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

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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 Pandava 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 Purāṇas and one who delivered the preaching of the Bhagavadgītā, 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-Gītā. 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. Krsnais 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 ofVisnapu. 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.”

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 Upaniṣad 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 Upaniṣad and the Mahabharata are the same personage.H.T. Colebrooke was the first to recognize this idea and later, the same line of argument was followed by Albrecht Weber in 1852. However, Auguste Barth was the first to refute this idea and called the passage citing Krsna in the Chandogya Upaniṣad as euhemerism. Despite Barth’s strong resistance, the identity of two Krsnas was accepted by Hopkins, Max Muller, Winternitz, Grierson, and Jacobi.

The Kausitaki Brahmana also provides a reference to Krsna. Macdonell and Keith suggest that Krsna of the Rg Veda and the one referred to in Kausitaki Brahmana as Krsna Angirasa are identical. 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. However, Wilson accepts the idea of struggle. Griffith, who wrote a complete translation of the Rg Veda in 1889, deviates from it. Sayana in his
commentary explained the term *Krṣnagarbhā* from the text as foetuses in the pregnant women of the *asura* Kṛṣṇa. 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 *Krṣnagarbhās* fortified places. 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 Krṣnagarbhā, bearing black (people) in the womb.’

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

Another foe of Indira in the period of the *Ṛg 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 Sayana, and the story has some interest in connection with the Krishṇa Cult. The later Purāṇas 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 *Ṛg Veda* period.

A synonymous compound, *Krṣnayonih*, is interchangeable with *Krṣnagarbhā*, 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. This interpretation sounds much closer to reality, as Indra was bestowed with epithet of *puramāḍara*, the destroyer of the fort.

In a deliberate attempt to present Kṛṣṇa as a non-Aryan, fighting with Indra, who is presumably presented as an Aryan, further complicated the question of Kṛṣṇa’s identity. 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 *drapsawas* a drink. Bhandarkar only emphasizes over the point that ‘a certain Kṛṣṇa, black like a cloud, was destroyed by Indra for the benefit of his favorite Drapsa’. It seems that both Bhandarkar and Radhakrishnan, based on Sayana’s commentary, portrayed *Kṛṣna-drapsaas* ‘the swift-moving Kṛṣṇa’, one *asura*. It is out of doubt that one of the hymns of *Ṛg Veda* uses the term *drapsa*, but it is highly improbable to understand it as what Bhandarkar and Radhakrishnan understood. This is because the word *drapsain* Sanskrit terminology means ‘a drop’. In fact, many scholars have made us believe that *drapsa* refers to *Soma*, and in one of the most important translations, both *drapsa* and Kṛṣṇa are presented as two different entities.
Conclusion

Thus, the position of historians in regard to understanding *drapsa* and Kṛṣṇa seems to be religiously and politically motivated. The idea of describing Kṛṣṇa as non-Aryan is based on race because it literally means dark or black. So, Kṛṣṇa is dark-skinned aborigines, or Dravidians. The reference to a seer named Kṛṣṇa came from the *Ṛg Veda*, and it is interesting to note that the person named Kṛṣṇa, 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 Kṛṣṇa as non-Aryan and the reference to a battle between Indra, representing Aryans, and Kṛṣṇa 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.


ixMacdonell and Keith, 1958, p.184.


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 (reprint1973). For a dissimilar view on this theme, see David, Frawley, *God, Sages, and Kings: Vedic Secrets of Ancient Civilization*, Passage Press, Utah, 1991.

Kṛṣṇo nāma kaścidasurah / tena niṣṭakarabhah tadiyā bhāryāḥ nirahan avadhit // also cited in Preciado-Solis, 1984, p.12


Jaiswal, 1967, p.64

xxi Rg Veda 8.96. 13-15
