote on page 255, Patton references the giving of the mantra in the twice-born ceremony, pointing out that it is normally practiced only for males.

### God as Child: Kṛṣṇa's Vṛndāvana *Līlāḥ*

These examples seem to imply that childhood is a necessity of the functions of the material world, better to not exist at all: however, a very different picture of childhood is found in the famous tenth *skandha*, which tells the story of the boyhood of Kṛṣṇa, and takes up about a fourth of the text. Kṛṣṇa undergoes his *upanayana* ceremony (10.45.29) well after he leaves his cowherd paradise of Vṛndāvana to assume his position as a prince in Mathurā at the age of eleven (3.2.26), well before the maximum age for a *kṣatriyaḥ upanayanam* ceremony of twenty-two, as prescribed by *Manusmṛiti* (2.36), thus he falls under the category of a “pre-ritual” person for the entirety of his life in Vṛndāvana.

The stories of the tenth *skandha* are engaged with in a radically different way by readers and theologians than the rest of the *Bhāgavata*. The Vṛndāvana pastimes are meant to illustrate specific types of relationships between Kṛṣṇa and the devotee, or *bhāva*, varieties of which include the attitudes of servant/master (*dāsyā*), parent/child (*vātsalyā*), peers or friends (*sakhyā*) and lover/loved (*madhuryā*). Edwin Bryant in *Bhakti Yoga: Tales and Teachings from the Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, writes that the relationships of Kṛṣṇa to the characters in the tenth *skandha* “are not paralleled by other paradigmatic devotees anywhere else in the entire *Bhāgavata*” (Bryant, 60). The reality of these relationships is not confined to the text; it is also available to Kṛṣṇa's devotees both in earthly worship and in Goloka, Kṛṣṇa's eternal, heavenly realm, where *līlā* goes on constantly. David R. Kinsey in *The Sword and the Flute* writes:

Kṛṣṇa's sport in Vṛndāvana is not held to have happened simply once upon a time. His life as set forth in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, in particular his sojourn in Vṛndāvana, is a description of both an earthly manifestation *and*

the eternal movement within the essence of the Godhead... Kṛṣṇa's childhood, adolescence, and love for Rādhā and the *Gopīs* are forever taking place in the paradise of Goloka. Every aspect of his biography, every incident, is therefore eternal (68-69)

This distinction causes the difference in how these pastimes are read. The stories in the rest of the text have a didactic aim, and their audience is meant to have a mimetic relationship with them, imitating the actions of the characters in order to lead pious, *dharmic* lives. As Narāsiṃha says to Prahlāda: "One who always remembers your activities and My activities also, and who chants the prayers you have offered, becomes free, in due course of time, from the reactions of material activities"(7.10.14). We are clearly meant to follow in his footsteps. Kṛṣṇa, who is God Himself, and has activities that no fallen *jīvas* can fathom, is not to be imitated; no Vaiṣṇava has ever sported a bracelet reading "What Would Kṛṣṇa Do?" After the famous *Rāsa Līlā* is described, in which Kṛṣṇa dances away the night in the Vṛndāvana forest with all of the married cowherd women in the town, Parikṣit, one of the key interlocutors of the *Bhāgavata*, objects, asking how *Bhagavān*, who has "descended into the world... for the establishment of dharma", could "behave in a manner contrary to *dharmā* by touching the wives of others?" (10.33.27). Śukadeva, the main narrator of the text, responds,

"Just as fire consumes everything, so it is seen that the blatant transgressions of *dharmā* by the more powerful rulers are not faults. The words of powerful beings are truth, and so is whatever is performed by them... One who is not a powerful being should certainly never behave in that fashion, not even in his mind.



Otherwise, acting out of foolishness, he will be destroyed...What, then, of the applicability of auspiciousness and inauspiciousness to the Supreme Being of all Supreme Beings and of all living entities, whether celestial, human, or animal?" (10.33.29-33)

