

EVOLUTIONARY ASPECTS OF THE KRṢṆA FIGURE IN THE MAHĀBHĀRATA

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PREFACE

This thesis has grown out of an interest first stimulated by a study course on the Bhagavadgītā. Since Kṛṣṇa is the dominant figure in that devotional poem I felt myself further challenged to pursue research on the Kṛṣṇa figure as it was represented in a greater work, the Mahābhārata, of which the Gītā is but a part. It soon became apparent that there was no one concept of this central person in the world's largest Epic. There were too many elements of a truly human nature and at the same time other elements which made it clear that one was confronted with more than a mere human being, i.e., a divinity.

In the beginning the question foremost in my mind was, Who was Kṛṣṇa? But with the discovery of a number of figures another question posed itself, Is there any way in reconciling the various figures or images of the man-god?

Living in the Western world as we do the thrust of the scientific mind is constantly directed towards an analytical approach to man himself and the material world in which he lives to the point where the sense of the wholeness of life has been more or less neglected. It has been encouraging to note the opposite trend in the Mahābhārata. Here there is an emphasis on the wholeness of life and an effort is consciously made to synthesize the various elements surrounding Kṛṣṇa (which must have been in circulation at the time of compilation) into one comprehensive whole, a synthesis which was possible under

the Hindu teaching concerning avataras.

It must have been no small undertaking at a time when sectarian movements and cults were threatening the very existence of Hinduism and in fact undermining the belief in a divine being. The Mahābhārata took form to stem the pluralism by gathering up a whole compendium of the Hindu way of life and then popularizing it by means of a rather new and personal deity and teacher, Śrī Kṛṣṇa. And the divine poem, the Bhagavadgītā, which is attributed to him has rung a responsive note in the hearts of the Indian people ever since.

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I. INTRODUCTION

There is little doubt that late Hinduism has been greatly influenced by the figure of Śrī Kṛṣṇa. This has not always been so, for there is little reference to Kṛṣṇa in either Vedic or Upaniṣadic literature. Somehow the image of Kṛṣṇa as a divine figure was introduced into Indian philosophic and religious thinking at some stage of history, and even when his godhead was introduced it was not freely admitted for some centuries. After the arrival of the Mahābhārata as an Epic and the ascendancy of the Kṛṣṇa figure it took the Bhagavadgītā, the devotional poem embodied into the Epic possibly as late as the second century B.C., to stimulate the rise of this deity to popularity, and that only after several more centuries had elapsed.

One is hard put to uncover genuine historical evidence with regard to the development of the Kṛṣṇa figure, for archaeological research has contributed only a little supportive information. Myths and legends which are numerous over a period of time coalesced to shape the various aspects of the all-god. Kosambi's contention is that Kṛṣṇa was really foreign to the Mahābhārata and that at some later date popularization began.¹ Śrī Kṛṣṇa is popularly believed to be one of the incarnations of Viṣṇu. However, he behaves at times like any other human being, and in the Mahābhārata (LXXXVI) an explanation is given of why this is so.²

1. Kosambi, D.D. - The Culture and Civilization of Ancient India, 91.

2. This point is discussed later in the thesis, 66.

There seem to be a number of levels on which Kṛṣṇa appears in the Epic or else one would have to argue that there must have been a number of different persons who were known by the same name who appear at different times and in different ways. There are those who suggest that the name 'Kṛṣṇa' appears already in Indian antiquity - from an ordinary tribal chieftain down to the time of the Epic designation for the Supreme God, Brahmān, himself. From the contents of the Mahābhārata it is argued that the mission of the Lord required expression in many forms, for the belief is evident that the Supreme One may assume many incarnations to restore the balance of values in the world by suppressing evil and reviving "righteousness". For this is how the Lord manifests himself within the world order, and that without becoming contaminated by the stain of action or its fruit as is the case with other human beings. He participates in the world and at the same time transcends it as the model of true and noble action.

What strikes the reader as most significant in the story of the Mahābhārata is that it makes room for growth and development. The Epic first introduces Kṛṣṇa as human figure and then moves on towards an overall climax of Kṛṣṇa as a divine figure to whom devotion is to be accorded. Such a concept of development is not limited to one particular civilization for H.G. Creel, Chinese Thought, observed a similar trend in ancient Chinese culture,

The reputed founders of aristocratic families were in many cases at least, mythological heroes or even deities. 1.

1. Creel, H.G. - Chinese Thought, 18f.

We are further told that at the time of the Chou Dynasty it was commonly believed that the family of Chou kings was descended from an ancestor call Hou Chi, a name that literally suggests an agricultural deity, who was miraculously conceived and miraculously escaped from harm. Ancestral aristocrats were conceived as living in the heavens and from there giving victory in war and prosperity in peace. Earliest Chinese cults were directed to live in harmony with the will of the ancestors so that adherents to the cultic beliefs might become the due recipients of the ancestors' blessings. There is some similarity here to the Kṛṣṇa of the Mahābhārata for he is frequently connected with rain and clouds which are so necessary in an agricultural economy.¹ Later in Puranic literature Kṛṣṇa assumes another significant role as protector of cattle as well as those who tend them, the gopis.

Beyond the evolution of the Kṛṣṇa figure in the Epic there follows the conception that he is the one who allows the growth of individual responsibility so plainly manifest in the Bhagavadgītā itself. Those who respond to his guidance deserve his grace and merit his help. Those who violate the law of dharma, namely, the proud and haughty, are given enough 'rope' so that in the end they hang themselves. The best example is Duryodhana who again and again is appealed to in the hope that he will respond on the side of righteousness but instead chooses the road to destruction.

1. Mbh. III.202 (car rumbles like rain clouds); 203 (Kṛṣṇa's voice is deep like the roll of the rain cloud); VI.153 (creator of rain); etc. (All references to the Mahābhārata are from P. Roy's translation).

This essay is an attempt to trace the evolution of the Kṛṣṇa figure within the literature of the Mahābhārata. There are at least three strata on which the problem is to be pursued: the historical, the metaphysical and the cultic. Within this frame of reference we shall concern ourselves with two problems:

1. To discover if Kṛṣṇa was a real person, and if so, to what extent he manifested human qualities and characteristics, to be thus featured in the history of the Bhāratas
2. To trace the development of thought and belief from the finite personage to a more complicated infinite and ultimately Supreme Being, a self-revelation that finds its epogee in the Gītā IV.8.

The historical background of the Mahābhārata, such as the dating of the Epic, its authorship and the tribal families concerned, together with their relationship with each other is straight-forward. We shall direct ourselves to these in so far as they relate to the issue before us; the interpretation of the Kṛṣṇa figure portrayed for us in the Mahābhārata.

II THE MAHĀBHĀRATA AS HINDU EPIC LITERATURE

Dating

Our first concern is to establish some reasonable basis for dating the epic period within the long religious tradition of India. Unfortunately we do not have any really adequate historic data for fixing a specific date with accuracy with the result that both Indian and Western scholars have shown a wide divergence based on numerous suppositions and assumptions which may or may not be correct. Archaeologic evidence is meagre and has contributed little to date fixing. It cannot be called upon to extricate us from the dilemma.

Every phase of Hindu culture is traditionally traced back to the Vedic period. The Aryans start with what is known as the Vedic age. The primeval word, OM, which is co-eternal with the creative urge, is according to Vedic ṛṣis the fundamental language from which the word of thought and existence originated. The same principle is attested to in any subsequent religious literature. Whenever attempts are made to designate the Vedic age all Indian tradition agrees that it came near the end of the third period of the world cycle, just before the final era of the world cycle began. Unanimous and authoritative voices have stated that the compilation of the Vedas by one known as Veda Vyāsa took place at about 3100 B.C.¹ The religious system of the Mantras was in use long before that period.

The advent of the Kali age² was one in which opposition was

1. Krishnamacharya, T.R. - Preface to the Mahabharata, 25f.

2. The basic cycle is the kalpa, sometimes spoken of as the "day of Brahmā". One Kalpa = 14 Manvantaras; one manvantara = 71 mahayugas;

being directed against the doctrine of unprofitable expenditure of food and foolish charity. It has been suggested that the Kali age, as a designation of a particular world age, is one of deterioration of the world order. It signalizes the stage of disharmony and disagreement and quarrels among men, particularly here the Aryans of India. The answer to the questioning of the Vedic practices was to be found in subsequent religious writings which appeared, such as the Āraṇyaka and Upanisads. These were by in large interpretations of Vedic thought and practice.

The Mahābhārata as a story of a great battle within the ranks of the Aryans in North India fits into the time slot of the Kali age. The beginning of the Kali age has been established to have begun somewhere around 3100 B.C. According to Krishnamacharya,

The acceptable view is that the original work must have been written, if not at the same time, at least at a time not far from the date of the stirring events. In respect of this question we may for the present take as sound and valuable the arguments and conclusions of Rao Bahadur C.V. Vaidyu, who fixes it at about B.C. 3100. 1

Such an early fixing of the date may be in line with the beginning of the Kali age as the last great age of this dispensation and the argument is that the above date depended on the astronomer's determination. It appears reasonable to assume that the Kaliyuga should be ushered in by some remarkable circumstance or event (The Bhārata War) and that this

each Mahāyuga is in turn divided into four yugas or ages, called Krta, Tretā, Dvāpara and Kali. Each yuga represents a progressive decline in piety, morality, strength, stature, longevity and happiness. "We are at present in the Kaliyuga, which began, according to tradition in 3102 B.C., believed to be the year of the Mahābhārata War." (Basham - The Wonder that was India, 321.)

1. Krishnamacharya, T.R. - Preface to the Mahābhārata, 25.

event was of necessity associated with Astronomical positions. Assuming that the earliest written form of the Mahābhārata appeared at least not far from such stirring events, we are led to wonder about the reason for the frequent references to other literature, such as the Puranas, the Brāhmaṇas, Vedānta, Rāmāyana and the Upaniṣads which must have existed in written form at the time of the writing of the Mahābhārata and been well enough established and recognized as authority to be mentioned in the Epic. Such writings post date the Kaliyuga date fixing at 3102 B.C. In addition mention is made of systems of philosophy such as the Saṅkhya, Mimāṃsā, Yoga and Vedānta, references to which are scattered throughout the whole Epic.¹

Other suggested dates of compilation range anywhere from 1700 B.C. to A.D. 200 or even 300. From such a variety of choices it can only be argued in a more general way that the Mahābhārata must have been compiled in its completed form sometime after the Vedas (mantras), the Brāhmaṇas (ritualistic commentaries) and the Upaniṣads (Philosophical commentaries). The fact that in the Epic mention is made of the Rāmāyana and Rāma would suggest that it was composed after the Rāma event. This too falls in naturally with the system of avatars where Rāma of the Rāmāyana precedes Kṛṣṇa of the Mahābhārata. In the Vana parva Rāma and Kṛṣṇa are linked,

L. Vide, Roy, Mahābhārata, Vols. I.125; VIII.91, 97, 98, 114, 116;
X.78, 92, 93, 95, 101, 109, 110, 114;
XI.340, 344, 347, 354, 355, 357, 382;
XII. 169, 299, 244, etc.

And, O Sister, assisted by Rāma, and Krishna, we are
invincible in battle 1

Likewise in the Anusasāna parva,

You are the mighty ape Hanuman that aided Vishnu in
the incarnation of Rāma in his expedition against Ravana. 2

The time at which the Mahābhārata was finalized is one in which
there is an awareness of sectarian elements and heterodox views for
it is said that the Pāṇḍavas together with Vāsudeva, upon the cessation
of the Great War, made gifts to high-souled Brahmanas and gratified
servants, guests, and even those who,

were undeserving and those that held heterodox views. 3

This is further established by some of the questions that are raised
in the Epic and which were in need of being answered. Such questions
are put into the mouth of Yudhisthira when he queries,

Who may be said to be the one god in the world?
Who may be said to be the one object which is our sole
refuge?
What religion is that which, according to thy judgment is
the foremost of all religions? 4

and Bhīṣma replies that it is Vāsudeva whose 1000 names are to be
recited. Such questions would be meaningless if they were not public
issues at that time.

In this connection it would be helpful if we could determine
whether such heterodox systems as the Buddhist and the Jainist were
in vogue at the time of the writing of the Mahābhārata. The names,

1. Mbh. Vol. II, 35.

2. Ibid., Vol. X, 92 (XI. 340 presupposes the Rāmāyana and XII, 299
mentions the Rāmāyana and 18 Puranas).

3. Ibid., Vol. X, 93.

4. Ibid., Vol. XI, 333.

Buddhism and Jainism, do not appear within the text although other sects are mentioned quite freely. The name Gautama appears but from the context it can hardly be said that he is the founder of Buddhism; it is most likely a rather common name in use at that time. When the praises of Kṛṣṇa are sung we are told that he is the Mahābhārata and other histories of that kind. He is also the treatise called the Mimamsa and

'Gautama (the founder of the science of dialectics. ¹

Beyond this however, there are a number of philosophic views expressed in the Epic that suggest Buddhist thought and these are scattered throughout. In the Vana parva we find a rather lengthy discussion of things painful (duḥkha) that produce bodily suffering. The causes of mental grief and bodily agony are expressly stated,

Affection is the root of all fear, of joy and grief of every kind of pain . . . , and it is from affection that spring the love of worldly goods. ²

In Buddhist terminology this is 'thirst' (tanha). The overcoming of pain and its cause are explained in the concept of renunciation. It is not merely a withdrawal from worldly possessions, but being free from evil passions, a soul's dependence on nothing, and not placing affection on either friends or on wealth. To quote the Mahābhārata,

The man that is influenced by affection is tortured by desire; and from desire that springeth up in his heart his thirst for worldly possessions increaseth. Verily, this thirst is sinful and is regarded as the source of all anxieties. It is this terrible thirst, fraught with sin, that leaneth unto unrighteous acts. Those find happiness that can renounce this thirst ³

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1. Ibid., Vol. X, 93.
 2. Ibid., Vol. II, 5.
 3. Ibid., Vol. II, 6.

The Santi parva brings to our attention Yudhisthira's recital of his remorse after the carnage of kuruksetra which in many respects sounds Buddhist as well. It is a lamentation that extols non-violence and regrets the death of so many who deserve not to be slain. Blessed is

abstention from injury. Fie on the usages of Kshatriyas,
Fie on might and valour 1

In the same account we are told that the cause of the great calamity is due to the fact that

They were always filled with envy and hankering after worldly objects, and were exceedingly subject to anger and joy. 2

And in his remorse Yudhisthira takes the blame on himself when he says,

We have committed sin . . . Having slain them our wrath has been pacified. But grief is stupefying me. 3

His self-blame is followed by an admonition to constant meditation on the Scriptures and being engaged in practices of renunciation. We are confronted with some striking parallels to the Asokan story in Indian history, who according to the Ceylonese chronicles secured his throne by a wholesale massacre of his brothers and was regarded as a monster of cruelty before his conversion to Buddhism. Upon his conversion he too felt the pangs of remorse for he was captivated by the desire to enhance Buddhism and in accord with the Buddhist doctrine of ahimsā suppressed the slaughter of animals and followed a policy of religious toleration. One of the footnotes to a verse in the Anusāsana parva expresses Roy's thoughts, namely, that here we have at least an allusion to Buddha himself. The particular verse reads,

1. Ibid., Vol. VIII.9
2. Ibid., Vol VIII. 10.
3. Ibid.

"Thou art he who put a stop to Vali's sacrifice."¹

In a footnote Roy thinks that this could refer to Buddha for he writes,

It may also mean that thou art he called Buddha who preached against all sacrifice. 2

Further consideration must be given to the development of cultic elements within Indian society which doubtlessly were gaining in popularity during the Jainist and Buddhist era. Such movements began to question the great sacrifices of the Brahmins and the social institutions of Hindu society. One of the issues was that of the Caste system which had set men apart and had given to certain strata of society distinct advantages while the others were suppressed and not permitted to rise above the station of life into which they happened to have been born. Arjuna struggled within himself over the issues of war, especially since it meant the killing of his relatives and other worthy heroes who had aligned themselves with either side. He was told that it was his religious duty to act as a ksatriya and part of his duty therefore was participation in killing (yudha dharma). His sensitivity against killing reflects a kind of sensitivity that we find amongst the Jains and Buddhists in such matters.

Cultic movements do not stop with attitudes towards social problems; they are centered around some historical or even mythical hero or person. For the Jains it was Mahavira with the whole system of previous Thirthankaras; for the Buddhists it was the Tathāgata and the belief in future Buddhas to come. For the Hindus it was the intro-

1. Ibid., X. 87.

2. Ibid.

duction of Kṛṣṇa (Goswami thinks he was a latecomer in the development of the Epic)¹ to champion the cause of an adjusted orthodoxy against heterodox cultic movements. The Kṛṣṇa cult met with considerable success, popularized by the Bhagavadgītā, because it gave the masses a personal, loving savior. This may in the end have saved India for Hinduism instead of the rapidly spreading Buddhism.

This view is in line with that of Sushil Kumar De who also thinks that formal heresies coming to a head in Jainism and Buddhism assailed the very core of Śrauta religion and that the orthodox ritual and creed now faced the task of remodelling themselves,

by assimilating and moulding the current popular beliefs and practices of the new environment. 1

He continues:

These popular cults, centering around the worship of Rudra, Śiva, Vishnu-Nārāyaṇa or Kṛṣṇa-Vāsudeva, were strongly marked by a tendency towards emotional devotionism, which must have had a disintegrating and even disruptive effect on the older ritualistic and theosophic religion. 2

What was the result? From the view of De we can draw the following conclusions; tracing the developments that took place in

1. Practical codification of the older tradition
2. a renewed and systematic philosophical activity
3. a gradual reshaping of the older religion
4. a new conception of the old gods as wielding the power of love and grace.

All of these were signs of accommodation,

1. Kosambi, D.D. - The Culture and Civilization of Ancient India, 117.
2. S.K. De - Aspects of Sanskrit Literature, 59.
3. Ibid.

the result of gradual compromise is seen not only in fully developed sectarianism of the Mahābhārata in general, which is a mixture of the old and the new, but also in particular in the syncretic theism of the Bhagavad Gita, which cannot be satisfactorily explained as an isolated phenomenon. 1

Another Indian scholar, V.S. Sukthankar, likewise places the final composition of the Epic into the post Buddhist period when, in his estimation, the Mahābhārata is an answer to Buddhist demand with its exaltation of character and detachment. If the renunciation of life by the monk was great in Buddhist eyes, then, according to the Epic it was even greater

to accept life and the renunciation of self-interest, egoism or self hood; and that is not possible without self conquest. 2

Trevor Ling³ places the writing of the Epic in the period of Buddhist ascendancy when the Brahmin priests were forced to find new ways of maintaining their position and asserting their importance and indispensability. In the Vedic period the kṣatriya class were most significant because it was for them that the priests performed the Vedic sacrifice and ritual. However, in the Epic period a new class, the mercantile class became important as trade expanded beyond the borders of the Magadhan Empire. Because of this cattle sacrifices seemed wasteful, a lavish and pointless waste of resources.⁴ In addition the Buddhists supported the view that the sacrificial ritual availed little. Aśoka as a great ruler, converted to Buddhism, proclaimed the futility of animal slaughter.

