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Spring 2021

Book Review: Māyā in the Bhāgavata Purāṇa: Human Suffering and Divine Play by Gopal K. Gupta

Lance E. Nelson, *University of San Diego*

Nelson, Lance. 2021. "Review of *Māyā in the Bhāgavata Purāṇa: Human Suffering and Divine Play* by Gopal K. Gupta." *Journal of Vaishnava Studies* 29 (2): 203–6.

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arrives at an opportune moment as our studies of the connections between religion and ecology evolve and adapt to the emerging precarities of our climate catastrophe. Continuing the excellent work he has already done on the tradition of devotional worship of the Yamuna River and the tradition of the worship of *pipal* trees in Indian culture and religion, Haberman offers to us richly compelling historical, cultural, and religious understandings of the worship of Mount Govardhan. This text offers the reader a chance to play within the realm of Mount Govardhan and to understand and experience "*prema-vilasa*, the joyful play of love, a state of being in which difference in unity is vital and has no objective other than its own enjoyment." (p. 232)

The free elements of play that attend to the worship of Mount Govardhan have vital constructive relevance for our understanding of how we should pursue and practice the study of religion. Haberman adds that "the playful adventure of religious studies promises edifying expansion, not definite dogma or positive proclamations. It aims not to provide a single answer, but rather a rich variety of food for thought." (p. 236) *Loving Stones* is a vital example of how such studies should be done and the kinds of expansive perspectives are provided when the study of religion opens itself to the "impossible." *Loving Stones* invites the reader to experience an encounter with the "impossible" which will demonstrate how possible it is to directly experience divinity in the loving fabric of creation which is all around us and all within us.

BOOK REVIEW 3

Māyā in the Bhāgavata Purāṇa: Human Suffering and Divine Play

Gopal K. Gupta. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020. 260 pages.

Reviewed by Lance E. Nelson
University of San Diego

There has been a blossoming of scholarly work on the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* (BhP) in recent years. I am thinking especially of publications by Edwin Bryant, Graham Schweig, Kiyokazu Okita, and the team of Kenneth Valpey and Ravi Gupta. This work has brought renewed attention to, and appreciation of, a text that—as many have argued—has been neglected in the academic study of religion. In the present volume, Gopal Gupta echoes the later sentiment while continuing the efforts of his predecessors. The book, as the title suggests, examines the *Bhāgavata*'s conception of *māyā* and several related concepts.

Gupta's approach is not what one would term Indological or disengaged. While demonstrating superb linguistic and historical training, one of the book's many strengths is that it is clearly the work of a Vaiṣṇava theologian. It is worth noting that this volume is published in the Oxford Theology and Religion Monographs series, under the auspices of the University of Oxford Theology Faculty. The book grew out of Gupta's doctoral thesis at the Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies; it is another example of the fine work that has come from that institution.

Gupta begins with a history of the concept of *māyā* in the Vedas, Upaniṣads, Mahābhārata, Śaṅkara's Advaita, and the Vaiṣṇava response. He then explores the Bhāgavata's presentation of the concept in relation to the material world and human experience, and also as regards what Gupta terms "the absolute realm," Kṛṣṇa's heavenly paradise (*vaikuṇṭha*, *vraja*). The most notable conclusion here—beyond the foundational idea that *māyā* is a power belonging to and wielded by Kṛṣṇa—is the positive role that *māyā* plays. Including, to be sure, but going beyond the well-known role of *māyā* as a delusive power, the Bhāgavata surprises by introducing positive readings of *māyā*, which Gupta suggests (112) are unique to the text. This is especially the case in connection with *māyā*'s unexpected role in facilitating spiritual experience, in particular the soul's enjoyment of devotional familiarity with God. Here, *māyā* hides Kṛṣṇa's "opulence," i.e., his awesome majesty and power (*aiśvarya*) as God, thus allowing devotees to experience uninhibited the exquisite bliss of playful intimacy with him. "In the absolute realm of Vraja," Gupta writes, "succumbing to *māyā*'s influence is the highest attainment of life and the ultimate goal of yoga" (122).

Gupta situates *māyā* with respect to a number of other topics, including women and the problem of evil and suffering. While admitting that the text in places associates women with the delusive aspect of *māyā*, he asks us to read the text in terms of the "time period and cultural context" of its origins (123). In the end, he says, the text sees passion, not women, as the cause of sensual attachments, and it holds out the women of Vraja, the *gopīs*, as Kṛṣṇa's most exemplary and elevated devotees. Suffering is necessary for the development of the soul; so it is "permitted, although not desired" by Kṛṣṇa. In any event, the soul "after death returns to its original home beyond matter," enjoying "never-ending spiritual joy in intimate association with Kṛṣṇa" (150).

