

INTRODUCTION

The Sacred Love Story

Dance of Divine Love presents India's classical sacred love story known as the Rāsa Līlā.¹ It is a dramatic poem about young maidens joining with their ideal beloved to perform the wondrous "circle dance of love," or Rāsa. Its story is an expression of the eternal soul's loving union with the supreme deity in "divine play," or Līlā. The Rāsa Līlā is considered the ultimate message of one of India's most treasured scriptures, the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*.²

The narrator of this story tells us that the highest devotional love for God is attained when hearing or reciting the Rāsa Līlā. Undeniably, its charming poetic imagery, combined with deeply resonating devotional motifs, expresses to any reader much about the nature of love. Narrated in eloquently rich and flowing Sanskrit verse, it has been recognized as one of the most beautiful love poems ever written.

A DRAMA OF LOVE

The Rāsa Līlā is set in a sacred realm of enchantment in the land known as Vraja, far beyond the universe, within the highest domain of the heavenly world. This sacred realm also imprints itself onto part of our world as the earthly Vraja, a rural area known as Vraja Maṇḍala ("the circular area of Vraja") in northern India, about eighty miles

1. The four-syllable phrase *Rāsa Līlā* (abbreviated as RL throughout this book) consists of two Sanskrit words pronounced phonetically "Rah-suh Lee-lah" ("ah" as "a" in "father," "uh" as "u" in "sun," and "ee" as in "see"). Definitions of key Sanskrit terms are listed in the glossary. In Hindi, the second short syllable is dropped, resulting in the three-syllable phrase "Rah-s Lee-lah." In Bengali, the second syllable is also dropped, but pronounced "Rah-sh Lee-lah." The specific sacred text known as "Rāsa Līlā" is to be distinguished from the name used for the pilgrimage dramas of Vraja, known in Hindi as *rās līlā*. Note that the distinction is made clear in this work through the presentation of the latter term in lower-case italic letters, with the Hindi spelling. For proper pronunciation of transliterated words from the Sanskrit language used throughout this book, please see the pronunciation table.

2. The words *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* mean "the timeless stories (Purāṇa) about God (Bhāgavata)." The title for this most popular sacred text of India has two variations: *Śrīmad Bhāgavatam* and *Bhāgavata Mahāpurāṇam*. It is often called simply the *Bhāgavata*. Among the eighteen famous Purāṇas, it is considered the most important, as will be discussed below.

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south of the modern capital city of Delhi.³ Vraja is described as a land of idyllic natural beauty, filled with abundant foliage heavy with fruit and bloom, roaming cows, and brightly colored birds singing melodiously. The Rāsa Līlā takes place in the earthly Vraja during the bountiful autumn season, when evenings abound with soothing scents and gentle river breezes. The following is a summary of the five chapters of the Rāsa Līlā story from the *Bhāgavata*'s tenth book.

ONE SPECIAL EVENING, the rising moon reached its fullness with a resplendent glow. Its reddish rays lit up the forest as night-blooming lotus flowers began to unfold. The forest during those nights was decorated profusely with delicate starlike jasmine flowers, resembling the flowing dark hair of goddesses adorned with flower blossoms. So rapturous was this setting that the supreme Lord himself, as Krishna, the eternally youthful cowherd, was compelled to play captivating music on his flute. Moved by this beauteous scene, Krishna was inspired toward love.

Upon hearing the alluring flute music, the cowherd maidens, known as the Gopīs,⁴ who were already in love with Krishna, abruptly left their homes, families, and domestic duties. They ran off to join him in the moonlit forest. Krishna and the Gopīs met and played on the banks of the Yamunā River. When the maidens became proud of his loving attention, however, their beloved Lord suddenly vanished from their sight. The Gopīs searched everywhere for Krishna. Discovering that he had run off with one special maiden, they soon found that she too had been deserted by him. As darkness engulfed the forest, the cowherd maidens gave up their search, singing sweet songs of hope and despair, longing for his return. Then Krishna cleverly reappeared and spoke to them on the nature of love.

The story culminates in the commencement of the Rāsa dance. The Gopīs link arms together, forming a great circle. By divine arrangement, Krishna dances with every cowherd maiden at once, yet each one thinks she is dancing with him alone. Supreme love has now reached its perfect fulfillment and expression through joyous dancing and singing long into the night, in the divine circle of the Rāsa. Retir-

3. Vraja (commonly spelled and pronounced as the Hindi “Braj”) is a region covering approximately 1,450 square miles. At the heart of Vraja is the forest village of Vrindāvana, the home of Krishna, and the city of Mathurā, Krishna’s birthplace. Vrindāvana is located between Delhi and the city of Agra (the home of the Taj Mahal, about 34 miles to the south). Throughout the Rāsa Līlā passage, Vraja is interchangeable with and often refers to Vrindāvana; see RL 1.18–19.

4. *Gopīs* is the plural of *Gopī*, “a female cowherd,” pronounced as the English word “go,” and “-pī,” as the English word “pea.”

ing from the vigorous dancing, Krishna and the Gopīs refresh themselves by bathing in the river. Then, reluctantly, the cowherd maidens return to their homes.

A *FIRST READING* of the story might lead one to believe that an obsessive love and passion for Krishna consumed the cowherd maidens. Their love could appear selfish and irresponsible, perhaps even unethical, as they abandoned their children, husbands, families, and homes. A closer reading, however, reveals the idealized vision of the story intended by its author and embraced and expounded upon by various traditions, in which the passionate love of the Gopīs becomes the model, even the veritable symbol, of the highest, most intense devotion to God.