1. Ibid.

2. V.S. Sukthankar - On the Meaning of the Mahabharata, 101.

3. Trevor Ling - A History of Religion, East and West, 143.

4. Ibid.

These are not the only scholars who have argued for heretic influence on the Aryan mind. Goswami¹ feels that the criticism of the earliest heretical schools were a blessing because they stimulated philosophical speculation to new heights. The Aryans were challenged to meet the charges by forging new weapons of philosophy. It is the heretic controversy that pushed forward the bhakti cult. The same author further states that the Vedas were based on the spirit of himsa due to its support of a sacrificial system or what he prefers to call the "murderous aspects of a sacrifice". The import of Goswami's view is based on the hesitancy, indeed the mental anguish of Arjuna who was about to engage in a monstrous battle, and also on Yudhisthira's lament and grief over those who were slain. This is a philosophical response of those who know about the criticism leveled against the concept of the caste duties of the Ksatriyas.

We thus find that between the rise of Buddhism and the re-establishment of Brahminical supremacy in Hindustan . . . a number of orthodox systems arose, one after another, avowedly to fight Buddhism and restore the ascendancy of Vedicism".²

Kosambi further talks about the function of Karma as characteristically Buddhist. "Without Buddhism, G.2.55-57 (recited daily as prayers at Mahātmā Gandhi's āśrama) would be impossible. The brahmanirvāṇa of G.2.72, and 5.25 is the Buddhist ideal state of escape from the effect of karma."³ Another point is made by the same author in which he maintains that the title Bhāgavat given to Kṛṣṇa was

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1. B. K. Goswami - The Bhakti Cult in Ancient India, 21f.
 2. Ibid., XXXVI.
 3. D. D. Kosambi - Myth and Reality, 16.

originally the Buddha's title and a Greek ambassador Heliodoros proclaims himself convert to the cult on the Bhilsa pillar.¹

More recently Upadhyaya wrote an article in Philosophy East and West called 'The Impact of Early Buddhism on Hindu thought (with Special Reference to the Bhagavadgita)' in which he argues from a textual basis that the Gītā was composed shortly after the rise of Buddhism. The Gītā was to meet the challenge of Buddhism and hence was post Buddhist. Because sholarly opinion to a large degree supports the post-Buddhist composition we are on safe ground. Yet Upadhyaya is not satisfied by such opinions for he goes further to note similarities in "important words, ideas, and passages" in the Gītā which suggest a familiarity with Buddhism. He draws attention to the word nirvāna which occurs frequently in the Gītā but nowhere in Pre-Buddhist Upaniṣads. Numerous other comparisons are made and the conclusion is that even though such similarities are prevalent the Gītā's intention is in sharp opposition to Buddhism. In Buddhism soldiers killed on the battlefield cannot go to hell or be born in an animal species whereas the Gītā promises heaven for them. The Gītā reacts to the Buddhist ideal of renunciation by pointing out that householders ought not be undermined because,

'complete abandonment or renunciation of action is neither possible nor necessary.' 2

It is not our intention to enter further into the complicated arguments for the dating of the Mahābhārata. To do so would require

1. Ibid., 26.

2. K.N. Upadhyaya - The Impact of Early Buddhism on Hindu Thought (with special reference to the Bhagavad Gita), 169. Journal - Philosophy East and West, Vol. XVIII, No. 3, July 1968.

a full consideration of all the details of how any religious work came to be written, going through the stages of oral tradition, collection of certain materials, composition of hymns, interpolations and recensions. The purpose of this thesis is not to delve into the evolutionary process of compiling scripture within a given tradition but of choosing the closest possible date in support of the Epic in its complete form and to ascertain the approximate time when the bhakti cult flourished. This will give us some indication as to the time when Kṛṣṇa Vāsudeva was given the importance and supremacy that he enjoys in the Mahābhārata.

My contention is that the Bhakti Cults in India flourished around the time of Jainism and Buddhism, both of which are dateable. The veneration of the relics of Buddha do give us an indication that his followers had a high regard for him, and in the centuries that followed the Mahayana developed a theology centering around the Buddha as a divine being. Such a development in Buddhism could possibly have been due to its being stimulated by the Mahābhārata Epic and more significantly by the Bhagavadgītā section in which divinity is accorded to Kṛṣṇa. The Gītā is to be considered as a success story in bhakti devotion.

The dating of Buddha is reasonably certain and even with a difference of opinion of about 60 years it is a historical fact that Buddha lived in the 6th century B.C. The final form of the Epic comes to us at least after this particular historical setting. It must be borne in mind that there is an ancient background out of which the Epic matured. The Mahābhārata is after all not one poem reciting the exploits of the Bhāratas; it is a combination of a number of poems

legends and stories. It is not a Kāvya like Valmiki's Rāmāyana (one author), but an Itihāsa (by many authors). Many of the legends are Vedic and of great antiquity and are at least as old as the Rāmāyana or even older. Others again are much more recent which according to scholars such as Monier-Williams were probably interpolations during the first centuries of the Christian era. The task still lies before scholars to apply the form critical method to the Mahābhārata and thereby to critically analyse the more ancient form and the less ancient material.

Even though the Epic is a collection of a multitude of stories it nevertheless has a leading story that cements the parts together into a whole. Significant parts were incorporated into the skeleton story for didactic purposes but we are left largely without knowledge as to the source of these parts. Bhandarkar¹ bases his conclusions (with regard to the Epic as a whole) on some dates in Indian History, and the history of Sanskrit literature which cannot be called into question. One of these evidences is the life of Patanjali, who lived in the reign of Puṣpamitra, the founder of the Suṅga dynasty, 178-142 B.C. Because of his Mahābhāṣya and comments on the Mahābhārata Bhandarkar rightly assumes that the Epic comes before Patanjali's time. Patanjali explained that the Vāsudeva in the Sūtra was the god Vāsudeva and that already by Panini's (preceded Patanjali) time Vāsudeva and Arjuna were associated together in the minds of the masses.² Among other evidence the same author refers to cave

1. R. G. Bhandarkar - Collected Works, 79ff. (Re date of the Mbh.)
2. Ibid., 82. (C.f. - Pāṇini Iv.3.98.)

inscriptions (Nasik Caves)¹ where certain characters from the Mahābhārata are mentioned. A further inscription in the temple at Iwullee (Dharwar and Mysore Districts) cites the date of the Bhārata war 3730 B.C., a point to consider with regard to the more ancient elements of the Epic. Over against the more ancient dating scholars have taken a stand by which they choose a date following the time of the Vedas and most of the Upanisads. R.C. Dutt² holds that the Epic in which the worship of Kṛṣṇa became the prevailing religion of India after the decay of Buddhism. If he is correct, then we could allow for possible Buddhist influence, either directly or indirectly. Metre alone establishes that the Epic does belong to post-Buddhist times. Hopkins has dated the completed Epic as late as 400 A.D.³ or even later, which dating is hypothetical and has little if any literary history to support it.

Kuhan Raja⁴ mentions that by the time of the Buddha the Mantras or original texts, the Brāhmaṇas or ritualistic commentaries and the Upanisads or philosophical treatises were complete and that the Itihāsas, the heroic tales, date around 400 B.C., a century after the death of the Buddha. During that time great changes were taking place and since such changes could not be stopped or reversed adjustments had to be made. It is during the Itihāsas period that the great gods

1. Ibid., 84.

2. Sukthankar, V.S. - On the Meaning of the Mahābhārata, 3.

3. Ibid., 9.

4. Kunhan Raja, C. - A Survey of Sanskrit Literature, 56.

came to men and lived among men as their companions. The poets of the Itihāsas and Purānas were literary attempts to restore Vedic civilization among the nation. In the Itihāsas the story centers about a great hero, and such matters as religion, philosophy, sciences law, etc. were introduced only incidentally.

One could go on ad finitum to discuss the details of the various views presented and to draw all kinds of chronological conclusions which may have elements of truth in them but not give us a conclusive answer to the problem. My own view which has been based on the wide variety of arguments and which is supported by a number of scholars places the Mahābhārata as a more or less completed Epic into the time following the early Upanisads, that is after 600 B.C. and not much later than the age following the Emperor Asoka or around 200 B.C. This seems to be the most acceptable time for the development of the Indian doctrine of devotion (bhakti). To trace Buddhist influence on some of the sections of the Epic is possible only by inference. No absolute and unrefutable references can be quoted from the Mahābhārata itself. The fact that bhakti appears in Jainism and Buddhism at about the same time lends credence to the theory that similar movements were taking place in Hinduism as well. This was an "age of devotion" and I do not see any significant reasons for adopting dates beyond this time.

This particular period in Indian history allows for the presence of Vedic, Brahmanic and Upaniṣadic philosophy. And enough time had been allowed for the possibility of an encyclopedic work on Hindu thought and practice as a culmination of former religious activity.

It reflects an era of heretic and sectarian movements, in which Buddhism no doubt played a role and my feeling is that the argument from silence does not necessarily preclude Buddhism . We note a universal aspect in the Epic -- the relationship between two neighbors, be they the ancient Aryans vs the Dasa, the Brahmin vs the Ksatriya, the Pāṇḍavas vs the Kauravas, the Viṣṇuvite vs the Śivite cult, or even the Hindu community vs the Buddhist community.

Authorship

Authorship of this great work in Indian Literature has traditionally been ascribed to a poet by the name of Veda Vyāsa and quite often he is known as Kṛṣṇa Dvaipāyana or even Bādarāyana, names that do not appear in Vedic writings. Nevertheless, for some he is connected with the author of the Rgveda.

The author of the work is Veda Vyāsa, son of the Vedic poet Parāśara through a girl belonging to the fishermen community. 1

The composition of a work as immense as the Mahābhārata consisting of 18 books involving a lack of verses (100,000) and treating such subjects as moral, political, religious and metaphysical themes, including the epic kernel, the Great Bhārata story, is far too extensive for one single person to compose. And it is certainly too extensive a work for one person to have memorized, (the Mahābhārata is the longest religious work in the world). It is therefore possible that the Epic began, as do most extensive religious

1. Kunhan Raja, C. - Survey of Sanskrit Literature, 58.

works, including the Bible in the West, as parts of the whole story, or as liturgical hymns which were repeated or recited at specific occasions. For the Epic it could have been a series of lays sung at the court of the conquerors. Kosambi¹ thinks that Kṛṣṇa Nārāyaṇa "had no role to play even in the first connected epic narrative."

In time the court singers, the ṛṣis, combined elements of the story and adapted others around a basic tale of heroic action. This continued to be recited as we are told that Kṛṣṇa Dvaipāyana recited the whole story. The only difference would be that in the earlier form (which must have been considerably shorter, 88,000 verses)² it may still have been possible to do so from memory while in the form that we have today it would no longer be humanly possible.

When in the Anugītā Kṛṣṇa is asked to repeat the Gītā in precisely the same manner as it had originally been spoken on the field of Kuruksetra he himself admits that it cannot be repeated verbatim.

Indian scholars are aware that three narrators were involved in the Mahābhārata,

1. The first one being the sage Santi or Suta who related the Epic story as it had been narrated by Vaiśvampayana at the court of Janamejaya to the sages assembled at the Naimisa forest (early chapters of the Adi parva).
2. Sanjaya, courtier and constant attendant of kind Dhṛtarāshtra who was given celestial sight by the sage. Thus the blind king received a complete account of the fighting (Bhīṣma, Droṇa, Karṇa and Śalya parvas).
3. Vaiśvampayana himself, narrator of the greater part of the Epic. 3

1. Kosambi, D.D. - Social and Economic Aspects of the Bhagavad Gītā, 13.
2. Rajagopalachari - The Mahābhārata, Preface, 8.
3. Narasimhan - The Mahābhārata, Preface, viii.

On the basis of three narrators single authorship of such an extensive work is hardly possible. As to the reputed author of the work, the sage Vyāsa, the Mahābhārata was intended to be a treatise on life itself. It included religion and ethics (dharma sāstra), polity and government (artha sāstra), philosophy and salvific elements (Mokṣa sāstra).

"That sacred history called the Mahābhārata, spreading the fame of the Pāndavas, which Krishna-Dwaipayana, asked by Janamejaya, caused to be duly recited after the completion of the sacrifice, I desire to hear duly. 1

"Krishna Dwaipayana directed his disciple Vaisampayana seated by his side, saying, --- 'The discord that happened 2

In the same section we learn that Kṛṣṇa Dwaipayana was a learned ṛṣi and that he was the chief priest, who had conducted the sacrifice at the court. It is this reciter, Vaisampayana, who makes the statement, that the history told by Kṛṣṇa Dwaipayana is and what he is going to tell is but the beginning, that the Bhārata consists of a hundred thousand sacred slokas which were "composed" by the son of Satyawati. The composer's merits are recited. He is none other than the "illustrious and great Rishi Vyāsa of immeasurable mental power, and worshipped in all the worlds". 3 We are told that the Bhārata is equal unto the Vedas, holy, excellent, worthiest to be listened to. The reference here to the Bhārata as equal to the Vedas has led some to assume that Veda Vyāsa was the author of both

1. Roy, Mbh. I. 130.
2. Ibid., 131.
3. Ibid., 136.

the Vedas and the Epic, a feat that would hardly be possible in the wide time span involved. Secondly, we are told that it took the sage Kṛṣṇa Dwaipāyana three years to complete the work and that because of tremendous efforts -- rising early, purification, and ascetic devotions.¹ Thirdly, the reason for the compilation is reported,

"This sacred history maketh the heart desire for salvation."²

He who "recites" the Veda of Kṛṣṇa Dwaipāyana earns much wealth and his sins are remitted. The king who "hears" it conquers all his foes and if both king and queen "hear it together" they will receive a heroic son or daughter to sit on the throne. Others who "hear" it recited will have obedient sons and servants and also the removal of the fear of illness. It is summed up in the following declaration,

For extending the fame of the high-souled Pāṇdavas and of other Kshatriyas guided also by the desire of doing good in the world,³

Kṛṣṇa Dwaipāyana composed this work.

The claim of the writer of the Mahābhārata is that it is historical in nature, but this claim could hardly be made for the whole of the Epic as it now stands because of legendary and mythical material super-imposed upon it. The historical events themselves are often couched in antiquity so far back that certainty cannot be conclusively established. We can add to this the apparent Indian unconcern about historical data prior to the rock edicts of Asoka and the cave inscriptions of certain historic events. What then can the writer of the Epic claim for it as history?

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1. Ibid.
 2. Ibid., 137.
 3. Ibid., 136.

For one thing, when the characters in the Mahābhārata talk about the Epic as history it is generally understood to signify "Sacred History". We have statements as the following,

That sacred history called the Mahabharata¹

or,

His perceptor recited the whole of that history.²

In other places the reference is to historical people and events,

This is the history of the Pandavas³

. . . the history, called Mahabharata, of the great acts of the Kurus.⁴

The history of the exalted birth of the Bharata princes is called the Mahabharata.⁵

The family history of the Kuru race is recorded; the blind Dhrtarashtra and the devout Pāṇdu with their offspring of 100 and 5 sons respectively.⁶ The Adi parva provides a long list of "begats" to give to the leaders of the two camps of Kurus an ancient lineage.⁷ Claims for the Epic as religious history are again reiterated in the Swargarohanika parva, close to the end of the Epic. It reads very much like that of the Adi parva to which we have already alluded. It is "a history"; it is "sacred, sanctifying and excellent."⁸ It can hardly be disputed that the work is anchored in world history because the "high race of the Bharatas is its topic."⁹

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1. Ibid.
 2. Ibid., 131.
 3. Ibid., 135.
 4. Ibid.
 5. Ibid., 137.
 6. Ibid., 158f.
 7. Ibid., 226ff.
 8. Ibid., Vol. XII. 290ff.
 9. Ibid.

The Indian tradition has always adhered to the belief that the Bhārata race was a real race of people and that such families as the Pāṇḍavas and the Kurus actually existed. Some of the places mentioned in the Epic can be traced even though names have changed over the centuries.¹ Generally it has also been acceptable to describe the great war of extinction as the central event of the Mahābhārata. It is to this particular event that we now turn for it is here that Kṛṣṇa participated as charioteer for Arjuna and even more importantly for India in particular he uttered the philosophy, the Bhagavadgītā,² for Arjuna's benefit. The Gītā was more like a sermon uttered on Kuruksetra as both armies faced each other, moments before the battle began. The Mahābhārata gives an elaborate description of this battle and the author evidently was extremely conversant with the science of warfare, "the rules of the game", and revels in the use of weapons, the blood and gore, the mangled bodies of heroes slain in battle. Such a graphic description and familiarity with the rules of war would be possible if the author a) was a Kṣatriya b) had been on the field of battle to witness the slaughter. The author in all probability based his description on what must have been some actual event but allowed himself to be carried away by the action. The battle became far more enormous than could be possible in actuality. We are faced with figures of an enormous army, engaged in a gigantic battle that lasted for 18 days, and with the result that the Kṣatriya caste faced almost complete annihilation. It is reported that,

1. A hill outside the town of Peddapuram (Andhra) bears Arjuna's foot imprint in the rock. Tradition of the area says that Arjuna stood there to guard against enemy surprise. While this cannot be verified it nevertheless shows how widely the story was accepted even in South India.

2. Mbh. Vol.V, 56ff.

"One billion six hundred and sixty million and twenty thousand men have fallen in this battle. Of the heroes that have escaped, the number is twenty-four thousand onehundred and sixty five. 1

The War of the Bhāratas

What date could we assign to the enormous battle described in the Epic? Again there is wide diversity beginning with the Kali age of 3101 B.C. with about 850 B.C. on the other extremity. Estimates that have been made are based on external arguments and even here it becomes most difficult to find a solution because several decisive battles have been fought throughout the ages in Kuru-land, the northern area of the country. Hastināpura in Kuru-land was the governmental center and the original settlement there was made up of the old Vedic Pūru tribe.² The Pāṇḍavas cleared Indraprastha by the original method, the burning down of the forest. It is suggested that Indraprastha today is a suburb of Delhi, probably the Purāna Qila suburb.³ The action of the war has thus been located in the Gangetic plain where the Delhi ridge and Pampat (formerly old Kuru-land) were of considerable strategic importance even in later times. Within this strategic location the Bhārata war would have been quite possible.

