

TEXT, CONTEXT, AND INTERPRETATION: THE QUESTION OF KRSNA'S IDENTITY

Dr. Pratik Kumar

Fellow, Prime Ministers Museum and Library,
Teen Murti Bhavan, Teen Murti Marg, New Delhi, 110011

DOI: 10.46609/IJSSER.2023.v08i08.006 URL: <https://doi.org/10.46609/IJSSER.2023.v08i08.006>

Received: 25 July 2023 / Accepted: 11 August 2023 / Published: 20 August 2023

ABSTRACT

The character of Krsna has many layers to explore and interpret. Almost anywhere in India, Krsna has left his imprint. For many of us, Krsna is not a god but a god in disguise of a human, performing different roles and rituals. He holds numerous epithets, such as the splendid king reigning over the kingdom of Dvaraka,¹ a statesman and diplomat in the struggle between the Paṇḍava and Kaurava, an orator who sang immortal *Bhagavad Gita*, a lover boy surrounded by *gopis*, a cowherd boy performing various kinds of *ras lilas*, a butter theft, and many more epithets. This article seeks to explore how Krsna has been portrayed in early literature.

Keywords: Dvaraka, Ras lilas, Bala lila, Gopis, Krsnaism, Krsnayoniḥ, Krsnagarbha, Drapsa

Introduction

Krsna is the most popular and beloved god in Hinduism. He is considered to be an incarnation of the Vedic deity Visnu. In spite of having an incarnation theory, Krsna remains obscure for many historians and scholars. This is partly because of his multiple names and pervasive personality. The overlapping identities of Krsna sometimes make it difficult to establish his identity. The scholars have laid emphasis on the name of Krsna, as the literature available to us reflects him with multiple epithets. The variation in presenting his character performing *bala lila* to *rasa lila* points towards the fact that Krsna is a subject of interest among the scholars. The question over his name was certainly silent prior to the writings of Western scholars, who came up with an idea to delineate this dilemma over his name. Was Krsna of the *Mahabharata* and the Puraṇas and one who delivered the preaching of the *Bhagavadgita*, is the same Vasudeva, the Yadava hero, who is known to us as an incarnation of Visnu.

Krsna is known to us as a central character of the *Mahabharata*, *Bhagavata*, and *Viṣṇu Purāṇa*, and the *Bhagavad-Gita*. The *lilas* of his life are well documented in these works of Sanskrit

literature. A divine hero, supreme power, butter thief, and flute player of *Bhagavata Purana*; an erotic personality in pursuit of pleasure in Jayadeva's *Gitagovind*; and a philosopher, King of *Bhagavad-Gita*, are presented as a diplomat and a friendly charioteer giving counsel to Arjuna in the *Mahabharata*. He is universally loved and venerated to the extent that he is most popular among the performing artists and largely presented in the folk literature of India.

The speculation about the antecedent of Krsna and the question of whether the Krsna of Mathura, Gopala of Vrndavana, and Vasudeva Krsna of Dvaraka are the different historical personalities or one and the same have become a subject of debate. The identity of one of the most conspicuous Hindu deities whose historicity remains obscure can be traced to the Vedic period. Krsna is not completely unknown in Vedic literature. His name appears in literature, but not as a heroic figure known for his charisma and divinities but as a sage who is said to have composed a hymn.ⁱⁱ He was the father of Visvaka and grandfather of Visnapu. The available verse from the *Rg Veda* says:

“To the son of Krsna, (who) supplicated you, praised you, O Nasatyas, by your power, like a lost animal, gave back to see, Visnapu to Visvaka.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Thus, the evidence related to the early life and actions of Krsna have provoked endless polemics. Although his name first appears in the *Rg Veda*, establishing it empirically that he is the same Krsna of the *Mahabharata* is a difficult task. The *Chandogya Upanisad* furnishes the earliest reference to Krsna as a Devakiputra and pupil of Ghora Āngirasa, and the *Mahabharata* furnishes similar views in regard to his parentage. The similarity of name and parentage, i.e., Devaki as a mother, has led scholars to conclude that Krsna of the *Chandogya Upanisad* and the *Mahabharata* are the same personage. H.T. Colebrooke was the first to recognize this idea^{iv} and later, the same line of argument was followed by Albrecht Weber in 1852.^v However, Auguste Barth was the first to refute this idea and called the passage citing Krsna in the *Chandogya Upanisad* as euhemerism.^{vi} Despite Barth's strong resistance, the identity of two Krsnas was accepted by Hopkins, Max Muller, Winternitz, Grierson, and Jacobi.^{vii}

