



The Child as a ‘Hero’: Kṛṣṇa and his Supernatural Feats

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Kṛṣṇa is the most revered god in the Hindu pantheon. The childhood images of Kṛṣṇa have attracted the attention of people and scholars across the globe. Texts like *Harivamśa* give a vivid picture of Kṛṣṇa’s early life. The author of the text gives captivating images of Kṛṣṇa to emphasize the unique role and mission of Kṛṣṇa since his childhood. The birth of Kṛṣṇa is associated with extraordinary natural events. On account of his distinctive character, Kṛṣṇa is often called “hero”. The heroic episodes of Kṛṣṇa’s early life are impossible to understand without situating him within the legendary regions of Vraja, Gokula, and Mathurā. Most of the stories of Kṛṣṇa’s childhood are largely based on the study of these regions.

The birth of Kṛṣṇa itself is an indication of the heroic traits of his personality. Also, the heroic aspects at the time of Kṛṣṇa’s birth are overshadowed by the divine elements. What compelled the authors of the *Harivamśa*, the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* and the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* to do so is a subject that requires greater enquiry. It is usually believed that the authors are more inclined to present his birth story in terms of divinity. The reading of the *Harivamśa and purāṇic* literature also attests to the fact that Kṛṣṇa’s birth was an outcome of divine planning.¹ However, looking at the early exploits of Kṛṣṇa, one can easily conclude that the narratives associated with his birth have a purpose. It aims to show Kṛṣṇa’s superhuman power, and there are numerous instances that particularly highlight this aspect of his personality. In one of those instances baby Kṛṣṇa overturned a carriage with his feet. The *Harivamśa* describes how Kṛṣṇa overturned the carriage when his mother Yaśodā went to the river Yamunā. The text reflects the motherly feeling of Yaśodā as she could not truly make out how the carriage was overturned. Scared of any mishap,

¹ The birth story mentioned in the *Harivamśa* has multiple layers. It shows how authors of Purāṇic literature are clear about presenting a human being’s birth and existence as divinely ordained. The information received by Kāṁsa about his death by the eighth child of Devakī; Nārada’s explanation of eighth child as supreme self-born; Kāṁsa plans to kill all the children of Devakī; Viṣṇu plays tactfully and makes the six demons sons of Kālanemin be born one after another from Devakī; the extraction of seventh child in the seventh month and moved into the womb of Rohiṇī; the exchange of babies between Devakī and Yaśoda, wife of Nanda.



she cursed herself as she had gone out for a bath at the bank of the river Yamunā.²

It is a captivating story, one that has found expression in many writings and poems for many generations. The turning of the carriage is differently narrated in other texts, and thus, variations in textual interpretations of an episode are important and need greater discussion. Śiśupāla in the *Sabhāparvan* refers to the carriage as an object ‘deprived of consciousness’ (*cetanārahitam*) or ‘inanimate’, as van Buitenen puts it.³ However, the *Bālacarita* has identified the carriage as a demon and emphasizes that a demon called Śakta came in the form of a carriage. The descriptions of the carriage as an inanimate object and the carriage as a disguised demon tell us about two different approaches to look at Kṛṣṇa stories. The two narratives have different outcomes. In the first version of the narrative, emphasis has been placed on the killing of a demon by a child. It primarily aims to present the amazing strength, courage, and fearlessness of Kṛṣṇa. Moreover, showing a child who overturned a big carriage is also meant to give a special effect in the narration. The *Bālacarita* version of the story has not merely portrayed the carriage but the killing of a dangerous demon by child Kṛṣṇa. However, the *Harivaṁśa* does not speak of any supernatural being involved in the overturning of the carriage. The *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* and the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* depict the whole episode with an element of religiosity. But here it is important to mention that the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*’s narration of the episode has supernatural elements too. Both *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* and *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* are not clear about whether a demon was involved in this whole episode.

