

New light on *Harivaṁśa*, an integral part of *Mahābhārata*

[A review/appreciation of Andre Couture's Krishna in the Harivaṁśa:

Volume 1 – The Wonderful Play of a Cosmic Child

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Traditionally, those who pursued the study of *Harivaṁśa*, the *khila* of *Mahābhārata* held the belief that (see *Harivaṁśa Māhātmyam* section of [1])

brahmaviṣṇumaheśānāṁ harivaṁśaṁ jagurvapuḥ
śabdabrahmamayaṁ viddhi harivaṁśaṁ sanātanam
śābde brahmaṇi niṣṇātaḥ parabrahmādhigacchati

[It is sung that *Harivaṁśa* is the manifested body of Brahma, Viṣṇu and Śiva. Understand that *Harivaṁśa* is permeated with the eternal śabdabrahma. One who is well-versed in śabdabrahma will attain parabrahma.]

Anandavardhana (9th century) who expounded the celebrated theory of Suggestion (*dhvani*), Madhvacharya (13th century) who was the proponent of the *dvaita* school of *vedanta* and Nilakantha (second half of the 17th century) who wrote the famous *Bhāvadīpa* commentary on *Mahābhārata* emphasizing the *advaita* view, considered *Harivaṁśa* as an integral part of *Mahābhārata*.

In *Dhvanyāloka*, Anandavardhana states [2] that the ultimate message suggested by Vyasa in *Mahābhārata* is *tasmāttasminneva paramēśvare bhagavati bhavata bhāvitacetaso ...* [be devoted in mind only to the supreme Īśvara, the possessor of splendors]. Anandavardhana continues: *ayaṁ ca nigūdharamaṇīyo'rtho mahābhāratāvasāne harivaṁśa varṇanena samāptiṁ vidadhatā tenaiva kavivedhasā kṛṣṇadvaipāyanena samyak sphutīkṛtaḥ* [2] [This sense is beautiful because it is concealed. The poet-creator Kṛṣṇadvaipāyana has made it perfectly clear, however, by composing the *Harivaṁśa* as a conclusion to his *Mahābhārata* [3].]

In the summary/commentary, *Mahābhārata Tātparyā Nirṇaya* [4], Madhvacharya has integrated episodes from *Harivaṁśa* with the episodes in *Mahābhārata* in an approximately chronological manner.

Nilakantha, at the beginning of his commentary [1] on *Harivaṁśa* has given several reasons for considering *Harivaṁśa* an integral part of *Mahābhārata* (*bhāratāntargatatvamasya*). He has noted that *Harivaṁśa* forms the last three *parvās* of the one hundred *upa-parvās* of *Mahābhārata* (*tatra śataparvaṇi tesyantimanṁ parvatrayaṁ harivaṁśarūpam*).

The *Mahābhārata Tātparyā Prakāśa* [5] of Sadananda Vyasa contains a brief summary of *Harivaṁśa* episodes and a rather detailed section on *Puṣkaraprādurbhāva* section of *Harivaṁśa*.

Very unfortunately this rich tradition has been lost for the last couple of centuries due to various circumstances. As Velcheru Narayana Rao has noted in his discussion of *Purāṇa* literature in general [6], “The *paurāṇikas* who knew this text culture had been initially marginalized and eventually disappeared from the scholarly scene [7]. So much so that the entire scholarship of the *Purāṇas* has been conducted viewing these texts as artifacts with little direct interaction with the users of these texts and their textual practices.”

It is in this context that we most welcome the publication of the first volume of Andre Couture’s path-breaking in-depth studies of *Harivaṁśa*. These studies, which are still ongoing, have so far spanned a period of forty years.

In considering each particular topic, Couture has followed the well-known maxim *itihāsa-purāṇābhyām vedam samupabṛñhayet*. For the past few centuries, forgetting this maxim by the indologists have often lead to either hurting the text (*bibhetyalpaśrutāt vedo māmayaṁ prahariṣyati*) or crossing over it (*māmayaṁ tarayiṣyati* as the critical edition of *Mahābhārata* has it), thereby exhibiting superficiality and missing the essence¹. In this volume, various childhood deeds of Krishna described in *Harivaṁśa* are examined as appropriate in the light of clues from mostly Vedas, Brāhmaṇas, *Mahābhārata*, *Rāmāyaṇa*, *Viṣṇu Purāṇa*, *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* and *Brahmavaivarta Purāṇa*. Couture has also very profitably churned the celebrated commentaries of relevant texts. The author has reviewed the interpretations offered by other scholars on each topic before carefully building up and presenting his own.

