

# Dark Visions of the Terrible and the Sublime in Hindu Mythology

DAVID R. KINSLEY

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# *The Sword and the Flute*

KĀLĪ AND KṚṢṆA, DARK VISIONS OF THE  
TERRIBLE AND THE SUBLIME IN  
HINDU MYTHOLOGY

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*To the memory of my brother Roy*

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## PREFACE

In September, 1968, I arrived in the teeming city of Calcutta to undertake research on the Bengal Vaiṣṇavas, those particularly enthusiastic worshipers of the Lord Kṛṣṇa. This research was part of my Ph.D. dissertation on play as an expression of the divine in the Hindu tradition. Kṛṣṇa, it seemed to me, was the perfect mythological expression of this idea, and it was with some eagerness that I anticipated seeing Kṛṣṇa expressing himself in a cultic context. I had come to India prepared to immerse myself further in the sublimely beautiful world of the flute-playing Lord of Vṛndāvana.

But September, October, and November in Bengal are the great festival months, and those deities that warrant the most dramatic, sumptuous, and tumultuous celebrations are goddesses, particularly Durgā and Kālī, both of whom reveal presences strikingly different from Kṛṣṇa's. First I was overwhelmed by Durgā Pūjā, that most joyous of all Bengali festivals in honor of the fierce, warrior goddess's triumph over the cosmic buffalo demon. Nearly a month later I was stunned by Kālī Pūjā, a tumultuous celebration of a fierce, female presence who haunts cremation grounds and on this occasion is actually worshiped publicly in them. On the last day of Kālī Pūjā I was invited to accompany some young men to the banks of the Hoogly River where the images of Kālī made especially for this festival are thrown into the murky waters. We set out for the river in an open truck, the image of Kālī facing backwards, braced against the rear of the truck's cab. There were perhaps twenty of us standing in the back of the truck trying our best to keep our balance in the lurching vehicle as it careened through the streets of Calcutta. The driver suddenly hit the brakes to avoid some

obstacle, and I was thrown forward into the arms of Mother Kālī. Our first violent meeting broke one of her arms (I can't remember which of the four it was). I was embarrassed. I felt that perhaps I had made a particularly miserable blunder in breaking the goddess's arm. But I was assured by my friendly comrades that no harm had been done. The life of the image had been removed ritually prior to putting her on the truck, and she was really nothing much more now than a piece of clay. I was relieved. The next day, however, I caught a miserable cold that lasted for weeks. Where was Kṛṣṇa, I wondered?

In pursuit of Eden I had found something very different. Kṛṣṇa, of course, was there all the time, as beautiful and bewitching as I had thought he would be. But those first few months in Calcutta dramatically impressed upon me the fact that, for the Bengalis, at least, the divine reveals itself in terrible as well as sublime forms. This book, then, in which I have chosen to deal with two such strikingly different Hindu manifestations of the divine, is no accident. During that memorable year in Calcutta I began dabbling in the history and cult of Kālī while completing my research on Kṛṣṇa. It was, perhaps, in an oddly scholarly way, my way of doing obeisance to that presence I had so unceremoniously met in the back of a truck, my way of acknowledging that, although Kṛṣṇa's flute is symbolic of many central truths of the Hindu religious tradition, Kālī's sword is similarly symbolic and that perhaps there is an ultimate truth of the tradition that lies somewhere in an unimaginable combination of the two.

It has been my decision not to index this short work. The Contents page shows clearly and in some detail the scope of the book, with its two definite Parts and the division of its chapters into subject-matter headings. Important terms such as *ānanda*, *līlā*, and *prakṛti* can be located in these subtitles, and I believe that it would be useless to index "Kṛṣṇa" or "Kālī" or names like Balarāma or Rāmprasād.

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## INTRODUCTION

Blue lotuses  
Flower everywhere  
And black *kokilas* sing  
King of the seasons,  
Spring has come  
And wild with longing  
The bee goes to his love.  
Birds flight in the air  
And cowherd girls  
Smile face to face  
Krishna has entered  
The great forest.<sup>1</sup>

Of terrible face and fearful aspect is Kālī the awful. Four-armed, garlanded with skulls, with disheveled hair, she holds a freshly cut human head and a bloodied scimitar in her left hands and makes the signs of fearlessness-assurance and bestowing boons with her right hands. Her neck adorned with a garland of severed human heads dripping blood, her earrings two dangling severed heads, her girdle a string of severed human hands, she is dark and naked. Terrible, fanglike teeth, full, prominent breasts, a smile on her lips glistening with blood, she is Kālī whose laugh is terrifying. Her flowing, disheveled hair streaming over her left side, her three eyes as red and glaring as the rising sun, she lives in the cremation ground, surrounded by screaming jackals. She stands on Śiva, who lies corpselike beneath her.<sup>2</sup>

