

# Bitextuality in *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* X.29

OKITA Kiyokazu

## 1. Introduction

In his ground-breaking monograph, Yigal Bronner (2010) traces the development of *śleṣa* in Sanskrit literature. However, conspicuous by its absence is a discussion of possible bitextuality in the purāṇic texts. Among the *purāṇas*, it is well-known that the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* is exceptional for both its theological and its literary qualities (cf. Gupta and Valpey 2013: 2). Scholarly opinions on the earliest possible date for the production of the *Bhāgavata* widely vary from the seventh (Bryant 2002) to the ninth or early tenth century (Hardy 1983: 488). As for the latest possible date, the most of the *purāṇa* must have been composed by the eleventh century (Hardy 1983: 486–7; Schmid 2002). If this is the case, the production of the *purāṇa* roughly coincides with the period when poets' engagement with *śleṣa* was intensifying ever more rapidly (Bronner 2010: 232–3). In this paper, I discuss possibly bitextual passages from the twenty-ninth chapter of the tenth book of the *purāṇa*. Previous scholarship has noted possible bitextual readings in this chapter of the *Bhāgavata*.<sup>1)</sup> Following their lead, this paper attempts to further explore the *purāṇa*'s bitextuality and to situate it in the larger context of the *śleṣa* movement in South Asian literature.

## 2. Kṛṣṇa's Statements toward the *Gopīs*

At the beginning of chapter twenty-nine, sage Śuka describes an enchanting nocturnal scene in autumn (verses 1–2). Kṛṣṇa plays a flute and his music pulls on the *gopīs*' hearts (verse 3). After listening to Kṛṣṇa's flute, the *gopīs* become agitated and leave their homes to see Kṛṣṇa on the bank of the Yamunā, setting aside their household duties and abandoning their families (verses 4–7). When the *gopīs* reach Kṛṣṇa, he addresses them.

In verse 17, Sage Śuka prefaces Kṛṣṇa's speech by introducing him as the best of speakers, and as a person who will bewilder the *gopīs* with his ornate words.<sup>2)</sup> I suggest that these descriptions are a hint that we are expected to derive multiple layers of meaning from

Kṛṣṇa's speech. Some commentators agree that there are at least two levels of meaning in Kṛṣṇa's speech, one in which Kṛṣṇa expresses indifference toward the *gopīs*, and another in which he expresses his wish for them to stay.<sup>3)</sup> We should also note that elsewhere the *Bhāgavata* states that indirect speech (*parokṣavāda*) is dear to Kṛṣṇa.<sup>4)</sup>

Moving to Kṛṣṇa's speech, although he initially welcomes the *gopīs* (verse 18), he quickly disappoints them by telling them to return to their homes (verse 19):

*rajany eṣāghorarūpāghorasattvaniṣevitā /*  
*pratiyāta vrajaṃ neha stheyam strībhiḥ sumadhyamāḥ //*

(1) This night is fearful, for it is full of fearful creatures. Go back to the village. Women should not stay here, O ladies with slender waists!

According to this interpretation, Kṛṣṇa tells the *gopīs* to return because staying outside at night is dangerous. However, Śrīnātha Cakravartī in his *Caitanyamatamañjuṣā* (sixteenth century) offers an alternative interpretation of Kṛṣṇa's statement:<sup>5)</sup>

(2) This night is **not** fearful, [for it is] full of **non**-fearful creatures. Do **not** go back to the village. Women **should stay** here, O ladies with slender waists!

According to this second interpretation, Kṛṣṇa begs the *gopīs* to stay with him. Thus Kṛṣṇa's attitude in this alternative interpretation is the complete opposite of his attitude in the first interpretation. Śrīnātha arrives at this second interpretation by exploiting the ambiguity inherent in euphonic combinations (*sandhi*) and in Sanskrit syntax. It was also common practice in manuscripts not to put spaces between words. In the first interpretation, the night is said to be fearful (*eṣā ghora-*). However, in the second interpretation, the night is described as **not** fearful (*eṣā aghora-*). In the same way, in the first interpretation the night is described as inhabited by fearful beings (*ghorasattva-*) while in the second interpretation it is inhabited by creatures that are **not** threatening (*aghorasattva-*). Moreover, in the first interpretation the negative particle *na* is construed with *stheyam*, meaning "[women] should not stay [here]." In the second interpretation however the same negative particle is instead connected with *pratiyāta*, meaning "women should not go."

