

## Chapter 1



### *Introduction*

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Krishna is the name of one of the most popular and beloved deities in the Hindu pantheon. The many intriguing and delightful features of this divine character match with one of the literal meanings of his name, "all-attractive." Whether known as an incarnation of the god Vishnu or worshiped himself as the Supreme Deity, Lord Krishna has found the widest representation in Indian culture. Indian scholar Bimanbehari Majumdar has underscored Krishna's magnitude in *Krishna in History and Legend*: "As Vishnu pervades all the worlds and through them causes himself to be permeated, so does Krishna permeate Indian art, literature, ethics, philosophy and religion." Yet we are also advised that, "no figure in the history of Indian culture has given rise to so much controversy as Krishna."<sup>1</sup>

The actual tradition of "Krishna" fits more specifically within the broad umbrella category of "Vaishnava" in Hindu India, understood to encompass also the veneration of Vishnu, Nārāyaṇa, Lakshmī, Rādhā, Rāma, Sītā, the remainder of the *avatāras* (incarnations) with their female consorts, saints, and sectarian leaders and followers. The other principal Hindu divisions are Śaivism, including Śiva and the worship of his many manifestations as supreme deity, Śaktism, encompassing the Goddess Devī as supreme feminine power such as Durgā or Kālī, Smārta traditions that venerate a sequence of five major deities, the Advaita nondualist traditions including neo-Vedānta, lesser-known sects, modern synthetic movements, and local cultic forms. While the personality and worship of the deity Krishna forms a very significant division within Vaishnavism, his complete profile has, as suggested above, remained problematic and elusive.

Through the centuries the enigmatic and shifting identity of Krishna has ranged from pure fantasy to mere history, from cowherd friend to dynastic king, from butter thief to philanthropist, from flute musician to charioteer, from wrestler to peacemaker, from flirtatious paramour to polygamist, from philanderer to Ideal Man, from *ksatriya* warrior to yoga philosopher, from non-Aryan tribal deity to Aryan superman, from cunning military strategist to avatāra of Vishnu, from Jesus clone to "Supreme Personality of Godhead," and from epic hero to the creator of the universe as well as the source of all religious incarnations in the world. Many Hindus embrace one of these forms of Krishna and distance others, and so it is clear that Krishna represents many different things to many different kinds of people, each in a unique way part and parcel of a whole which has never been fully grasped in entirety.

As may be surmised, the "Krishnaite" traditions are by no means uniform, and so for our purposes are tentatively divided into normative and alternative. The so-called normative Krishna is based primarily on a canon of early Sanskrit texts, while an alternative Krishna may or may not include these along with specific regional or vernacular texts and traditions. The word "alternative" means, in the strictest sense, that besides a standard norm there are other choices or options available. In our case, besides an alleged normative Krishna, there are several other types of Krishnas that have flourished in different parts of India among various ethnic groups and sectarian divisions.

As a collection of essays describing "alternative Krishnas," this book is an attempt to supply some of the more elusive yet compelling missing pieces to the complete jigsaw puzzle of "Krishna." Yet to fully appreciate the range of choices presented within this volume, one needs to clarify the standard or normative Krishna, if indeed there is one. As a term, "standard" refers to "regular, orthodox, conventional." Is there such a Krishna to be found, or is this option merely an artificial construction drawn from other diverse types? If we look carefully at the "orthodox" literature in Sanskrit pertaining to the life of Krishna we indeed already find an assortment of "types" or even "archetypes" of the person of Krishna that have become overlaid upon each other throughout the passage of many centuries. In this case the category "alternative" could be problematic in that it may refer simply to additional varieties of the ever expanding multiple expressions of this rather amazing personality known as Krishna. Nonetheless, as it stands there is a kind of normative Krishna that has become accepted at least by the more orthodox schools and among sectors of the pan-Indian public. The Sanskrit/vernacular divide is not meant to be contrastive, but serves to widen the lens on the broader meaning of Krishna in India. While a few of the alternatives may appear to dispute

the primacy of the standard or orthodox Krishna, the intention of the book is to give voice to some other religious traditions of Krishna worship, regional and vernacular, that have run parallel to the mainline.

The earliest classical sources for a "standard" life of Krishna include the *Mahābhārata* epic as well as the *Hari Vamśa*, *Vishnu Purāṇa*, the *Brahma Purāṇa*, and the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* (also known as the *Śrīmad Bhāgavatam*). Taken together, these will be referred to as the Sanskrit "canon." The *Hari Vamśa*, attached as an appendage to the much earlier *Mahābhārata*, is dated roughly within the first three centuries CE, and the *Vishnu Purāṇa* before 500 CE. While the *Brahma Purāṇa* is perhaps only a few centuries later, the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, as the principal literary source for the childhood pastimes of Krishna, most probably reached its final form in the ninth century CE. Many other Purāṇas and supplementary texts were written to corroborate material contained in the above canon. While the dating of Krishna's life is accepted by pious tradition to be around 3000 BCE, there is also believed to have been a strong oral tradition of his life handed down until the written format was commenced sometime before the Christian era.