Man has apprehended the divine in unbelievably varied and contrasting ways. The divine has revealed itself in sublime and terrible forms—in graceful, bounteous, merciful beings and in

<sup>1</sup>Vidyāpati, *Love Songs of Vidyāpati*, ed. W. G. Archer, trans. Deben Bhattacharya (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1963), no. 50, p. 89.

<sup>2</sup> The *dhyāna mantra* of Dakṣiṇa-kālī from Kṛṣṇānanda Āgamavāgīśa's *Tantrasāra* (*Bṛhat Tantrasārah*, 2 vols. [Calcutta: Basumatī Sāhitya Mandir, 1341 B.S. (1934)], 1:310–11). Kṛṣṇānanda is quoting from the *Śyāmā Praharāṇam*.



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horrific, punishing, and wrathful deities. It has revealed itself, or been apprehended by man, in male, female, bisexual, androgynous, animal, plant, and geographical forms. The divine as revealed to man, or apprehended by him, has always shown the tendency to surprise, delight, and stun, to overpower man in ecstasy or overwhelm him with fear and trembling.

The Hindu religious tradition presents us with one of the richest and most diverse assemblies of divine beings to be found anywhere in man's religious heritage. The Hindu pantheon confronts us with a host of beings as varied and numerous as any in the world. The gallery of Hindu gods includes soft, beguiling deities, such as Lakṣmī and Pārvatī; withdrawn, ascetic gods, such as Śiva; kingly, active gods who involve themselves in maintaining the balance between good and evil, such as Viṣṇu and his assortment of incarnations; intoxicating and beautiful gods such as Kṛṣṇa; and terrible, frightening deities such as Kālī. There are innumerable regional and local gods and godlings, there are deities who assume theriomorphic disguises, and there are gods and goddesses who are primarily associated with mountains, rivers, cities, and pilgrimage sites.

The Hindu pantheon, because of its size and diversity, has sometimes proven an embarrassment to would-be defenders of the Hindu tradition, who are frequently reluctant to describe Hinduism as "polytheistic." The pantheon has also proven an embarrassment to orderly, scholarly minds who find difficulty in discerning neat, systematic patterns in the Hindu multitude of gods, godlings, and supernatural beings. The embarrassment (not shared by all, to be sure) is totally unwarranted. The very diversity and size of the Hindu pantheon testify eloquently to the fact that for the Hindu the divine cannot be circumscribed. The divine has consistently proven itself in the Hindu context so to transcend the finite world of man that it excites man's imagination to incredible and even extreme lengths in an attempt to apprehend it in its fullness.

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This study does not aim to discern an underlying system to the Hindu pantheon; it does not try to refute, affirm, justify, or condemn the term "polytheism" in the Hindu context. It tries, rather, to articulate the visions that underlie the mythologies and cults of two particularly popular Hindu deities, the god Kṛṣṇa and the goddess Kālī. In so doing, this study tries to convey the depth, complexity, and inexhaustible nature of the Hindu apprehension of the divine, the sacred, the holy, or the "other." It tries to emphasize the fact that in the Hindu tradition man has shown himself to be open to a divine dimension of reality that can both intoxicate and terrify him. It also tries to show that whether the divine delights or frightens it is ultimately redeeming to him who perceives it.

Certain methodological presuppositions should be made clear at the beginning. A primary presupposition of this study is the conviction that religious phenomena can best be understood on their own plane of reference. It is of course obvious that there is no such thing as a purely religious fact. Any religious phenomenon is also a social, psychological, and historical fact as well. This is the case because every religious phenomenon is, in the final analysis, also a *human* phenomenon, and the human phenomenon reveals itself in social, psychic, and historic milieus. This is all quite evident. What is not as obvious, perhaps, is that religious phenomena deserve to be interpreted in religious terms. They deserve to be interpreted for what they pretend to be—that is, manifestations (or revelations) of the sacred. Man is clearly a social, economic, and historical being. He is also, however, a religious being—a being who has traditionally demonstrated that he must relate himself to an "other" dimension of reality *in order to be human*. Religious things obviously meet social and psychic needs and fulfill certain social and psychic functions. Religious things clearly are also influenced by historical events. But religion also claims to transcend these "horizontal" factors, indeed, it claims to underlie these dimensions of reality.