Contrary interpretations may arise because the vision of God presented herein is intimate, esoteric, and complex, containing elements that are familiar to both Western and Indic religious traditions, as well as those that are unfamiliar. Certainly, one can observe how Krishna is acknowledged within the text as being a sovereign deity—a God of grace who teaches and redeems devoted souls, and who possesses other mighty and divine attributes, characteristics one would expect to find in the divinity of Semitic traditions. But there is a unique vision presented in this dramatic poem—a vision of the inner life of the deity. Here, God is celebrated as an adorable, eternally youthful cowherd boy who plays the flute and delights in amorous dalliance with his dearest devotees.

In Indic traditions, the attainment of God is commonly believed to be achieved through asceticism and renunciation. Yet such an unyielding, self-imposed renunciation for personal spiritual gain is not favored in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, thus contrasting with the greater tradition out of which it arises. Rather, the text promotes renunciation that is naturally occurring and selflessly generated, spontaneously arising out of love. The cowherd maidens are considered to have achieved the perfection of all asceticism and to have attained the highest transcendence simply through their love and passionate devotion to God. This method of attainment is clearly distinct from the rigorous asceticism and ceaseless search for world-denying transcendence for which much of religious India is known.

Even though the divinely erotic tenor of the Rāsa Līlā story has delighted many, it has confused others. Some Western and even Indian interpreters have assumed that the love exhibited between the cowherd women and their beloved Krishna is nothing more than a display

of worldly lust.⁵ The author's intention expressed in the text, however, is quite the contrary—the hearing or reciting of this story, he proclaims, will *free* souls from lust, the “disease of the heart.” Therefore saintly voices from particular traditions within the Hindu complex of religion claim that its erotic imagery is an expression of the intensity and intimacy of divine love, rather than a portrayal of worldly passion. It is only a lack of enculturation and purity of heart on the part of the reader that prevents one from appreciating the Rāsa Līlā as the greatest revelation of love.⁶

Such traditions tell us that the true interpretation of the story requires a certain type of vision, the “eye of pure love,” *premā-netra*, which sees a world permeated by supreme love constantly celebrated by all beings and all of life.⁷ This eye beholds a realm of consummate beauty and bliss, in which both the soul and intimate deity lose themselves in the eternal play of love. *Premā-netra* is said to be attained when the “eye of devotion” is anointed with the “mystical ointment of love,” an ointment that grants a specific vision of the “incomprehensible qualities of the essential form of Krishna.”⁸ These traditions claim that such qualities are revealed through the Rāsa Līlā text, which, with

5. The various interpretations of the Rāsa Līlā story in the West as well as the East have a long and interesting history, not within the scope of this study. My interest here is to prepare the reader for appreciating the rich literary and religious dimensions of the text, and for understanding aspects of the esoteric vision of its drama.

6. The modern exponent of Vaishnavism who spread the tradition worldwide, Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupāda (1896–1977), cautioned outsiders or nonpractitioners in their reading of the stories of Krishna and the Gopīs presented in his volume entitled, *KṚṢṂA: The Supreme Personality of Godhead* (Los Angeles: Bhaktivedanta Book Trust, 1970), p. 188ff., a retelling of the *Bhāgavata*'s tenth book, interpolated with his own grave warnings against misinterpretation. It is important to point out that the Swami presented these stories of the *Bhāgavata* to the modern Western world, a world he encountered as having far more promiscuity than the traditional Indian culture out of which he came. However, he also battled the dark side, within his own culture, of radical heterodox Sahajiyā traditions arising out of Bengal Vaishnavism. Such traditions had been influenced by tantric Buddhist practices, in which practitioners, according to the Swami, lacked “requisite practice and spiritual discipline in devotional love,” *sādhana-bhakti*, and thus the humility for truly understanding the *Bhāgavata*'s stories. At worst, some Sahajiyā sects have attempted, to this day, to reenact the divine acts of Krishna with the Gopīs through sexual rituals. The perception of orthodox Vaishnavas is that Sahajiyā practitioners dwell on the intimate divine acts of God prematurely, taking the teachings cheaply or sentimentally.

7. The phrase *premā-netra* is taken from Krishnadāsa Kavirāja's great biographical and theological exposition, *Caitanya Caritāmṛta* [CC] 1.5.21, in which he describes how the eye of love can comprehend “the manifestations of divine essence,” or *svarūpa-prakāśa*.

8. These phrases and ideas are taken from a verse of the *Shri Brahma-Samhita* (Madras: Sree Gaudiya Math, 1958), v. 5.38. Translations are mine. The *Brahmā Samhitā* (BrS) was discovered in south India and canonized by the bhakti saint Caitanya in the sixteenth century. Caitanya's discovery of the BrS is related in CC 2.9.237–241.



Figure 2. The village of Barsānā surrounded by beautiful Vraja landscape.
Photograph courtesy of Helmut Kappel.

its sensuous spirituality and innocent playfulness set in alluring poetic verse, ever beckons and attracts souls to enter into its drama.

This is the vision of saints, which I myself do not claim to possess. As one who is Western-born and trained in the academic study of religion, having had the privilege of living in India among saintly practitioners and participating with them in devotional practices, however, I am perhaps in a position to present this work to those both outside and within these traditions. My intention is to illuminate a particular tradition's special vision of such an important text, thereby facilitating further dialogue with other world traditions of theistic mysticism.