Thus, Kṛṣṇa's childhood is treated as no ordinary childhood, but rather a mysterious revelation of Divine Love to the devotee, distinct from the rest of the *Bhāgavata* tales. That Kṛṣṇa remains a child throughout the duration of the *Vṛndāvana līlāḥ* is a complicated assertion, given the varied nature of the portrayal of Kṛṣṇa's youthfulness. As previously stated, Kṛṣṇa is only 11 years old when He leaves *Vṛndāvana* for Mathurā, yet starting at chapter eleven, once His family moves from Gokul to nearby *Vṛndāvana*, Kṛṣṇa begins to be portrayed as the valiant slayer of demons and the lover of the *Gopīs* rather than as a small, babbling toddler. Laurie Patton in her anthologizing of the pastimes, categorizes them as being during Kṛṣṇa's "adolescence", which, strictly speaking, will not occur until He has returned to his princely position. The majority of popular sources depicting Kṛṣṇa's life confirm this characterization; Jayadeva's *Gīta-govinda* certainly opts for a more serious, romantic depiction of Kṛṣṇa as an adolescent during his time in *Vṛndāvana*. This seeming fluidity in the depiction of the age of Kṛṣṇa, who is referred to often as the "*purāṇa puruṣa*", literally "the Oldest Person" (10.16.30), is in keeping with His chameleon-like appearance in different forms "like an actor in a drama" (1.3.37), glorified throughout the text. Even though He is only eleven years old, His primordial nature allows Him to change His appearance to any type of youth in order to produce *bhāṅv* and *rās*, which, as previously stated, is the primary objective of the *Vṛndāvana līlāḥ*. Perhaps it is better to imagine Kṛṣṇa's youth rather than childhood

specifically. David Mason speaks to the fact that Kṛṣṇa's *līlāḥ* are sharply divided along the lines of His youth in Vṛndāvana and His adulthood in Mathurā, which exist in almost completely different worlds:

The stories of (Kṛṣṇa's) childhood luxuriate in his bucolic environment and the paradisiacal conditions in which He indulges His childish inclinations alongside His happy friends. The stories of His adulthood occur on a very different terrain, and describe a character with little of the same impish joy, but rather one who is given to philosophical deliberation while engaging in cynical strategies of politics and war, and who finally dies a bleak death, alone. (45)

When we discuss Brajavāsī drama, we will look at an interesting example where Kṛṣṇa's *madhurya līlāḥ* with the *Gopīs* is presented within the context of childhood specifically, but suffice to say for now that we will be treating Kṛṣṇa's Vṛndāvana pastimes as under the category of childhood, since it still falls under our definition, equating "child" with "non-ritual person".

The text emphasizes the miraculous circumstances of Kṛṣṇa's appearance constantly, from his advent following a prophecy from the sky (10.1-5), His fights with the demons sent by Kāṁsa to kill Him, to His revelation of His true nature to His foster-mother, Yaśodā. An exhaustive overview of these stories can be saved for further study, but I would like to highlight a few specific instances that accentuate the otherworldliness of Kṛṣṇa's magical childhood, and how they compare to the instances of childhood we have explored up to this point.

In the early chapters of the 10th *skandha*, The childish games and revelry of Kṛṣṇa and Balarāma are celebrated and described in detail,

In this way, giving delight to the inhabitants of Vraj with their childlike, sportive activities and sweet lispings... in the company of the cowherd boys, [Kṛṣṇa and Balarāma] tended the calves, bringing with them various articles of play. Sometimes they played on flutes, sometimes they used the fruits of the Bilva tree... for throwing as balls... sometimes they imitated the cattle... sometimes they played the part of bellowing, fighting bulls. Sometimes they imitated birds like swans and peacocks. In this way they roved simulating ordinary children. (10.11.37-40)

Kṛṣṇa's childishness, however, is always undercut by astounding revelations of His divinity, whether intimate and subtle or magnificently grand. One of the better known examples comes in 10.8, in which Yaśodā is told by Balarāma that Kṛṣṇa has been eating dirt. When she looks inside His mouth, she sees the entire universe within it, "all moving and nonmoving entities, outer space, and all directions" (10.8.37). During this vision, Yaśodā's familial affection for Kṛṣṇa dissolves completely, for "Through (Kṛṣṇa's) illusory power arise such ignorant notions such as 'I am me; he over there is my husband; and this is my son, I am the virtuous wife'" (10.8.42); echoes of Chitraketu's revelation to His father can be heard here.