A noteworthy feature of Gupta's exposition is that it emphasizes sustained reflective engagement with a number of the Bhāgavata's narrative passages—as opposed to its explicitly theological discourses and hymns—regarding them as a "lens through which to study its theology" (7). Through careful study, in some cases looking at earlier versions in other texts, Gupta draws out the theological

implications implicit in these passages. A look at two of these treatments will suffice to give an idea of this method.

In chapter 4, Gupta engages in a lengthy analysis of the *Bhāgavata*'s complex allegory of Purañjana and the city of nine gates (BhP 4.25-29). This is Gupta's most extended consideration of an individual narrative. In it, he unpacks and articulates, among other ideas, the text's vision of the human soul and the Divine. Both are persons. The eternal self has a "non-material (metaphysical) body" (77); God also is a "complete person, who possesses all the faculties and features that one normally associates with personhood" (78). In recounting, analyzing, and reflecting upon the narrative, Gupta stresses the importance of the notion of *viśuddha-sattva* to Vaiṣṇava soteriology. This spiritual substance is the constitutive element of Kṛṣṇa's heavenly abode, where liberated person-selves abide and participate in his divine *līlā*. It is free of all the negative, delusive aspects of *māyā*, but it retains the positive aspects already discussed.

In chapter 5, Gupta elaborates on the positive conception of *māyā* in the *Bhāgavata* through reflection on some of the text's more well-known narratives: Yaśodā seeing the universe in her foster child's mouth, her struggle to bind Kṛṣṇa with a rope, and of course, not to be omitted, the *rāsa-līlā*, Kṛṣṇa's famous moonlight dance and love play with the *gopīs* recounted at BhP 10.29-33. Helping us see the latter story through the lens of yogic practice, Gupta notes that "the yoga of the *rāsa-līlā* takes place according to the arrangement and supervision of Kṛṣṇa's *yoga-māyā*" (111). Indeed, he suggests, the whole scenario of blissful abandon and union between the *gopīs* and Kṛṣṇa is orchestrated by *māyā* in its positive aspect.

While reading the book, I often found myself wondering whether the theology being extracted was from the *Bhāgavata* itself or whether the author was reading into the text the theology of the commentators. In any event, one's impression is that the meaning, once passed through Gupta's lens, is certain. There is no suggestion of possible alternative interpretations, nor discussion of any disputes among the commentators as to the meaning of a particular verse or concept. One wonders, initially, whether there were any differences between the commentary of Śrīdhara and the Gauḍīya commentators. If so, would they be pertinent to this inquiry? And what about the commentaries of Madhva and Vallabha? Do they shed light on the *Bhāgavata*'s conceptualization of *māyā*? Do these non-Gauḍīya commentators read verses differently? Gupta is silent on such questions. He also says hardly anything about resonances between *māyā* and the concept of *śakti*, though he does suggest that both are closely related powers of the divine. Certainly, *śakti* plays a central role in the theologies of the Gauḍīya Gosvāmins as well as in Śaiva and Śākta sources of the period.

Still, one book cannot do everything, and these questions might well be missing the point of Gupta's narrative turn, which seeks to enunciate the ethos of the text rather than focus narrowly on commentarial detail. So, leaving such quibbles aside, the book stands as a work of serious theological engagement with a scripture of vast importance to the Hindu tradition. Gupta's *Bhāgavata* scholarship is as thorough as it is thoughtful, and his deep engagement with the text's narrative theology especially repays study. This book will generously reward the attention—and indeed serious engagement—of both scholars and interested general readers. And for serious students of the *Bhāgavata*, Gupta's four appendices by themselves, comprising some 68 pages, are well worth the price of the volume. Appendix IV, for example, listing all occurrences of the word *māyā* in the *Bhāgavata*, is an extraordinarily helpful product, providing the verse reference of each instance, the complete verse in Sanskrit, a partial translation of the relevant phrase in the verse, and a classificatory description of the usage (*māyā* as creative power, *māyā* as magic, *māyā* as goddess, etc.).

Māyā in the Bhāgavata Purāṇa will have an honored place on a shelf near my desk, and it will be consulted often.