Kṛṣṇa's Dvārakā according to Hindu tradition is now located in Kathiawad, on the sea and south of Mathurā. There is some question as to whether Dvārakā could have been on the sea or whether it had not best be located inland, further West of the Kuru-land.

1. Mbh. Vol VII. 42f. (Stree parva).

2. D.D. Kosambi - Culture and Civilization of Ancient India, 91.

3. Ibid.

The dating of the war is more difficult and a number of scholars maintain a date around 900 B.C.¹ This date is argued for on the basis of the development of agricultural land (progress in clearing the dense forest) which made possible regular agricultural settlements to support a fairly extensive population. Ease in food gathering would be pre-requisite for supporting an army of any magnitude and land clearing on a large scale by fire was ended when Aśoka set up his fifth pillar edict. Agriculture meant using the plow and plow culture further depended on a supply of iron. It is doubtful whether plow-using villages were extensive before the 6th century B.C. We can accept Kosambi's view that,

It is most improbable that iron was sufficiently plentiful anywhere in India for the existence of local kingdoms which could supply large contingents for a war at Kurukṣetra in 950 B.C.²

Iron is mentioned on a number of occasions in the Mahābhārata but it seems to me that it was a rather rare commodity out of which only superior weapons were forged, e.g. Kṛṣṇa's discus was made of iron, and the use of a fierce iron bolt is attested to.³ There is no reason to assume from the context that iron was abundant, and when it was used it suggested superior weapons such as Kṛṣṇa's discus.

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1. DeBary, T. - Sources of Indian Tradition, 8. (900 B.C.)
Op.Cit., Kosambi, 91. (about 850 B.C.)
Kosambi, D.D. - The Autochthonous Elements in the Mahabharata,
JAOS A 64, Vol. 84, 34. (950 B.C.)
 2. Ibid., Kosambi, 34.
 3. Mbh., Vol. XII, 255, 256, 258, etc.

If we were to take seriously the size of the army that was assembled it would stagger the imagination. One billion six hundred and sixty million and twenty thousand men killed, plus twenty-four thousand one hundred and sixty five who escaped the slaughter. It is physically impossible that the country could have mustered such a huge army, that production could have supported it and that regional kings could have sent so much equipment over long distances to the plains of Delhi. More conservative estimates¹ of nearly five million fighting men killed, 130,000 chariots, and equal number of elephants and three times the number of cavalry with the non-fighting camp followers would still have required a total population of 200 million to make possible the Mahābhārata war. Such a population was not reached in India until the British period. The greatest army camp reported after 600 B.C. was under Chandragupta Maurya and numbered only 400,000 men.

What we are really left with is a war between two tribes that was fought on the plains near Delhi and which was significantly important enough to be described in Hindu literature. The poet who composed the figures of the fighting men involved in that great war was evidently carried away even as he had been carried away by describing the staggering action between heroes and the gruesomeness of the slaughter. We can however deduct from his description and report of the conflict that a battle of some magnitude took place, probably around 900 B.C. and that a certain Kṛṣṇa became involved as ally to the Pāṇḍavas for which reason the victory ultimately was theirs.

1. D.D. Kosambi - Myth and Reality, 12.

2. BRIEF SUMMARY OF CONTENTS

The Mahābhārata as the largest work in any language of the world is a poetic work with a small portion in prose. The prose portion is not significant when one considers the work as a whole, 18 books consisting of a lakh of slokas. This small portion "preserves and continues the style of the Yajurveda and the Brāhmanas".¹ Considering the whole poem we discover a similarity with the language of the Vedic poets, "in its simplicity and lucidity, in its flowing style and its easy expression. But the language had undergone a considerable change from the Vedic times".²

The Epic proper contains about 20,000 stanzas embedded and embellished by moral, religious, metaphysical and political discussions. The morality of gambling, of behavior towards women, of fighting fairly in battle, of the right religious attitudes towards sacrifices and rituals, of treatment of the Brahmins is amplified. We read about the metaphysical sphere of the real of the gods and their activities beyond and in the human spheres; of political aspirations of rulers with instructions on how to rule properly and how to treat subjects of the kingdom, especially the Brahmins. We are told about attitudes towards the enemy, the principle of "divide and rule". In all there are numerous instructions (encyclopedic) for rulers and for masses.

This didactic poem, which is made up of many episodes, in which the 18 day war is central, introduces us to two families, the Pāṇḍavas

1. C. Kuhnhan Raja - Survey of Sanskrit Literature, 58.

2. Ibid.

and the Kurus with their chief characters, some of which appear to have been known in ancient literature and others who are more contemporary. It brings into bolder outline a struggle between the old and the new; the old Vedic gods and the new personal deity (Kṛṣṇa), the many Vedic deities and the one ultimate supreme Being of the Upanisads and the Gītā, the old sacrificial demands and the new yoga of renunciation, Orthodoxy and bhakti. All of this is in an age that knows about foreign nations, the Greeks, Scythians, Persians as well as occasionally the Chinese. It portrays a time of empire, with possible conquest of all of India.

It shows a superficial knowledge of the extreme north and south and a very intimate knowledge of Middle India.¹

The entire Epic is made up of a number of Episodes² which are woven into the basic story of the Bhārata clans. These episodes do not detract from the central action, they rather support and elaborate particular parts of the story. The largest number of episodes are related to the banishment of the Pāṇḍavas, and these brighten the 12 years of forest life. Various aspects of nature are brought together not as animate and inanimate, nor as higher and lower levels of creation, but as that which has life and feels for each other. There is a unity in creation and in this unity the heroes of the Epic spend much of their life in the forest. When they at last emerge from forest life to pursue their normal caste role we get the impression that men need not abandon the world and withdraw them-

1. Hastings - Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics, 325.

2. A.A. MacDonell, - A History of Sanskrit Literature, 296.

(MacDonell has designated four-fifths of the entire Epic as episodal).

selves in order to find real and lasting happiness. Both the forest and the palace can be places of beauty, both are to be enjoyed. Man is created for the happy contemplative, simple and relaxing atmosphere of the forest as well as the sitting on thrones with their palatial pomp and ceremony. The Vāna parva shows the poet's enchantment with nature, the Bhīṣma parva his involvement with government. Another significant episode upon which we will comment later is the Bhagavad-gītā.

The Epic kernel of the Mahābhārata describes the conflict between the Pāṇḍavas and the Kurus revolving around an 18 day battle on the plains near Delhi. The leader of the Kurus was the unrighteous Duryodhana; the political chief of the Pāṇḍavas was Yudhisthira representing truth and righteousness. The righteous one resists the evil one with the result that good ultimately is victorious over evil. Thus Yudhisthira becomes the victor and is finally restored to his rightful place in the palace at Hastināpura. Both were cousins, descendants of King Bhārata, the son of Sakuntalā. The Epic kernel is doubtlessly based on the struggle between two neighboring tribes, namely the Pancālas and the Kurus who finally merged into one people around the 9th century B.C.

Following is a brief outline of the Mahābhārata according to the 18 parvas:

1. Adi parva - The Mahābhārata begins with the book of beginnings which serves as an introduction to the childhood of the heroes. It

attempts to explain the origin of men and gods in a general sense. Two brothers, Dhṛtarāṣṭra and Pāṇḍu, were educated by their uncle, Bhīṣma. Dhṛtarāṣṭra married Gāndhārī and had a hundred sons who were known thereafter as the Kurus. The oldest and most ambitious son was Duryōdhana who played a significant role in the disastrous warfare. Pāṇḍu had two wives, Mādri, who committed satī at her husband's death and the other, Kuntī, who raised the five Pāṇḍavas, Yudhisthira, Bhīma, Arjuna, and the twins, Nakula and Sahadeva.

2. Sabha parva - The Epic drama begins at the Hastināpura gaming hall (Hastināpura is about 60 miles north of Delhi). The Pāṇḍava brothers have been invited to the assembly and by trickery in a game of dice Yudhisthira loses all his wealth and the kingdom he is to inherit. The result is that the Pāṇḍavas are forced into a forest exile for 12 years. Draupadī accompanies them.

3. Vāna parva - This book describes the life of the exiles in the forest. Interspersed with the forest life are other legends and tales (Nala and Damayanti, et al) to relieve the weariness of exile.

4. Virāṭa-parva - The end of the exile has come and the Pāṇḍavas take refuge with king Virāṭa, at the same time assisting him to repel Kuru attacks.

5. Udyoga parva - Allies are gathered together and preparations for war begin. Kṛṣṇa (Viṣṇu) comes to the side of the Pāṇḍavas.

6-9. Bhīṣma, Droṇa, Karṇa, and Salya parvas - A number of battle episodes describe the detailed encounter between the outstanding heroes of opposing sides. The battle goes on for 18 days. The Bhagavadgītā, Kṛṣṇa's advice and encouragement to Arjuna, just before the war begins, has been inserted into the Bhīṣma parva.

10-11. Sauptika, Stree parva - With some of the illustrious heroes slain in battle, the Kurus counter attack the Pāṇḍava encampment by night, killing the whole army of their enemies but not the five Pāṇḍavas. The war finally concludes with victory for the Pāṇḍavas which is followed by the lamentation of the women over their dead.

12-13. Śānti, Anusāsana parvas - Bhīṣma miraculously appears again to preach his doctrines of religion and philosophy. Included in this section are the rules for ethical behavior.

14. Āsvamedhika parva - Yudhisthira is crowned rightful king (as had been designated by blind Dhṛtarāshtra, vice-regent until the Pāṇḍavas matured). As king he performs the Āsvamedhika, the great horse sacrifice to symbolize undisputed kingship. The Anugītā, a poem which seeks to imitate the Gītā has been inserted into this book.

15-18. Āśramavāsika, Mausala, Mahāprasthānika parvas - The final four books deal with the last things; the demise of Dhṛtarāshtra, his queen, Kunti, mother of the Pāṇḍavas; the death of Kṛṣṇa as well as his brother Baladeva and the inundation of the city of Kṛṣṇa, Dvāraka; the Pāṇḍavas give up their kingdom, climb up to heaven via the northern mountains. Two supplements have been added: the Svārgārohana describing the road to heaven and the Harivamsa or genealogy of Viṣṇu (scholars agree that this addition dates from the 2nd century A.D. or even later.

From this brief bookwise outline it is possible to relate the central story of the whole Epic. In Kurukṣetra (land of the Kurus), at times called the

Bhārata country, in the capital city known as Hastināpura (near modern Delhi) there lived two princes named Dhṛtarāshtra and Pāṇḍu. Dhṛtarāshtra was blind, therefore although he was the oldest of the two, he was not permitted to be emperor as declared in the dharma śāstra. So Pāṇḍu succeeded to the throne, reigned gloriously and produced five sons. Dhṛtarāshtra had 100 sons who together were known as the Kauravas (or Kuru princes) of whom the eldest, Duryodhana, made moves to take over the throne and eliminate his cousins. After the premature death of Pāṇḍu, the blind brother reigned as vice-regent, apparently unable to control his own sons. The relationship between the two families deteriorated further when the king appointed his eldest nephew, Yudhisthira to be heir-apparent. Intrigues forced the Pāṇḍavas to flee for their lives and they made their way to the king of Pancāla. In the Swayamvara of the king's daughter Arjuna alone among all the assembled heroes and kings was able to bend the royal bow. Draupadī with the intention of avoiding strife consented to become the common wife of all five brothers.

At this point in the story Kṛṣṇa entered the scene, not as a divine being, but rather as a renowned hero of the Yādavas. He soon came to be regarded as advisor and friend to the Pāṇḍavas. When Dhṛtarāshtra became aware of the formation of the double alliance between the Pancālas and the Yādavas he tried to bring about a peaceful settlement and divided the kingdom, giving Hastināpura to his own sons and parceling a new district to his nephews. Good

fortune attended the Pāṇḍavas so that they soon established their own renowned city of Indraprastha (near Delhi). Such success only rankled Duryodhana further who now directed his energies to once more ruin his cousins. He made arrangements, with the approval of his father, and invited the Pāṇḍus to Hastināpura. While there, Yudhisthira who was unaware of any trickery (naive) and because of his weakness for dice was challenged by Śakuni, a skillful gamster, and lost everything; his kingdom, wealth, army, brothers and finally Draupadī who was embarrassingly humiliated as well. As a solution the Pāṇḍavas agreed to accept a 12 year banishment and to remain unrecognizable for a 13th year. After this time had been completed they would be allowed to return again to claim their kingdom.

The period of exile passed but when the Pāṇḍavas demanded back their possessions they were refused whereupon preparations for war began. The armies with numerous allies on both sides met in the sacred region of Kuruksetra. In the 18 day battle the Pāṇḍavas alone escape alive together with Arjuna's charioteer, Kṛṣṇa. The enemy has been defeated and the Pāṇḍavas at last emerge victorious and are reconciled with Dhṛtarāshtra. At Yudhisthira's coronation in Hastināpura the great Āswamedha is celebrated. The rest of the story winds up the closing days of our heroes, which includes the death of Kṛṣṇa episode. As the Pāṇḍavas had emerged from the forest, so they return again in the final end.¹

1. This summary is the core story for the Epic around which other stories and legendary accounts were added. C.f. Roy's Mahābhārata, and MacDonell's History of Sanskrit Literature.

3. THE PĀNDAVAS, THE KAURAVAS AND KR̥ṢṢNA'S RELATIONSHIP WITH THEM

We have already alluded to the possibility that in the historical background to the Epic the Kurus and the Pancālas were two neighboring tribes who were caught in a life and death conflict with the result that the two peoples became merged as one. If this was the real historical background then in the process of time, as the old songs and ballads were handed down, the feud and the relationship of the heroes to one another took on a new significance. They were no longer two neighboring tribes but two kingship groups and in the end the two neighbors became two brothers with two groups of cousins descending from them. Kr̥ṣṢna of the Yādavas, who in the beginning may have represented a third neighboring tribe, is also brought into the relationship, at first as an arbitrator in the feud but ultimately as the one whose alliance turned the tide of events in favor of the Pāṇdavas. Such a view is not completely without merit for already in the light of the Upaniṣads the philosophy of oneness appears. All men are brothers by virtue of being part of that divine essence which expressed itself through nama-rupa. By the divine in them all men are basically related.¹

The highest god, Brahmān, is no longer the transcendent unmanifest, but the imminent manifest in human form. The deity incorporates "allness" into "oneness". We need not be alarmed to find the mention of Śiva and Kr̥ṣṢna being identified together for in the more comprehensive philosophy of Indian thought both Vaisṇavism and Śaivism find a common unity in Kr̥ṣṢna, as the principle goes

1. Chh.U. VI.8.7. (TAT TVAM ASI).

. . . back to the Upanisads, that fountainhead of all Brahmanical speculation and philosophy. In their search for Truth the first bold step taken by the Upanisadic seers was to synthesize the plurality of Vedic gods into one Ultimate reality. 1

Yet,

. . . it is clear that the Mahābhārata in its present shape contains an epic nucleus, that it favors the worship of Visnu 2

We note one other possibility, namely that in the philosophical movement towards a unity of the godhead, there remains the hope that heretical elements such as Buddhism will ultimately be brought back into the fold of Hinduism. The new importance attached to Kṛṣṇa in his role as a personal god and the devotion accorded him was to turn for the victory of Hinduism (philosophically speaking) so that the two peoples who originated from a common source and shared the same common heritage would in the end be amalgamated into one homogenous mass.

Commenting on the origin of the Pāṇḍu peoples Bhandarkar in Ancient History of India makes the claim that the Pāṇḍyas were an Aryan race connected with the north of India somewhere around Mathurā. A section of them migrated southward, settled and were called the Pāṇḍyas. The name originally was that of a Kṣatriya tribe as well as of a country. He quotes such sources as Kātyāyana, Ptolemy and Pliny as support for his position.³ E.W. Hopkins lists some of the ancestors of Pūru and Yādu but connects them with the

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1. V.S. Sukthankar - On the Meaning of the Mahabharata, 94.
(It is suggested that the Epic is a Vishnuvite poem).
 2. A.A. MacDonell - A History of Sanskrit Literature, 286.
 3. R.C. Bhandarkar - Ancient History of India, 9ff.

the lunar race, Yādu being the ancestor of Kṛṣṇa and Pūru being the ancestor of Bhārata and Kūru. Using the Puranic list of kings he says that

A real historical background is reflected in the maze of myth . 1

Pāṇḍu became a mighty king, and famous warrior and a just ruler in the kingdom over which he reigned. Of the two wives, Pritha and Madri, whom he married, the former one was of celestial origin. Her mother was a nymph and her father a holy Brāhman; her brother, Vāsudeva, was the father of Kṛṣṇa. The Adi parva recites the long genealogy of the Bhāratas, linking them with divine origin and hence the explanation for their prowess and achievements. The parva cites several pages of "begats"

Dwaipayana,begat three children -- viz. Dhṛtarāshtra, Pāṇḍu, and Vidura. Dhṛtarāshtra had a hundred sons . . . and Pāṇḍu had two jewels of wives 2

Of the three brothers Dhṛtarāshtra, the eldest, was born blind due to a fault of his mother. Because of such a physical handicap the question of kingship was raised,

how can one that is blind become a monarch worthy of the Kurus? How can one that is blind become the protector of his relatives and family, and the glory of his father's race? 3

Hence another king of the Kurus was necessary. A second son was born who because of the fear of his mother was to be pale in complexion.

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1. E.W. Hopkins - Hastings Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics, 326.
 2. Roy, Mbh. I. 228. (The 'begats' are recorded in the same place, 225-8).
 3. Ibid. 256.