One may affirm with considerably more assurance that there is such a thing as an historical "orthodox Jesus," in that various councils of Christian theologians through the centuries have determined a standard Jesus, binding on the believers, that has been drawn from the very limited body of material in the New Testament. Despite this, the so-called search for the historical Jesus has occupied some of the most brilliant minds in modern Christendom, from its initial frenzy in the nineteenth century to the current revival from the 1950s, and especially with the Jesus Seminar in Berkeley beginning in 1985. One may also acknowledge an "orthodox Muhammad" in the Islamic tradition, strictly based on the Quranic writings, the Sunna, and the Hadith. Historical studies, with their recurrent problems, have followed in search of the historical Buddha, Lao Tzu, and Confucius. As founders of major world religions, Jesus, Muhammad, and the Buddha have also been treated in a spate of biographies in recent years, with focused attention on minute details as shifted through historical and literary evidence.

In the Western examples, a rigid demarcation between orthodox and heterodox was often established and implemented by central ecclesiastical authorities, such that alterations in the depictions of these religious founders were declared heresies and abolished in one manner or another. The case is quite different with the personality of Krishna, for there has never been a central tribunal of orthodoxy in Hinduism that would have enforced or mandated a particular version of the Krishna personality for all Hindus, that is, limiting its sources to the Purāṇas only, the epics only, the Sanskrit literature only. Thus what might have

been deemed heretical in terms of the Krishna image and personality has survived in both urban and rural locations, everywhere largely untempered by orthodox enforcement. Later Vaishnava Sampradāyas, religious schools claiming orthodoxy, shaped their formations of Krishna by selection of specific texts, both in Sanskrit and in vernacular languages, along with additional materials conforming to the teachings of the founder saints. And while they often debated with each other to affirm and develop their own doctrinal theologies, the regional or alternative Krishna traditions were not persecuted as in Inquisitional Christianity or radical Islamist regimes.

The empirical evidence of inscriptions, dated monuments, and original manuscripts is not perhaps as strong for Krishna as in some of the other examples of religious figures. However, most scholars of Hinduism and Indian history accept the historicity of Krishna—that he was a real male person, whether human or divine, who lived on Indian soil by at least 1000 BCE and interacted with many other historical persons within the cycles of the epic and puranic literatures. And while not the founder of Hinduism as such, Krishna is probably the most important “historically divine” figure in Hindu India today, with Lord Rāma of the *Rāmāyaṇa* story the only possible rival for popularity. By “historically divine” is meant a god or divine being that is both worshiped as a transcendent God and believed to have appeared in human form in historical time.

Despite the obvious importance of Krishna for the history of India and Hinduism, there is as yet no serious “biography” much less a “standard” one. Modern apologists representing the various faith-based communities of Hinduism or Krishna worship, while accepting the historical divinity of Krishna, have generally limited their sources of historical authority to the Sanskrit canon (S. Radhakrishnan, Swami Prabhupada, Devi Vanamali, Swami Cinmayananda, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, etc.). Many secular or lay authors who have attempted to portray a life of Krishna have also drawn exclusively from the epic and Purāṇic sources (Menon, Sheth, Frith), yet have usually consigned Krishna purely within the realm of myth, legend, and even fairytale. Moreover, the widely popular Indian TV serial of *Shri Krishna* (Bombay: Sagar Enterprises, 1989) of 106 episodes by famed *Ramayana* director Ramanand Sagar was “mainly based on Shrimad Bhagvat Maha Puran by Bhagwan Veda Vyās, with material from other Purāṇas,” reinforcing standard images of Krishna throughout India and the world. With the exception of Hildebeital (1976), Kinsley (1979) and Hawley (1983), who have each focused on a specific dimension of Krishna’s life using canonical as well as noncanonical sources, most academic scholars of Hinduism have also remained within the domain of the Sanskrit canon for any kind of biographical reconstruction. Thus Krishna, whose actual his-

torical presence is no longer in dispute, has all but evaded the eyes and ears of serious scholarship to such an extent that his "real life" has become virtually shrouded in mystery. The Krishna of Indian piety and imagination has eclipsed the objective historical Krishna by leaps and bounds.