First part of the book deals with *Harivaṁśa*, Genre in Context. In this part, the first chapter provides an overview of *Harivaṁśa* together with a detailed examination of the meaning of the word *khila*. Using the insight provided by C. G. Kashiker and Nilakantha, Couture concludes that *khila* is a supplement received from elsewhere for the sake of completion, fulfilment and elucidation. This is in contrast to the impression conveyed by BORI Critical Edition and the translation of *khila* as appendix. Chapter two examines the topic of Akrūra and the *Bhāgavata* tradition according to *Harivaṁśa* and related texts. The notion of *Bhāgavata* is essential to understand the community which studied and propagated texts like *Harivaṁśa* over a vast span of time. *Harivaṁśa* and the notion of *Purāṇa* is studied in chapter three and finally in chapter four, the thorny issue of assigning a date for *Harivaṁśa* is tackled. The author concludes that “Nothing permits one to establish a date for *Harivaṁśa* which could be beyond reasonable doubt.”

Part two of the book deals with the two versions of the births of Balarama and Krishna, namely the one involving embryos and the one involving “Hairs” and meaning of the name Yoganidra of the Goddess who plays a crucial role in the births involving embryos. The birth narratives are examined in detail in the light of clues from Vedas and Brahmanas. The author notes that Vaiśampāyana tells Janamejaya that Vishnu himself is *yajña puruṣa*. In the ritual of sacrifice, the priests make the sacrificer an embryo such that he is born again. In the cosmic context of the story, the author notes that Vishnu is *Hiraṇyagarbha*.

¹A notable exception is Christopher Minkowski, *Nilakantha’s Vedic Readings in the Harivaṁśa Commentary*, in ed. Petteri Koskikallio, *Epic, Khilas, and Puranas: Continuities and Ruptures*. Proceedings of the Third Dubrovnik Conference on the Sanskrit Epics and Puranas, September 2002. (Zagreb: Croatian Academy of Sciences and Arts, 2005) 411-33.

The story of Balarama’s and Krishna’s birth is connected to the birth of Aditi’s son and that of the Sun and the Moon. Author concludes that the births from Black hair and White hair can only refer to the birth of heroes who personify sacrifice itself. The problem of the meaning of Yoganidra illuminates Vishnu’s sleep in the ocean as envisioned by the sage Markandeya, Nidrāyoga or Yoganidra?, sleep (svapna) as a vedic theme of reflection and the king’s special relationship with nidra. Towards the end of the article, Couture discusses the feigned sleep of Krishna when Duryodhana and Arjuna approached him for help just prior to the Mahabharata war. Even though the currently available Sanskrit texts of *Mahābhārata* does not qualify the sleep as feigned, the most famous retelling in Malayalam (from seventeenth century) explicitly states so and elaborates on it. One of the conclusion of this study is that “... there is a tradition in India according to which Krishna, as a real *cakravartin*, sleeps without sleeping, or rather feigns sleep while remaining the perfect and eternal *sākṣin* (witness).”

Interestingly *Mahābhārata Tātparya Nirṇaya* [9] and another Sanskrit text from seventeenth century Kerala [10] explicitly refer to the sleep as fake.

Part three of the book deals with Krishna’s childhood in *Harivaṁśa*. In chapter one on cowherd-settlements and forests in three ancient versions of Krishna’s childhood, Couture has examined the words *Gokula*, *Vṛndāvana*, *Vraja*, *ghoṣa* and *ghoṣṭha* based on *Harivaṁśa*, *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* and *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*.

Chapter two is concerned with the study of the composition of the narrative of Krishna’s childhood according to *Harivaṁśa*. Couture observes that certain childhood episodes illustrate Mahāyogin Vishnu’s capacity of performing the highest deeds in the human world with the required values of discipline, self-control, indifference and detachment. According to the author, through the apparently childish images of the story, the great myths of the destruction and recreation of the world are invoked.

Chapter three is an in-depth study of Kubjā, the hunchbacked woman who was straightened up by Krishna. Couture convincingly establishes that Kubjā symbolizes earth and since the king is considered the husband of Earth, a hunchbacked handmaid servant serving Kaṁsa indicates a deep disorder at the cosmic level. Uplifting of the hunchback corresponds to the restoration of order in Mathura by Krishna. Drawing attention to *Brahmavaivarta Purāṇa* which provides information on the past lives of Pūtana and Kubjā, Couture draws the conclusion that both in *Harivaṁśa* and *Rāmāyaṇa*, certain women are the images of Earth degraded by the actions of a King who fails to follow his own dharma. While providing new illuminating interpretations of various plays of Krishna, Couture never forgets to emphasize its significance within Krishna’s childhood narrative. The connection of Kubjā with Earth is brought back to the episode of Earth complaining to Brahma about her burden in the presence of *devas*. The acts Krishna and Balarama perform are characterized as *līlā*. The uplifting Kubjā is part of *līlā*. The laughter that is mentioned more than once in this episode in fact runs through the text again emphasizing the aspect of *līlā*.

Chapter four discusses the various meanings and their implications of Krishna’s name Dāmodara. Among different meanings, author has paid particular attention to an interpre-

tation given by Shankaracharya in his commentary on the *viṣṇusahasranāma* (one thousand names of Vishnu).