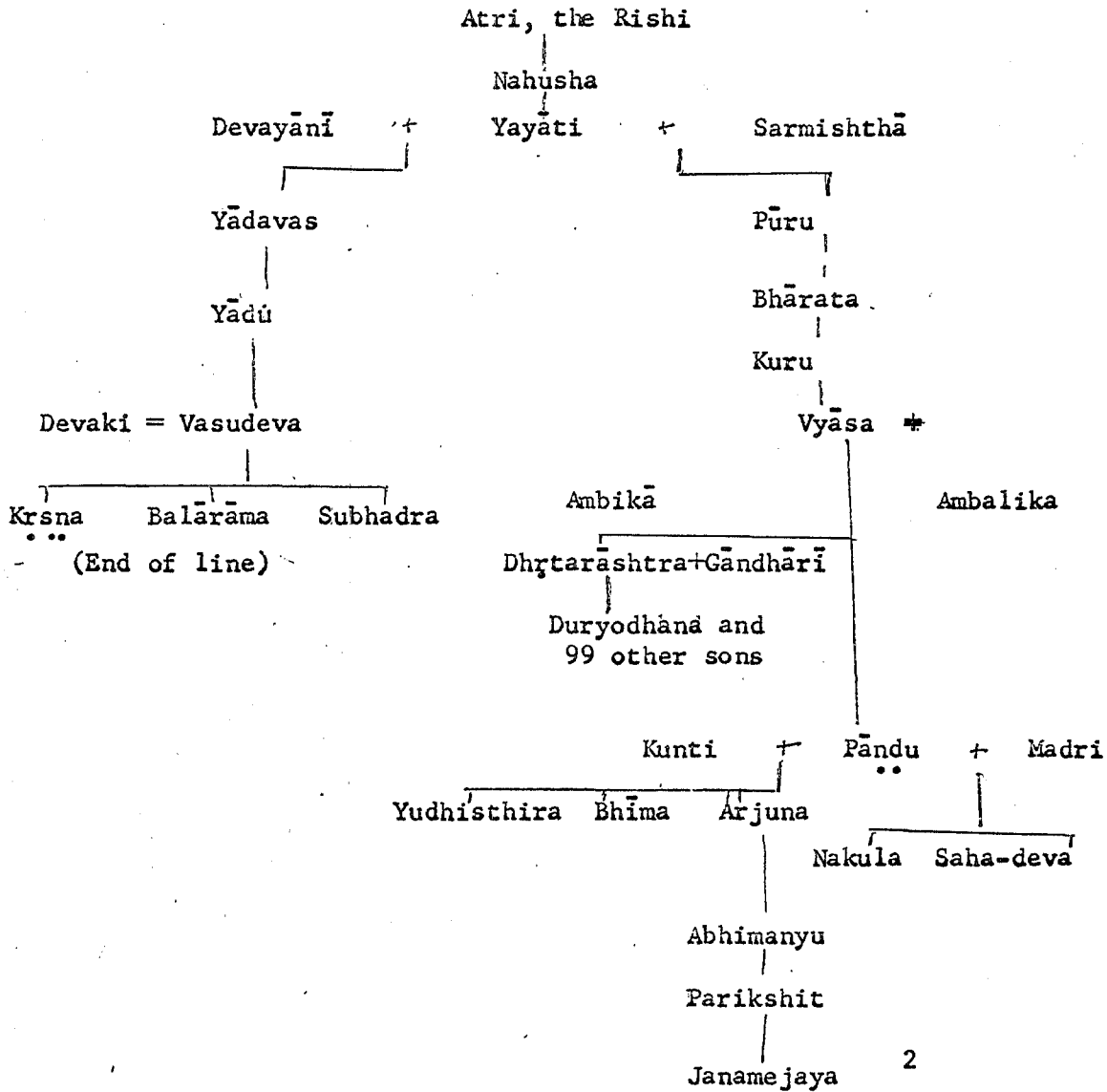
The R̥ṣi also told the mother to call this child Pāṇdu (the pale).

A third son born to the princess Anvalika, begotten by K̥ṣṇa-

Dwaipāyana was called Vidura.

"Thus were born, in the field of Vichitravirya, even of Dwaipayana those sons of the splendour of celestial children, those propagators of the Kuru race." 1

GENEALOGY OF THE KAURAVAS AND THE PĀṆDAVAS



1. *Ibid.*, 257.

2. J. Murdock - the Mbh. 8. (Genealogy has been somewhat abbreviated).

In the above genealogical scheme Kṛṣṇa is represented as a man, the son of Vāsudeva. His mother was Devakī and he had one older brother who was called Balārāma as well as one sister, Subhadra, whom Arjuna married. Kṛṣṇa is Arjuna's cousin and as such each cousin is essential to the other for only as they work together are they invincible. In the Mahābhārata the two are often called the "two Kṛṣṇas". Kṛṣṇa having received boons as gifts from the gods becomes invulnerable. He is lauded as a human warrior and at the same time is accused of ignoble conduct, ignorance in battle, and unreasonable rage. During the Epic war Kṛṣṇa acts as charioteer for Arjuna because Duryodhana preferred to choose the forces that he had to offer instead of Kṛṣṇa himself. He declared that he would not participate in physical combat and yet on several occasions has to be stopped by Arjuna from doing so.

The key figures in the story around whom most of the action revolves are the following:

- i) Pāṇḍu and Kuntī; the 5 Pāṇḍavas (of whom Arjuna is the most significant and Yūdhishthira as royal incumbent comes a close second); Draupadī (at times known by another name, Kṛṣṇā).
- ii) Dhṛtarāshtra (uncle to the Pāṇḍavas); 100 sons (of whom Duryodhana dominates); Bhīṣmā; Droṇa; Karna; Salya.
- iii) Kṛṣṇa (related to both sides, acts as intermediary in the beginning but joins Arjuna as his charioteer during the war).

The Pāṇḍavas are represented as the worshippers of Viṣṇu and more particularly the avatar of Viṣṇu, namely Kṛṣṇa who in the Epic dominates as divinity par excellence. It is Kṛṣṇa who has been

chosen by Arjuna (Duryodhana having had first choice, chose the troops of Kṛṣṇa)¹ which suggests the beginning of the bhakti cult.

The Royal rivals, the Kauravas, do not maintain much of a relationship with Kṛṣṇa. They resist his approaches of arbitration and whenever possible downgrade him. This may be the reason why scholars, like S.K. De, argue that the "Kauravas were probably Śiva worshippers."² Such a position is not really tenable because Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa as well utter words of praise to Śiva, recite his glory and accord him worship.³ In some places the names of Kṛṣṇa and Śiva are linked together.⁴ De admits that the Epic does not show any great antagonism between the sects of Śiva and Viṣṇu, "each sect apparently believed in the supremacy of its own god, but neither decried the other".⁵ The strongest support for linking the Kurus with Śiva comes from their destructive tendencies, just as Śiva who is linked with Rudra and Kali represents the destructive nature of deities during the Kali age. Duryodhana appears to be destined to carry out the destruction of the Kṣatriyas during the last stage of the world cycle.⁶

A third party, Vasudeva Kṛṣṇa has been interjected between the royal rivals. At first he appears more as a historical figure than "the divine Viṣṇu" and the "mythical Nārāyaṇa". Just how the

1. Mbh. III. 9-10.

2. S.K. De - Aspects of Sanskrit Literature, 67.

3. Mbh. X, 40; X. 65; XI. 368.

4. Ibid., X. 40.

5. Op.Cit., De, 67.

6. Mbh. X. 60.

human and the divine came to be identified is not known. There are two pictures that emerge out of the Epic, one that distinctly suggests that Kṛṣṇa was a tribal chief and significant warrior (even though in the Epic he is made to play the menial role of charioteer and has to be stopped by Arjuna when he attempts to participate in actual hand to hand combat) who is so often referred to as "the Slayer of Madhu" and other warrior-like epithets. Here the portrayal is that of a chieftain who is not overly scrupulous¹ but at the same time he must be a great diplomat and advisor in the contention between the two camps.

A third aspect of Kṛṣṇa is that he is also a philosophical and religious teacher and such teaching is not/merely from a human point of view but from a divine perspective (E.g. The Bhagavadgītā). We can assume that Kṛṣṇa originally was a tribal hero of the Yādavas who over a long period of time was transmuted into a deified saint and through efforts of the bhakti cult came to be regarded as the Ultimate Reality incarnate in human form for the salvation of the world.² The troublesome question before us is this: Does the Mahābhārata as it now stands, suggest an evolutionary process towards developing a divine Kṛṣṇa figure, or, are there several Kṛṣṇas who have become mixed up and finally coalesced into a divine yet human manifestation? In attempting some solution it will be necessary to sort out the historical evidence, (whatever that may be), then to examine the metaphysical imagery and finally to interpret the cultic material.

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1. More will be said about this aspect of Kṛṣṇa's character in Ch.III.
 2. This is Bhandarkar's hypothesis - c.f. S.K.De - Aspects of Sanskrit Literature, 91.

as it makes itself felt in the Epic.

III THE HISTORICAL KR̥SNA

1. PRINCE OF THE YĀDAVAS

The previous chapter set forth the more human relationship of Kṛ̥sna with both the Pāṇḍavas and the Kauravas. In the scheme of the genealogical table all were relatives; two major families engaged in a life and death struggle and Kṛ̥sna situated somewhere in the middle with his efforts to reconcile the two by working at a compromise that the extermination of so many renowned heroes might be avoided. Kṛ̥sna as a man was the son of Vāsudeva in the line of Yādu descendants. His mother was Devakī, the daughter of Devaka.¹ There were other members in the family; one elder brother, Balārāma, and a younger sister, Subhadrā, whom Arjuna married.² Kṛ̥sna is also Arjuna's cousin and the picture we get from the Mahābhārata is that the two cousins were absolutely essential to each other because their being together makes them invincible. The two are frequently known as "the Two Kṛ̥snas". In the Bhāgadatta this association is expressed,

. . . from the neck of his elephant, Bhagadatta scattered showers of shafts on the two Krishnas, staying upon their car. 3

1. See genealogy on page 40.

2. Mbh. I. 485. (Arjuna carried Kṛ̥sna's sister away by force but with the approval of her brother).

3. Mbh. VI. 63.

In the Karna parva, Karna addressed Salya, saying that he is well aware of the greatness of Kṛṣṇa as a "bull among the lords of the earth. He is not afraid to take on these "two tigers among men" (Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna) and he further reprimands Salya for trying to frighten him,

Being a friend, why dost thou, like an enemy, frighten me with these praises of the two Krishnas? Either they two will slay me to-day or I will slay them two. Knowing as I do my own might, I do not cherish any fear of the two Krishnas. 1

Further on in the same parva the two are regarded as being invincible and ultimately victorious.

"When the two Krishnas are excited with wrath, they show regard for nothing. The two bulls among beings are the Creators of all real and unreal things. These two are Nara and Narayana . . . rulers over all . . . none equal to either of them Let the victory, however, belong to the two Krishnas. 2

Another description of the two gives us a slightly different picture, as if they were two halves which made up one whole. Vāsudeva is represented as comforting his own sister, Subhadrā, wife of Arjuna who has lost her son in the battle. He tells her how he will defend Arjuna and crush the enemy with his own discus, saying,

He that hateth him, hateth me. He that followeth him, followeth me. Thou hast intelligence. Know that Arjuna is half of myself. 3

Such a linking together of Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna under the designation "two Kṛṣṇas" or even considering them to be two complementary halves

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1. Mbh. VII. 107.
 2. Ibid., 256. (There are other references where the two have been joined in this fashion).
 3. Ibid., VI. 150. (In IV.24 the two are known as two heroic and mighty car warriors, united with each other. "Indeed they are one soul born in twain.")

which together make up one whole makes possible the following observation:

- i) Both are human heroes that have developed such a close friendship that they cannot be separated from each other. (It brings to mind the Jonathan-David friendship in the Old Testament Jewish Scriptures).
- ii) Or both have to be considered as divine in their origin and thus stand together in the struggle to arrest evil. (The purposes and intentions are so identical that one title is used to designate equality).

Such attempts of making the two equal partners or two halves of one whole dare not be pushed too far. Arjuna in the Mahābhārata is not accorded the same human qualities that Kṛṣṇa is. One is the warrior hero, the other the advisor and the charioteer. Nor can the name Kṛṣṇa be used interchangeably with Arjuna. If both are regarded as divine beings then again differences must be noted; they are not two Nāras but Nara and Nārāyaṇa. This distinction is rather obvious within the context of the Bhagavadgītā as well as in other places. Arjuna is not endowed with the 1000 names of the divine nor accorded the worship that is reserved for Kṛṣṇa alone. If the epithet is to be preserved it seems to fit more aptly to some concrete historical personages, such as the establishment of an alliance between two tribal chieftains as the Epic suggests. The two are great heroes, warriors with outstanding qualifications, complementing each other in such a unique way that one could speak of them as the two Kṛṣṇas.

Kṛṣṇa's Home is none other than the Capital city of Dwāravati from which he comes in the beginning of the Epic and to which he returns when the war has been terminated. Yudhisthira for some unknown

reason sent his brother Arjuna into the forest where he lived for eleven years and some months. During this lengthy sojourn in the forest Arjuna made his way to Dwāravati and married Subhadrā, the sister of Vāsudeva. At the conclusion of the marriage both Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa sacrificed butter to Agni.¹ Efforts have been made to locate Dwāravati and to place it in its geographical setting. All that can be determined so far is that Hindu tradition has believed Kṛṣṇa's Dwārakā to be in Kathiawad, south of Mathurā, on the sea coast.

At the close of the Epic account Kṛṣṇa is again represented as returning to his capital in Dwārakā where in that delightful city of Dwāravati he entered the palace after a long absence. He was embraced by his father and mother, and having washed his feet to dispell "his fatigue" he answered all the questions of his father.² All supernatural elements are missing from the story about his home coming. The episode of the "mighty-armed hero" returning victoriously from Kurukṣetra lets us see only a son, (or it could be any other son) having distinguished himself in battle returning home amid the hurrahs of the citizenry and questioned by the father.

1. Mbh. Vol. I. 134. (Adi parva).

There is some indication that Kṛṣṇa's Dwārakā has been located
i) south of Mathurā in Kathiawad (On the sea coast)
ii) West of Kuru-land and not south since migrations of refugees mentioned in the Adi parva would not have been able to move southward but westward, because they feared Jarāsmḍha at Mathura.
c.f. Kosambi - The Autochthonous Element in the Mahabharata, 35.
JAOS vol. 84, 1964.

2 The MEDIATOR, ADVISOR AND PHILOSOPHER

As tension mounted between the Pāṇḍavas and the Kurus Kṛṣṇa was called upon to act as mediator for the hope still prevailed that somehow a compromise might be effected. The Pāṇḍavas ought to be given at least half of the kingdom as their own, and the good offices of Kṛṣṇa were invoked to effect, if possible, an amicable settlement to the satisfaction of both sides. His role therefore was that of ambassador to the capital of Hastināpura to explain the demands of Yudhisthira. In choosing an ambassador consideration had to be given to the right person,

Therefore, let a person, virtuous and honest and of respectable birth, and wary, --- an able ambassador, set out to beseech them mildly for inducing them to give half the kingdom to Yudhisthira. 1

The plan was designed to conciliate the Kurus and not to provoke them to war. The Pāṇḍavas and their allies debated for some time the political strategy they should successfully follow, and when Kṛṣṇa enters the debate he appears as a human being, devoid of supernatural power or wisdom. He is respected as a man of wisdom, sound advice and a capable ambassador.²

Equally noteworthy is the strategy by which Kṛṣṇa was able to avoid alienating either Duryodhana or Arjuna who approached him for support but it does not show supernatural ability in knowing what to do. Both warriors had made their way to Dwārakā only to find Kṛṣṇa asleep. Since Duryodhana had entered the bed chamber first he sat down at the head of the bed while Arjuna having arrived last stationed himself at the back of the hall.

1. Mbh. IV. 2.
2. Ibid., 9, 48f.

When Kṛṣṇa awoke he saw Arjuna first but pursued to question both of them as to the intent of their visit. Duryodhana spoke first,

It behoveth you to lend me your help in the impending war. Arjuna and myself are both equally your friendsyou bear the same relationship to both of usI was the first to come to you. 1

In this case who had preference? Duryodhana who had arrived first or Arjuna who had been seen first? Since his eyes had first rested on Arjuna, Kṛṣṇa argued that he was obligated to help him first. Secondly, he was the junior of the two and the junior one was to have first choice. The choice is significant because both are told that they will be helped by Kṛṣṇa. Arjuna chose Kṛṣṇa alone and that in spite of the fact that he was told that Vāsudeva had resolved not to fight on the field of battle. Duryodhana happily chose the ten crores of cowherds (Kṛṣṇa's soldiers) to be on his side.² The arrangement could be interpreted in a historical way except that it doesn't make much sense from the human point of view to have Kṛṣṇa on one side and his army fighting against him on the other side. At least Duryodhana regarded the arrangement adequate for with troops numbering in the thousands he stood a better chance of winning. He now regarded Arjuna as already defeated. Arjuna alone seems to see beyond the physicalness of it all and detect something more than human in Kṛṣṇa.

Another role which Kṛṣṇa filled in the Epic war was that of charioteer for Arjuna and this role was coupled with the resolve that he would not fight in hand to hand combat nor would he bear arms.³ This role does not seem natural for a warrior and hero

1. Mbh. IV. 9.
2. Ibid., 9f.
3. Ibid., 8.

who had successfully fought his own battles. We are even more non-plussed when Kṛṣṇa does what is natural for a soldier, when he rushed from the chariot excited with rage to attack Bhīṣma, and Arjuna has to drag him back to his post and remind him of his resolve.

The high souled Partha, however, seizing then with great force his legs as he was proceeding at a quick pace toward Bhishma, succeeded, O King, in stopping him with difficulty at the tenth step. 1

Nor is there any logical explanation that Kesava should have resolved not to take up arms in battle because Kṛṣṇa and his discus are inseparable,

the once more, discus on arm, mounted the car. 2

The discus, as weapon of the mighty Viṣṇu, is significant because it is the "destroyer of enemies"; it had been employed in the struggle with Danava (the huge head of Danava, cut off by the discus)

"and it blazed like the fire consuming all things at the end of the yuga"

"hurled from the hands of Nārāyaṇa. . . . 3

Kṛṣṇa is born into the world armed with the discus⁴ and though it is represented as a metaphysical weapon it is made of iron and has natural characteristics as well.

Kesava is known to be a great warrior who had fought great battles prior to his alliance with the Pāṇḍavas. One of the epithets associated with him is "slayer of Madhu".⁵

1. Mbh. V, 164. (a similar incident appears in V, 286).

2. Ibid., I, 67, 68. See also V, 163. (The discus is further described as of abundant energy, five cubits in diameter, invisible to the Kurus, capable of being hurled at the foe both great and small. IV, 155. It also acts as a boomerang, the great powerful discus hurled from the hand of Kṛṣṇa reduces the enemy to ashes and comes back into his hands. II, 49.)

3. Loc. cit.

4. Ibid., X, 619.

5. Ibid., II, 48.

His greatness as "hero" and as human warrior is reiterated on several occasions¹ which is contrary to his role and employee of Arjuna as charioteer in the Mahābhārata war. One would have expected to see Kṛṣṇa, as allied to the Pāṇḍavas, engaged in hand to hand combat with a chariot and charioteer of his own. At the same time this great hero and warrior is vulnerable and is pierced in battle without hindering him in his activity. One account tells us that both Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna were pierced by Droṇa; in another account Karna does the same with five shafts.²

There are other roles, both in and out of battle, that Kesava has to carry out in the Epic. He acts as an advisor of strategy,³ consoler of Arjuna and comforter of his sister Subhadrā⁴, as a priest who performs sacrifices.⁵ His role as mediator is well known and need not be elaborated further.