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Religion, as such, may be taken, and should be taken, as meaningful on its own plane of reference. The study of things religious can be first and foremost a study of *religious* man, a study of that dimension of man that he has consistently proclaimed to be the most ultimately real and the most ultimately human.

But how does one study religious things as religious things? This is not an easy question and does not elicit a simple answer. In the first place one does not study religion on its own plane of reference by ignoring what I have called “horizontal” factors. To understand religious things one must acquaint oneself with their contexts, one must be sensitive to the cultural setting of a given phenomenon. But what is more important one must seek to discern the visionary aspect of a religious phenomenon, that aspect of the phenomenon that legitimates it as a religious thing.<sup>3</sup> This means going beyond, or behind, the sometimes obvious social, psychic, or economic significance or function of a given phenomenon to grasp what the thing reveals to religious man, what the phenomenon reveals to man about that “other” realm of the sacred. This may call for a certain naïveté, a willingness to remain open to possibilities out of the ordinary, a willingness to marvel at and delight in the extraordinary—the willingness, perhaps, to wish that it might be so. One could say, it calls for one to be objective—for it prohibits the temptation to reduce a phenomenon to more easily manageable cause-and-effect interpretations. It does not allow one to foreclose any possibility

<sup>3</sup>The term *vision* is used here in a positive sense to denote man's apprehension of the real. Visions, as used here, are things that enable man to *see*—to see things as they really are. Visions enable men to see beyond the immediately sensed world of bits and pieces; they enable men to have a world, a cosmos. They situate man vis-à-vis an ultimate reality that grounds all else. Visions explode man out of his bound condition as a purely historical, and therefore limited, being and enable him to participate in a transcendent realm of “otherness.” Visions impel man out of the ordinary and enable him to discern the extraordinary. Visions are not mere dreams, not hallucinations, but glimpses of something other that is ultimately meaningful to man.

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but demands an openness to a dimension of reality that may not be experienced by the interpreter in his own life.

A second presupposition of this study stems from the first. When dealing with Kṛṣṇa and Kālī, with their mythologies and cults, we must seek interpretive directions from the larger religious tradition of which they are a part. Kṛṣṇa and Kālī are Hindu deities, and as such they undoubtedly reveal truths that are in some way related to, if not compatible with, other truths of this tradition. They are also very popular deities, particularly in Bengal. Their popularity suggests, further, that despite appearances (especially in the case of Kālī) they are not aberrations of the tradition but, quite likely, epitomes of or embroiderings on certain fundamental truths of the Hindu religious and philosophic traditions. It is my conviction that both deities do convey, in dramatic ways, central Hindu themes—that they articulate aspects of a primordial vision of the real that the Hindu tradition glimpsed thousands of years ago and that still underlies and orients the tradition today. This study tries to show how Kṛṣṇa and Kālī reveal and participate in that primordial vision.

This study is not historical in the sense of concerning itself primarily with chronicling the development of the Kṛṣṇa and Kālī cults. Particularly in the case of Kṛṣṇa, this task has already been done adequately by others.<sup>4</sup> In the case of Kālī, about whom very little has been done at all, this study is slightly more historical. It is primarily phenomenological, however. It seeks to bracket the phenomena under study in an attempt to apprehend a vision of reality that persists throughout

<sup>4</sup>For the history of Kṛṣṇa and the Kṛṣṇa cult, see William G. Archer, *The Loves of Krishna in Indian Painting and Poetry* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1957); R. G. Bhandarkar, *Vaiṣṇavism, Śaivism and Minor Religious Systems* (Varanasi: Indological Book House, 1966); Suvira Jaiswal, *The Origin and Development of Vaiṣṇavism* (Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1967); Hemchandra Raychaudhuri, *Materials for the Study of the Early History of the Vaishnava Sect* (Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1936); and Charles S. J. White, "Kṛṣṇa as Divine Child," *History of Religions* 10, no. 2 (November 1970): 156-77.

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the history of the two deities. This does not mean that the study dismisses the possibility of change resulting from historical developments in the Kṛṣṇa and Kālī cults. It is obvious that such change did take place—that both deities changed quite drastically, particularly in appearance and character. But change is interpreted in the study primarily as a modification, perhaps a clarification, of the primary visions that underlay the two deities. My approach is not to attempt to understand Kālī and Kṛṣṇa by amassing historical data: I seek instead to discern in the “presences” of these two beings, as revealed in history to be sure, hints of the transcendently real in the Hindu spiritual tradition. To put it in very unscholarly terms, my approach is to attempt to understand Kṛṣṇa and Kālī by trying to glimpse Kālī’s sword and hear Kṛṣṇa’s flute.