This work, then, explores a vision of intimacy with the supreme deity as presented by the *Rāsa Līlā* text and elaborated upon by recognized sages possessing this eye of love. The translation of the story, found at the heart of the book, is intended to be literal and faithful, striving to capture some of the exquisite poetic beauty and profound theological expression of the original. Within the introductory and commentarial sections that frame the translation, deeper or more hidden meanings of its verses are presented through general discussion and specific verse comments. It is hoped that these key teachings and traditional commentaries, from one of the most influential traditions interpreting the text, will enrich the reading of this masterpiece of world literature and enhance its appreciation.

SACRED LOVE STORIES

Among all love stories of the world, only a few are considered divine revelation. Certain mystical traditions honor a particular love story as their ultimate vision of supreme love. These stories exhibit erotic longings, often in the feminine voice, as can be observed in the following similar expressions of passion presented in two very different scriptural texts, the first biblical and the second purāṇic: “Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth!” (Song of Solomon 1.2), and “Please bestow upon us the nectar of your lips!” (Rāsa Līlā 3.14). These explicitly romantic expressions have been perceived as the voice of the soul in its passionate yearning for the divine. Devout mystics and saintly persons have shown, through their own elaborate worship and interpretation of these stories, that the desire to love God intimately and passionately lies deeply within the human heart. These special stories can thus be called sacred love stories.

God as the divine lover is not as foreign to us in the West as perhaps we might assume. According to a sociological study conducted several years ago, a surprising 45 percent of Americans can “imagine God as a lover.”⁹ Intimate love of the deity, therefore, is apparently neither remote nor uncommon, nor is it seen as existing only in the past among people of different cultures and distant places. That its presence is concealed may be due to the confidential nature of the experience of intimacy in relation to the sacred; perhaps the phenomenon is preserved at an understated and private level of human religious experience. Though it would be impossible to determine the pervasiveness of this religious phenomenon, or the type and depth of experience, it is clear that humans throughout the ages have desired intimacy with the divine.

Sacred love stories, in many ways, appear to present the passionate love shared between a lover and a beloved. They disclose explicit conceptions or allegorical depictions of a transcendent realm of love, in which a supreme deity and affectionate counterpart—either a devout soul or divine personage—join together in various phases of amor-

9. See Wade Clark Roof and Jennifer L. Roof, “Images of God among Americans,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 23, no. 2 (June 1984): 201–205. The summarized results of this study received attention from the popular magazine *Psychology Today* (June 1985): 12, and the nationwide newspaper *USA Today* (May 30, 1985). The latter focused specifically on the content of “God as a lover” from *Psychology Today*, which was highlighted in its section called “Life,” under “Lifeline: A Quick Read on What People Are Talking About.”

ous, even erotic intimacy. The purest and highest attainable love associated with these stories occurs only when the recipient of the soul's exclusive devotion is the supreme Beloved. Such stories have inspired the human heart to reach for superlative and pure expressions of love. It is not surprising that generations of religious writers, in numerous works, have developed and embellished essential themes drawn directly from these sacred stories.

In the Western world, the biblical book *Song of Solomon*, also known as the *Song of Songs*, relating the passionate love between a king and queen, has been regarded by many as a sacred love story.¹⁰ This story has become foundational for various forms of Jewish mysticism, such as the Kabbalah. The rich and erotic words of the *Song* reveal the union of lover and beloved who symbolize, for these traditions, the divine "queen" and "king" within the godhead. Additionally, the *Song of Solomon* has been a profound source of inspiration for Catholic love mysticism and Christian piety in general. The feminine and masculine voices of the text have represented the loving relationship between the soul and God, respectively, in which the soul becomes the "bride" and Christ the divine "bridegroom."

Similarly, traditions of Islamic love mysticism have drawn upon an ancient Arabic tale that allegorizes the soul's capacity to be utterly intoxicated with love for God. The story of Layla and Majnun describes Majnun's uncontainable madness of affection for his beloved Layla, from early boyhood throughout his life, and even beyond life.¹¹ Although there has never been complete agreement on the sacred value or degree of holiness of these particular love stories, often because of the explicit sensuality and erotic imagery of their content, there is no doubt that powerful traditions of love mysticism have based their religious visions on such texts. Sacred love stories are indeed stories of romance and passion, but they are often seen as much more than that. They are regarded by many as sacred expressions of the innermost self that can lift the human spirit into the highest realms of intimacy with the deity.

10. The *Song of Songs* is readily accessible in any complete translation of the Hebrew Bible. It has also received scholarly attention as a text apart from its biblical context, and one finds, to this day, attempts to translate its especially rich poetry into English. For example, see *The Song of Songs: A New Translation*, by Ariel Bloch and Chana Bloch (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995) with elaborate introduction and commentary to the text; and *The Song of Songs: A New Translation*, by Marcia Falk (San Francisco: Harper, 1990) with illustrations and introduction to the translation. Both editions present the original text in Hebrew script.

11. See Nizami's *The Story of Layla and Majnun*, translated from the Persian and edited by Dr. Rudolf Gelpke (New Lebanon, N.Y.: Omega Publications, 1997).