The overturning of the carriage was an act of surprise both for his father, Nanda, and the villagers alike. However, the texts are also not clear regarding the absence of Yaśoda when Kṛṣṇa overturned the carriage. The *Harivaṁśa* says that Yaśoda once left the baby alone, sleeping under the carriage, and went over to the river Yamunā.⁴ In the absence of his mother,

² The detailed story is mentioned in M.N. Dutta, (edited & translated) (1897: 262), *A Prose English Translation of Harivamsha*, Calcutta: Elysium Press, LXI (4-11). Also, see Edwin F. Bryant (edited) (2007: 99-100) *Krishna A Sourcebook*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

³ J. A. B. van Buitenen, (1975: 98) *The Mahābhārata*, Vol. 02, Chicago: University of Chicago Press. The text says *cetanārahitam kṣatham yadyanena nipāitam/ pādēna śakaṭam bhīṣma tatra kiṁ kṛtamadbhutam*; cited in Benjamin Preciado-Solis (1984: 68) *The Kṛṣṇa Cycle in the Purāṇas*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.

⁴ *Harivaṁśa* 50.4; *Śakaṭasya tvadhāḥ suptaṁ kadācitputragṛd dhinī/ yaśodā tam samutsṛjya jagāma yamunāṁ nadīm*; cited in Benjamin Preciado-Solis (1984: 68).



baby Kṛṣṇa started feeling hungry. The baby started crying, raising his arms and kicking in the air. With one of those kicks he overturned the carriage.⁵ It is intriguing to note that the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* does not mention where Yaśoda had gone, while, as discussed above, *Harivaṁśa* clearly talks about the details regarding Yaśoda's whereabouts. The discrepancy could be explained in light of the fact that the two texts were composed at different times and with different central notions regarding Kṛṣṇa. Hence, the authors chose to include some parts of the story and omit others. It particularly emphasizes upon Kṛṣṇa and states that he was sleeping under the carriage, and his action alarmed the cowherdess (milkmaid/*gopi*) who noticed the noise and informed the others.⁶

The textual variations in presenting a person are interesting as they allow us to analyse an episode from various perspectives, but it also creates confusion. In all the cases discussed above, Kṛṣṇa remained at the centre, but the narrative and object of presentation varied. In a broad sense, it exemplifies textual variance or a way to adopt alternatives in narrating an event or episode. The variation has always raised serious questions, such as, who gets to decide what to write and how to present? How can one get information about the real and modified stories and how fast the revision or amendment was made?

These textual variations are not limited to any particular episode in Kṛṣṇa's life. They also worked as a contributing factor in making Kṛṣṇa's image attractive and people friendly. We can also notice such textual variation in Yamalārjuna's account of Kṛṣṇa's childhood, where Yaśoda knotted her beloved son. Both the *Harivaṁśa* and the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* narrate the same story with mild variations in the content. The *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* says that the two trees that Kṛṣṇa uprooted were sons of Kubera who were cursed in their previous birth by Nārada. Uprooting the

⁵ *Harivaṁśa* 50.5-6 *Śiśulīlāṃ tataḥ kurvansvahastacaraṇau kṣīpa/
Ruroda madhuraṃ kṛṣṇaḥ pādāvūrdhvaṃ prasārayan//
Sa tatraikena pādena śakaṭam paryavartayat/
nyubjaṃ payodharākāṅkṣī cakāra ca ruroda ca;* cited in Benjamin Preciado-Solis (1984: 68).

⁶ *Viṣṇu Purāṇas* 5.6.4-5; *gopāḥ keneti kenedaṃ śakaṭam parivartitam//
Tatraiva bālakāḥ procurbālenānena pātītam//
Rudatā dṛṣṭamasmābhiḥ pādavikṣepapātītam/
śakaṭam parivṛttam vai naitadanyasya ceṣṭitam;* cited in Benjamin Preciado-Solis (1984: 68).