As the "best of male beings" and as the "sinless one" he is by human standards capable of ignoble behavior. What is said about him is all too human and not fitting for a transcendent god role. Kṛṣṇa is all too easily provoked to anger and wrath, certainly a human characteristic. Granted that one can speak about "Divine anger" the problem of excessive anger and of being carried away in wrath when the enemy does not yield is more the nature of man than of god.⁶

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1. Mbh. II. 49; III. 170; VII. 106. etc.
 2. Ibid., VI. 172; VII. 275.
 3. Ibid., IV. 8; VI. 173. etc.
 4. Ibid., VI. 136, 145.
 5. Ibid., XI. 355. (See also II. 100, 101.)
 6. Ibid., V. 163, 164; II. 28, 100; VII. 256.

3. KR̥SNA'S IGNOBLE BEHAVIOR

In the battle against the enemy Kṛ̥ṣṇa is accused of ignoble behavior, not only once, but on a number of counts. He boasts of having killed the brother of Śiśupāla, a boy of tender years.

Revengeful Salwa made his way to Dwārakā while Kṛ̥ṣṇa was away.

As he searched for him he called out

Where is that wretch of the Vr̥ishni race, Vāsudeva, the evil-souled son of Vāsudevā? I will humble in battle the pride of that person so eager for fight! Where is he? Where is he? Wretch . . . hath killed my brother . . . who was but a boy of tender years . . . not on the field of battle, unprepared as he was. 1

So also in the Śalya parva Duryodhana bitterly accuses Kṛ̥ṣṇa of various unfair acts; of crooked council to the Pāṇḍavas (especially Arjuna); of not stopping the Pāṇḍavas when they acted unfairly; of condoning cruelty and of attacking when the foe could not defend himself; of baffling "darts" meant for Arjuna. In the midst of the recital of the misdeeds Duryodhana cries out to him,

Who is there more sinful than thou?

concluding with a condemnatory note,

If ye had fought me and Karna and Bhishma and Drona by fair means, victory then, without doubt, would never have been yours. By adopting the most crooked and unrighteous of means thou hast caused many kings observant of the duties of their order and ourselves also to be slain. 2

1. Mbh. II. 36.

2. Ibid., VII. 180.

The amazing thing is that Kṛṣṇa does not deny his guilt in such matters, he merely counters Duryodhana with his own misdemeanor, and recites in turn all the unrighteous acts he has perpetrated upon the Pāṇḍavas. Such a recital of unrighteous acts becomes the defense of Kṛṣṇa to cover up his own actions which are not beyond criticism. The conclusion is that Duryodhana is the cause of everything since he provoked reaction towards himself,

'in consequence of the sinful path in which thou hast trod!'¹

Neither are absolved of their unrighteous deeds as if evil had to be overcome by evil. In my estimation this leaves Kṛṣṇa a human figure who was limited by his humanity just as others were. He demonstrates an all too human philosophy of revenge, of Tit for tat.

4. DEATH, THE ACHILLES HEEL

The last incident among others to which we will now address ourselves is the death of Kṛṣṇa. If Kṛṣṇa is not a human figure then we have difficulty in understanding his demise and if he is a human figure there still remain aspects of his death which go beyond nature. In the Stree parva the death is already predicted by Gandharī as she laments over the slain Karṇa lying on the ground. In one sense it was more than a prediction for it was a curse pronounced on Govinda and his descendents,

1. Mbā. VII. 180, 181.

" 171. (Kṛṣṇa suggested unfair means in fighting).

" 178. (He approved Bhīma's unfair blow below the navel).

O Govinda, thou shalt be the slayer of thy own kinsmen!
On the thirty sixth year from this, O slayer of Madhu,
thou shalt after causing the slaughter of thy kinsmen
and friends and sons, perish by disgustful means within
the wilderness.

The ladies of thy race, deprived of sons, kinsmen, and
friends, shall weep and cry even as these ladies of the
Bharata race.¹

Upon hearing this curse Kṛṣṇa accepts that the Yādavas would fall
by one another's hand (an explanation for the extinction of the
line of Kṛṣṇa). The account of the death is briefly described in
the Mausala parva where we are told that Kṛṣṇa took leave of his
father and determined to proceed into the forest to practice penance.
He wandered for a while in lonely surroundings and at last "laid him-
self down in high yoga". The curse became a reality for,

A fierce hunter of the name of Jara . . . desirous of deer
. . . mistaking Kesava . . . for a deer, pierced him at the
heel with a shaft Coming up, Jara beheld a man dress-²
ed in yellow robes, rapt in yoga, and endued with many arms.

He died, we are told, and ascended upwards until he reached his own
inconceivable region. He met the deities who worshipped him.

The manner of death resembles that of the Greek myth surrounding
the Greek hero Herakles who was traditionally a darkened athlete who
killed the many headed hydra and wedded many nymphs. Herakles (or
Achilles) having slain the Amazons was in turn slain by Paris, whose
arrow was guided by Apollo to his vulnerable heel. The myth suggests
that "behind such legends there probably lies a real man, certainly
not a sun, river or other god."³ The Greeks who conquered north India

1. Mbh. VII. 42.

2. Ibid., XII. 263.

3. L.R. Farnell - Greek Hero Cults, 288.

(See also Appendix I)

immediately identified the Indian Kṛṣṇa with their Herakles and the similarity between the two legends cannot be easily dismissed. Kosambi has arrived at some sort of an interpretation which to my thinking is more conjecture than possibility and he does not give and proof for his position when he writes,

The Yadu demi-god died of an arrow shot into the heel by the wild hunter Jaras, really his half-brother. Indians still cannot understand how such a wound could be fatal. 1

He then proceeds to push the legend into a remote past while at the same time connecting it with Greek mythology.

The stories of Achilles and so many other Greeks of mythological antiquity show that the peculiar death must have been due to a ritual killing connected with a poisoned weapon often wielded by the brother (or tanist) of the sacrificed hero. 2

Late in the fourth century, invading Greeks found that the worship of an Indian demi-god whom they equated immediately with their own Herakles was the main cult of the Punjab plains 3

The kind of ritual sacrifice alluded to by Goswami does not to my knowledge appear in Indian literature. The closest that we could come to the concept would be the Kali ritual murders that took place during the days of the British but the two differ greatly. Neither is the designation "demi-god" an adequate one for Kṛṣṇa for this would be very much like calling Jesus a demi-god which is by no means acceptable.

1. D.D. Kosambi - Ancient India, 117.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

The death of Kṛṣṇa as described in the Mausala parva may be a mythical way of describing the death of that great hero and to cloak him with a mysterious quality. Besides the mysterious element may clothe a much more ordinary event which through the process of time and retelling assumed legendary characteristics. Trevor Ling, A History of Religion East and West, has this to say:

Kṛṣṇa is generally closely connected with herdsmen as protector of cattle and it is possible that Kṛṣṇa was a historical figure so far back that only the legendary aspects remained. In time a mythology evolved which incorporated veneration to the extent that the Kṛṣṇa cult became a reality. 1

We cannot dismiss the story as not being grounded in reality. Some of the characteristics of Kṛṣṇa which we have discussed so far do point to a historical personage. In my view it appears that Bhandarkar sums up best what many have hoped to establish as a basis for the Epic when he writes,

Vāsudeva Kṛṣṇa had a historic basis; and the circumstances which led to his being invested with the supreme godhead, occurred in later times, . . . when Vāsudeva came into the field, he appealed more to the hearts of men as the god who had come to dwell amongst them. 2

Kṛṣṇa then does appear as a human figure in the Bhārata story. He was a tribal chief who figures prominently in human relationships and by giving his allegiance to the Pāṇḍava side in the great war helped them to turn disgrace into victory. Throughout the Epic he is presented in a human form; he makes his mistakes and is ill suited to be an interpreter of morals. He performs as a menial charioteer for Arjuna, offers devious advice and is accused by the foe of being a rascal. The charge sheet is significant indeed.

1. Trevor Ling - A History of Religion East and West, 147.

2. R.G. Bhandarkar - Vaisnavism, Saivism and minor Religious Systems, 110f.

In spite of all the praise accorded him as a divine being he died a miserable death; as if to show his vulnerability. This is one figure with which Kṛṣṇa makes himself known in the Mahābhārata. It is not the only one.

IV. THE METAPHYSICAL KṚṢṆA

1. KṚṢṆA AS PERSONAL GOD

The second figure of Kṛṣṇa in the Epic is that of a highly exalted divine being. All other concepts of gods from the time of the Vedas to the time of the finalization of the Epic in written form converge in him. The thousand names by which he is known and which are recited with blessings for both the reciter and the listener capture for us a new conceptualization of God revealing himself in human form. The philosophical notion is not that God is wholly transcendent, unknowable and unapproachable by all except the sacrificing priests (Vedic). It is God come down to live among men in a form that could be recognized by all who were not blinded by māyā. He is a personal god who embraces all as the Creator, Preserver and destroyer in the Kali Yuga. He becomes approachable by men (Arjuna, Duryodhana, Kunti, Draupadī etc.) and acts as advisor or consoler as the need arises. As avatara of Vishnu he participates in human history, and as God is not limited by human morality or standards. What in human understanding appears as limitations in reality supplies the answer of who Śrī Kṛṣṇa really is; he is God who has limited himself for the purpose of saving men and at the same time is not limited by human standards. If he were limited by human standards he would no longer be God.

We can see a tendency of Hindu thought to merge the many gods into one, and incorporate the whole of human experience and life into the divine life. That is why we are brought through the grief of the Pāṇḍavas and the greed of Duryodhana to the final state of affairs where we discover the unexpected. It is the foe who enjoys heaven and those who were thought to be righteous must first suffer in hell. Their fate had been reversed but ultimately would be rectified when all are saved.

From the metaphysical stance we are propelled towards Viṣṇuism and this means the Hindu system of Avatars. At particular stations in human history, when the affairs of men have become desperate, it behooved the Metaphysical to enter the physical with the purpose of setting things in order again. The Mahābhārata reflects upon the need of the Ultimate Being to reveal himself in a particular way and at a particular time. By means of one incarnation or another, God has shown the world how men may participate in the highest life of which they are capable, the life of religious purity. When the Creator of life descended into the human arena for such a purpose he brought with him his whole divine nature (his supernatural powers) to accomplish it. Nor is there any exception for the Kṛṣṇa avatara as it is unmasked in the Bhagavadgītā. Kṛṣṇa incarnated himself for one purpose and that purpose was to draw all towards himself in love and joy.¹ In making his purpose known he had to reveal himself in

1. The root for the name, Kṛṣṇa is कृष् which means 'to draw'.

many ways and display many characteristics which were not always discernable or acceptable to all.

This simultaneous multifurcation or many sided manifestation of Divine nature is one of the Characteristics, one of the exclusive privileges, of Divinity. He must love and be loved. 1

This helps us to understand the close, inseparable relationship of Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna in the Mahābhārata .

The belief that the Supreme Being assumes material form to preserve and rectify the existing world is the key to Viṣṇuvite religion. Viṣṇu was born among men in many forms as a fish, as Rāma, as Kṛṣṇa, as Buddha. His role is that of preserver. When he assumes the form of a prince of Dvārakā he fulfills the role of teacher of the Viṣṇuvite faith, the devotional religion which replaced the Vedic ceremonies and the Upaniṣadic philosophy of the divine as utterly transcendent. The aim is to invite sinners to surrender themselves to Sri Kṛṣṇa as the human avatara of Viṣṇu, Preserver, God of love. When Draupadī was being divested of her garments, in the court of king Dhṛtarāshtra, in her distress she called on Sri Kṛṣṇa for help, who being deeply moved came to her assistance,

and while Yajnaseni was crying aloud to Krishna, also called Viṣṇu (italics mine) and Hari and Nara for protection, the illustrious Dharma, remaining unseen, covered her with excellent clothes of many hues. 2

1. B.K. Goswami - The Bhakti Cult in Ancient India, 403.
2. Mbh. II. 144.

2. THE SUPREME BEING

The issue of the Supreme Being arises in the dialogue between Duryodhana and Bhīṣma. When Duryodhana requests an answer as to the origin and the glory of Vāsudeva who is spoken of as the Supreme Being in all the worlds, he is reminded that Vāsudeva is the

... God of all Gods . . . none superior to him . . .
all soul . . . highest soul . . . Supreme male Being
. . . laid himself down on the waters . . . created
Speech and the Vedas, . . . the universe He is the
great Boar, He is the great lion, and He is the Three-
stepped Lord. 1

The creation of caste is also attributed to him and a recital of the many avataras by which Kṛṣṇa in "days of old" had appeared on earth is offered in the Vāna parva and sounds like the Jataka tales of later Buddhism. In the last instance he appropriated unto himself the sacred city of Dwārakā. Lapsing into a description of his characteristics, Arjuna describes him as devoid of crookedness, anger, envy, untruth and cruelty; He would know no deterioration,² (Most of these aspects are contradicted at some time or another in the Epic). Taking up the same laudation Draupadī as well bursts out with a hymn in praise of Kṛṣṇa in appellations that are repeated on other occasions throughout the whole Epic.

Thou are the Eternal One! . . . Lord of all . . .
Omnipresent, Soul of all things, . . . Supreme lord of
all creatures Etc. 3

1. Mbh. V. 187 f.
2. Ibid., II. 30.
3. Ibid., 31.

Thus when Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna are linked together before the battle begins they are called

Those same ancient gods, the divine Nara and Narayana . . . they are one Soul born in twain. These two, by their acts, enjoy numerous eternal and exhaustible regions, and are repeatedly born in those worlds when destructive wars are necessary. For this reason their mission is to fight. 1

In god-like nature the two are equal to each other and they have taken their birth of their own will.²

Victory is attributed to Kṛṣṇa because he possesses infinite energy and the claim is made of his indestructibility because his weapons are incapable of being baffled. Neither is he a new upstart of a god since he

appearing as Hari in olden days, said in a loud voice unto the Gods and Asuras -- Who amongst you would be victorious? . . . Even the conquered who said, . . . With Krishna in the front we will conquer. 3

In the last chapter we argued that victory came to the Pāṇḍavas because of a human alliance which turns the tide of events. Now the victory has been positioned in the metaphysical realm among the Gods and Asuras for Śrī Kṛṣṇa transcends the human sphere to represent himself as a metaphysical figure.

3. TO WHOM WORSHIP IS DUE

From the beginning we are informed that opposition to worshipping Kṛṣṇa as God did exist. Some were not willing to accept him as the

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1. Mbh. IV. 124.
 2. Ibid., 155.
 3. Ibid., V. 49.

All God and individuals like Śuśipula and Duryodhana belittled him in public, criticizing him and trying to make him something inferior. Here we could allow some basis for the argument that there was opposition between the worshippers of Viṣṇu and Śiva and that the struggle was a philosophical war between the two cults.

The question of according worship to Kṛṣṇa arose already in the Sabha parva. How can Madhava deserve the first worship? Is he greater than Droṇa or Dwaipāyana or Bhīṣma? When brave Aswatthaman, knowledgeable, is here, Why is Kṛṣṇa being worshipped? Who do you O son of Pāṇḍu pass over illustrious heroes to give priority to Kṛṣṇa who is neither a sacrificial priest, nor a preceptor, nor a king? Are you hoping for some advantage, some gain or is it to insult us?

This wretch born of the race of the Vrishnis unrighteously slew of old the illustrious kind Jarasandha. Righteousness hath today been abandoned by Yudhisthira and meanness only hath been displayed by him in consequence of his having offered the Arghya to Krishna.¹

The above questions were first directed to Yudhisthira. But the matter did not end here because, turning towards Kṛṣṇa, Śiśupāla addressed him accusingly and demanded to know why he would even think of accepting worship of which he is unworthy. It was indeed offered to him by those "mean minded princes" but Kṛṣṇa should have had enough sense to refuse it and set them straight.

1. The questions raised by Śiśupāla have been paraphrased as they represent a lengthy speech. Mbh. II. 86, 87.

Thou thinkest much of the worship unworthily offered unto thee, like a dog that lappeth in solitude a quantity of clarified butter that it hath obtained. 1

Having had his say Śiśupāla left the assembly hall but king Yudhisthira ran after him trying to reason with him why worship should be accorded to Kṛṣṇa. There are two reasons why Govinda is worshipped. It is plain that he is distinguished in knowledge of the Vedas and their branches, and also excess of strength has been demonstrated by him. He has defeated many warriors in battle and the whole universe has been established by him.²

The whole question revolves around who Kṛṣṇa is. Is he a metaphysical figure or merely a human figure? Is he divine or only human? The one side is convinced that he is an ordinary being who enjoys the false honor of god given by the Pāṇḍavas and the other side reasons that he is more than human and therefore God incarnate, origin of the universe, of mobile and immobile creatures that have sprung into existence from him only and into whom the universe will dissolve; the Creator, the Eternal.³

Nor has the God left himself without testimony. Kṛṣṇa defends himself as one worthy of worship. The defense has been made and a shower of flowers fall on Sahādeva's head and an other worldly voice speaks "Excellent, excellent". Kesava of dark hue, clad in black deer skins; this dispeller of doubts, made his final declaration,

1. Mbh. II. 87.

2. c.f. Ibid. 88f.

3. Ibid.

Those men that will not worship the lotus-eyed Krishna should be regarded as dead though moving, and should never be talked to on any occasion. 1

The objection to accord worship to Kṛṣṇa is overcome to a large degree by an acceptance of his incarnation. This concept bridges the gap between the human figure and the metaphysical figure. Kṛṣṇa as teacher depends on Viṣṇuism which incorporates in its beliefs the incarnation theory and on the Mahābhārata which assumes that he has taken many forms at various times in world history to rectify conditions. The Ultimate Being has appeared in the form of Rāma², in multi-form,³ in infinite forms,⁴ he has taken birth among men,⁵ incarnated on earth (as Krishna of Yādu's race),⁶ Vāmana the dwarf,⁷ Hanuman in the Rāma incarnation,⁸ and numerous others.