INDIA'S SONG OF SONGS

The love poem of the Rāsa Līlā could easily be regarded as the “Song of Songs” of ancient India. Several Vaishnava sects—those traditions within the Hindu complex of religion whose worship is centered upon the supreme deity Vishnu, also known as Krishna—single out the story of the Rāsa Līlā, claiming it to be the essence of all *līlās*.¹² As the Song of Solomon has been elevated to the highest status above all other biblical books by many Jewish and Christian mystics, and thus has become known as the “Song of Songs,” the Rāsa Līlā also has been honored as the “essence of all *līlās*” and the “crown-jewel of all acts of God” by several Vaishnava traditions, for which it functions as the ultimate revelation of divine love.¹³

The enchanting Rāsa Līlā has had great influence on the culture and religion of India, perhaps even more than the Song of Songs has had on the Western world. For over a thousand years, poets and dramatists have continually told its story, often creating new stories that expand upon particular themes of the Rāsa Līlā. Artists and dancers from a variety of classical Indian schools have attempted to capture the beauty and excitement of various events within the story through pictorial renderings and interpretative dance performances. In modern times, in the West and in India, literary and artistic creations continue to be generated directly from this great work. The passionate love of the Gopīs for their beloved Lord Krishna has epitomized sacred love in Indian civilization, and to this day provides the richest source of poetic and religious inspiration for Hindu love mysticism.

Another Sanskrit love poem, the *Gīta Govinda* or “Song of Govinda,” by Jayadeva, has been referred to as the song of songs of India by some Indian and Western scholars.¹⁴ This twelfth-century work concerning Govinda, who is Krishna, and his most beloved Gopī,

12. The Vaishnava sects of Vallabha, Caitanya, and Rādhāvallabha celebrate the Rāsa Līlā as the greatest *līlā*.

13. Krishnadāsa Kavirāja uses the words *līlā-sāra* (“essence of *līlās*”) to describe the RL in C 2.21.44. Viśvanātha Cakravartin describes the Rāsa Līlā as *sarva-līlā-cūḍa-maṇi* in his commentary to the first verse of the RL.

14. The first translation of Jayadeva’s work was by the nineteenth-century British scholar Sir Edwin Arnold, and its title clearly makes the claim: *The Indian Song of Songs* (London, 1875). Indian scholars have echoed Arnold’s claim and accepted this work’s association with the biblical text; see *Kangra Paintings of the Gīta Govinda*, by M. S. Randhawa (Delhi: National Museum, 1963), p. 13. Western scholars of the Song of Solomon have also drawn parallels between the two works. See *Song of Songs: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, by Marvin H. Pope (New York: Doubleday, 1977), especially the section entitled “Gita-Govinda, the So-Called ‘Indian Song of Songs,’” pp. 85–89.

Rādhā, presents a tempting parallel to the Song because of the singular hero and heroine between whom a passionate love tale ensues. By contrast, the Rāsa Līlā portrays a group of heroines, though there is special attention given in one chapter to a favored Gopī, who is assumed by some Vaishnava sects to be Rādhā.¹⁵ Furthermore, the Rāsa Līlā does not reach the erotic intensity of the *Gīta Govinda* and the Song of Songs. Whereas the general tone of the Rāsa Līlā is more amorous or romantic, the overall tone of both the Song and Jayadeva's work is considerably more sensuous, if not explicitly or metaphorically sexual.

Despite these similarities of Jayadeva's work to the biblical song, the Rāsa Līlā deserves recognition as India's song of songs in light of its literary-historical and scriptural parallels. Historically, the *Gīta Govinda* appears centuries later than the *Bhāgavata*. In fact, the Rāsa Līlā is referred to repeatedly in a refrain within the second part of Jayadeva's story (vv. 2–9). Similarly, the Song of Solomon functions as the source of much literary activity, as we find with the Spanish mystic poet, John of the Cross, who himself derived direct inspiration from the Song for his poetry describing the spiritual marriage of the soul and Christ.

The Song of Solomon has had significant influence on Western religious traditions, especially on Jewish and Catholic forms of mysticism, in which it has received unmatched attention. The Rāsa Līlā has also had widespread cultural and religious recognition, particularly within certain bhakti or devotional traditions of Vaishnavism. Whereas appreciation of the *Gīta Govinda* has been primarily concentrated in eastern regions of India such as the states of Bengal and Orissa, the Rāsa Līlā has had a pan-Indian presence.

Perhaps the most compelling argument for claiming the Rāsa Līlā to be India's song of songs would be the powerfully supportive scriptural contexts in which each text is found. Although Jayadeva's poem is directly inspired by the *Bhāgavata*, it is an independent poem, lacking the greater literary and scriptural context that the *Bhāgavata* and the Hebrew Bible provide for the Rāsa Līlā and the Song of Solomon, respectively.¹⁶ One could argue that the biblical Song is perhaps even more dependent upon its context than the Rāsa Līlā is on its scriptural setting, because of the absence of any explicit religious statements in

15. The *Gīta Govinda* is the first text to powerfully establish the name, identity, and role of Rādhā as Krishna's favorite Gopī, stimulating a great deal of later poetic activity, as well as influencing the way viewers and readers perceive Rādhā's role in the RL text itself.

16. The *Gīta Govinda* compensates for a lack of scriptural context or authority by providing a theological introduction: the first chapter is devoted primarily to singing the praises of the various "divine descents," or *avatāra* forms, of Krishna and Vishnu.



Figure 3. Ivory miniature painting of Rādhā and Krishna. Artist unknown; from the private collection of the author.

the Song. The story line of the Rāsa Līlā, on the other hand, is a continuation of earlier events from within the greater *Bhāgavata* story, and there is notable material prior and subsequent to the Rāsa Līlā that anticipates or reflects upon its story. Moreover, much of the theological content of the *Bhāgavata* and references to many of its surrounding stories are engaged within the Rāsa Līlā itself.