According to even the most circumspect approach, however, the purported life of Krishna had more of the "stuff" of real history than most religiously historical figures, though much of this information appears exaggerated at first glance. According to the accounts in the Sanskrit canon, as well as depictions in sculpture and other visual art, Krishna ruled his own kingdom and was the descendent of an illustrious dynasty that has been carefully chronicled and preserved by scribes and Purāṇic authors. In fact, Krishna is the only deity in the Hindu pantheon whose entire earthly life, from birth to death, has been presented in Sanskrit literature. His life spanned over one hundred years according to the *Vishnu Purāṇa*. This would place Krishna's life considerably longer than the lives of either Jesus (thirty-three years), Muhammad (sixty-two years), Confucius (seventy years), the Buddha (eighty years), or Mahavira (seventy-two years). Krishna had more wives (16,108), children (180,000 sons, according to *Vishnu Purāṇa* 5.32), and grandchildren than any other known religious figure, except perhaps some of the mythical Chinese emperors of yore. Krishna's earthly career covered more geographical territory than any of the others, including the entire region of northern India. There are far more material pilgrimage sites and shrines commemorating specific events in Krishna's life than for any other sacred figure in world religions. Furthermore, there are more references to Krishna's life in literature, both classical and vernacular, than any other historical or semihistorical religious personality.

Then why is there hesitation to conduct comprehensive biographical documentation? Perhaps the reason can be summed up in the expression that is used as the title for the first chapter of Professor Majumdar's book: "Chronological Puzzles," referring to the enormous number of contradictions and discrepancies surrounding the chronology of Krishna's life as depicted in the Sanskrit canon. In order for Krishna to have conducted all of the activities described therein at the specific ages mentioned, he either needed to duplicate himself or else perform certain acts way out of their normal human range of possibilities (i.e., become a grandfather at age thirteen, or join the Mahābhārata war at age ninety-four!). If Noah of the Bible can live 475 years, or Abraham can father a child at 100 years of age, then perhaps those who study Western traditions can empathize. These kinds of problems, and others, have posed as nearly insurmountable hurdles for even the most ambitiously devout scholar of any religious tradition. Yet the much talked about "problem" of constructing the historical

life of Jesus from the Synoptic Gospels, of Muhammad from the Qur'an and Hadith, compared to the task of the Krishna historian, is quite rudimentary, indeed even a picnic.

The gradual stages of historical development by which Vishnu ascended to prominence after the Vedic period are important precursors to the ascendancy of Krishna as the Supreme God. The earliest Vaishnavas, early followers of Vishnu and Nārāyaṇa, were the Bhāgavatas and Pāñcarātras, both of whom rejected the Vedic sacrificial cult and embraced the path of devotion, or *bhakti*. But while the former group accepted the *varṇa* system and brahmanical status, the latter rejected it and originally flourished among ascetics and those influenced by the Tantric tradition. Vishnu and Nārāyaṇa were previously worshiped separately by the Bhāgavatas and Pāñcarātras, yet the new amalgam, with the further addition of Vāsudeva-Krishna, developed rapidly to become the most important theistic division of Sanskrit Hinduism.

The relationship of Krishna with these Vaishnava traditions is complex and develops over a long period, but is at least initially established by the time of the Bhagavad Gītā or the *Mahābhārata*, around 200 BCE in its final form. Thus, before the Christian era, the "historical" figure and evolving deity of a cowherd clan by the name of Krishna was annexed into the Bhāgavata religion as Vāsudeva-Krishna, first as an incarnation of Vishnu-Nārāyaṇa, then gradually as identical with him as in the Bhagavad Gītā, and finally, as his superior by the time of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* in its final form in the ninth century.

By the medieval period, orthodox sectarian Vaishnavism had developed into four major Vaishnava Sampradāyas, disciplic lineages or schools that were each founded by a renowned scholar who wrote learned Sanskrit commentaries on the Upanishads, the *Vedānta Sūtra*, and the Bhagavad Gītā. The four founders, ranging in time from the eleventh century to the fourteenth, were Rāmānuja, Madhva, Nimbārka, and Vishnuswami. Each conferred authentic—that is, Sankritic—sanction to the emerging bhakti movements devoted to the expression of bhakti as the superior means of achieving *moksha*, or liberation. In these schools, the status of Krishna ranges from avatāra (incarnation) of Vishnu, to identity with Vishnu on the highest level. In each case he is connected directly with the Supreme Being and co-eternal with the Upanishadic Brahman. In modern times the Gauḍīya Sampradāya, linked to Madhva Sampradāya but established by Caitanya and his followers in sixteenth-century Bengal, includes the recent worldwide movement known as ISKCON (International Society for Krishna Consciousness) in which Krishna is most clearly declared the "Supreme Personality of Godhead," surpassing Vishnu.