Finally, the "metaphysicalness" of Śrī Kṛṣṇa is amplified in the numerous hymns of praise dedicated not to his human achievements but to his performance as an avatar of Viṣṇu and above all his metaphysical qualities. Within the realm of the metaphysical, the Macrocosm, Śrī Kṛṣṇa is the ultimate Being who is the Creator, the Sustainer and the Destroyer. He embraces the full god-head and absorbs all other deities into his being. There are a number of such devotional hymns in the Mahābhārata in which the attributes and names of him are spun out in endless succession. They completely overshadow any criticism which his foes had made of him. It is not

1. Mbh. II. 90. (The argument over the true nature of Kṛṣṇa continues over successive pages of the Sabha parva)

2. Ibid., XI. 349.

3. Ibid., 342.

4. Ibid., 346.

5. Ibid., 330.

6. Ibid., X. 619.

7. Ibid., 91.

8. Ibid., 92.

possible nor necessary here to repeat the pages upon pages of epithets and praises recited in adornment of Kṛṣṇa; to illustrate only a few will be quoted as typical. He is the Creator and Lord of all things, eternal one, omnipresent, Soul of all things, active power prevailing everything, Supreme Lord of all creatures, the several worlds, sun and moon are established by him, Lord of the gods, he is called TAT, Brahmān has sprung from him, Unmanifest, Father of the universe, he created Speech and the Vedas, he is Actor and Action, the past, present and future, without form, the One only being, beyond mind and matter, Viṣṇu, Śiva, Rudra, Kali, Nārāyaṇa, etc. etc.¹

When the 10,000 names of Vāsudeva are recited the Mahābhārata declares that these names have been selected from Vedic lore and are celebrated over all the world. The refrain is the same,

"Mahadeva is Eternal Brahman".

In these pages upon pages of the great "Thou art" sections all of human experience and imagination is attributed to Kṛṣṇa. Neither are the gods to be forgotten nor are the sacred scriptures (Thou art the Veda, Smṛtis, Itihāsas, Puranas, other Scriptures) to be neglected.²

If Śrī Kṛṣṇa is the Creator of all things animate and inanimate, and if he is the preserver of the world order, then he is also the end of the created order since ultimately all must sink back into the bosom of that great sea from whence it arose. Therefore Kṛṣṇa must

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1. Hymns in praise of Kṛṣṇa magnify his metaphysicalness and are found in many places of the Epic. Mbh. II. 30f; V. 56ff. (B.G.); V. 49f., 184-6; VIII 91, 94f., 96f.; IX. 94f; X. 39ff., 39ff., 325 ff.; XI. 325ff. ("He is" section).
 2. Mbh. X. 79 ff. (Scriptures are mentioned in X. 101.)

embrace the attributes of Śiva (and his consorts) who in popular Hinduism have been designated as the destroyer. He is competent to destroy all things, is known as the destroyer of all, exceedingly ugly and fierce (Kali).¹ As master and controller of the universe and as Lord of the Past, Present and Future great power is vested in him which includes the power to destroy. He is

the Creator (or Destroyer) of all existing things. . . .²

There is little room for doubt, if the Mahābhārata is at all taken seriously, that Śrī Kṛṣṇa is a metaphysical figure who is Ultimate Being, beyond and above the worlds of gods and men, the one Eternal reality who is the "Alpha and Omega" of all things. Anyone who regards him other than the Unmanifest and eternal is a wretch and labours in darkness.

That person of foolish understanding is called a wretch, who, from disregard, speaketh of Hrīṣīkeśa as only a man.³

We are compelled to face the question once more, If Kṛṣṇa is that Supreme Being attested to in the Epic, Why does he manifest human characteristics and frailties? If he is the origin and destruction of all things why does he submit himself to an ignoble death at the hands of a hunter? The composer of the Epic feels the challenge of such a question and has Vāsudeva, in dialogue with Utanka, utter his own reply.

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1. Mbh. X. 101 f.
 2. Ibid., XI. 334.
 3. Ibid., V. 185.

I am the Creator of all existent objects and I am their destroyer. Knowing no change myself, I am the destroyer of all those creatures that live in sinfulness. In every Yuga I have to repair the causeway of Righteousness; entering into diverse kinds of wombs from desire of doing good to my creatures. . . . Born now in the order of humanity, I must act as a human being. I appealed to them (the Kauravas) most piteously. But stupefied as they were . . . I frightened them . . . But once more I showed themselves my usual (Human) form. 1

The enlightened Utanka no longer felt inclined to curse him. As one who least deserves the Lord's grace he asks him, "show me once thy sovereign form", upon which Kṛṣṇa showed Utanka that eternal Vaiṣṇava form. But the "excellent and indestructable form" is not all that Utanka desired to see for he continued with a further request,

I wish to behold thee now in thy own (human) form which too is eternal. 2

Miraculous elements are considered to be part of the transcendent being, yet when we look at Kṛṣṇa there seems to be confusion attached to his great power and energy. At times he appears to be incapable of using his power indiscriminately and has to depend on others, e.g. Arjuna, for implementation. He has the mighty discus at his disposal but that too becomes more of a symbol of power and not an actual weapon. It is as if the mighty God, in his form of Kṛṣṇa were deliberately limiting himself with the purpose of provoking men into action. We see him the mighty warrior on the battle field playing

1. Mbh. XII. 107f.
2. Ibid., XII. 108.

the role of a humble charioteer and offering advice to Arjuna, which if followed in faith would set in motion the machinery of liberation and freedom. However, some of the miracles performed by Kṛṣṇa "since his birth" were evidently known and only alluded to at the time of the compilation of the Epic.¹ Those acts have been recited by people while the much talked about attributes have come to the attention of the author. What he has in mind here is no doubt the rescue of Davakī's children (including Balārāma and Kṛṣṇa) from the evil intentions of Kansa, king of Mathura. Kṛṣṇa is said to have performed miracles soon after his birth. When his father was imprisoned the chains fell from him and he was able to escape with the child Kṛṣṇa. When the two crossed the river Jumna, the father carried the child in a basket on his head. The waters were so deep that the danger of drowning was real, but Kṛṣṇa dipped his foot in the water and it abated.² Miracles continued to abound during his youth as well, the adventures of which are recorded for us in the Harivamsa, an appendix to the Mahābhārata. Here Kṛṣṇa, the many-faceted God is pictured as a lovable infant, a mischievous shepherd boy (Roy translates this aspect as 'cowboy'), lover of the milkmaids, husband of goddesses, exponent of ascetic renunciation, roughest of all bullies, fountainhead of morality even if it runs counter to every rule of decency and fair play. Somehow beyond all of Hindu morality he continued to shine as the One Supreme and Ultimate reality. He remains the Preserver, the one who conserves values and assists in

1. Mbh. II. 88.

2. D.A. Mackenzie - Indian Myth and Legend, 128f.

their realization.

Unlike the complex Śiva, he is the perfect and patient exemplar of winsome divine Love. He watches from the skies; and whenever he sees values threatened or the good in peril, he exerts all his preservative influence in their behalf. i

1. J.B. Noss - Man's Religions, 285.

The HARIVAMSA

Harivamsa = Family of Viṣṇu.

It is a supplementary book to the Mahābhārata and is concerned only with Kṛṣṇa. The 16,000 śloka are divided into three sections.

i) Harivamsa parvan

A history of Kṛṣṇa's ancestry up till the time of Viṣṇu's incarnation into him.

ii) Viṣṇu parvan

An account of Kṛṣṇa's exploits, the cowherd god, the Viṣṇu incarnation.

iii) Bhaviṣyat purāṇa

Prophecy telling of future vices of the Kali age.

4. ATTESTATION OF THE BHAGAVAD GĪTĀ

The Bhagavadgītā as an ingegral part of the Bhīsmā parva is not really concerned with supplying arguments to support Kṛṣṇa as a metaphysical entity. The Supreme reality which has incarnated itself cannot be arrived at through dialectic gymnastics which the mass of humanity is not able to understand. It approaches the problem from the position that only spiritual experience can provide the proof of the existence of Spirit. Simply and briefly stated, one cannot as a finite being provide any description of the infinite because of limitations and where one attempts to define the undefinable it always turns out to be wholly inadequate. In the language of the Upaniṣads the only conclusions which one may draw is that the Eternal, the Supreme, is both being and becoming, it does not move yet it moves, it is far and yet it is near. He is both transcendent and imminent. For the Gītā the concern is the imminence of God and his involvement with the world of men who are engaged in an active struggle between good and evil. God incarnates himself to become man's liberator. He offers his love to help man to resist the forces of destruction. The wholly other in the Upaniṣads becomes the personal God who created the world and resides within it in the Gītā. The spirit of the cosmos presides over the created cosmos and takes up residence in the heart of every being.

The Lord abides in the hearts of all beings, O Arjuna, causing them to turn round by His power as if they were mounted on a machine. 1

The Ultimate being has two natures, the higher (parā) and the lower (aparā) and as a personal Lord of the universe contains conscious souls (Ksetrajna) and unconscious nature (Ksetra).

Earth, water, fire, air, ether, mind and understanding and self-sense . . . This is my lower nature. Know then my other and higher nature which is the soul, by which the world is upheld. 1

Arjuna is further reminded that,

Men of no understanding think of Me, the unmanifest, as having manifestations, not knowing My higher nature, changeless and supreme. 2

The Gītā identifies Kṛṣṇa with the Supreme Lord, the Oneness that lies behind the universe of nama-rupa, the changeless truth behind all appearances, who transcends over all and yet is immanent in all. Knowing no birth or change he becomes the human embodiment of Viṣṇu, and appears in the world as though he was born and embodied again and again.

If God is to be looked upon as the savior of mankind, though he is wholly transcendent, he must reveal himself whenever evil forces threaten human values. The theory of avatara is an attempt to explain the descent of God into man and not the ascent of man into God. The Gītā lays stress on the view that the divine consciousness is always present in man but at the same time implies that there are two aspects of the Divine, compatible with each other, and these are the transcendent and the immanent. Kṛṣṇa born of Vāsudeva and Devakī represents the immanent nature, while at the same time being transcendent. If this is so, then, what makes Kṛṣṇa in his

1. B.G. VII. 4-5.

2. Ibid., 24.

immanence distinct from Arjuna? In what sense is Kṛṣṇa transcendent and Arjuna not? The answer is supplied by Kṛṣṇa himself,

Many are My lives that are past, and thine also, O Arjuna; all of them I know but thou knowest not, O Scourge of the foe(Arjuna). 1

This verse from the Gītā suggests that Arjuna like Kṛṣṇa has undergone many incarnations as associate devotee to serve the Lord in different capacities. The difference between the Lord and Arjuna is that Kṛṣṇa remembered all the incidents while Arjuna could not remember. Arjuna who is called the mighty hero who subdues enemies somehow is unable to recall what had happened in various former births and so can never be equal to God. All depends on the divine grace of Kṛṣṇa for an understanding of the transcendence of the Lord. The Lord is the dispenser of such grace, Arjuna the devotee who receives it.

Another distinction can be noted, namely, that the Lord does not change his body,

My transcendent Body never deteriorates I still appear in every millenium in My original transcendental form. 2

How different for Arjuna and other living entities, who are conditioned souls and may have one kind of a body in the present birth but a different one in the next birth. The one is uncontaminated by the material world, the other is contaminated (affected by Karma) by material nature.

1. B.G. Iv. 5.
2. Ibid., 7,8.

A third consideration enters the picture to further elaborate the distinction. Kṛṣṇa appears on schedule at the beginning of the Kali yuga but there is nothing in the universe that could make him comply with rules and regulations. He is completely free and acts at His will, voluntarily, and is under no compulsion. He assumes his manifestation at his own choice,

Whenever and wherever there is a decline in religious practice . . . a predominant rise of irreligion -- at that time I descend Myself"

In order to deliver the pious and to annihilate the miscreants, as well as to re-establish the principles of religion, I advent Myself millenium after millenium. 1

As for Arjuna, and others, their embodiment is not voluntary. Because of ignorance they are born again and again. Prakṛti controls them while the Lord controls prakṛti. Ordinary beings are determined by the force of prakṛti while Kṛṣṇa is free, coming and going by his own free will, not subjected by Karma.

"Taking hold of nature which is My own, I send forth again and again all this multitude of beings, which are helpless, being under the control of nature (prakṛti)."²

In the development of popular religion there was a longing for a personal, half-human god or gods. This longing was contemporary at least in part with the Upaniṣadic speculation which was limited to an intellectually small segment of society. Thus the popular belief had to be manysided enough to satisfy the religious requirements of the masses and intellectuals as well. The Gītā fills this need.

1. B.G., IV. 7f.

2. Ibid., IX. 8.

We are unable to reconstruct the evolution of Kṛṣṇa from human to half god among gods until at last he assumes the stature of Eternal Being who manifests himself in the Viṣṇu avatara in the Bhagavadgītā. Yet it is possible to conclude that local and tribal deities were worshipped in different parts of India, each regarded as the chief or even as a god of a particular tribe.¹ Such tribal deities appear to have been local heroes, deified after death.

Such a local hero must have been the Kṛṣṇa who appears as the Supreme Deity, the "Blessed One" in the Bhagavad-Gita. He was apparently a deified local chieftain, the head of the Vṛṣṇi clan. Indeed, he appears as such in strictly human guise, in the greater part of the Mahābhārata. In the Gita he is . . . an incarnation of the Deity in human form . . . he has all the attributes of a full-fledged monotheistic deity.²

The further question to which we shall address ourselves, now that we have considered the historical and metaphysical Kṛṣṇa figures, is the notion of the cultic Kṛṣṇa.

V THE CULTIC KṚṢṆA

We have already observed that the Mahābhārata had to deal with the question of worship accorded to Kṛṣṇa. Indeed the question of his divinity was raised by those of the Kuru clan who could not persuade themselves to regard Vāsudeva even as important as Drona, Karna and Bhīṣma. To the man of unbelief the answer was obviously that Kṛṣṇa was an imposter who accepted worship at the hands of the Pāṇdavas, and he enjoyed this glory given him without doing anything to

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1. This is quite universal in ancient civilizations. In Egypt each Nome had its own particular deity - a practice which persisted until the unification of Upper and Lower Egypt.
 2. F. Edgerton - The Bhagavad Gita, 132.

discourage them. The opposition, particularly the evil minded Duryodhana, remained obstinate to the bitter end. The Pāṇḍavas thought otherwise for by faith they knew the 'true nature of Kṛṣṇa' and accepted him as one to whom praise and worship ought to be given. Their devotion to Kṛṣṇa is plainly established in the Gītā.

1. KṚṢṆA AS LATE COMER DEITY

We are confronted with a time in Indian religious development that followed the routine sacrificial systems of Vedic times and also the highly speculative and abstract philosophy of the earlier Upaniṣads. In both of these the mass of the people had been neglected who at the time of the composition of the Mahābhārata were clamoring for participation in religious matters. A popular God was necessary who would appeal to both the higher and lower circles of Hindu society. Kṛṣṇaism, as many sided as it appears in the Epic, became the kind of teaching which aroused the emotional support of almost every man.

Why was Kṛṣṇa chosen as the one to be popularly supported? Why were none of the ancient deities of the Vedas accorded such devotion? Kṛṣṇa as such does not appear in the Vedas (the name appears only once in the Rg veda) and the Upaniṣads mention only one Kṛṣṇa who evidently is not the same person mentioned in the Epic. Bhandarkar, an eminent Hindu scholar, went so far as to claim that Kṛṣṇa was not yet identified with Viṣṇu in the Gītā, though this happened soon afterwards.¹ His conclusions do not stand up for

1. R.G. Bhandarkar - Vaiṣṇavism, Śaivism and Minor Religious Systems, 13.

we have already noted the frequency with which Kṛṣṇa is identified as an avatara of Viṣṇu and even directly declared to be Viṣṇu. Such frequent usage would indicate a rather wide and common acceptance of such teaching. The Gītā as well testifies to this for Kṛṣṇa addresses Viṣṇu,

When I see Thee touching the sky . . .
my inmost soul trembles in fear and I find
neither steadiness or peace, O Vishnu. 1

Viṣṇu was one of the gods of the Rg veda, probably a nature god, a personification of the sun. He is not as prominent as one would expect when one considers his later popularity. As a minor figure he acquired no greater significance in the older Upaniṣads which pre-date the Gītā where he is mentioned only three or four times. Kṛṣṇa, who is associated with Viṣṇu as avatara and receives due recognition in the Epic, shares Viṣṇu's vagueness in both the Vedas and the Upaniṣads.

Speculation has been abundant in seeking out evidence to identify the Epic Vasudeva Kṛṣṇa with the Rg vedic Kṛṣṇa² and the Upaniṣadic Kṛṣṇa.³ The Vedic Kṛṣṇa is known as Kṛṣṇa Āṅgīrasa, the Upaniṣadic one as Kṛṣṇa Devakīputra, pupil of Ghora Āṅgīrasa. Is it possible that there is a continuous tradition that claims the Vedic ṛṣi or teacher for the Upaniṣads and the Epic as well? Time-wise and also office-wise it seems quite unlikely that the two can be pressed into the same divine hero who is featured in the Mahā-bhārata. Ranade concurs with the view saying that if at least

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1. S. Radhakrishnan- The Bhagavad Gita, XI. 24 (see also XI. 30)
 2. Rg veda VIII.74.
 3. Chhandogya Upaniṣad, III.17.6.

the Chhandogya Kṛṣṇa and the Epic Kṛṣṇa were one and the same then we still cannot understand why in a work such as the Mahābhārata, which is expected to give us everything about the divine warrior, the name of his teacher goes unmentioned.

Mere similarity of name proves nothing. It fills one with humour that a new facile philosophy of identifications . . . instituted . . . by a host of critics of no small calibre when they would raise a huge structure of mythic-imaginary identifications by rolling together the god Vishnu of Vedic repute, Nārāyaṇa the cosmic God, Kṛṣṇa the pupil of Ghora Āṅgīrasa, and Vāsudeva the founder of a new religion and thus try to prove that the sources of the religion of the Bhagavad Gita are to be found in the teachings of Ghora Āṅgīrasa! 1

It is a futile search to try to trace the devotion accorded to Viṣṇu and more particularly Kṛṣṇa to ancient sources. Popularity of these two appears to have arisen rather abruptly within the Epic structure, in a period following the early Upaniṣads. It was probably stimulated by the Bhagavadgītā itself, and encouraged because of the rise of a bhakti cult in Buddhism. If cultic elements surrounded the hero of the Epic then we can also assume that similar cultic elements were present among the masses that followed Buddhist teaching. These appear with the collection of the relics of the founder, the building of stupas as places to house such relics, the collection of the Jataka Tales of Buddha's previous births, and the attention given to Buddha by the Mahāyana school. For the Buddhists the focus was one of devotion to Tathāgata, founder of the

1. Ranade - A Constructive Survey of Upanisadic Philosophy, 205.
(The whole problem is discussed in 201-205).

religion, great teacher of eternal truths of suffering and the overcoming of suffering. The appeal was so widespread that persons from lowliest circumstances to those in kingly courts left the old way to enter the monastic life in the Sangha. The movement gained such momentum that Buddha at one point began to discourage this kind of devotion because it disrupted society. The bhakti cult continued to spread so that by the time of the Mahayana school Buddha was deified and many miraculous stories began to be circulated.