It is on the basis of this dependence on context that the poetic love story of the Rāsa Līlā gains, as does the Song of Songs, its sacred aura and religious authority. Furthermore, each text, as a rarified sacred love story, has become the jewel in the center of its own scriptural setting. In light of these significant parallels, the Rāsa Līlā may truly be considered the song of songs of India.

BHĀGAVATA AS THE ULTIMATE SCRIPTURE

There are eighteen Purāṇas, or collections of “ancient stories,” and Indian and Western scholars alike have recognized that among them, the *Bhāgavata* stands out. Dozens of traditional commentaries have been written on the *Bhāgavata*, whereas other Purāṇas have received just one or two, if any.¹⁷ The *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* (BhP) itself declares that it is “the Purāṇa without imperfection” (*amala purāṇa*) and the most excellent of all Purāṇas.¹⁸

Modern Indian scholars acknowledge the greatness of the text. S. K. De writes that “The *Bhāgavata* is thus one of the most remarkable mediaeval documents of mystical and passionate religious devotion, its eroticism and poetry bringing back warmth and colour into religious life.”¹⁹ Specifically referring to the tenth book of the *Bhāgavata*, A. K. Majumdar states: “the most distinguishing feature of the *Bh.P.* is the tenth canto which deals with the life of Kṛṣṇa, and includes the *rāsa-līlā*, which is unique in our religious literature.”²⁰ Western scholars have also identified the synthetic nature of the text. Daniel H. H. Ingalls writes: “The *Bhāgavata* draws from all classes, as it does from all of India’s intellectual traditions. It does this without being at all

17. Edwin F. Bryant, in his introduction to his translation of the tenth book of the *Bhāgavata*, has counted as many as eighty-one currently available commentaries on this part of the text. See his work *Krishna: The Beautiful Legend of God* (New York: Penguin, 2004), p. xii.

18. See BhP 12.13.17–18.

19. S. K. De, *Early History of the Vaiṣṇava Faith and Movement in Bengal* (Calcutta: Firma K. L. Mukhopadhyaya, 1961), p. 7.

20. A. K. Majumdar, *Caitanya: His Life and Doctrine* (Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1969), p. 35.

interested in social questions and interested in intellectual questions only so far as they may illustrate or fortify its doctrine of love. What is important to the *Bhāgavata* is to feel God, to be moved by Him.”²¹

The compelling text of this Purāṇa presents a rich tapestry of diverse forms of ancient Indian theological discourse, social thought, and literature, all of which support its evolved doctrine of devotion. More than any other Purāṇa, it engages much that comes before it by elaborating upon philosophical themes and stories of religious India, drawing from both northern and southern traditional cultures, as well as from great scriptures dated as early as the Vedas (circa 3000–1200 B.C.E.), India’s oldest and foundational scriptures.²² Indeed, the *Bhāgavata* has been regarded as the quintessential scripture: “The very essential core (*sāraṁ sāraṁ*) of all of the Vedas and all of the histories has been collected [in the *Bhāgavata*]” (CC 2.25.145).

The challenge of dating the *Bhāgavata* brings out some of the text’s literary characteristics. The precise date of its complete formation has been difficult to ascertain, since the *Bhāgavata* re-presents much of what has already come before it.²³ Whereas scholars have often pointed to the seventh or ninth century C.E. as periods during which either portions of the text or the complete work appeared in its present written form, the text has also been dated to as early as the fourth century. Moreover, the *Bhāgavata* records layers of narrations that were initially orally transmitted. This is not surprising, since India is known for its rich oral literary traditions, beginning with the Vedas themselves, which were preserved and handed down by priestly families for many generations.

Devout Hindus see the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* as an eternal revelation; yet the text itself presents a description of how it came into exist-

21. Daniel H. H. Ingalls in his foreword to *The Divinity of Krishna*, by Noel Sheth, S.J. (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1984), p. xii.

22. See BhP 1.1.3. Friedhelm Hardy considers the *Bhāgavata* “an opus universale,” a special purāṇic text that blends the poetic sense and intense devotional expression from southern Tamil culture with philosophical themes of the Upanishads and Vedānta, and the dharmic social system of the north. See his work *Viraha Bhakti: The Early History of Kṛṣṇa Devotion in South India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983), pp. 489ff.

23. It is interesting to note that as early as the second century C.E., the Rāsa dance of Krishna has been described in the South Indian text known as the *Cilappatikāram* by Iḷaṅkō Aṭikaḷ. See canto 17 entitled, “The Round Dance of the Herdswomen” in *The Cilappatikāram of Iḷaṅkō Aṭikaḷ, An Epic of South India*, translated, with an introduction and postscript, by R. Parthasarathy (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), pp. 170–178. For a recent study critically reviewing the complex issues surrounding the dating of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, see Edwin F. Bryant’s lucid article, “The Date and Provenance of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* and the Vaiṣṇava Perumāḷ Temple,” *Journal of Vaishnava Studies* 11, no. 1 (Fall 2002): 51–80.

tence.²⁴ The sage Vyāsa, whose name means “compiler,” became despondent due to a lack of fulfillment, even after compiling the great literatures of India such as the Vedas, the *Mahābhārata*, and others.²⁵ He turned to his teacher, the renowned sage Nārada, and expressed his utter dissatisfaction. Nārada addressed his disciple’s frustration by explaining to Vyāsa that although he had delineated the “ultimate purposes of human life” (*puruṣārtha*), he had yet to describe the greatness of Krishna. Thus the *Bhāgavata* is a text that is thought of as completing the task of compiling the scriptures, by crowning them with the full theology of Vishnu or Krishna. Certainly there is no other scriptural text that presents this theology so comprehensively. The teachers of the sixteenth-century bhakti school founded by the mystic and revivalist Caitanya express the superiority of the text over that of all other sacred Indian texts, collectively referred to in the following as the Vedas: “The *Bhāgavata* describes the essential nature of Krishna, bhakti, and the relationship to God (*rasa*). Therefore its greatness is supreme among Vedic scriptures” (CC 2.25.150).