two trees as an act is compared here with the liberation of the sons of Kubera.⁷ The *Harivaṁśa* narrates the same episode and portrays the trees as oldest or tallest and people consider them auspicious and pray to them for blessings.⁸ It is not necessary that the presentation of an episode of one's life be narrated in different ways. A particular story of Kṛṣṇa's life is not always a subject of variation, and there is a possibility of similarity in its narration. In the *Bālacarita* episode, Bhāsa shares many similarities with the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* version of the story. This version mentions Kṛṣṇa just a month old when he performs the miraculous act of uprooting the two trees that were presented as two demons put to death. Later on, due to this act, *gopīs* exclaimed that from today onwards, the baby's name should be Dāmodara, because of his great strength and prowess.⁹

The above description gives a traditional yet unique image of Kṛṣṇa popular amongst the Indian masses. Also, these imagers are not confined to textual narratives and have become part of popular memories. There could be two interpretations for this: first, it is an attempt to popularise the image of Lord Kṛṣṇa among the commoners; second, it could be an effort to show the supernatural and religious aspects of Kṛṣṇa's character. This whole episode could also be seen as positioning Vaishṇavism at the centre of popular belief. Vaishṇavism has so deeply captured the religious sentiments of Hindus that it is regarded as one of the most important

⁷ Edwin F. Bryant (edited) (2007: 98).

⁸ Edwin F. Bryant (edited) (2007: 98); cited in *Harivaṁśa* 51.22: *vraje satyopayachitau*

⁹ Benjamin Preciado-Solis (1984: 69).

Cited in *Bālacarita* 3; *tado māṣaparivutte ṇaṇdagovavutte ekaṣṣim gehe gacchin khīraṃ pibai aṇṇaṣṣim gehe gacchia dadhim bhakkhai ekaṣṣim gehe gacchia navaṇḍam giladi, aṇṇaṣṣim gehe gacchia pāasaṃ bhuṇjai aparāṣṣim gehe gacchia takkaghaṭaṃ paloadi/*

tado luṭṭhāe ṇaṇdagovīe dāmaṃ gahṇia taṣṣa majjhe bandhia ṣeṣaṃ ulūhale bajjham/

tado taṃ pi ulūhalm aāghattaantam pekkhia jamalajjuṇe ṇāma dāṇave nikkhitam/

tado duve ekkībhude teṣaṃ antaleṇa gacchanteṇa ṇaṇdagovavutteṇa āghaṭṭaanteṇa ṣamūlaviḍavaṃ cuṇṇīkide te vi dāṇave bhavia tattoo evva mude/

tado govajāṇehi uttam mahābala palakkamo ajjappahudi bhaṭṭidāmodalo ṇāma hodu tti=tatomāṣaparivṛtto nandagopaputra

ekasmin grhe gatvā kṣīraṃ pibati, anyasmin grhe gatvā dadhi bhakṣayati, ekasmin grhe gatvā navaṇḍam girati, anyasmin grhe

gatvā pāyasam bhuṇjate, aparasmin grhe gatvā takraghaṭam pralokate tato ruṣṭābhir gopayuvatibhir nandagopyai uktam/

tato ruṣṭayā nandagopyā dāma grhītvā tasya madhye baddhvā ṣeṣamulūkhale baddham/

tatastadapyu lūkhalamāghaṭṭayat prekṣya yamalārjunayornāma dānavayornikṣiptam/

tato dvāvekībhūtau/

tayorantareṇa gacchatā nandagopaputrenāghaṭṭayatā samūlaviḍapam cūṇṇīkṛtau tāvapi dānavau bhūtvā tata eva mṛtau/

tato gopajanair uktam mahābala parākramo dyaprabhṛti bhartṛdāmodaro nāma bhavatu iti



religious traditions in India. This is also proven by the fact that it was the religion of Heliodorus, of the Gupta Emperors, of Chaitanya, of Rāmānuja, of Kavīra, and of Tukārāma. The popularisation of Kṛṣṇa's image is possibly an attempt to strengthen the base of Vaishṇavism. Thus, the popularity of Kṛṣṇa aims to establish him as the supreme deity of the Vaishṇava pantheon. The uprooting of two massive trees by pulling the mortar in between them is obviously an example of Kṛṣṇa's childhood strength.

