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 purānic 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*.

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 gopī with his ornate words. 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.\(^3\) We should also note that elsewhere the Bhāgavata states that indirect speech (parokṣavāda) is dear to Kṛṣṇa.\(^4\)

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):

\[
\text{rajany eṣāghorarūpāghorasattvaniṣevitā} / \\
\text{pratiyāta vrajaṁ neha stheyaṁ strībihīḥ sumadhyamāḥ} //
\]

(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:\(^5\)

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

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:

\[
bhartuḥ śuśrūṣanam strīnām paro dharmaḥ hy amāyayā /
\]
Bitextuality in Bhāgavata Purāṇa X.29 (Okita)

**tadbandhūnāṃ ca kalyāṇyaḥ prajānāṃ 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 bhartṛ 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, tadbandhūnāṃ and prajānāṃ are also reinterpreted in order to provide the second layer of meaning.

I propose that the bitextuality in Kṛṣṇa’s speech corresponds to what Bronner calls ‘selfing,’ which typically occurs in an unusual temporal setting in the poem (2010: 74). According to Bronner (2010: 71–75), this use of śleṣa 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 śleṣa 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* provide bitextual readings for both Kṛṣṇa’s and the gopīs’ speech. For example, in verse thirty-five the gopīs speak to Kṛṣṇa:

\[
\text{siṅcāṅga nas tvadadharāṁṛtpūrakeṇa hāsāvalokakalagīajayāgniṃ / no ced vayaṃ virahajñyayuktadehā dhyānena yāma padayoḥ padavīṃ sakhe te //}
\]

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. 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:

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

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.

*Pāda* s 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*.

--- 1046 ---
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 Nītivarman 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. Śrīdharā’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 Vaṃśīdhara, 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.

I thank David Buchta, Bergljot Chiarucci, Dominic Goodall, Andrey Klebanov, and Yūko Yokochi for their useful comments.

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), Viṣvanātha Cakravarṭī (seventeenth century), and Vamśidhara (nineteenth century) support bitextual interpretation.
4) Bhāgavatapurāṇa 11.21.35cd. 5) Śrīnātha (1955): 114. 6) Śrīnātha (1955: 114).
7) Śāstrī (1955) mistakenly attributes the Vaiṣṇavatoṣanī to Jīva Gosvāmī. 8) For this interpretation, see for example Śrīdharā’s commentary. 9) Sanātana (1955: 234).

Bibliography

Bronner, Yigal. 2010. Extreme Poetry: The South Asian Movement of Simultaneous Narration. New York: Columbia University Press.

Bryant, Edwin F. 2002. "The Date and Provenance of the Bhāgavata Purāṇa and the Vaikuṇṭha Perumāl Temple." Journal of Vaishnava Studies 11(1): 51–80. ———. 2003. Krishna: The Beautiful Legend of God. Śrīmad Bhāgavata Purāṇa, Book X, with Chapters 1, 6 and 29–31 from Book XI. London: Penguin Books.

Hardy, Friedhelm. 1983. Viraha-Bhakti: The Early History of Kṛṣṇa Devotion in South India. Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Redington, James D. S. J. 1990. Vallabhācārya on the Love Games of Kṛṣṇa. Delhi: Mitiilal Banarsidass. Sanātana Gosvāmī. Vaiṣṇavatoṣanī in Śāstrī 1955. Śāstrī, Kṛṣṇaśaṅkara. Ed. 1995. Śrīmad-Bhāgavata-Mahāpurāṇam. Tenth Book, Vol. 4. [with multiple commentaries]. Ahmedabad: Śrīmad Bhāgavata Vidyāpīṭha.

Schmid, Charlotte. 2002. "Aventures divines de Kṛṣṇa: la līlā et les traditions narratives des temples cōlā." Arts asiatiques 57: 33–50.

Schweig, Graham M. 2005. Dance of Divine Love: The Rāsa Līlā of Krishna from the Bhāgavata Purāṇa. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press.

Śrīnātha Cakravarṭī. 1955. Śrī Śrī Caitanyamatamañjū. Ed. Purīdāsa Mahāśaya. Vṛndāvana: Haridāsa Śarmā.

Tagare, G. V. (1978) 2007. The Bhāgavata Purāṇa. Part IV. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.

Key words śleṣa, Śrīnātha, Sanātana, Vaiṣṇavism

(Assistant Professor, Sophia University, PhD)