Much of the *Bhāgavata* is a “compilation” of earlier texts, but not merely that. The works engaged by the *Bhāgavata* are refined versions of previous materials, incorporating the highly evolved theology of Vishnu, and this is certainly the case with the Rāsa Līlā story. This act of literary refinement and re-vision is expressed toward the very beginning of the *Bhāgavata*, in a verse that depicts the text as the “ripened fruit” of the wish-granting tree of all Vedic literature.²⁶ The name of the primary narrator of the text, Śuka, meaning “parrot,” holds special significance here. Vyāsa’s compiled stories are narrated by Śuka, his son, which causes them to become especially refined and sweet, just as it is believed that a parrot makes the juice of a mango sweeter, once it has sliced the fruit with its beak. Also, parrots are known to repeat faithfully what they hear, and similarly, Śuka faithfully retells the stories he has heard.²⁷

24. For the *Bhāgavata*’s account of why it was written, see BhP 1.5.2–9.

25. Vyāsa is known for compiling sacred texts, especially the Vedas, the oldest and most authoritative scripture of India, perhaps the oldest scriptural text in the world. Among the four parts of the Vedas, the *R̥g Veda* is the best known, appreciated for its Sanskrit hymns praising sacrificial practices, philosophical musings, and devotional expression.

26. “The ripened fruit (*galitam phalam*) of / the wish-granting tree of the Vedas / Has perfectly culminated in the flow / of nectar (*amṛta-druva*) from the mouth of Śuka. / You drink the juice (*rasa*) of this fruit constantly, / which is the *Bhāgavata*, the ultimate abode—/ Ah, for you appreciate what is tasteful (*rasikāḥ*) / and possess a sense for what is beautiful (*bhāvukāḥ*) in this world” (BhP 1.1.3).

27. For more information on the significance of Śuka as a transmitter within Hindu traditions, see Wendy Doniger’s “Echoes of the Mahābhārata: Why Is a Parrot the Narrator

This finer, more pleasing result produced by the parrotlike effect of Śuka's narrations is readily observable when comparing other purāṇic versions of Krishna's dalliance with the cowherd women to the *Bhāgavata's* presentation. Śuka's vision combines some essential Krishna-Gopī themes found in three other versions: the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa*, *Brahma Purāṇa*, and *Harivaṁśa* texts. The verses in the *Viṣṇu* and *Brahma* Purāṇas that parallel the *Bhāgavata's* Rāsa Līlā actually include the event of the Rāsa dance, whereas the *Harivaṁśa* does not, although it clearly shares other scenes and motifs of the story. All three versions are similar to the *Bhāgavata* in dramatic content and utilize, in places, similar and even the same vocabulary. But the story's finest imagery and poetic rendition are found in the *Bhāgavata* version.²⁸

As mentioned above, the *Bhāgavata's* Rāsa Līlā reflects several of the literary and theological features of the greater *Bhāgavata*, a context that is lacking in the three counterpart versions. It is no wonder that this text has been preferred by later Vaishnava sects (those following Vallabha, Caitanya, and Rādhāvallabha). The dramatic tone and content of the *Bhāgavata* story embellish the erotic presentation of the *Harivaṁśa* and further develop the theological apologia of the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa*, thus combining and engaging aspects from both, resulting in a far richer text. The effect, then, of Śuka's parrotlike narration on the *Bhāgavata's* Rāsa Līlā is a substantially more developed story that is the most eloquent, dramatic, and theologically sophisticated of the four versions.

We have seen that the Vaishnava teachers regarded the Rāsa Līlā as their "song of songs," the most important and elevated passage of the *Bhāgavata*. We may ask, does the *Bhāgavata* text itself enthrone the Rāsa Līlā passage as the *līlā* of all *līlās*? Are the Vaishnava interpreters of the text correct in thinking that the *Bhāgavata* regards the Rāsa Līlā in this way, or is their appreciation doctrinally driven? I will present, in the "Textual Illuminations" and "Notes and Comments" sections of

of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* and the *Devī Bhāgavata*?" in *Purāṇa Perennis: Reciprocity and Transformation in Hindu and Jaina Texts*, edited by Wendy Doniger (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993).

28. See treatment of first verse in Notes and Comments to RL 1.1 for a comparison of the first verse of the *Bhāgavata* to the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* and *Harivaṁśa* versions. Clearly, a measure of vocabulary and imagery is shared by all three. A synoptic analysis of these versions brings out much of what is unique about the *Bhāgavata's* presentation (see appendix 3, "Synoptic Analysis of Rāsa Līlā").

this work, compelling indications, both literary and theological, that the *Bhāgavata* indeed elevates the Rāsa Līlā to an ultimate status within its vast text.