To relieve Yaśodā's bewilderment, Kṛṣṇa quickly puts her under the sway of *Yogamāyā* (lit. Yoga-Illusion), His divine, deluding power, after which she forgets her vision and looks upon Kṛṣṇa again as her darling boy. *Yogamāyā* could be said to be the defining feature of the Vṛndāvana *līlāḥ*. Identified with Mahādevī, the Great Goddess

(Durga, Kali, Lalita, etc.), She allows Kṛṣṇa’s devotees to interact with Him through one of the intimate relationships of *rāsa* and *bhāva*, rather than with the awareness that He is the Supreme Being, as with more awe-inspiring forms like Viṣṇu, Narāsimha, and Rama. Although this perception is technically false or unreal, it is inspired by *bhakti* and engineered by God, different from the *māyā* that governs the functions of the material world. “While the regular *māyā* can disappear only by devotion to Kṛṣṇa” writes Bryant, “The divine Yogamāyā can appear only by devotion to Kṛṣṇa” (61).

In chapter nine, we find the *Damodar-Līlā*, the story of Yaśodā’s punishment of Kṛṣṇa for breaking one of her butter pots. At first Yaśodā attempts to beat Kṛṣṇa with a switch, but on seeing “the guilty boy (who) was crying and rubbing His eyes, smearing the mascara with His hands” (10.9.9), she resolves to tie Him to a grain mortar instead. Yaśodā is amazed when, no matter how much rope she uses, she cannot tie Kṛṣṇa, as the rope remains perpetually “two fingers two short” (10.9.15-16); Kṛṣṇa is God Himself, of course, and cannot be tied by a mere *jīva*. Seeing His mother’s great effort, Kṛṣṇa finally allows Himself to be bound by the power of her love for Him, for “He is only constrained by His own free will. By Him this universe, along with that who controls it, is controlled” (10.9.19).

The tension between the reality of Kṛṣṇa as the Supreme Ground of Being and the illusory nature of his pastimes as a small child is much relished and revealed in by poets and commentators on the text. Vallabhā, the foremost *ācārya* of the Rudra Vaiṣṇava Sampradāya, heavily emphasizes the *vatsalya bhāva* in his extensive commentary on the *Bhāgavata*, *Śrī Subodhinī*. In his commentary on chapter nine, he discusses Kṛṣṇa’s allowing Himself to be controlled and “become dependent” on His devotees (as in the

*vatsalya bhāva* ) as evidence of His supreme compassion (*kṛipā* in the *Bhāgavata* text) for His devotees, which is only accessible through an intimate, transcendental relationship. “Without any relationship” writes Vallabha, “then, this may look preposterous and may create severe disturbance in the world...Our Lord’s compassion is more stronger (*sic*) than any other reason or basis for behavior or *Dharma*” (1214). Vallabhācārya raises a possible objection: if God has lowered Himself to the level of a child, then this would “affect the Lord’s Divine self, and this will not lead to the desired result... 'compassion', which will go to waste” In other words, if *Bhagavān* lowers Himself, even for the benefit of the devotee, it cannot be called "compassion" because of His compromised position. Vallabhācārya responds in turn:

In this verse, only with a view to clear this doubt, the appellation of “by Himself” is used for our Lord Śrī Kṛṣṇa--to denote that our Lord never really comes under the control of anyone. Hence, no one can subdue or dominate our Lord and He can never be removed or disturbed from His Divine position (*acyuta*)... (All Beings) are under the full control and hegemony... of our Lord Śrī Kṛṣṇa... hence, whoever does anything to our Lord... (He) always exercises this *karuna* (compassion) on Him.”(*Subodhinī*,1215)

Yaśodā’s love for the child Kṛṣṇa is positioned deeply and irrevocably within this tension between Kṛṣṇa’s appearance as a child and the reality of Kṛṣṇa’s status as the Absolute Truth; all instances of the celebration of Kṛṣṇa’s appearance, thus, are in the far-off realm of *līlā*, decidedly removed from childhood within the bounds of ordinary existence. His playfulness and spontaneity come from His true, divine nature, and ultimate freedom to, a

freedom that does not seem accessible to everyday, human children in the view of the text.

### **Childhood *Līlā* Embodied: The *Rās Līlā* in Braj**

While the two dominant models of childhood we've discussed remain worlds apart, the communities that have integrated the *Bhāgavata* into their culture have begun to play with these childhood associations and re-cast, even subvert, conceptions of childhood that seem to be apparent in the text. The tradition of Kṛṣṇa *līlā* dramas in Braj, the north-central Hindi speaking region of the subcontinent that encompasses Vṛndāvana, Mathurā, and other places associated with Kṛṣṇa's life, has a particularly fascinating balance between these perspectives, both demonstrating the otherness of Kṛṣṇa's pastimes and also creating an access point to it through the flesh-and-blood, earthly children that make up their casts. I will be drawing on a transcript of one such drama, depicting the *rāsa* dance of the tenth *skandha*'s 29th-33rd chapters, included in John Stratton Hawley's volume, *At Play with Kṛṣṇa: Pilgrimage Dramas from Bṛndāvana*