PART I

THE FLUTE: KṚṢṆA'S CARNIVAL OF JOY



## CHAPTER I

### KṚṢṆA AND "THE KṚṢṆAS"

One of Hinduism's favorite gods, a god worshiped virtually throughout the entire subcontinent, is described as a youthful cowherd who lives in an idyllic forest setting. He is a surpassingly beautiful god who intoxicates and delights all those who see him or hear his flute. In the autumn, on full-moon nights, he beckons with his flute to his beloved cowgirl companions to join him in the forest, where they dance, sing, frolic, and make love with him. He wears a crown of peacock feathers, has a lovely blue complexion, and is an incorrigible prankster. He is Kṛṣṇa, the darling of Hindu devotionism.

The Hindu tradition's "affair" with Kṛṣṇa has been varied and complex and has persisted for more than two thousand years. In the earliest stages Kṛṣṇa reveals himself primarily as a teacher, counselor, and friend. In the tradition's great epic, the *Mahā-bhārata*, he is the pivotal figure—the ally of the Pāṇḍava brothers in their struggle to regain their throne, which has been taken from them by the Kauravas. Throughout the vast epic Kṛṣṇa stands by the five warrior brothers, counseling and consoling them, acting as their diplomatic representative, and intervening at critical moments in the action in order to bring about eventual victory for his friends. His most famous and dramatic intervention has come to be known as the *Bhāgavadgītā*, the "Song of the Lord," in which he reveals himself as an *avatāra* of Viṣṇu, an incarnation (or "descent") of the supreme god, whose divine purpose is to ensure victory for the just Pāṇḍavas. In this text Kṛṣṇa also reveals himself to be a skillful teacher, providing the Hindu tradition for millenia to come with a brilliant epitome of its most cherished teachings. Playing the role of Arjuna's charioteer (a humble and subservient role, like his later cowherd role),



Kṛṣṇa reveals himself in the *Gītā* as a divine being worthy of man's devotional love and service.

Not long after the final redaction of the *Mahābhārata* (circa 400 A.D.), and perhaps concomitant with it, the biography of Kṛṣṇa was elaborated in detail in the *Harivaṁśa* (the geneology of Hari, i.e., Kṛṣṇa), a text that was meant to be an appendix to the *Mahābhārata*. In the *Harivaṁśa* the details of Kṛṣṇa's birth and early life in a cowherd community (at Vraja or Vṛndāvana) are given, perhaps for the first time in the tradition.<sup>1</sup> It tells of his miraculous escape from his wicked uncle, Kāṁsa, his adoption by his foster parents, Nanda and Yaśodā, his pranks as a child, his play as an adolescent, and his love dalliance with the *gopīs* (cowherd women). These are episodes that eventually mark a transformation in the affair between Kṛṣṇa and the Hindu tradition, for the subsequent tradition becomes enamored of the cowherd youth, his mischievous childhood, and his passionate affair with the *gopīs*. The later tradition never entirely forgets the Kṛṣṇa of the epic—the loyal friend, political adviser, and teacher—but it becomes fascinated primarily by the gay and wild child of Vṛndāvana and dotes on him as a parent dotes on a child or as a woman dotes on her beloved, which is precisely the the context of the tradition's affair with Kṛṣṇa from this point onward.

In the *Viṣṇu-*, *Bhāgavata-*, *Padma-*, and *Brahma-vaivarta-purāṇas* the story of Kṛṣṇa's sojourn in Vṛndāvana is retold with increasing elaboration. In Jayadeva's *Gītāgovinda* (twelfth century A.D.) the complexities and subtleties of emotion involved in Kṛṣṇa's love affair with the cowherd women are explored in more depth with the appearance of Rādhā, Kṛṣṇa's favorite

<sup>1</sup>There is archaeological evidence for the cowherd Kṛṣṇa as early as the second century B.C. (Sukumar Sen, *A History of Brajabuli Literature* [Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1935], p. 480), and the poet Bhāsa describes the child Kṛṣṇa (circa A.D. 200-300). The *Harivaṁśa*, however, even if it is later than the fourth century A.D., appears to be the first detailed account of Kṛṣṇa's childhood and youth.