Let us consider the major literary indications pointing to the Rāsa Līlā's special status. First, the poetic language and style of the text are distinctive. Second, no other story within the *Bhāgavata* resembles a drama as does the Rāsa story, and though its drama clearly fits into the greater text of which it is a part, it also has the ability to stand independently, as one would expect of a Sanskrit romantic drama. Furthermore, the tight dramatic structure stretching over an unusually lengthy five contiguous chapters is, again, a unique feature among all *līlās* of the *Bhāgavata*. Third, as has been mentioned, "framing" passages placed before the story anticipate and lead up to the text, and those that follow remember and invoke the significance of the *līlā*. These passages may be a single verse (inside and outside of the tenth book), or partial and even whole chapters (within the tenth book), prior to or following the five-chapter story. No other episode in the *Bhāgavata* has received this type of elaborate framing. Moreover, the characters of the hero and heroines are developed prior to the story, and their interactions within the episode reach heights not achieved prior to or following the Rāsa event. Finally, throughout the passage as many as eighteen other *līlās* from within the *Bhāgavata* are recalled, a rare occurrence in any *līlā*.

Unique theological features also indicate the special status of the Rāsa Līlā. The first and last verses of the piece launch and cap off its story with dramatic indications. Krishna takes full refuge in the Goddess in the first verse, which is unprecedented in the greater *Bhāgavata* text, and the author states in the final benedictory verse that the "highest devotion" is achieved by hearing or reciting this story, a benediction that is not offered anywhere else. Additionally, the *Bhāgavata* presents many great devotees of Krishna, but none receives the same level of recognition and praise in the text as the cowherd maidens of Vraja, whose love and sacrifice even amaze Krishna himself. They are depicted as master *yoginīs* who are capable of embracing God within their hearts, their devotion excelled by no one. Furthermore, among all the Gopī passages of the *Bhāgavata*'s tenth book, the Rāsa Līlā drama introduces and tells the tale of the special singular Gopī, identified by the Caitanya school as Rādhā, Krishna's dearest consort. This favored cowherd maiden is revisited only once more, seventeen chapters later (BhP 10.47), where her soliloquy to the black bee is presented. Clearly,

the *Bhāgavata*, through these and other theological and literary features of the text, deliberately establishes the Rāsa Līlā as the very center of its work, celebrated as such by many Vaishnava traditions.

SACRED CONTEXT OF THE RĀSA LĪLĀ

The *Bhāgavata*'s Sanskrit text contains 335 chapters, consisting of sacred stories, philosophical discourse, and epic poetry that all respond to the essential question of what one is to do to prepare for death.²⁹ Of the twelve books forming the *Bhāgavata*, the tenth and longest book comprises ninety chapters, including the five chapters of the Rāsa Līlā (chapters 29–33). This is the most famous and widely read of the books, particularly known for its descriptions of Krishna's youthful *līlās* in Vraja.

The *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* presents a dialogue between the sage Śuka and a king named Parīkṣit, which addresses the question of how to prepare for death. The text possesses a complex narrative structure consisting of three layers. The authorial first voice, as we have seen, is understood to be that of Vyāsa. The work opens by introducing the voice of the general narrator, the sage Sūta, as he addresses a gathering of holy men in the Naimiṣa forest, delivering the outer narrative shell. Sūta in turn narrates the vision of the narrator of the *Bhāgavata* stories themselves, the sage Śuka. Thus, the first narrative is by Vyāsa, who reveals the dialogue between Sūta and the sages assembled at Naimiṣa. And the second narrative is by Sūta, who reveals the dialogue between Śuka and King Parīkṣit. Within this second narrative frame, we learn about the king, whose death is imminent due to a curse from a small boy. The story goes as follows:

THE RENOWNED KING Parīkṣit, while searching for water in the forest, came across a great sage deeply immersed in meditation. The king requested water from the sage, but received no response. Feeling resentful, he picked up a nearby dead snake with his bow, and angrily draped the snake over the shoulder of the sage. The son of the sage, infuriated upon hearing how the king had insulted his father, cursed the king to die in just seven days from the poisonous bite of a fanciful snake-bird.

29. For a scholarly treatment on the theme of death in the *Bhāgavata*, see E. H. Rick Jarow's book *Tales for the Dying: The Death Narrative of the Bhāgavata-Purāṇa* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003).

The king, feeling remorseful, accepted the curse as his fate and seated himself on the bank of a holy river. Soon, many renowned sages arrived, for he was a much-loved king. After greeting them, the king said, “Let the snake-bird bite me at once. I desire only that all of you continue reciting the glorious divine acts of Lord Vishnu.”³⁰ Inquiring from the sages about the highest perfection of life, he asked, “What is the duty of one who is about to die?”³¹ The beautiful young sage known as Śuka, son of Vyāsa, praised the king for his inquiry, and offered an explanation that points to an essential message of the *Bhāgavata*: a long life wasted in ignorant activity is useless compared to a short life utilized in achieving the ultimate spiritual goal.³²

THE THIRD NARRATIVE, then, constitutes the greater part of the *Bhāgavata* text. Here, Śuka responds to the seminal question of the king concerning how to prepare for death. Throughout the *Bhāgavata*, Śuka narrates stories to and converses with Parīkṣit, the king, who is in the submissive role of Śuka’s student. The *Rāsa Līlā* also opens with Śuka as the narrator, and his voice is heard in each act of the drama.