Hawley discusses the city and pilgrimage site of Vṛndāvana itself to be a place where Kṛṣṇa's childhood is preserved and kept, where all who live there can spend their days enjoying the spectacle of Kṛṣṇa's *līlā*. He compares Vṛndāvana to Vārāṇasī, the "archetypical tirtha; one goes there to die, to be ferried to a transcendent level", whereas Vṛndāvana is a place where people come to live and experience, to "thrive in the perennial presence of Kṛṣṇa and Rādhā; that is not a state beyond the world, but a secret hidden in its midst" (50). As previously stated by Kinsey, Kṛṣṇa's deeds are seen by the faithful as an eternal reality revealed through both enactment and depiction, as well as the physical places (Vṛndāvana, Govardhan, Mathurā. etc.) that are their settings. The

Brajavāsī dramas are products of this incubator of *Kṛṣṇa prema*, with requirements that the boy actors be born and bred in Vraj (Hawley, 18), and performance spaces that connect directly with famous Vaiṣṇava pilgrimage sites, such as the Rādhā Raman temple, which Hawley discusses in detail (3-4)

According to David Mason in *Theatre and Religion on Krishna's Stage*, the first outside attestation available for the use of child actors by Brajavāsī dramatists comes in the writing of a servant in the court of the Mughal emperor Akbar (reign, 1556-1605), appearing around 1572, which describes troupes of *brāhmaṇas* who “dress up smooth-faced boys as women and make them perform, singing the praises of Kṛṣṇa and reciting his acts” (58). It is unclear from sources inside the tradition when or who began the practice of casting Kṛṣṇa dramas with children; in chapter four of *Theatre and Religion*, Mason argues that it is likely that both male and female children performed in the dramas, and that at some point the practice switched to boy actors only. While popular tradition states that this was to protect girls from abuse by Mughal conquerors, Mason points to historical evidence that the change may have had more to do with *brāhmaṇa* ical attitudes around women and impurity (74-81). Whatever the etic historical case may be, the emic tradition offers varying accounts of the origin of these dramas with a fascinating place given to the child actors. Several of the stories involve Vallabhācārya whose commentary I’ve cited earlier, who in most versions is the catalyst for a miraculous or divine experience which leads to the institution of the boy actors in Vaiṣṇava drama. In one, quoted by Mason from a text called *Braj ka Rās Rangmanc* Vallabhācārya appoints Swami Haridas (cited along with the actor-saint Ghamanddev as the founder of the *Braj rās līlā* tradition) to choose *brāhmaṇa* boy actors to play Kṛṣṇa and the *Gopīs*,

When the moment in the dramatic story came that Kṛṣṇa was to disappear, the ‘boy who was acting Kṛṣṇa really disappeared, and the children playing the *Gopīs* who go frantically searching for Kṛṣṇa became themselves the object of a search’. When the parents of the missing children took the play’s organizers to task, Vallabhācārya stepped in and told the parents to bathe in the Yamunā. When they had done so, the distraught parents saw their children playing happily in Kṛṣṇa’s divine bower, which settled that matter. (67)

This folktale speaks to the elevated status given to boy actors within the tradition. As mentioned earlier, the pastimes of Kṛṣṇa are considered non-different from Kṛṣṇa Himself, and thus those chosen to embody the *līlā* are often worshipped themselves as forms (*svarūp*) of the Deities they embody, posed and worshipped as are *murtis* in a temple at the end of each performance, with the audience being allowed to “perform many of the same gestures of adoration, purification, and submission...(bringing) monetary offerings and circling them before the faces of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa...somewhat reminiscent of the *ārtī*” (Hawley, 15) Mason relates a story about how, backstage at a performance as the boy-actor playing Kṛṣṇa was being helped with his crown, a devotee came up to pay respects, offering a handful of *lāḍḍū* (sweets made of dates and nuts). The boy--Kṛṣṇa responded by “(touching) a finger to his tongue, and ‘anointing’ each one.” (25). Mason points out how this embodiment of the deity provides an interactive, personal experience for devotees, even more than worship of images in a temple, being allowed to “see God eat the offering, and... even take the opportunity to feed God directly... (taking) a *lāḍḍū* from the plate and (placing) it directly into Kṛṣṇa’s mouth”