The potential for bitextual interpretation is not limited to verse nineteen. Verse twenty-four offers another good example:

*bhartuḥ śuśrūṣaṇaṃ strīṇāṃ paro dharmo hy amāyayā /*

*tadbandhūnām ca kalyāṇyaḥ prajānām cānupoṣaṇam //*

(1) O beautiful ladies! Serving [one's] husband without deception, and taking care of his relatives and progeny is indeed, without mistake, the highest *dharma* for women.

In this first interpretation Kṛṣṇa tells the *gopīs* to return home because serving their family is their highest duty. However, according to Śrīnātha's alternative interpretation, the above statement is to be secondarily interpreted as follows:

(2) Serving the lord [i.e. Kṛṣṇa] sincerely, and taking care of his female companions and those who have excellent birth (i.e. those who descended into the world with him) is indeed, the highest *dharma* for women like you.

In the second interpretation *bhartuḥ* does not refer to the *gopīs'* husbands, but to Kṛṣṇa himself, who is the lord of the three worlds. In this interpretation, the *gopīs'* highest duty is to serve Kṛṣṇa. This rendering exploits the double meaning of the term *bhartṛ* which can mean either 'husband' or 'lord'. Similarly, *tadbandhūnām* and *prajānām* are also reinterpreted in order to provide the second layer of meaning.<sup>6)</sup>

I propose that the bitextuality in Kṛṣṇa's speech corresponds to what Bronner calls 'self-ing,' which typically occurs in an unusual temporal setting in the poem (2010: 74). According to Bronner (2010: 71–75), this use of *sleṣa* allows a character to reveal her true self while maintaining her superficial identity. In the case of Kṛṣṇa's speech to the *gopīs*, its first register presents Kṛṣṇa as the protector of *dharma*, the righteous lord who instructs Arjuna in the *Gītā*. However, the second register allows him to express his other side, which is bound by his devotees' love toward him. Thus this *sleṣa* reading of Kṛṣṇa's speech reveals the principles of both *dharma* and *bhakti* within his character. This speech also occurs at a critical moment in the narrative because it marks the beginning of Kṛṣṇa's secret rendezvous with the *gopīs* which ultimately leads to their union with him during the performance of the *rāsa* dance.

### 3. The *Gopīs'* Reply

After Kṛṣṇa's speech, the *gopīs* reply to him. While the *purāṇa* signaled the twofold nature of Kṛṣṇa's speech, we do not find anything similar in relation to the *gopīs'* statement. In fact Śrīnātha's commentary, which elaborated bitextual readings in Kṛṣṇa's speech, gives no such analysis in the case of the *gopīs'* speech. However, certain commentaries such as

Sanātana Gosvāmī's *Vaiṣṇavatoṣaṇī*<sup>7)</sup> provide bitextual readings for both Kṛṣṇa's and the *gopīs*' speech. For example, in verse thirty-five the *gopīs* speak to Kṛṣṇa:

*siñcāṅga nas tvadadharāmṛtapūrakeṇa hāsāvalokakalagūtajahṛcchayāgnim /  
no ced vayaṃ virahajāgnyupayuktadehā dhyānena yāma padayoḥ padavīm sakhe te //*

(1) By means of your [sweet words, which are a] stream of nectar flowing from your lips, extinguish the fire of our passion; [the fire] that was ignited by [your] smile, [your] gaze, and [your] soft singing. Otherwise, O friend, with our bodies wasted by the fire of separation, we come to you by means of meditation (i.e. we shall commit suicide).

In this first interpretation, the *gopīs* beg Kṛṣṇa to speak sweetly with them and to thereby alleviate the pain of separation.<sup>8)</sup> This corresponds to the first interpretation of Kṛṣṇa's speech, in which Kṛṣṇa asks the *gopīs* to go back to their homes. However, Sanātana Gosvāmī offers a second interpretation according to which the *gopīs*, refusing to stay with Kṛṣṇa, get the upper hand:<sup>9)</sup>

(2) By means of your stream of nectar flowing from your lips, extinguish the fire of your passion, [the fire] that was born from [our] smile, [our] gaze, and [our] soft singing. If [you do] not [let us go, then] our bodies [will be] consumed by the fire of separation [from our husbands]. Even in our thoughts, we do not approach you, O friend!

In the first interpretation, the *gopīs* ask Kṛṣṇa to extinguish *their* desire for *him*, which was created by *his* smile and so on. Thus, it is the *gopīs*' hearts that are enflamed. However, in the second interpretation the direction of desire is reversed. In this rendering, the *gopīs* tease Kṛṣṇa by asking him to extinguish *his* desire toward *them*. His desire was created by *their* smiles and so on. In other words, in the second interpretation Kṛṣṇa becomes the one who begs for the *gopīs*' favor, and the *gopīs* tease Kṛṣṇa by telling him to console himself by his words.