Many scholastic works in Sanskrit by the above founders established the orthodox sampradāyas and the legitimacy of bhakti toward Krishna or Vishnu as superior to other paths employing knowledge (*jñāna-mārga*) and works (*karma-mārga*). The complete *raison d'être* for these lineages, however, either at their inauguration or within their development, was not simply to perpetuate a Sanskrit canonical Krishna, but to uplift the status of bhakti vernacular writings within the canonical sphere. For example, in the Rāmānuja or Śrī Sampradāya there were the Tamil poems of the Āḷvār saints like Āṅṭāl and Nāmmālvār, for Madhva the devotional songs and poems in Kannada language of the Haridāsa Kuṭa saints like Vyāsatīrtha and Purandara Dāsa, for Vishnuswami and the Vallabha Sampradāya the Hindi or Braj Bhāshā poems of the Aṣṭachāp poets like Sūr Dās, and for Nimbārka Sampradāya the Braj Bhāshā poems of Śrī Bhaṭṭa and Śrī Harivyāsadeva. The later Gauḍīya tradition, while containing many Sanskrit treatises by the Six Gōswamis of Vrindaban, included on an equal level the Bengali poems of Chaṇḍīdās, Vidyāpati, and Narottama Dās, among many others. Within all four of the major "orthodox" traditions of Vaishnavism, there were significant elements of vernacular and regional input. Thus there is no surviving official "Sanskrit-only" tradition of Krishna theology and worship that has been mandated by any central or sectarian Hindu authority. As such, no living "orthodox tradition" of Krishna worship rejects vernacular expressions. In terms of orthodoxy there are only specific religious lineages that have propounded a specific form of Krishna as most effective in a salvational scheme of sectarian devotion. The rest is alternative! The so-called normative, classical tradition of Krishna mythology and worship as allegedly disseminated throughout India by brahminical culture and the Sanskrit canonical literature is in reality more of an academic construct useful for theorists and historians to analyze and evaluate the historical developments of ideas in India.

Nonetheless, drawing upon the classical Sanskrit sources, including especially the *Bhāgavata Purāna* but also the epics and other Purānas, a brief biographical portrait of the normative Krishna is presented below for purposes of providing a frame of reference for comparison with the papers presented in this volume.

Krishna is most generally accepted within the Hindu tradition as the eighth of ten incarnations of Vishnu, descending on earth at the beginning of the present age of Kali Yuga, and at the end of the previous age of Dvāpara Yuga, in about 3000 BCE. Whenever there is a general rise in unrighteousness, Lord Vishnu is believed to descend as an

avātara (incarnation) in order to punish the miscreants and deliver the righteous devotees from the cycle of rebirth. At this particular juncture there was a preponderance of demons from former times that had taken birth as evil kings and were threatening the stability of Hindu Dharma. Planning his strategy of descent, Vishnu is said to have pulled two hairs from his head, one black (Krishna) and the other white (Balarāma).

Many centuries ago descendants of the Yādava family had settled around the town of Mathurā in North India. Overthrowing his pious father Ugrasena, the evil King Kāmsa was the principal villain and reason for the descent of Vishnu. With the support of his father-in-law King Jarāsandha of Magadha, he precipitated a reign of terror in the region. Krishna, while understood to have taken a divine birth, was born to Devakī, the sister of Kāmsa, and her husband Vasudeva of the same illustrious Yādava family, a lunar dynasty descended from the Moon. In a situation of similar intrigue to the Jesus narrative, Krishna's parents had to face a horrible ordeal. Kāmsa had heard in a vision that the eighth son of Devakī would ultimately kill him, and so he had Devakī and Vasudeva imprisoned in a Mathurā jail, where he murdered six of her sons out of fear. Kāmsa was told that the seventh child had aborted. However, this child, known as Balarāma who was another avātara of Vishnu sent to help Krishna, had actually been miraculously transferred to the womb of Vasudeva's second wife Rohinī. When Krishna finally took birth, divine intervention allowed for the blackish-colored child to be carried out of jail and switched with a female child in the nearby village of Gokula, where his new "foster parents" Yaśodā and her husband Nanda lived as wealthy dairy farmers. Thus when Kāmsa tried to kill the eighth child of Devakī, lo!, it was a girl and had to be spared.

Krishna's early life was spent growing up with his elder brother Balarāma, who was white colored, in an idyllic rural setting. Yet Krishna and his family were besieged by demons sent by Kāmsa, who had gotten wind of a miraculous child in the Braj area. Krishna, as a beautifully divine child, was naturally adorable to everyone in the village, but could also wield frightening consequences on the evil beings that entered his turf. This series of demons included a witch, whirlwind, cow, serpent, bird, sea dragon, ox, horse, and goat, all of which were destroyed by the child prodigy and his brother. Further exploits included lifting Govardhan Hill to protect the villagers from the rainfall of a jealous Lord Indra, and stealing the clothes of the cowherd girls of the village of Vrindāvana where his family had subsequently settled. As Krishna approached his teenage years, he gained a reputation for dallying with the local cowherd maidens and wives by enchanting them with his flute, leading ultimately to a midnight Rāsa Dance in which he multiplied himself in order to satisfy their amorous



desires. All of these childhood pastimes created an unprecedented outpouring of affection and deep attachment for Krishna by the villagers that became a paradigm for religious devotion in Vaishnava traditions.