(Mason, 25). The worship of the boy-actors in many cases goes beyond their turns onstage, as Hawley documents:

People will bow to such boys in the street... they are plied with the finest food available, offered every attention, even massaged all night as they sleep. Because of people's desire to worship, to serve, and to imagine, the distinction between child and divinity is not observed with rigidity... indeed, the worship of children, precisely because of their innocence- a normalcy of disposition as yet undistorted by formal rules of conduct... is a general feature of Indian life...The playful among us, children, are encouraged to play; adults play through them. (20)

Mason confirms this notion of reverence and care for children being a facet of the culture of the Subcontinent, particularly in the case of boys, citing sociological studies that report, "Children go to bed when they are ready, they play in any state of dress or undress, they are seldom coerced or thwarted" (109). This is, of course, a broad sweeping generalization, but it points to a reverence for childhood in Indian culture which can help us understand the dynamics of the worship of *rās līlā* performers. It would be a mistake to interpret this reverence for Vṛndāvana's young actors as putting them on a pedestal, as it were, seeing the God of the Universe Kṛṣṇa over the child playing Kṛṣṇa. This would be antithetical to the whole mood of Brajavāsī worship. I argue that the Brajavāsī's reverence for the young actors comes from the divinity revealed by their childhood, not a divinity that is somehow foisted onto or attached to it. Hawley points out that the audiences of the *rās līlā* dramas are perfectly aware that the children that performers in Kṛṣṇa dramas are not in themselves divine incarnations and that they are truly ordinary

local children; they don't "believe in the *svarūps* the way children believe in Santa Claus", yet the reverence comes out of the spontaneous playful moods conjured by the children themselves. He points out that the children must be local, and thus "entirely unmystified, completely normal" (18), bringing in their natural, earthly, and familiar childhood into their performance.

### **Inside and Outside of *The Great Circle Dance***

The idea of children as a vehicle for the transmission of the *rāsa* of Kṛṣṇa's pastimes is displayed interestingly in *The Great Circle Dance*, a drama recounted, transcribed, and translated by Hawley, based on Kṛṣṇa's dance with the *Gopīs*. As usual, the roles of Kṛṣṇa, Rādhā, and the principal *Gopīs* are filled by boy actors, but two important adult characters are also present, depicting elements of the story added by subsequent texts and popular tradition after the *Bhāgavata* was compiled. The first is Kāmadev, god of desire and eroticism, who vows to disturb Kṛṣṇa's dance by firing at Him one of his lust-bestowing arrows. The second is Śiva, who wishes to witness the unfolding of the *līlā* for himself. Both these roles are played by adults, and both are denied entrance into the dance as they are, which creates, although perhaps indirectly, an astounding portrait of how childhood is employed as an embodied metaphor to depict the holiness of Kṛṣṇa's acts.

I have not discussed the *Rāsa Līlā* at length in my analysis of the *Bhāgavata*'s depiction of Kṛṣṇa's childhood, partially because the *Gopīs*, at the time of their dances with Kṛṣṇa, are specified as not being children. In the chapters describing the *Rāsa Līlā* in the tenth *skandha*, the age of the *Gopīs* is never established, but much of Kṛṣṇa's discourse with them, discussed later, revolves around whether or not the *Gopīs* should

return to their husbands (10.29.22-24). The other famous passage of the *madhurya līlāḥ*, in chapter twenty-two, specifically describes the pastimes of the unmarried *Gopīs*, who undertake a vow to propitiate the Goddess to make Kṛṣṇa their husband (10.22.1-3). As they ritually cleanse themselves in the river Yamunā, Kṛṣṇa steals their garments, calling them to come up one by one to get their clothes from Him, naked. Traditionally, a woman's husband is the only one to see her naked, so Kṛṣṇa acts intending to fulfill the *Gopīs*' desire (10.22.27). I will leave this story as a topic for another analysis; here, we are exploring the *Bhāgavata* as interpreted by Brajavāsī drama, and, for obvious reasons, this story is likely considered unsuitable for staging, and is not found in the canon of Brajavāsī dramas to this author's knowledge, and the amount of analysis required to sufficiently unpack it exceeds our space here. Premānand, the author of *The Great Circle Dance*, alludes to it in the text of his play (Hawley, 184), but does not specifically differentiate the two groups of *Gopīs* as the tenth *skandha* does.