Both the *Bālacarita* and *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* share many similarities in the Yamalārjuna's account of Kṛṣṇa's childhood. However, the latter has a different account of Kṛṣṇa's prank. The *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* avoids presenting Kṛṣṇa as a butter thief and his childhood naughtiness, which is clearly mentioned in the *Bālacarita* version of the story. The text particularly highlights the presence of his brother, Balarām and presents them as strong boys. So, an attempt has been made to portray both the brothers full of strength and vigour.¹⁰ Scholars also believe that the main purpose of narrating this story is to explain the origin of Kṛṣṇa's name Dāmodara.¹¹

Moreover, some of the early valiant deeds in Kṛṣṇa's life also symbolise his strength and reveal his heroic victory over the evil forces. One such event from his early life is attached with the destruction of demoness Pūtanā.¹² Pūtanā, the female demon, arrived in Vraja and when she looked at young Kṛṣṇa, she transformed herself into a beautiful woman and approached him. She took Kṛṣṇa in her lap and tried to breastfeed with the sole aim to kill him. The *Harivaṁśa* portrays Pūtanā as a wishful demoness, capable of assuming forms at will.¹³ The text says that "Pūtanā, that infant-killer evil spirit, roving in search of babies, came by chance to the house of Nanda, and saw the child Kṛṣṇa (who was the exterminator of the wicked), lying in bed with his immeasurable innate glory veiled like fire covered under ashes."¹⁴

The Pūtanā episode from the *Harivaṁśa* and the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* tells us about the bravery of infant Kṛṣṇa. Pūtanā entered Vraja when people fell asleep and began to breastfeed Kṛṣṇa with

¹⁰ Benjamin Preciado-Solis (1984: 69); Edwin F. Bryant (edited) (2007: 98).

¹¹ Benjamin Preciado-Solis (1984: 69).

¹² Putanā acted as Kṛṣṇa's nurse.

¹³ M.N. Dutta, (edited & translated) (1897: 263), LXI (22-23).

¹⁴ *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, VI, 7.



her poisoned milk to kill him. However, Kṛṣṇa suckled her breasts and took away her life.¹⁵

Pūtanā, in spite of making an unsuccessful attempt to kill Kṛṣṇa, obtained the grace of God.

The question that comes to mind is why Kṛṣṇa is presented in his early life as a hero who aims to accomplish several supernatural achievements. It is also necessary to ask why almost all the texts dealing with his early life give a vivid picture of his supernatural acts, which are almost impossible for a child to perform. And this is probably to create an image among the common masses that Kṛṣṇa is different from other young boys and that his activities are super-natural and hence divinely ordained. Another point to be analysed here is this: Is it only textual narration that is behind the portrayal of Kṛṣṇa as a divine being right from his birth? Or, did these events actually take place irrespective of the textual description? Although experience teaches us to look at the narratives of miracles with suspicion, the strength of the beliefs held by a huge mass of people does cast some doubt on the confidence with which we hold on to our opinion in this regard.

So far, a large number of studies on Kṛṣṇa critically evaluated his birth stories and tried to understand how narratives follow a common pattern.¹⁶ Here, an attempt has been made to emphasise this point. Similar patterns can also be seen in the case of the narratives around Indra.¹⁷ The early exploits of Kṛṣṇa is looked upon as mythical stories. But the birth stories of Kṛṣṇa nowhere make the point that Kṛṣṇa and the activities associated with his birth and early life are myths and have nothing to do with reality. The historicity of Kṛṣṇa has already been established through archaeological findings and textual evidence. Thus, there might be some interpolation and exaggeration in some of the narratives, but the idea of presenting them solely as myth may not be compatible with the historicity of Kṛṣṇa.

¹⁵ M.N. Dutta, (edited & translated) (1897: 263), LXI (26).

¹⁶ Benjamin Preciado-Solis (1984: 50).

¹⁷ It is not possible to say that there are complete similarities in the birth stories of Indra and Kṛṣṇa but some similarities can be seen in both cases, such as the general pattern of casting the child in the water, the defeat of enemies at the hands of the hero child, etc.



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