At one point, Kāṁsa invited Krishna and Balarāma to Mathurā to witness a fourteen-day sacrifice, using this as a ruse to destroy them. Akrūra, a devotee of Krishna, was sent by Kāṁsa to collect the brothers in Vrindāvana and warned them of Kāṁsa's evil designs. The residents of Vrindāvana experienced deep emotional trauma upon the departure of the two brothers, yet were assured of their return after helping the Yādava clan. In Mathurā, Krishna and Balarāma performed a few healing miracles, killed an evil elephant, defeated two wrestlers, and ultimately killed Kāṁsa along with his eight evil bothers. After this, Vasudeva and Devakī, released from prison, proceeded to arrange for their sons' education in the sixty-four arts and archery at the hermitage of the sage Sāṁdīpani Muni. After their return, it became difficult for the brothers to remain in Mathurā. The evil Jarāsandha, king of Magadha and father of two of Kāṁsa's wives, led a large coalition of kings with their armies into revenge on the Yādavas, who were temporarily impoverished and thus retreated. Krishna quickly built a new capital city of Dvārakā on an island off the Northwest coast of India, where his parents Vasudeva and Devakī were kept safely. Through a series of events, Krishna and fellow Yādavas accumulated wealth and built up a large kingdom and army. Krishna then married Rukmiṇī as his chief queen, but went on to also marry many other women (i.e., Jambavatī, Satyabhāmā, Kālindī, Satyā, Kaikeyī, etc.), who either fell in love with him or else were given by grateful kings or princes in return for his valor and good deeds. In one unprecedented event in all world religious history, Krishna married the sixteen thousand daughters of Nārakāsura who were released by him from captivity, and built each of them a palace in Dvārakā where he multiplied himself in order to satisfy all simultaneously! In terms of progeny, it is mentioned that Krishna had ten sons from each of eight wives.

The remainder of Krishna's story is bound up with the fate of the five Pāṇḍava brothers and their common wife Draupadī. The Pāṇḍavas, including Yudhiṣṭhira, Bhīma, Arjuna, Nakula, and Sahadeva, were also Yādavas, being the sons, by divine intervention, of Pāṇḍu and his wives Kuntī and Mādri. Krishna took pity on their miserable plight of being cheated by the Kauravas out of their wealth and kingdom in a loaded dice game. Despite the efforts of Krishna to negotiate peace between the rival family groups—the Pāṇḍavas and their allies versus the Kauravas including the one hundred sons of Dhritarāṣṭra and Gandhārī—steps were taken toward an all-out war on the battlefield of Kurukshetra in northern India. Krishna lent his skill as a charioteer to Arjuna, and the stage was set for the

epic eighteen-day war chronicled in the *Mahābhārata*. After speaking the famous Bhagavad Gītā discourse to Arjuna who had suddenly been overcome with grief and panic about performing his duty in battle, Krishna and the Pāṇḍavas fought relentlessly and scored a victory in that war. The Yādava clan returned to Dvārakā to celebrate, yet evil omens lay ahead. Gandhārī, angered at her loss of sons and kin, cursed Krishna to die in the forest, and the entire Yādava Dynasty to be destroyed within thirty-six years. Such was the case, as the Yādavas killed each other in drunken quarrels, and Krishna was struck with an arrow in the foot (Achille's Heel!) by the hunter Jara who mistook him for a deer. Arjuna then cremated Krishna's body and our hero rose up as Vishnu to return to the heavenly Vaikuṅṭha and receive worship there as Nārāyaṇa. Krishna's brother Balarāma who had stayed with him throughout most of his life except for the war, died just before him at the same location and rejoined Vishnu.<sup>2</sup>

The lengthy and variegated life of the normative Krishna, spanning nearly 120 years, was thus drawn to a close. The evil King Kāmsa and many of his cohorts were certainly vanquished, yet it is believed that with the withdrawal of Krishna and Balarāma from the world, the evil and decadent fourth age of Kali Yuga commenced in which we are presently embroiled.