The *Kausitaki Brahmana* also provides a reference to Krsna.^{viii} Macdonell and Keith suggest that Krsna of the *Rg Veda* and the one referred to in *Kausitaki Brahmana* as Krsna Angirasa are identical.^{ix} Some of the more interesting and noticeable writings on Krsna's identity came from the medieval Hindu commentators of *Rg Veda*. Sayana, a medieval Hindu commentator, identified Krsna with a demon killed by Indra. Many scholars further built their argument on Sayana's interpretation and attempted to colour it in terms of the struggle between the oncoming Aryans and the resistant forces of the indigenous peoples. M. Langlois, in his translation of the *Rg Veda*, follows this interpretation.^x However, Wilson accepts the idea of struggle.^{xi} Griffith, who wrote a complete translation of the *Rg Veda* in 1889, deviates from it.^{xii} Sayana in his

commentary explained the term *Krsnagarbha* from the text as foetuses in the pregnant women of the *asura* Krsna.^{xiii} This was meant to support the notion that a battle took place between Aryans and non-Aryans. But Skandasvamin, another commentator on the text, interprets *Krsnagarbha* as fortified places.^{xiv} This interpretation was also accepted and discussed by D.D. Kosambi in his book *An Introduction to the Study of Indian History*, who wrote:

‘The Strongholds shattered by Indra are occasionally described as *Krsnagarbha*, bearing black (people) in the womb.’^{xv}

Even before Kosambi, S. Radhakrishnan wrote in his *Indian Philosophy*

Another foe of Indira in the period of the *R̥g Veda*, was *Krishṇa*, the deified hero of a tribe called the *Krishṇas*. The verse reads: “The fleet *Krishṇa* lived on the banks of the *Aṃsumati* (*Jumna*) river with ten thousand troops. Indra of his own wisdom became cognizant of this loud-yelling chief. He destroyed the marauding host for our benefit.” (8.85.13-15) This is the interpretation suggested by *Sayaṇa*, and the story has some interest in connection with the *Krishṇa* Cult. The later *Puraṇas* speak of the opposition between *Indra* and *Krishṇa*. It may be that *Krishṇa* is the god of the pastoral tribe which was conquered by *Indra* in the *R̥g Veda* period.^{xvi}

A synonymous compound, *Krsnayoniḥ*, is interchangeable with *Krsnagarbha*, and both give similar meaning, literally ‘black womb’ or ‘black-in-the womb’. *Renou* interprets it as ‘fortification with black people inside’ on the basis of *Skandasvamin*’s interpretation.^{xvii} This interpretation sounds much closer to reality, as *Indra* was bestowed with epithet of *puramdara*, the destroyer of the fort.

In a deliberate attempt to present *Krsna* as a non-Aryan, fighting with *Indra*, who is presumably presented as an Aryan, further complicated the question of *Krsna*’s identity.^{xviii} Most of the scholars agree over this point that a battle between Aryan and non-Aryan took place for the benefits of *Indra*’s favourite drink, *drapsa*. However, *Suvira Jaisawl*, relying on the work of *Gonda*, does not seem to be convinced that *drapsa* was a drink.^{xix} *Bhandarkar* only emphasizes over the point that ‘a certain *Krsna*, black like a cloud, was destroyed by *Indra* for the benefit of his favorite *Drapsa*’. It seems that both *Bhandarkar* and *Radhakrishnan*, based on *Sayaṇa*’s commentary, portrayed *Krsna-drapsa* as ‘the swift-moving *Krsna*’, one *asura*.^{xx} It is out of doubt that one of the hymns of *R̥g Veda*^{xxi} uses the term *drapsa*, but it is highly improbable to understand it as what *Bhandarkar* and *Radhakrishnan* understood. This is because the word *drapsa* in Sanskrit terminology means ‘a drop’.^{xxii} In fact, many scholars have made us believe that *drapsa* refers to *Soma*, and in one of the most important translations, both *drapsa* and *Krsna* are presented as two different entities.^{xxiii}

Conclusion

Thus, the position of historians in regard to understanding *drapsa* and Krsna seems to be religiously and politically motivated. The idea of describing Krsnaas non-Aryan is based on race because it literally means dark or black. So, Krsnais dark-skinned aborigines, or Dravidians. The reference to a seer named Krsna came from the *Rg Veda*, and it is interesting to note that the person named Krsna, who is also mentioned as a seer of hymns (VIII. 85-87 and X. 42-44), has never been pointed out as a non-Aryan, writing a text of Aryans. In short, the compelling reasons for presenting Krsna as non-Aryan and the reference to a battle between Indra, representing Aryans, and Krsna are example of prejudice scholarship.

References

ⁱCity on the west coast of India over which Kṛṣṇa ruled after he had completed his adventures in Braj Mathurā.

ⁱⁱ*Rg Veda*, 8.85; for more details of the verse, see Ralph T.H. Griffith, *The Hymns of Rigveda*, Vol. 1, Munshiram Manoharlal, New Delhi, 1999.