What was happening in Buddhist circles was also happening in Hinduism as popular demand for a personal god and as a counter movement to Buddhism with its wide appeal that threatened the old Brahmanic traditions and beliefs. As Buddha came to be regarded as the teacher par excellence in Buddhist circles, so Kṛṣṇa in the Mahābhārata is regarded as the teacher par excellence of the Viṣṇuvite faith. It preached a salvation by knowledge embracing works. Sinners must surrender themselves to Kṛṣṇa, the human incarnation of Viṣṇu, the Preserver, the God of Love.¹ Such a faith is expressed in the Gītā where Kṛṣṇa as charioteer and as human avatara reveals himself to Arjuna as the Divine Being, the cause of the entire universe, destroyer, there is no one higher than the Om, the Supreme Soul, Viṣṇu, the Source of All.² Arjuna is encouraged to worship that Divine Being.

1. D.A. Mackenzie - Indian Myth and Legend, 125.

2. Edgerton, B.G. X. (The antiphonal hymn declaring the attributes of Sri Kṛṣṇa.)

But those who, all actions
Casting on Me, intent on Me,
With utterly unswerving discipline
Meditating on Me, revere Me,

For them I the Savior
From the sea of the round of deaths
Become right soon 1

We are not denying that devotion existed prior to the writing of the Mahābhārata. Devotion as such can be traced back a long, long time. It is inherent in the hymns of praise and prayers in the Rg veda and finds expression in the piety of the Upanisads. Difficult as the worship of the unmanifest must have been there were some who were able to feel an emotional closeness to God. But bhakti to a Personal God is an easier way to achieve a spiritual aura and besides it is open to all; to the ignorant, the illiterate, the lowly too who can now believe and experience the saving love of God.

2. BHAKTI

Bhakti is a term derived from the root, bhaj, to serve and as such expresses more than common social service because it is a basic service to God. It emphasizes a humility, a readiness to serve, gentle love, a renouncing of self will and a surrendering of oneself completely to the Lord. But it is not completely passive for the devotee is expected to be involved at least in a small way in earning the grace of God, ² in the doing of works without a desire for the

1. Edgerton, B.G. XII. 6f. (also XVIII. 65f.)

2. Such participation is known as the "monkey hold way". The young monkey is not passive but clings to the mother as it is carried to safety. It is opposed to the "cat hold way" where the mother picks up the young while they remain completely passive.

fruits thereof.

The comments of Edgerton on the Way of Devotion in the Gītā¹ help us to better understand what was happening in the Epic age as compared to the Vedic and Upaniṣadic periods of Indian thought. The Upaniṣads, he explains, taught that "knowledge" of the First Principle of the Universe led to salvation. Such "knowledge" was difficult to attain and not all men were therefore capable of achieving the highest goal. It was easier for most of mankind to pursue a more emotional scheme for salvation. Such a scheme is set forth in the Gītā by means of the "famous doctrine of bhakti -- devotion -- love of God,

"it is almost a new note in Hindu religious speculation."² Bhakti can hardly become an experience unless there is a divine personality, and Kṛṣṇa became this personality. It led to the rise of a cult devoted to the love of God without, displacing outright the old intellectual theory of salvation through knowledge. Bhakti became another means of gaining knowledge of God,

By unswerving devotion it is possible to know Me in this form, 3

Just when this popularization of the Bhakti cult took place is hard to determine. Basham, The Wonder that Was India,⁴ thinks that the sect of the Bhāgavatas, or worshippers of Vāsudeva was identified

1. Ibid., B.G. 172 f.

2. Ibid., 173.5

3. Ibid., XI. 54.

4. A. L. Basham - The Wonder that was India, 328.

(Telang, Bhandarkar - 4th century B.C.; Lassen, Weber - 3rd Century B.C.; Garbe, Hopkins - 2nd century B.C.)

as Viṣṇu and Kṛṣṇa at least a century before Christ. The Gītā section of the Epic was most likely composed around that time. Radhakrishnan holds that the work, on the basis of archaic constructions and internal references, was definitely pre-Christian, dated as early as 500 B.C. and followed by subsequent alterations. Garbe disagrees with so early a date because the Kṛṣṇa-Vāsudeva cult got mixed up with the Sāṅkhya Yoga somewhere in the 3rd century B.C. and therefore the original Gītā was composed around the 2nd century B.C. It is more practical to assume that the rise of the cult and the composition of the Gītā should somehow go hand in hand at a time when a literary recognition of the Way of Devotion was imperative.

It (The Bhagavad Gītā) was woven into the enormous epic, the Mahābhārata about the first century A.D. and has greatly influenced Hinduism ever since. 1

S.K. De confronts us with a rather convincing argument for the rise of the bhakti cult in Hinduism. It came at a time when heresies assailed the orthodox ritual and creed.² By demand of current popular beliefs a remodelling, assimilating and a moulding took place. The times demanded a practical codification of the older tradition and a stricter regulating of daily life and conduct (thus the encyclopedic work, the Mahābhārata).³ All this activity came as a response to the popular teaching of Jainism and Buddhism.

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1. Clark D. Moore, David Eldridge (eds.) - India, Yesterday and Today, 47.
 2. S.K. De - Aspects of Sanskrit Literature, 59.
 3. Subjects treated in this Encyclopedic work - caste duty, particularly the Kshatriya caste; how a king is to rule righteously; how women are to be treated; the conducting of successful warfare; right worship; sacrifice; etc.

The special emphasis on the power and the love and grace of God was not really contrary to either Vedic teaching nor Upanisadic philosophy. It was but the ultimate outcome of a long development of "God thinking". It is still a mixture of the old with the new outlook and since there is a harmony the Mahābhārata has been called the "fifth Veda". Kṛṣṇa is of old, known as the "Ancient of Days", the Brahmān, Parjāpati, Vayu, Yama, Agni, Varuna, Primal God, First Creator etc. He is also the new, the present and known by Arjuna and others as Kṛṣṇa, Yādava, Companion, Friend. So it did not really matter if for the masses the Vedic gods had lost their old status and power. God was in a more personal form in the midst of his people, asking that his devotees yield their souls to him in faithful devotion.

Among the other cults (Śivite, Saura, Māyāna) Viṣṇuism dominates in the Epic. It is called the religion of the Bhāgavatas because worship is centered around Bhāgavat Vāsudeva-Kṛṣṇa, the avatara of Viṣṇu. The sacred literature of the Kṛṣṇa cult was the Bhagavadgīta which became inbedded in the Bhīṣma parva of the Mahābhārata. The cult had not yet developed any definite form of worship since no directions for worship apart from focusing attention on Kṛṣṇa are given. All that is required is the,

Fixing the thought organ on Me . . .
Revere with constant discipline.
. . . all actions casting on Me . . .
Meditating on Me, revere Me. 1

So the powerful, yet benevolent, loving and lovable deity became the center of personal devotion and worship. But it is not clear from the Mahābhārata or even the Gītā what the nature of worship was to be. When the Epic speaks about such worship it is not specific¹ even where Kṛṣṇa himself demands that worship of him as father, guru and preceptor be approved. The only requirement that is suggested is that of meditation and concentration of the "thought" on the Supreme Being as Creator, Sustainer and Destroyer. When the debate over the worship of Kṛṣṇa is introduced the haggle is not over the form of worship but rather over who should be worshipped. The repetition of the 10,000 names of the deity and the recitation of the achievements of the hero-god are the cultic expressions of worship.

The recitation of the names of Vāsudeva includes the calling upon Kṛṣṇa in times of distress. When Draupadī suffered her humiliation she appealed to Kṛṣṇa to remove the stigma from her. Arjuna approached Kṛṣṇa for support and advice in the face of the Epic war. During the battle he was appealed to again and again for advice and direction. This element of petition is preserved throughout the whole poem for in the end when the heroes of both sides appear the other world, the fortunes of both clans are reversed. Arjuna appeals to Kṛṣṇa for the correction of this strange dilemma.

The practice of sacrifice, though not completely dismissed from the Mahābhārata has been pushed into the background. Sometimes

1. Mbh. II. 89 (V. 104) Kṛṣṇa commands that worship of him be approved of by kings -- it does not specify what such acts of worship are to be.

Kṛṣṇa offers sacrifices along with others, at times he is spoken of as the sacrifice itself.¹ It is evident that only harmless offerings are described, such as, Viṣṇu himself receiving the sacrifice as Kṛṣṇa. Bloody sacrifices of former times are replaced by libations and flowers and cakes. What is important is that god himself is the sacrifice for he takes on a human form which must meet with dissolution (return to the original divine form). One animal sacrifice that is neither approved nor rejected but expected to be performed by the king himself is that of the Asvamedha as a symbol of his kingship. In other places (and these are rare) where animal sacrifices are mentioned it is Kṛṣṇa himself who,

"resides in the form of Sacrifice in all animals".²

Yudhisthira's disgust with the usage of the Kṣatriyas, his sermonizing on pain, desire and the overcoming of desire through renunciation which we mentioned in Part I of this thesis would contravene the practice of sacrifices. It also goes against the spirit of love emphasized in the Gītā.

In the new interpretation of the old system the onus is on meditative worship and the reciting or hymning the praise of Kṛṣṇa, the devotee is again and again encouraged to "Recite, Recite, Recite . . ." Blessings come to the devotee because of the repeating of the name of Kṛṣṇa in its many forms and do not flow from the

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1. Mbh. XI. 331. (Kṛṣṇa is the great sacrificial ladle)
336. (Offerings made to him are enjoyed by him)
341. (He conveys the libations poured on fire...for whom they are intended)
 2. Ibid. XI. 342 . (resides in the form of sacrifice in all animals).

performance of many sacrifices.

It is the cultic emphasis on devotion which the Kṛṣṇa Consciousness Movement of our times has chosen to emphasize as its central teaching.¹ Bhakti, then and now, is the establishment of a personal relationship between the devotee and the deity (Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa).

It depends on

- i) the self surrendering grace of a loving God
- ii) man's need of loving devotion.

The grace of God is that even though his real nature is veiled in mystery he manifests himself as a personal God whenever and wherever the world is in need of him and he can thus be apprehended by the eye of faith. It is the birthless one coming to birth by his cosmic power and the devotee who yields himself to the Bhāgavat in worship and selfless service rises above to Kṛṣṇa's heaven and eternity.

To all men the Bhagavat is impartial, desiring in his infinite grace the welfare of all, and responding to men in the way in which is is approached. There is therefore no fixed rule or mode of worship, for there are various avenues of approach. But the best way is the most simple way of complete self-surrender to divine grace, not in inactivity but in selfless activity, not in ignorance but in the fullness of knowledge.²

My own judgment, based on research largely limited to the Epic, is that what we speak of as the bhakti cult in the Epic period is not a fully developed phenomenon but only the beginning of a vitalizing

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1. Kṛṣṇa Consciousness emphasizes the repeating of the name, Hare Kṛṣṇa, Hare Rāma. A rather elaborate ritual for the worship of Śrī Kṛṣṇa at their festival gatherings on Sunday afternoons.
 2. S.K. Dē - Aspects of Sanskrit Literature, 100.

force in Hinduism at a time when the power of the older teaching had deminished to ^{an} all time low. Though bhakti had been a motivating force over a long period of time, it did at the time of the compiling of the Epic take on a much more inclusive nature which would continue to expand and enjoy immense popularity during the early Christian era. Dutt concurs with this view,

As Krishna worship became the prevailing religion of India after the decay of Buddhism, the old Epic caught the complexion of the times, and the Krishna-cult is its dominating religious idea in its present shape. 1

The evolution of the Kṛṣṇa cult or Bhāgavata cult had some historical basis in the legend of the hero-god which became fused together with the Kṛṣṇa myth. To a lesser extent outside influences crept in, some of which may have been Western. The Greek invasion of India and the Nestorian Christian penetration may have been source material. The death-of-god in the Mahābhārata has a strange similarity to the Greek Eleusinian and Dionysian and the Roman Attis and Cybèle cults. It is a known fact that the dying god idea is widespread in the Near East and is un-Indian in tragic character. No where else in Indian Mythology is the death story of Kṛṣṇa repeated. The hero is killed by a hunter who mistakes him for a deer. His arrow pierces the only vulnerable spot, his heel. Such a story is similar to the Greek story of Achilles for when the Greeks entered India they readily identified Kṛṣṇa with their own mythical hero. The

1. C.f. V.S. Sukthankar - On the Meaning of the Mahabharata, 3.

great city of Dwārakā inundated by the sea has its counterpart in the European sunken city episodes (Atlantis). Kamsa, the wicked brother, appears to echo Herod; the story of Yudhisthira and his loss of all possessions by misfortune over which he appears to have no control and then the final restoration to greater glory reminds us of Job in the Old Testament.

Those who go to the extreme have suggested that the childhood stories of the Epic hero are late indeed when compared with the compilation of the Mahābhārata and were popularized as late as the middle ages based upon the circulation of inspired tales brought to India by Christian merchants and Nestorian Missionaries. Too much has been read into such contacts with the outside world and if one is inclined to find similarities there is no end to which comparisons may be pressed to suit particular desires. Besides there is no reason to believe that such stories did not have independent origination. The childhood stories surrounding Kṛṣṇa must have grown up quite naturally just as fables and legends grew up around Jesus and were rejected as part of Sacred history. A.L. Basham comments,

In any case, the story of the child Kṛṣṇa, often depicted in later sculpture as a plump infant crawling on all fours, gave the god a rare completeness. As hero he met the worshipper's need of a divine father and elder brother; as the young cowherd, he was a divine lover; and as an infant, a son. The cult of the child Kṛṣṇa made a special appeal to the warm maternity of Indian womanhood; and even today the simpler women of India, while worshipping the divine child, so delightfully naughty despite his divine powers, refer to themselves as 'the Mother of God'.¹

The young Kṛṣṇa's erotic exploits have also been widely popularized but lack the depth of religious dimension that other literature on Kṛṣṇa preserves. As Lord of the Herdsmen (Govinda) his sporting with the Gopis and his cavorting with 16,000 wives must be seen symbolically as the love of God for the human soul and the sweet music issuing from the flute

calling the women to leave their husband's beds and dance with him in the moonlight, represent the voice of God, calling man to leave earthly things and turn to the joys of divine love. 1

This theme has inspired Jayadeva's Gita Govinda (Song of the Cowherd) of Bengal (12th century), which is a series of dramatic lyrics (to be sung) describing the love of Kṛṣṇa for Rādhā and the milkmaids.

Apart from the popularization of Kṛṣṇa as deity and the mythologizing of the exploits there are some parts of the story of ancient origin, so old that they have been lost in antiquity, possibly going back to the Aryan warriors arrival in India. Other parts must have been of indigenous sources which in time were brought together to give a long tradition to Kṛṣṇa, son of Devakī and Vāsudeva. The cult of devotion embraced him as a personal deity, a loving avatara of Viṣṇu, the savior of those who call upon him.

3 POSSIBLE COUNTERPART TO BUDDHISM

The belief in a personal God who came to men with healing powers

1. Ibid., 305.

(We have in one of the Jewish books of the Old Testament a similar theme. The Song of Songs has to be understood as a mystical experience of the poet who penned it.)

in the hands of the bhakti cult became a movement that stemmed the tide of Buddhism (Hinayana) and at the same time stimulated Buddhist devotées to evolve the Bodhisattva ideal (Mahayana) of love and concern for humanity. The Avalokitesvara (the Lord who looks down) became the chief Bodhisattva. As Padmapāni, his attribute is compassion and he reaches into the deepest Buddhist hell (purgatories) to rescue men. As Manjusri he is a Bodhisattva with sword in hand to signify the destroyer of error and falsehood.¹

Nor did evolution end here for the Mahayana school declared that Gautama Buddha had never been a mere man but a spiritual being of three bodies; the Body of Essence, Body of Bliss and the Created Body (the Created Body was the one seen on earth.) Buddha, a historical person, became a presiding deity, the Amitabha, a Father in Heaven. There are many other heavenly Buddhas; all are emanations of the primal Body of Essence (Dharmakāya). The Body of Essence differs little from the Hindu Brahmān, the World Soul, the Absolute, the Creative Urge, the Eternal. The Created Body is like the incarnation of the divine form in Hinduism. In time Gautama took other on/ features of Hinduism; birth stories (Buddhist Jataka Tales), a series of incarnations for the purpose of alleviating the pain of the world.. The circle becomes complete as Buddha himself is accepted into the Hindu avatara scheme as the 9th incarnation of Sri Viṣṇu. What Buddhism at first had opposed in Hindu orthodoxy it now absorbed into itself under a new terminology so that in Buddhist bhakti cult the mere calling on the name of Buddha brings salvation.

1. Ibid., 276.

It is the counterpunctal balance between the two movements, the Kṛṣṇa ideal of the Epic, and the Buddha ideal of the later Mahayana school, which evokes a creative stimulation and expresses itself in narrative form as the Bhagavadgītā (the Song Divine) and also the Lotus Sutra (the flowery narrative of the life of Buddha with its marvelous elements). Kṛṣṇa could not remain a tribal hero for he had to be elevated in the popular mind to god-head; and Buddha could not be envisaged as purely human for he was lifted beyond the human sphere and in the end given divine qualities.

VI CONCLUSION

1. ONE KṚṢṆA OR SEVERAL

We now pause to ask the historian's question from the outside: Who is Kṛṣṇa? He who stands as the paradox of all paradoxes; the philosopher on the battlefield is the one who gives away his own troops to swell the ranks of the enemy. He acts as ally for the Pāṇḍavas but vows to hold no weapon in his hands. As the great hero he stoops to fulfill the role of a menial charioteer in the employ of Arjuna. As politician he secretly works for the annihilation of the Kauravas and for the victory of the Pāṇḍavas. He presents himself to those who will have him as God incarnate and ask them to worship him as such even while he acts like any other "tricky mortal".

On the basis of what has so far been said any critical inquiry must ask whether there was only one Kṛṣṇa or several. It is true that the Epic writer claims for the work the designation of history, but not history per se because he qualifies this claim the adjective "sacred" history.

And it is true that he is not dealing with secular history for there is a fusing of the natural with the mythical. Kṛṣṇa as the hero of the Yādu race, son of Vāsudeva and Devakī, who hailed from the city of Dwārakā in modern Gujerat is also the mythical avatara of the Lord Viṣṇu and hence Eternal Being.