I argue that, although the *Gopīs* depicted in *The Great Circle Dance* are not concretely children, the performance practices and casting explicitly read childhood onto them. Although both children and adults make up its cast, not all the children play child characters. Beyond the ambiguously aged *Gopīs*, the Goddess Yogamāyā, an ageless mother- goddess figure, is also played by a boy actor. This could be attributable to the greater verisimilitude of a boy actor playing female roles, as was the case in Elizabethan drama, if not for the fact that Kāma's wife Rati is played by an adult actor the same age and size as her husband (218). The "Nights", the anthropomorphized form of the nights that Kṛṣṇa spends with the *Gopīs*, also appear, and are played by the same boy actors who play the *Gopīs* (183). I suggest from this evidence that the child/adult divide in this drama

is not found in the actual ages of the characters themselves, rather whether the character is inside or outside the *Rāsa Līlā*. In Premānand's text, the circle of the *Rāsa Līlā* becomes a kind of container of childhood, and the intrusion of adults like Śiva and Kāma are meant to illustrate both how those with wrong attitudes or conceptions are denied access, and the transformation that sincere devotees must undergo in order to enter the dance.

Hawley details that although Kāma is portrayed as youthful, in the Braj drama there is “nothing cherubic or infantile about him” (157). In the drama, he is played by the same actor who has portrayed characters like Kaṃsa and Indra, other adult antagonists that populate the Kṛṣṇa stories. While sometimes performances emphasize Kāma's beauty and youth, recorded here is a decidedly adult portrayal, played by “a fully matured man with great moustache, clad in the paraphernalia of royalty” (174). Hawley compares Kāma's desire to disrupt the *Rāsa Līlā* to the role of Indra in the story of the lifting of Govardhan hill (157-158).

It is clear that the kind of love Kāma represents is on the platform of base, earthly eroticism, not the transcendent love of Kṛṣṇa and His associates. When Kāma first swaggers onstage, he boasts of his exploits tempting such mighty Gods as Indra and Brahma to lust, alluding to various *purāṇic* myths (176). When Kāma is told by his companion, Spring, of the descent of Kṛṣṇa, he scoffs at the idea of setting his sights on Him, a mere eight year old boy: “there's no way for me to enter the body of a child like that!” (178). It is only when he is informed by Nārada Muni that the *Rāsa Līlā* is about to take place that he attempts to participate. Nārada, of course, knows that he is sending Kāma to his ultimate destruction, alluding to one of Kāma's names, Madan (“the

intoxicator”) and contrasting it with Kṛṣṇa’s name, “Madan Mohan” (“the one who deludes the intoxicator”) (179). When Kāma attempts to shoot Kṛṣṇa in the midst of the dance, he is unable to even string his bow, comically collapsing to the ground to the delight of the audience (195).

Kāma’s central mistake, according to the text, is conflating himself, desire, with the love that Kṛṣṇa and the *Gopīs* experience, to which the word “*prema*” (“Divine Love”) is applied. Although in the *Bhāgavata* text itself, the word *kāma* is applied to the *Gopīs* and their love (10.29.38, 10.33.25), the drama makes a clear delineation between these two types of love; one cannot exist where the other is present. The distinction between these, Hawley argues, is motive; whereas *kāma* exists for the satisfaction of the one who possesses it, *prem* can only be a pure, selfless expression of love, aiming to pleasure the Supreme Beloved, Kṛṣṇa, with no thought of fulfilling one’s own desires. This builds on a theme introduced in the second verse of the *Bhāgavata* itself, which begins “*dharmah projjhita-kaitavo ’tra*” (“rejecting *dharma* covered by material motive”1.1.2).

For this other love *prem*, is a world unto itself: it is pure. Unlike *kām*, it satisfies no desires of those who partake of it, and by the same token, it has no results in the natural world...*kām* supplies much of the motivating force that brings the world of family and social obligation into being, *prem* builds nothing. And if *kām* can build, it can also exhaust itself, but *prem* cannot (Hawley,158)

Hawley’s characterization of *kām* and *prem* echo back to previous characterizations of family life that we have discussed earlier. In the *Bhāgavata* text, Kṛṣṇa famously

chastises the *Gopīs* for abandoning their familial obligations: "For every woman the highest *dharma* is to serve her husband without falsity...Certainly adultery is condemned everywhere" (10.29.24-26). The *Gopīs* respond in turn that Kṛṣṇa, in reality, has a more intimate relationship to them than any of their family members have had, "Let our *dharma* be for You...Truly You are the dearest beloved of all living beings, the most intimate relation, for You are the Supreme Soul" (10.29.32). The present drama is shockingly explicit in its distinction between affairs of lust, children, and family life, and the ever spontaneous, playful, eternal world of *līlā*; Kṛṣṇa directly challenges the *Gopīs* with the accusation of intentions based in lust: "You've left your husbands only to have sex with me" (207). The *Gopīs*' indignant response is especially salient:

"No, no, Lord, You are not sensual; you're the one that wipes away every trace of the sensual...If it were sensual pleasure we wanted, then that would be desire (*kāma*). But it's *You* we want, and that's not desire, it's love (*prem*). Desire serves the senses, but love serves only You; ultimately desire results in nothing but destruction, but love leads to playing in the eternal circle dance." (207)

The condemnation of family life as temporary, fleeting, and driven by lust, and the exaltation of Divine Love that we've seen throughout the text, are rendered more potent, radical even, when the world of *prema* is conveyed through a group of children; the grown-up *Kāma* and all the entanglements that come with him don't stand a chance.

Śiva also tries to enter the circle dance, but with far more noble aspirations than the pompous *Kāmadev*. As a married ascetic, Śiva is totally detached from *kāma*; the famous story in which Śiva burns *Kāma* to death with His third eye is referenced many

times in Premānand's text. Śiva in Vaiṣṇavism is portrayed as a great devotee; in the *Bhāgavata*, Śiva is praised as "the greatest of Vaiṣṇavas" (12.13.16), and as such Premānand has Śiva approach the Circle Dance not as an intruder, but as a prospective participant. Hawley's picture of the Brajavāsī Śiva emphasizes His asceticism, with legs "painted white to suggest a covering of ash, serpentine bands encircling his arms, and behind his crown the matted locks of a renunciate"(215). Śiva's mood, thus, is not one in keeping with the sensitive cowherd girls. His repeated calls of "Infinite One!" fail to elicit a response from Kṛṣṇa, spoken as they are in a "deep, rough bellow". Clearly Śiva's devotion does not have the intimate flavor of that of the *Gopīs*, being still defined by the attitude of awe and reverence eschewed by Vallabhācārya earlier. The *Gopīs* tell Śiva that if He is to witness the *Rāsa Līlā*, He will have to make a mood adjustment: "If you want to see it", He is told, "You'll have to become one of the milkmaids of Braj." (216)

After bathing in the Yamunā river, Śiva is miraculously turned into a *gopī*. Transformed in appearance and in emotions, He performs a vigorous dance for the pleasure of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa, replete with "imitation of classical representations of the wild *tāṇḍava* dance that is Śiva's favorite," although Hawley notes that He soon "reaffirms his metamorphosed identity with a humble prostration" at Their feet (223). Hawley argues that regardless of the depth of Śiva's devotion, because of the exclusive and refined nature of the *rāsa* dance, he must make an "about face" in order to enter it, shedding his personality to adjust to the mood of the *Gopīs*, forgoing asceticism and meditation on the Ultimate Absolute, into the deeply personal reality of the *madhurya līlāḥ*. "There is no real connection between this world and the world from which (Śiva) had come, he must alter totally to make the transition" (Hawley,160).

Mason writes of a performance he witnessed of the same story, describing Śiva “(striding) onstage sporting a full, black beard, holding a rather menacing trident, and wrapped in a sari” (132). He interprets the incident as analogous to the transformation that the audience of Brajavāsī dramas undergoes in order to appreciate the moods of the stories presented. Mason argues that the aesthetic and devotional term *bhāva*, usually used for emotions cultivated by actors in order to elicit an audience response, also applies to the psychospiritual lens that audience members use to view performances of Kṛṣṇa *līlā*.

The environment of Vṛndāvana is a scriptural paradigm, and it very overtly trains residents, actors and audience alike to inhabit the paradigm as suitable characters. Attending *rās līlā* theatre, devoted patrons very actively seek to align their *bhāv*, their attitude, their consciousness with the *bhāv* of Kṛṣṇa’s childhood friends, so as to see Kṛṣṇa...as they saw him...Devotees regard Śiva’s self-transformation in this myth as a model for the kind of inner transformation that devotion requires (132)

This hearkens back to Hawley’s description of how adult audience members “play through” the actions of the child actors onstage. The audience is thus invited, along with Śiva, to enter the crucible of childlike innocence and play that constitutes Kṛṣṇa’s pastimes, as embodied by local actors, who bring their own, unique childhood *bhāv* to the mix.