Most of the stories or narrations of the *Bhāgavata* begin with an introductory line preceding the opening verse (that is, just before the first quarter line of the poetically metered verses), and the *Rāsa Līlā* is no exception. Directly preceding the first verse of the drama are the words, *śrī-bādarāyaṇir uvāca*, “the illustrious Bādarāyaṇi spoke.”³³ Here, Śuka is introduced by the name Bādarāyaṇi, which appears only once, to inform the reader that Śuka is the son of Bādarāyaṇa, another name for Vyāsa.³⁴ Therefore, Śuka is not only a sage recognized by the king and assembly of sages accompanying him; he is also the son of the divinely empowered Vyāsa, the compiler of the *Bhāgavata*, granting even greater authority to his narration.

The vision that Śuka shares with his student, King Parīkṣit, is not only what he sees but also his interpretation of what he sees. When Śuka reveals the poetic narrative and descriptions of the *Rāsa Līlā*, he acts as a bard and sage, whereas when he discusses and reflects upon the stories, he acts as the interpreting theologian. The conversation

30. BhP 1.19.15.

31. BhP 1.19.37.

32. BhP 2.1.12.

33. The reader may consult the complete transliterated text of the *Rāsa Līlā* in the section titled “The Sanskrit Text,” toward the end of this book.

34. Only some editions of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* introduce Śuka as Bādarāyaṇi in the *Rāsa Līlā* passage. Other editions simply introduce him as Śuka.

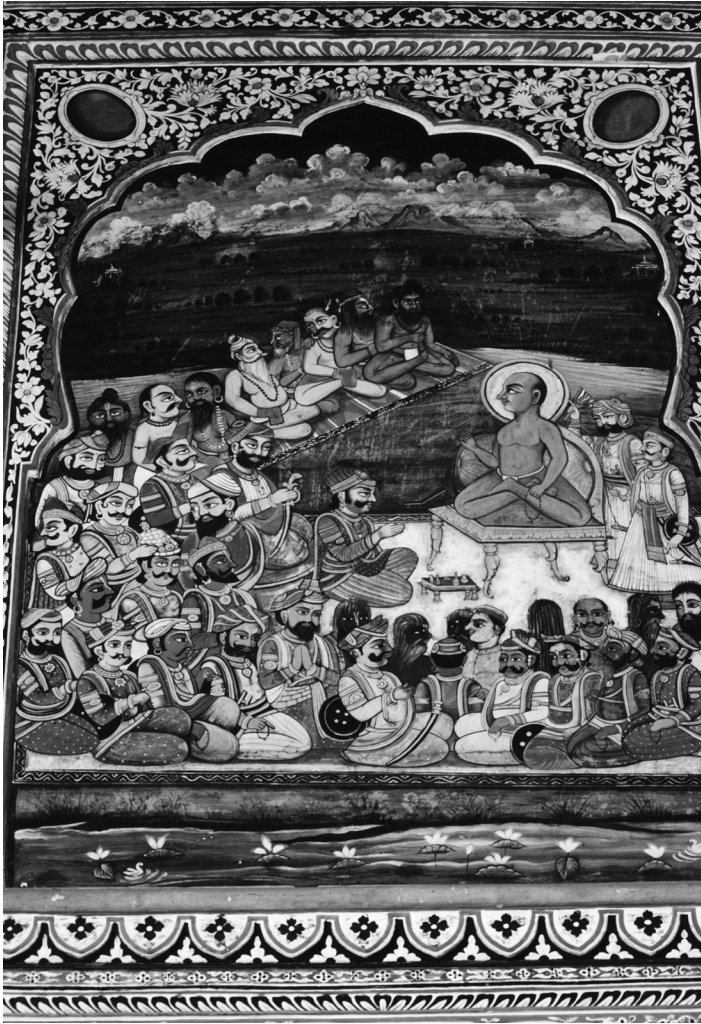


Figure 4. Wall painting of Śuka narrating the *Bhāgavata*'s Rāsa Līlā to the King and Gathered Sages. From Gopīnāthjī Temple, Jaipur. Photograph by the author.

between Śuka and the king is in turn being narrated by Sūta to an audience consisting of Śaunaka and his group of sages. Sūta and Śaunaka's conversation is obviously narrated, as well, by the original narrator and author, Vyāsa. Effectively, then, the Rāsa Līlā is delivered to the reader through telescoping narratives; it is a multilayered conversation within which narrations of other conversations are taking place.

Before exploring the many other remarkable features of this literary masterpiece in greater detail, I will introduce the translation of the dramatic poem itself, so that the reader may experience a fresh encounter of its plot and imagery. Following the translation, further mediation or guidance will be offered in the "Textual Illuminations," as well as the "Notes and Comments" portions of this book. The translation is presented as a freestanding drama, with chapters 29 through 33 from the tenth book of the *Bhāgavata* now appearing as acts 1 through 5 within the drama, each act containing various scenes.

Following the Rāsa Līlā translation are translations of two famous passages concerning the cowherd maidens. These episodes frame the Rāsa story, one prior to and the other following it. The first is the chapter known as "Song of the Flute" (Veṇu Gīta), in which the Gopīs describe the power and beauty of Krishna's divine flute music. It is appropriate that this passage should appear before the Rāsa Līlā in the *Bhāgavata*, since it is the flute music that awakens the maidens' loving self-surrender at the beginning of the story, initiating the unfolding of the plot. The second translation is called "Song of the Black Bee" (Bhramara Gīta), a portion of a chapter that expresses loss and love in separation from Krishna. It is famous for its description of the special Gopī, identified as Rādhā, who speaks to a black bee in loving madness.