*Pādas* c and d are similarly reinterpreted. In the first interpretation, the *gopīs* tell Kṛṣṇa that if he does not speak sweetly with them (*no ced*), then, tormented by the fire of separation from *him*, they will approach (*yāma*) his feet through meditation (*dhyānena*). In the second interpretation, however, the *gopīs* tell Kṛṣṇa that if he does not let *them* go (*no ced*), then they will be tormented by the fire of separation from *their husbands*. Therefore, they will not approach Kṛṣṇa (*na yāma*) even in their thoughts (*dhyāne*). Thus this second interpretation hinges on analyzing the term *dhyānena* differently, as the locative singular *dhyāne* followed by the negative particle *na*.

#### 4. Conclusion

Are these *śleṣa* readings in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* “writerly” or are they “readerly” (Bronner 2010:169)? In other words, did the *purāṇa* composer(s) intend Kṛṣṇa’s and the *gopīs*’ speeches to be read bitextually, or is it something the commentators imposed onto the text in a place where no such bitextuality was intended? My provisional suggestion is that *śleṣas* in Kṛṣṇa’s speech, at least some of them, are writerly while it is likely that those in the *gopīs*’ speech are readerly.

Bronner suggests (2010: 169) two criteria for deciding whether commentators have imposed a *śleṣa* reading onto a text. A *śleṣa* reading is likely to be readerly (1) if the text does not clearly indicate that it contains *śleṣa*, and (2) if only particular commentators identify *śleṣas* in verses where others do not. Concerning the first criterion, I suggest that verse seventeen, which describes Kṛṣṇa as a supremely gifted speaker, serves as a clear indication of a *śleṣa* reading. We should also remember that Kṛṣṇa’s speech marks a crucial moment in the narrative, and that poets such as Nītivārman and Māgha in the seventh and the eighth centuries typically employed *śleṣa* precisely at such junctures.

The second criterion is harder to fulfill since there is no consensus among the *Bhāgavata*’s numerous commentators. Śrīdhara’s well-known *Bhāvārthadīpikā* commentary (fourteenth century) on this chapter does not contain any *śleṣa* analysis. However, many commentators from the sixteenth century onwards, including Śrīnātha, Sanātana, Vallabha, Viśvanātha Cakravartī, and Vaṁśīdhara, provide *śleṣa* readings on some or all of Kṛṣṇa’s statements in this chapter. Insofar as the *gopīs*’ statements are concerned, even fewer commentators provide bitextual analysis. Still, there are commentators such as Sanātana who interpret the *gopīs*’ statement bitextually.

Judging from the above evidence I believe that there is a good possibility that the *śleṣas* in Kṛṣṇa’s statements, at least some of them, are writerly. However, this is less likely the case with the *gopīs*’ speech. If Kṛṣṇa’s speech contains *śleṣas*, then there is an obvious temptation to provide a second meaning to the *gopīs*’ reply as well. This is precisely the reason why the *śleṣa* analysis of the *gopīs*’ statement is likely to be readerly.

My discussion will necessarily remain speculative since we do not have any means to be sure of authorial intention. One may argue that my analysis is too speculative, and that those *śleṣa* readings discussed above are all readerly. Even if that is the case, there still re-

mains the fact that an enormous number of commentaries were produced in the early modern period that provided bitextual analysis of the *Bhāgavata*. This is a remarkable phenomenon in and of itself, and one which unfortunately has not received proper scholarly attention. Thus I hope to have shown that we need more than a few footnotes to properly address the issue of bitextuality in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*.

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### Notes

- 1) Cf. Redington (1990: 104), Tagare (2007 [1978]: 1437–1438), Schweig (2005: 210–219).
- 2) *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* 10.29.17.
- 3) For example, Sanātana Gosvāmī (sixteenth century), Viśvanātha Cakravartī (seventeenth century), and Vamśīdhara (nineteenth century) support bitextual interpretation.
- 4) *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* 11.21.35cd.
- 5) Śrīnātha (1955): 114.
- 6) Śrīnātha (1955: 114).
- 7) Śāstrī (1995) mistakenly attributes the *Vaiṣṇavatoṣaṇī* to Jīva Gosvāmī.
- 8) For this interpretation, see for example Śrīdhara's commentary.
- 9) Sanātana (1955: 234).

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(Assistant Professor, Sophia University, PhD)