Perhaps one of the most striking elements of Premānand’s *Great Circle Dance* is that it ends not with a dance praising Kṛṣṇa, the bewitching Lord of the *Gopīs*, but in praise of Kṛṣṇa’s more boyish form, as the child Gopāla, stealing butter from Yaśodā’s butter pots. Hawley describes how the child Kṛṣṇa, played by “a glowing boy of six or



seven”, begins to crawl on His knees like a toddler. He is given a bowl of sweets by the *Rāsdhari*, or director/lead singer, and coyly offers them to the audience. As Kṛṣṇa becomes a child again, to the delight of the audience, He sings:

“Oh, they call me all these names--Braj’s moon, cloud of joy, Nanda and Yaśodā’s boy, the death of Kans, the list goes on and on. But the name they don’t call me is the one that’s sweetest of them all, the one my daddy calls me...One name’s sweeter than sweets to me, it’s when they call me the butter thief” (225)

Even after the depiction of His defeat of Kāma and stealing the hearts of the married cowherd women, the preferred meditation of the audience, the authors, and, indeed, Kṛṣṇa Himself, is as a little child.

### **Epilogue: Ajāmila and the Saving Grace of Childhood**

We have explored the *Bhāgavata*’s contradictory and ambivalent attitude towards childhood, highlighting the distinctions between the ordinary, fraught, *samsāric* childhood of earthly existence and the eternal and blissful *līlāḥ* of Kṛṣṇa and His young companions. We have also examined a text in which the popular tradition that creates a window into Kṛṣṇa’s eternal, youthful reality through the voices, faces, and performances of local *Brajavāsī* children. The question remains as to whether or not the latter attitude has justification or precedent within the *Bhāgavata* text itself.

There is one more instance of childhood in the *Bhāgavata* that I have not discussed, from the fifth *skandha*. The child in question is barely mentioned; the main character of the story is his father, Ajāmila, a pious *brāhmaṇa* who, after accidentally happening upon a hunter having sex with a courtesan in the forest, is consumed with

lustful thoughts. He takes the courtesan into his household as a servant, and later leaves his wife and family to have children with her. One of his sons, whose name is Nārāyaṇa, becomes Ajāmila’s pride and joy:

“The old man’s heart was attached to that toddler, with his broken sentences, and he took great pleasure in gazing on his childish play.

Whenever he was eating and drinking, he used to feed the boy by offering him food and drink, his heart bound by affection. Passing his life in this way, when the time of death presented itself, the ignorant man fixed his mind on his son- the boy whose name was Nārāyaṇa” (6.1.25-27)

When Ajāmila is on his deathbed, he sees the servants of Yama, the god of death and karmic judgment, coming to drag him to hell for his sins. As described above, Ajāmila cries out for his son, who is playing a distance away (6.1.29). Instantly, the *Viṣṇu-dūtas*, servants of God, stay the hands of Yama’s representatives; he is to be spared his punishment because he has chanted God’s name at the time of death. The *Yama-dūtas* argue against this, citing Ajāmila’s various sins and transgressions of *dharma*. The *Viṣṇu-dūtas* declare that since Ajāmila chanted the Lord’s name “in a helpless condition... which bestows liberation” (6.2.7), even if he did not intend to call out to God, he should be saved. Ajāmila is then spared from death and given a chance to amend his life.

This classic story is oft repeated as an illustration of Viṣṇu’s boundless mercy and grace, as well as the power of the recitation of His holy names, but it is often left out that the factor that led to Ajāmila’s “helpless condition” and surrender, is his love for his unnamed child; it is in many ways the first instance of him espousing an unselfish or loving attitude in the text, which coupled with the divine name is enough to guarantee

him another chance at life, and frees him from hell in death. I interpret this to indicate a subtle balancing of the *Bhāgavata's* two presentations of childhood. On the one hand, children and their rearing are part of a system fueled by earthly desire, problematic for those attempting to achieve pure, selfless love of God. It also suggests that the wholesome, unselfish love that is natural in childhood and parenthood is a shadow, an earthly approximation of the relationships the *jīva* can have with God in Kṛṣṇa's transcendent Goloka Vṛndāvana. For Ajāmila, Śiva, readers of the *Bhāgavata* and audiences of Brajavāsī *rās līlā* dramas alike, childhood embodies both entrapment in the temporary, and a doorway to eternity.

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