While there are nonetheless multiple images and roles of Krishna already contained in the normative depiction, this volume seeks to describe alternative versions of Krishna that lie outside the parameters of the above canonical paradigm and especially of the four orthodox Vaishnava Sampradāyas. As we shall observe, there are numerous variations on the Krishna theme throughout India, manifested almost solely in vernacular languages and in so-called folk cultural traditions that occupy smaller regions or localities, but which are no less significant or compelling. The nine chapters of the present volume present such assorted regional and vernacular variants of the Krishna story, ranging from Bengal to Mahārāṣṭra and Benares, from Jainism to Tamilian South India, and from Braj traditions to a modern depiction. Each in its own way contributes toward a complete and perhaps more robust understanding of the full identity of this complex deity and personality.

The first two chapters focus on Krishna in West Bengal. Chapter 2, "Contemporary Metaphor Theory and Alternative Views of Krishna and Rādhā in Vaishnava Sahajiyā Tantric Traditions," by Glen Alexander Hayes, illustrates how the Vaishnava Sahajiyās, a medieval Bengali Tantric tradition, developed "alternative" Krishna traditions using the vernacular language of Bengali and distinctly regional metaphors of body, world, and being. Vaishnava Sahajiyās transformed Krishna and Rādhā from a divine being and consort into the inner masculine and feminine essences of every man and woman.

By examining selected Sahajiyā texts of the seventeenth century, it will show how such alternative views of Krishna and Rādhā reflect Bengali religious, social, linguistic, cultural, and geographical contexts. Using insights from recent studies of conceptual metaphor and folklore, this chapter explains how “alternative” worldviews and practices are connected to underlying linguistic and metaphoric worlds. This sheds light not only on important roles of language and culture in the history of religions, but also on the powerful influences of vernacular imagery and deeper conceptual structures.

As chapter 3, “Folk Vaishnavism and the Ṭhākur Pañcāyat: Life and Status among Village Krishna Statues” by June McDaniel discusses further the Krishna of West Bengal by showing how Krishna is understood by folk Vaishnava devotees in a certain district to be a living presence in his various statues. In some villages, the New Year is celebrated by having a “Ṭhākur Pañcāyat,” or a meeting of deities in the form of statues. The statues are carried in procession, feasted, and left to discuss the village budget and future celebrations. Based on field work primarily in Moyda village north of Calcutta, this chapter describes these events and examines assumptions inherent in this meeting of deities, and the various moods and forms of living statues. It also contrasts the alternative folk understanding of the embodiment of deities with the orthodox tradition of Gauḍīya Vaishnavism in Bengal—that is, a kind of Vaishnava “animism” versus the normative brahmanical system of deity installation.

Chapter 4, “Domesticating Krishna: Friendship, Marriage, and Women’s Experience in a Hindu Women’s Ritual Tradition,” by Tracy Pintchman, uncovers an alternative Krishna tradition in one of the very centers of Hindu orthodoxy, Benares. According to Brahmanical Hindu traditions, the god Vishnu weds the plant goddess Tulsi every year on the eleventh day of the bright fortnight of the month of Kārtik in the fall season. In Benares, the main celebration of this wedding takes place in Śrī Maṭh, where Rāmānandī monks perform the wedding with great pageantry. In homes throughout the city and on the ghats of the Ganges River where women perform this marriage, however, there is an alternative understanding of this event. According to these women’s traditions, this is not Vishnu’s wedding but Krishna’s, and the marriage of Krishna and Tulsi is the culmination of a full month of *pūjā* in which female devotees “raise” Krishna from infancy to adulthood, marrying him and his bride and sending them off to their home in Vaikuṅṭha, the Vaishnava heaven. Based upon extensive fieldwork in Benares as well as on a number of literary sources including both Sanskrit Mahātmyas and vernacular texts, this chapter focuses on this alternative understanding of the marriage of Tulsi, furthering our understanding, through anthropological

modes of gender analysis, of Hindu women's "folk" ritual practices and mythological traditions.