ⁱⁱⁱ*Rg Veda*, 1.116.23; *avasyate stuvate kṛṣṇiyāya rjoyate nāsatyā sacibhiḥ /paśuṃ na naṣtam iva darśanāya viṣṇāpvām dadathur viśvakāya//*; also cited in A.A. Macdonell and A.B. Keith, *Vedic Index of Names and Subjects*, Vol. I, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1958, p.184.

^{iv}H.T. Colebrooke, *Miscellaneous Essays*, Vol. 2., London: Wm. H. Allen, 1837, p. 177; rep. as *Essays on the Religion and Philosophy of the Hindus*, Vol. 1., London: Williams and Norget, 1858, p. 284.

^vWeber, Albrecht, *The History of Indian Literature*, Vol. 08, Varanasi: Chowkhamba Sanskrit Series Studies, 1961, p. 71.

^{vi}Preciado-Solis, Benjamin, *The Kṛṣṇa Cycle in the Purāṇas: Themes and Motifs in a Heroic Saga*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1984, p. 24.

^{vii}For a detailed discussion of all authors, see Moritz, Winternitz, *A History of Indian Literature*, New York: Russell & Russell, 1926, p. 457; Grierson, George, 'The Nārāyaṇīya and the Bhāgavatas', *The Indian Antiquary*, Vol. 37, 1908, p. 253.

^{viii}*Kauśītaki Brāhmaṇa*, (30.9); for more details on the verse, see E.R.Sreekrishna Sarma, *Kausitaki-Brahmana*, Vol. 1, 1968.

^{ix} Macdonell and Keith, 1958, p.184.

^xLanglois, M., came up with the first complete translation of the *Rig Veda* in the middle of the 19th century. The idea of Aryan and the resistance of indigenous people is promulgated by Langlois. For a detailed discussion on this topic, see Langlois, M. *Rig-Veda*, Firmin Didot, Paris, 1848-51, Vol. I, p.193; also see Preciado-Solis, 1984, pp. 12-13.

^{xi} For his complete translation, see H.H. Wilson, *Rig-Veda*, Vol. I, N Trubner and Co., London, 1866.

^{xii} Griffith agrees with the idea that *asuras* were the earlier inhabitants of India. For a detailed discussion, see R.T.H. Griffith, *The Hymns of the Rig Veda*, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1889 (reprint 1973). For a dissimilar view on this theme, see David, Frawley, *God, Sages, and Kings: Vedic Secretes of Ancient Civilization*, Passage Press, Utah, 1991.

^{xiii} *Kṛṣṇo nāma kaścidasurah / tena niṣiktagarbhāḥ tadyā bhāryāḥ nirahan avadhīt //* also cited in Preciado-Solis, 1984, p.12

^{xiv} *Kṛṣṇo nāmāsurah. sa garbhabhūto 'ntargato yāsām senānām tāḥ Kṛṣṇagarbhā.* Also cited in Preciado-Solis, 1984, p.12.

^{xv} D.D. Kosambi, *An Introduction to the Study of Indian History*, Popular Book Depot, 1956, pp.93-94; also cited in Preciado-Solis, 1984, p.12.

^{xvi} S. Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy*, Vol. I, George Allen and Unwin, London, 1962 (reprint), p.87.

^{xvii} Preciado-Solis, 1984, p.12.

^{xviii} The non-Aryan origin of Kṛṣṇa is well reflected in the writings of D.R. Bhandarkar and A.P. Karmarkar. For a detailed discussion, see D.R. Bhandarkar, *Some Aspects of Ancient Indian Culture*, University of Madra, 1940, p.82; A.P. Karmarkar, 'Some Nude Gods in the Hindu Pantheon', *Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute*, Vol. 23, 1942, p.219; D.D. Kosambi also supports this idea of Aryan and non-Aryan struggle between Indra and Kṛṣṇa, and presented Kṛṣṇa as "Asura" in this book, *Myth and Reality*, Popular Prakashan, Bombay, 1962, p.24 and 39; also cited in Preciado-Solis, 1984, p.14; similar to many scholars mentioned above, the work of Suvira Jaiswal also supports the idea that the name Kṛṣṇa certainly indicates a non-Aryan genesis. For a detailed description, see Suvira Jaiswal, *The Origin and the Development of Vaiṣṇavism*, Munshiram Manoharlal, Delhi, 1967, p.64.

^{xix} Jaiswal, 1967, p.64

^{xx} Preciado-Solis, 1984, p.14.

^{xxi} *Rg Veda* 8.96. 13-15

^{xxii} M. Monier Williams, *A Sanskrit English Dictionary*, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 2005 (reprint), p.500; also cited in A.A. Macdonell and A.B. Keith, *Vedic Index of Names and Subjects*, Vol. 01, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1995 (reprint), pp. 382-83.

^{xxiii} Preciado-Solis, 1984, p.16. One can also look for its original translation in German: Karl Friedrich Geldner, *Rig-Veda*, Vol. 2, p.422-23.