The task we undertook in this thesis was to,

- a) discover whether the Epic Kṛṣṇa was a real human being, a historical person with human characteristics
- b) explore the possibility of several Kṛṣṇas who were brought together by the Epic writers...
- c) and if not then to trace the development of thought and belief as it evolved from the finite to the infinite Supreme Deity, incarnated and accepted by the bhakti cult as an object of devotion.

On the basis of the arguments presented in Chapter III¹ we have reasonably established the fact that a historical Kṛṣṇa must have existed in the past, a conclusion which has been supported by Indian tradition as well. We are convinced that there must have been some such man even as there must have been some such great poet like Veda Vyāsa. The Epic itself gives evidence for such a common individual who shows so many human characteristics, in fact, there are times when he behaves more human than divine. Further support for the manhood of Kṛṣṇa comes from the family tree, from the name of the clan to which he belonged and the places with which he is associated.

1. See above, Chapter III, 43ff.

Over the span of years individual persons were often segregated from the common people as custodians of wisdom and endowed with divine qualities. The poet saw in such a great man the god himself in human form, living among the people and moving among the people. There was a need for a divine element in a truly great person and the poet took Kṛṣṇa and presented him as other than man. This is the genius of the Indian mind, which moved out of the circle of routinized Vedic sacrifice to follow a philosophical approach to the transcendent being so mystically defined in the Upanisads until at last it brought the wholly other down from the pedestal to the level of men in the Epic. He became the God no longer intellectually apprehended by a few but popularly worshipped by the masses.

There cannot be several Kṛṣṇas in the Epic who by the process of fusion were wedded together into one divine being. The same historical person is also the divine person, the god-man wrapped up all in one. The process of divinization is not unique for Indian thought alone. Bygone civilizations have developed in much the same way. We have already referred to the Chinese scheme in which the great emperors were imbued with heavenly attributes and deified as the first great gods among men. For the Japanese the great goddess, Amaterasu, incarnated herself in the divine emperor who was believed by his countrymen to be a "son of heaven". The Ancient Egyptians attributed to their Pharaoh the nature of divinity. One could multiply such accounts.

From early times the Vedic religion and a number of popular tribal religions co-existed. The deities worshipped by the tribal people differed from the Vedic pantheon. The same held true for religious practices and beliefs, to quote De Bary,

Sheltered under Brahmanism these remained restricted to tribal origins but with the gradual decline of Brahmanism, together with the asserting influence of Buddhism and Jainism, the popular religion gained in stature and perhaps seem to be encouraged by Brahmanists as a means of challenging the heterodox movements. 1

The one significant tribal development that overshadowed all others was Kṛṣṇaism with its dark hero of the Yādu clan. With Kṛṣṇa as temporal and spiritual leader the belief in him expanded until at last he was transformed into a tribal god. The effectiveness with which he was supported in the evolutionary process had its effect on early Buddhism as well for we see the same process developing with regard to Buddha. He came to be regarded as the one who had been available in former births and in the future he would come again. To trace the process of deification in Buddhism is less complicated since we have more historical evidence at our disposal. For what happened in Buddhism must have happened earlier in Kṛṣṇaism.

In the culmination of a long philosophical process the Vedic Pantheon had served as the beginning and brought with it a type of devotion to divine beings by means of the ritual sacrifice. In the

1. T. De Bary - Sources of Indian Tradition, Vol. I, 274.

process of time the trend was away from the Pantheon of divinities to a concentration on the one sole Reality adhered to by the Upanisadic philosophers. Brahman was the Atman, "the Self", which was in men and in all objects of the universe.

There (in that state) a father is not a father,
A mother is not a mother, the worlds are not
worlds, the gods are not gods, the Vedas are
not the Vedas
There is not, however, a second, nothing else
separated from him that he could see. 1

That one (tad ekam), without another, was the creative principle. Material substance of things was derived solely from Brahman. To him all must return, just as a spider ejects and retracts (the threads) and a plant sends forth shoots from the earth, or a tiny spark flies out from the anvil.²

Creation and dissolution are attributes of Brahman in the Upanisads; they are attributes of Kṛṣṇa in the Epic. There is no second other in the Upanisads for all is comprehended in the divine being; so also for the Epic Kṛṣṇa. This does not mean the denial of all the ancient Vedic gods, Indra, Agni, Mitra, Varuna. All gods together with men become subordinated to the One God who in the Epic has been designated as the newcomer Kṛṣṇa. It is a short step from the philosophy of the Creator and Sustainer as one without another and the identifying of man with that divine being. The divine is in everyone, the atman resides in the physical body. The only distinction

1. Br. U. Iv.3.22,23.
2. Ibid., II.1.20.

between men is that some have come closer to that Ultimate and to being liberated from the material order.

A very famous verse in the Upanisads drives home the teaching of divine nature in the human soul. Svetaketu was urged by his father to live the life of a religious student so he studied all the Vedas for 12 years only to return conceited and arrogant. In the dialogue with his father the discussion centers around that Being, without a second, who produced creation by saying, "May I go forth, May I be many, may I grow," and in doing so he entered into nama-rupa. The son asks for further instruction from his father, and the whole key to their discourse was the affirmation that the principle of God is common to both the universe and the individual.

That which is the subtle essence (the root of all)
this whole world has for itself. That is true. That
is self. That art thou, Svetaketu. 1

We must bear in mind that the actors in the Epic drama are not ordinary human beings. They have their origin in the divine being and to that source they ultimately return. Even the hated enemy is not barred from the heaven of Kṛṣṇa. Every man, as part of the divine within, needs to be freed from the world of nama-rupa. And when we ask: Who is Kṛṣṇa? we must give the answer in ultimate terms of "TAT TVAM ASI". This is the record that the many hymns of praise to Kṛṣṇa repeat. Once that has been accepted then it is not too

1. Chh. U., VI.8.7. (TAT TVAM ASI).

difficult to move to the final stage, namely, that of devotion. The popularization of devotion was achieved by the Epic, especially by the Bhagavadgītā which lies embedded in the Bhīṣma parva.

The Polytheism of the Vedas was seen in a new light by the Upanisadic seer as the wholly other who was unapproachable and indiscernable unity. The Epic moves on beyond to the one who incarnates himself in human form so that he might be accessible to man and his needs. He becomes Kṛṣṇa, the personal God, incarnation of Viṣṇu, who receives popular devotion in the centuries immediately preceding the Christian era. The bhakti became a devotee to Bhāgavat to whom devotion was directed. The cult had its beginning -- it was none other than the cult of the god Vāsudeva.

The evolution of Kṛṣṇa is now complete with the exception of the childhood tales and the gopi legends which were to accrue later. There is a basis for the historical figure who in time became a legendary personage, was imbued with mythological qualities and seen as a manifestation of the god Viṣṇu whose appearance became necessary in the divine economy whenever evil and justice prevailed in the affairs of men. In the setting right of things the Bhagavadgītā uplifts Bhāgavata as a personal God with eternal characteristics.

Who see Me in all
and see all in Me 1

recognize that,

Than Me no other higher thing
Whatsoever exists, Dhanamjaya;
On Me all this (universe) is strung,
Like heaps of pearls on a string. 1

Gods know not my origin
For I am the starting point of the gods.

. . . .

Of the Vṛṣṇi-clansmen I am Vāsudeva

. . . .

There is none such as could be without
Me, no being moving or unmoving. 2

And those who cast all action on him and meditate on him for them
he becomes the Savior from the sea of the round of deaths.

Such then was Kṛṣṇa, the local tribal hero, deified after
death to reappear as the Supreme deity in the Gītā. As head of the
Vṛṣṇi clan he appears in strictly human guise throughout the larger
part of the Mahābhārata. In the Gītā he is both god and man; and
as an incarnation of deity in human form he has all the attributes
of a monotheistic deity. He appeals to both the higher and lower
circles of population, whatever their intellectual or social status
may be. Here lies the strength of Kṛṣṇaism in later India.

Is Śrī Kṛṣṇa God or man? We can only answer that he is both,
whose complex character should be so grossly misunderstood by Western
critics of the great Epic. He is a mortal and yet not a mortal. We
can identify him by caste, family, parents, by the circumstances of his

1. B.G. VII. 7ff.

2. B.G. X.2, 37, 39.

birth; at the same time he tells us that he is unborn and of the many past births he knows them all. He subjects himself to human laws and behavior but he is also above and beyond such laws and behavior. He died one day by a hunter's arrow shot into his heel, but it is told to us that he is nevertheless immortal, eternal and infinite. Apparently the Indian mind remains untroubled by such paradoxes. Kṛṣṇa has been the object of devotion for over 2000 years but nowhere do we see signs of those who would demote him from the exalted position. In fact the very opposite is true as the Kṛṣṇa Consciousness cult will testify (whatever we may say about it).

Our only other alternative would be to cut Kṛṣṇa completely from the drama - his drama - to find if he makes any difference in the story. It probably would destroy much of the Epic because he is central and an integral part of the dramatic action. For the masses the conviction persists: Śrī Kṛṣṇa in the past aided the righteous Pāṇḍavas, he helps his devotees now in their own trials and tribulations. For this sake, "I come into being in age after age".¹

2. AGE OF CONFLICT

The Mahābhārata does not deal with the problem of one Kṛṣṇa or several. This is not the Epic's problem because it is concerned with the reconciling of the various images of Kṛṣṇa to forge one comprehensive image. It accepts Kṛṣṇa as ruler, savior, teacher as a unity; as the divine counter-part to the soul and thus includes the interiorization, which pattern the Gītā has perfected. To achieve such a comprehensive image in an age of conflict is no small achieve-

ment.

In the Mahābhārata, the Epic of Hinduism which was compiled in final form somewhere during the closing centuries B.C., we see evidence of many interacting forces. It depicts an age of conflict which fits Indian thought on the cyclical evolvment of a world order within metaphysical time. Within the "Day of Brahman" it concerns itself with the last stage, the Kali yuga, the beginning of the present age which moves swiftly towards deterioration and final disolutionment of the created world. The present order would come to rest in the cosmic order, the "Night of Brahman" out of which would in time yet unknown emerge a new created order.

The Bhārata war, which we dated about 900-850 B.C., symbolized the emensity of the conflict within which the social order was enmeshed. One people were pitted against another people and all hope of compromise or resolution was futile. The war that followed was a "War of Annihilation" in the view of many commentators. The Kauravas lost the kingdom they had so unrighteously usurped as well as their identity as a separate clan and indeed their very lives. For the Pāṇḍavas it was only a Phyric victory because their forces had been decimated as well.

The conflict is more than that; it is one of individual proportions. Within the elaborate description of the 18 day war one hero is pitted against another hero in a life and death struggle. Karna, Drona, Salya, Bhīṣma and Duryodhana individually are made to meet one of the Pāṇḍavas in deadly combat, and the fact that they

are related to each other makes the conflict more tragic. It places before us the antagonisms of daily living within a social order of which all men are part. Wars are not necessarily the result of a clash between two cultures or civilizations. The conflict usually begins on a much more personal basis within the family, the community, the national structure. As has been said, a man's enemies are the men of his own house: "a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and a man's foes will be those of his own household." ¹

We see evidence of the conflict being interiorized as it takes place within the mind (soul) of the person himself. Kuruksetra may be the heart of the person and the war becomes his agonizing over the action he is to pursue. As example we think of Arjuna's agonizing over the rightness (or wrongness) of a war he is compelled to fight, in which so many were already drawn up in battle array,

Teachers, fathers, sons,
Grandsires as well,
Uncles, fathers-in-law, grandsons,
Brothers-in-law, and (other) kin folk. ²

His mouth becomes parched, body trembles, and his hair stand on end,

And my mind seems to wander . . . ³

I do not wish to slay
How should we not know enough to turn back
from this wickedness ⁴

1. Matt. 10:35f.

2. Edgerton, B.G. I. 34.

3. Ibid., 29f.

4. Ibid., 35, 39.

So also Yudhisthira when the battle had ceased, agonized over the senseless destruction which had taken place and is actually ashamed of being a Ksatriya as he laments, "fie on the usage of the Kshatriyas."

Complimentary opposites have been universalized and are found on both levels, the metaphysical and the physical. On the metaphysical level the gods and demons (Asuras) contend with one another to fulfill creative roles:

Gods (Devas)	-----	demons (Asuras)
Viṣṇu	-----	Śiva
Vedic deities	----	new deity Kṛṣṇa (the One Supreme)

On the physical level the creative spirit is enhanced in the interaction between the following:

Aryans	-----	Dasas
Brahmins		Kṣatriyas
Pāṇḍavas		Kauravas
Good		Evil
Sacrifice		Devotion
Faith		Doubt
Spiritual		Material
Divine in man		Human in man
Hindu		Buddhist

In this scheme of opposites the Pāṇḍavas are designated as incarnations of various deities:

Yudhisthira	-----	Dharma
Bhīma		Vāyu
Arjuna		Indra
Nakula	}	Aswins
Sahadeva		

The Kauravas are represented as the incarnation of the Asuras; Duryodhana is none other than the arch demon, Kali, while Duhsāsana and others are Pulastya demons.

The poem, as we have noted previously, has a didactic purpose, and one of the chief functions of Kṛṣṇa was that of teacher. Since the Epic clearly sets out to inculcate a moral it does so by the method of contrasting the life and fate of the righteous Pāṇḍavas with that of the unrighteous Kauravas. The aim is to demonstrate the victory of good over evil and to provoke the hearers to engage in a good and virtuous life. As far as this goes it sounds admirable but somehow things turn out topsy turvy. Characters fail to act the way one would expect them to act and the chief hero of the Epic, Kṛṣṇa, representing godhead fails to conform to the standards of morality which are so basic to the Dharma Śāstra nor does he deny doing so. In the build up of the story we are led to sympathize with the Pāṇḍavas because of the injustices they had suffered. We feel that we have a right to expect that justice will be the keynote in their own behavior for they know that it means to suffer at the hands of villains. Instead we have to contend with a paradox. We have been told that two wrongs do not make a right but the behavior of the "righteous ones" hardly agrees. The war is won by a whole list of aberrations of justice. The list is long and when finished we are in a quandry as to who is the more just (or unjust). Any right-thinking person would condemn such acts.

Yudhisthira, the Dharmarāja, tells barefaced lies at a critical stage of battle, knowing full well that his opponents will believe him and thus be brought to an untimely death. Bhīma, against

everything he had been taught as a Ksatriya warrior, strikes a blow below the navel, shattering the thighs of Duryodhana. The god-like Arjuna, friend of Śrī Kṛṣṇa, killed Bhīṣma, grandsire of the Kurus by shooting him from behind an efeminate warrior against whom the old warrior could not fight. On another occasion he shot and killed the disadvantaged Karṇa who was pleading helplessly for time. When Kṛṣṇa is accused openly of condoning such actions and encouraging the Pāṇḍavas in their evil deeds, he merely points out the wrongs of the enemy. Our sense of justice rebels against the whole idea of two wrongs making one right.

The Kauravas on the surface at least appear to behave much more honorably and are represented as more generous of heart; they do not stoop to low down tricks against their enemies (at least not in the war). In consternation we stand and ask: Who are the real villians anyway? Has the Epic failed in its anticipated effort to vindicate righteousness (dharma) as supreme in the world? Evidently there has to be an explanation for this seeming paradox and the poem does give reasons for condoning the "sins" of the Pāṇḍavas. They are not supra-human but human like the rest of us and there is a basic awareness that no one is perfect. Our heroes do sin, and have human failings so that we can the more identify with them. Even Kṛṣṇa as human avatara meets this requirement. If anything, we are confronted not with pure whites and blacks but all the shades of grey inbetween. And the Kauravas are just as unscrupulous, if not

more so, in a kind of cultivated wickedness; burning their enemies alive, cheating them of the kingdom, killing Arjuna's son first to disturb him and make him more vulnerable. They plot in secret and present a sanctimonious front to the world.

We can identify with the various kinds of personalities. The Pāṇḍavas and the Kauravas have been universalized by the Epic as two neighbors who live beside each other everywhere and in every age of man. The basic distinction is that of the motives out of which each acts.

However, for our purposes we have centered our attention on the paradox of Śrī Kṛṣṇa who is found in the beginning, the middle and the end of the poem. He overshadows the entire Epic, manifesting the creative genius of the Indian mind, as the one who was above dharma and adharma, and beyond good and evil. That which from the outside appears as several Kṛṣṇa figures has by the genius of the writer of the Mahābhārata been comprehended into one whole. The uniting element is the teaching of Kṛṣṇa as avatara by means of which he "comes into being age after age."

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APPENDIX I

The death of Achilles in Greek mythology has a number of striking parallels to the myth of Kṛṣṇa's death in the Mahābhārata. To mention but a few such similarities: the killing by an arrow, the mortal wounding of the hero in what is the vulnerable part of his body, namely, the heel, the connection of the event with a great war episode (Trojan, Bhārata), etc. are significant. The death of Achilles, regarded as a legend in this particular account, is not elaborated in either of the Iliad or the Odessy but follows in another work which continues the story where the Odessy leaves off. Arktinos in his Aithiopsis takes up the story and elaborates it.¹ The legend of Achilles is considered to be the result of an Achean cult which promoted it or at least kept it alive. This gives the legend cultic significance and the account seems to relate quite well to Kṛṣṇa for the death of Kṛṣṇa through a hunter's arrow shot at his heel has the same legendary nature and most likely was retained in the Mahābhārata under the influence of a cult.

In the Odessy Achilles was killed by an arrow. No mention is made to the heel. The fact that the funeral of the hero is also described makes the story more true to human experience while in the Aithiopsis this is not so. The gods participate in the slaying, the arrow is guided by Apollo. Kraemer, Mythologies of the Ancient World, touches on the problem when he says,

1. L.R. Farnell, Greek Hero Cults, 288.

This is the familiar folk-tale motif of the "life index", the implication that the hero was invulnerable and potentially immortal is completely contrary to the ideas of heroic epic. The story that Achilles had been dipped at birth in the waters of Styx which made him invulnerable except where his mother held him by the heel is inconsistent with the Iliad where the fact that Achilles' mother is a goddess of the sea does not affect his own mortality. The heroes are mortal and vulnerable; they may suffer pain or death each time they take the field of battle, and in this lies the power of the stories.¹

The same applies to the legend of the death of Kṛṣṇa. For some reason or other it was necessary to fill in the gap between Kṛṣṇa as a human avatara until we see him again after his translation into the heavenly abode.

1. S. N. Kraemer - Mythologies of the Ancient World, 236f.

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