The next two chapters cover alternative images of Krishna in Braj, his place of birth and childhood. Chapter 5, "Krishna as Loving Husband of God: The Alternative Krishnology of the Rādhāvallabha Sampradāya," by Guy L. Beck, introduces the alternative Krishna theology of the Rādhāvallabha Sampradāya headquartered in the Braj region. As part of the larger bhakti movement of medieval North India, this group shared many externals with other mainstream Hindu groups (temple worship, male lineages, seasonal festivals, etc.), yet bore some striking differences from the normative Krishna traditions found in the epics and Purāṇas and in the orthodox *sampradāyas*. Essentially rejecting most of the normative Sanskrit literature and ritual practice of Vaishnavism, Rādhāvallabha theology stood more in debt to local folk expressions found in the region of its origin, which it combined with its own unique religious perspective. This alternative Krishna is depicted in the literature of the founder Śrī Hita Harivaṁśa (sixteenth century CE) and his followers as the servant and husband of God, in this case the Goddess Rādhā. Opposing mainstream Vaishnava Sampradāyas that recognized Krishna as either avatāra of Vishnu or Supreme Being, the Rādhāvallabha tradition claimed that Rādhā is the Supreme Being, with Krishna as her most loving companion and eternal spouse. The devotees relish the bliss of the divine conjugal union as the highest spiritual attainment. The literature of the sect is almost entirely in Braj Bhāshā, a medieval dialect of Hindi said to be the actual language spoken in the heavenly abode of Krishna, and is ranked higher than the Sanskrit canon, which is relegated to mundane concerns compared to the elevated and erotic subject matter of their own poetry. Based on fieldwork in Vrindaban and literary study, this chapter discusses theological issues surrounding the placement of Rādhā above Krishna, and presents three poetic songs (*Vyāhulau Utsav ke Pad*, "Wedding Festival Songs") of the sect in translation in which the wedding of Rādhā and Krishna is described and praised.

In chapter 6, "Holī through Daūjī's Eyes: Alternate Views of Krishna and Balarāma in Daūjī," A. Whitney Sanford describes how the Holī celebration in Daūjī, the center of Balarāma devotion in India, located in the region of Braj, displays an alternative vision of the traditional relationship between Krishna and his elder brother Balarāma or Daūjī. These raucous and unique Holī festivities establish Balarāma in his seemingly paradoxical role as profligate—though at the same time protective and generative—elder brother in contrast to his more innocently playful

younger brother Krishna. The traditional images of Balarāma and Krishna are routinely portrayed as pastoral. Yet Braj pastoralization, which is ironically an urban phenomenon, encompasses a different set of conflicts, chief among which is the disjunction created by Balarāma's (anomalous) rusticity in relation to Krishna's rural persona, which masks an urbane sophistication. Balarāma's earthly image conveniently frees Krishna to exist in that pastoral ideal in which nature never presents danger and erotic dalliances have no unwanted consequences. Balarāma is important in a symbiotic but necessarily hierarchical relationship with Krishna. This family relationship appears in multiple dimensions (e.g., theological, iconographic, and communal) and provides a flexible structure through which divergent groups and practices can be related to the center, inevitably a form of Krishna. These Holī festivities in Daūjī specific to Daūjī provide a variant understanding of Krishna and his relationship to his Braj environs and family.

In chapter 7, "A Family Affair: Krishna Comes to Paṇḍharpūr and Makes Himself at Home," Christian Lee Novetzke discusses an alternative form of Krishna in Western India. Pilgrims, on their triumphant entrance into Paṇḍharpūr in Mahārāṣṭra, sing praises to their God of many names: Viṭṭhal, Pāṇḍuraṅga, Śiva, Vishnu, or simply Mother. They venerate an image of Śiva at a simple temple, half submerged in Chandrabhāga's water, before they enter Viṭṭhal's opulent home. Several scholars have suggested that the conical headdress that crowns the image of Viṭṭhal in his temple is really Śiva's *liṅga*, while others have argued that sometimes a hat is just a hat. Charlotte Vaudeville described this religion known as Vārkarī as a Śaiva-Vaishnava synthesis, suggesting that a predominantly Śaiva tradition had been flavored by nominal Vaishnavism. However, the nature of Viṭṭhal and his worship, with his bride Rukmiṇī and his pastoral mythology, make him decidedly Krishnaite. And while the foundational poets of the Vārkarī religion, namely Jñāndev and Nāmdev, worshiped both Śiva and Vishnu and were initiated into Śaiva Tantric lineages, Jñāndev translated and commented on the Bhagavad Gītā in Marāṭhī while Nāmdev, according to some, inaugurated Vaishnava Bhakti in northern India. This chapter posits that their devotion actually superseded sectarian differences or was altogether unaffected by them. Through an examination of how Nāmdev and others conceived of Viṭṭhal in their early songs, this chapter attempts to demonstrate that more important than sectarian affiliation was the construction of a religious tradition that reflected the plurality of beliefs of the tenth to twelfth centuries. Nonetheless, by the middle of the seventeenth century, some three hundred years after Nāmdev and Jñāndev, the Vārkarī religion was transformed into the sectarian Krishna Bhakti tradition flourishing today.