*dāmāni lokanāmāni tāni yasyodarāntare
tena dāmodaram devāḥ ...*

The author notes that the editor of the text is unable to find an exact reference. Interestingly, we find that, the commentary on *viṣṇusahasranāma* by Parashara Bhatta [8] also quotes the passage with a slight variation:

*dāmāni lokanāmāni bhāṁti yasyodarāntare
tena dāmodaram devāḥ ...*

Bhatta explains: *sakalalokādhāratayā arṣavacanānusārāt. dāmāni lokāḥ udare asya iti vā.* Delving further deeply into the *Harivaṁśa* episode which has led to the most popular understanding of the name Dāmodara, Couture unearths the opposition between ignorance and knowledge, that between bondage and liberation, which is the part and parcel of the purāṇic tradition.

How the vedic theme of winged mountains is dealt within *Harivaṁśa* is the theme of chapter five.

The concluding chapter of the Volume 1 is devoted to the inner meanings of birds, herders and yogins who frequent the narration of the childhood of Krishna in *Harivaṁśa*. Couture finds logical answers to the question: How Krishna who spent time in the cow settlements go on to achieve so many accomplishments later in life dwelling in Dvaraka? This question also points to why *Harivaṁśa* is to be considered an integral part of *Mahābhārata*. The clues begin with the observation that Vishnu is depicted as a Gopa in *Rgveda* itself. Attention is paid to Hamsa (*so'ham*) among the birds. Forests and mountains point to a world of freedom. One natural conclusion is that “The images of birds, mountains and yogins come together in their power to evoke fleeting glimpses of that eternal freedom that sleeps in the heart of every Indian.”

We enthusiastically look forward to the forthcoming Volume two and sincerely hope that in the study of ancient texts other indologists will follow the methodology adopted by the author in his approach to the study of *Harivaṁśa*. This will re-establish the tradition which most unfortunately became extinct a few centuries ago, at least among the English speaking world.

References

- [1] *Śrīman Mahābhāratam*, Part VII, *Harivaṁśa* with Bhārata Bhāvadīpa commentary by Nīlakaṇṭha. Edited by Pandit Ramachandrashastri Kinjawadekar. Printed and Published by Shankar Narhar Joshi, Chitrashala Press, 1026 Sadashiv Peth, Poona City. First Edition AD 1936.
- [2] *Dhvanyāloka* of Shri Anandavardhanacharya with the *Locana* commentary by Shri Abhinavagupta along with full Hindi translation of both texts and *Tārāvati Vyākhyā* by

Ram Sagar Tripathi, second part (III & IV Udyota), published by Moti Lal Banarsi Das, Delhi, 1963.

- [3] *The Dhvanyāloka* of Anandavardhana with the *Locana* of Abhinavagupta, translated by Daniel H. H. Ingalls, Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson and M.V. Patwardhan, edited with an Introduction by Daniel H. H. Ingalls, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1990.
- [4] Text of *Mahābhārata Tātparyā Nirṇaya* is available at <http://www.dvaita.org>
- [5] A scanned copy of *Mahābhārata Tātparyā Prakāśa* of Sadananda Vyasa is available at Digital Library of India (<http://www.dli.ernet.in/>) with barcode 9999990293403 and publication year 1942. Publisher details not available.
- [6] Velcheru Narayana Rao, *Purāṇa*, in the *Hindu World*, edited by Sushil Mittal and Gene Thursby, Routledge, New York and London, 2004.
- [7] Perhaps, currently, the only vestige of the *Paurāṇika* tradition are the oral temple ritual performances called *Cākyār Kūttu* and *Pāṭhakam* in Kerala. Legends popular among Chakyars trace their lineage to Sūta, the reciter of *Purāṇas* to the sages at Naimiṣāraṇya. See the article in Malayalam, *Māṇi Mādhava Cākyar: Naimiṣāraṇyattile Sūtan* by Das Bhargavinilayam, *Samskārakeralam*, January-March 1995, pages 33-35.
- [8] parāśara bhaṭṭa kṛtaṁ bhagavadguṇadarpaṇākhyabhāṣya-nirvacana-niruktivyākhyā-trayopetaṁ śrīviṣṇornāmasahasram, lakṣmīveṅkaṭeśvara mudraṇāgāre mudrayitvā prakāśitaṁ, kalyāṇ (mumbaī), samvat 1950.
- [9] *tayorāgamanam pūrvaṁ jñvātaiva hi hariḥ prabhuḥ
asuptaḥ suptavacchiṣye
adhyāya 24, śloka 14-15.*
- [10] *prakaṭitakapaṭasvāpasya kuhanāmānuṣasya bhagavato vāsudevasya vāsabhavanam
praviśya
Dūtavākyaṁ Campū Prabandham* of Melputhur Narayana Bhattathiri, Malayalam translation (with Sanskrit mūlam) by Chunakkara Unnikrishna Variyar, published by Kottakkal Lakshmisahayam Press, Kerala, 1925.