Chapter 8, "Dance before Doom: Krishna in the Non-Hindu Literature of Early Medieval South India," by Anne E. Monius, reflects the growing interest in South India as a fertile source for alternative Hindu and non-Hindu traditions. Based on literary analysis and research into Tamil folk Vaishnava traditions, this chapter explores the scenes of Krishna's dance in two early medieval texts (fifth to sixth century CE), Buddhist and Jain, that share a non-Hindu Krishna tradition. In the Buddhist *Maṇimēkalai*, the king of Pukār frolics with his queen in the royal garden; seeing three birds dancing about a tank, he cries: "This is the kuruvai dance danced by Māmaṇivaṇṇaṇ, his elder brother, and Piñṇai!" Later, the king's son is brutally slaughtered in a case of mistaken identity. In the primarily Jain *Cilappatikāram*, the herdsman Mātari calls for the local girls to perform "one of the boyhood dances of Māyavaṇ and Balarāma with Piñṇai" to ward off impending evil. Immediately following the end of the dance, the heroine learns of her husband's untimely demise and predicts that she will burn the city of Maturai to the ground. Both texts serve to downplay the effectiveness of the dances of the gods for bringing positive results, and yield instead to larger impersonal forces like *karma* and destiny.

In chapter 9, "Hero of Wonders, Hero in Deeds: Vāsudeva Krishna in Jaina Cosmohistory," Jerome H. Bauer draws us into the realm of Jainism, where Jaina teachers have masterfully adapted the "Hindu" Krishna stories popular among their laity by retelling them to conform to Jaina orthodoxy and to promote orthopraxies. Accordingly, Jaina Krishna mythology presents an alternative Krishna, which stands alongside the well-known Hindu stories simultaneously popular among the Jaina laity. Krishna in the Jaina tradition is no more a god than any other human being capable of liberation from karma and rebirth, but neither is he an ordinary human being. Krishna Vāsudeva is, on the one hand, a model Jaina layman and king and, on the other hand, a Śalākāpuruṣa, an Illustrious Person, with an illustrious destiny. As such, he has the role of *karmavīr* or "action hero," rather than *dharmavīr*, the role played by the Tīrthamkaras (exemplary saviors) and other renunciants. As *karmavīr*, he is also *āścaryavīr*, "wonder hero," an apparent worker in miracles. For example, the Śvetāmbara canon tells a unique story of a singular wonder worked by Krishna whereby he journeys across spatiotemporal boundaries to rescue the heroine Draupadī. While Hindu theologians are divided on the issue of whether Krishna, as an avatāra of Vishnu, controls, or is controlled by, the law of karma, the Jains have no doubt. Krishna must go to Hell, for his (necessary) deeds of violence, committed to uphold the order of society and divine custom, and for his well-known sexual misconduct, as troubling for Jaina teachers as it is for their Christian

and Muslim counterparts. Sin is real, and must be worked off, even by such an exalted personage as Krishna, whose penultimate destiny is to become an exalted Jaina teacher, the twelfth Tirthankara of the coming age, and whose ultimate destiny is liberation. This chapter examines Krishna's role in Jaina cosmohistory, drawing upon both Śvetāmbara and Digambara texts as well as the testimony of current lay practitioners.

Chapter 10, "Epiphany in Rādhā's Arbor: Nature and the Reform of Bhakti in Hariaudh's *Priyapravās*," by Valerie Ritter, explores the development of a modern Hindi variant of the Krishna theme. *Priyapravās* ("The Sojourn of the Beloved") is an epic work in Khari Boli or Modern Hindi by Ayodhyāsīmḥ Upādhyāy ("Hariaudh") that is well known for its revision of the character of Rādhā, presented through a virtuosic use of Sanskritic literary forms. In this poetic work, Hariaudh recasts the carnal relationship between Rādhā and Krishna in an intellectual context of reformism and cultural defensiveness. His revision entailed changes in the bodily-ness of Vaishnava devotion and the interpolation of an explicit message of social service. This chapter addresses the reformist antecedents of this text, and its relation to revisionist religious thinking of the period. Additionally, Hariaudh's method of positioning the text between "tradition" and "modernity" by means of literary tropes will be examined. This analysis of *Priyapravās* may yield insight into the problems of conceiving both a "modern" Hinduism and "modern" Hindi literature in this period of incipient nationalism.

One of the tasks of the phenomenology of religion is to cultivate an openness to a variety of perspectives on the same subject of inquiry, with the underlying axiom in place that an object of study is by no means exhausted with one or more "orthodox" views, and that the views of the most authoritarian believers or controllers of the mythic image of a deity are just one among many. What ultimately counts is the total picture as gleaned from multiple source readings, including those from diverse social classes, language groups, religious sects, and other branches of the social order. Thus an examination of regional variants of a living Hindu tradition facilitates a deeper and truer understanding of the phenomenon we call Krishna in India. It is hoped that these nine perspectives will help to round out a more complete portrait of Krishna within India and beyond.

## Notes

1. Bimanbehari Majumdar (1969), 1.
2. This brief summary of the life of Krishna was constructed from entries found in Vettam Mani (1975), 420–29.

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