

THE SUPREMACY OF VISHNU/KRISHNA IN THE MAHĀBHĀRATA

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As the *Mahābhārata* begins, the well-known sage Sūta comes to the sacred forest of Naimiṣāraṇya, where the saintly assembly requests him to narrate the the great epic. Sūta begins by offering his respectful obeisances to “the primeval person” (*ādyaṁ puruṣam*), “the Lord” (*iśānam*), “He who is called and praised in many ways” (*puru-hūtaṁ puru-ṣtutam*). Sūta himself demonstrates this last feature of God by glorifying Him in this initial hymn with three celebrated names: Vishnu, Hṛṣikeśa, and Hari.

Who is the God whom Sūta addresses as Vishnu, Hṛṣikeśa and Hari? He is first, as mentioned above, the original person, the controller, and one who is praised and prayed to in various ways, by many names. He is also the moral and spiritual Truth (*ṛtam*), the unique and imperishable verity indicated by the syllable Om̐ (*ekākṣaram*), the Absolute (*Brahman*), the manifest and the unmanifest (*vyaktāvvyaktam*), and the everlasting (*sanātanam*); both being and non-being (*asac ca sac caiva ca*), that which constitutes the whole (*yad viśvam*), and that which is beyond both being and non-being (*sad asat-aḥ param*). He is the creator of the high and the low (*parāvarāṇām sraṣṭārāṇi*), primeval (*purāṇam*), transcendental (*param*), and undecaying (*avyayam*). He is the auspicious and that which makes other things auspicious (*maṅgalyaṁ maṅgalam*), Vishnu, Who is desirable, sinless, and pure (*viṣṇuṁ vareṇyam anagaṁ śucim*), Hṛṣikeśa, the Guru of moving and unmoving things, the Lord Hari (*hṛṣikeśaṁ carācara-guruṁ harim*). (1.1.20-22)¹

The ancient *Ṛg-veda*, widely considered by scholars to be the oldest Indo-European scripture, addresses several of its hymns to this same Lord Vishnu. It is fitting, therefore, that within its own vast text, the *Mahābhārata* first

honors God with the name of Vishnu. Indeed, those who worship God as Krishna, Rāma, Nārāyaṇa etc., are traditionally known as Vaiṣṇavas, worshippers of Vishnu, since all such devotees agree that they worship various forms of a single Supreme Lord.

After the initial praise offered to Lord Vishnu in the beginning of our text, Lord Vishnu next appears in chapter 15, wherein the Lord instructs the gods to churn the mighty ocean in order to produce *amṛta*, the elixir of immortality, which they so anxiously seek. This is the first instance in the *Mahābhārata* of *līlā*, a pastime of the Lord in which He freely participates in the affairs of this world, but with His own transcendental agenda.

In Chapter fifteen of the *Ādi-parva*, the gods ascend mighty Mount Meru and discuss how they might obtain *amṛta*. God, Nārāyaṇa then tells Brahmā, the cosmic engineer and chief of the gods, what must be done:

Therein, as all the gods were pondering and discussing from all points of view, Nārāyaṇa, God, said this to Brahmā: let the ocean (which is like a great) water-pot, be churned by the gods and the hosts of the ungodly. When the great ocean is churned, *amṛta* will come forth from it. Churn the ocean, O gods, for after attaining all medicinal herbs, and indeed all precious stones, you will then find *amṛta* (MB 1.15.11–13).²

The gods then attempt to lift up Mount Mandara since they plan to use the mountain as a churning rod to stir up the ocean. But failing to do so, they again turn to the Lord, now clearly identified as Vishnu, and to Brahmā:

At that time, all the hosts of gods were unable to lift the mountain. Approaching the seated Vishnu, and Brahmā, they said this: “You two should devise here the best strategy that will afford us the greatest good. Let an effort be made to lift up Mount Mandara, for our benefit.”

“So be it!” said Vishnu, together with Brahmā, O Bhārgava. Thereupon Lord Ananta, encouraged by Brahmā, and also instructed by Nārāyaṇa, and possessing the power to execute that task, rose up. Ananta, possessed of great strength, now used his strength and lifted up the king of mountains with its forests and forest inhabitants, O brāhmaṇa (MB 1.16.47).³

This passage clarifies several important theological issues:

1. It is clear from this and other passages to be mentioned below that

Vishnu and Nārāyaṇa are the very same personality of the Godhead.

2. When all the gods, and cosmic demons, were unable to produce nectar, they approached the Supreme Lord, Nārāyaṇa, Vishnu, who then told them what to do. Again, when they were unable to lift up Mount Mandara, Vishnu provided the solution.

3. The solution was Lord Ananta, (“the unlimited one”) Who is also understood to be a plenary incarnation of Lord Vishnu. The identity of Ananta, also called Śeṣa, is given in Chapter sixteen of the *Ādi-parva*, as follows:

Ananta, the Lord, God, was in the same place as Nārāyaṇa. Lifting up the head of the Nāga (Vāsuki who served as the churning rope), He threw it down again and again (MB 1.16.14).⁴

Thus, two incarnations of the Lord cooperated to perform the task of churning the ocean. This is not all. Ananta was able to lift up the Mandara Hill, but in order to churn the ocean, the mighty mountain had to rest on a suitable platform, and so Akūpāra, the gigantic king of the tortoises who is Himself generally considered to be an incarnation of the Lord, provided his own back at the request of the gods and demons:

The gods and demons said to the tortoise king, Akūpāra: “You, sir, should kindly become the foundation of the mountain.” When the tortoise agreed, saying “So be it!”, Mandara was placed on His back... (MB 1.16.10-11).⁵

Thus, several manifestations of the Supreme worked together to enact the pastime of churning nectar from the ocean. But the central form of the Godhead in this incident remains Nārāyaṇa or Vishnu. Even after churning the ocean and producing various potent liquids, the gods could not specifically generate nectar without the additional intervention of Lord Nārāyaṇa. The gods first approach Lord Brahmā, who then appeals to the Lord for help. Earlier (MB 1.16.4–6), the gods had approached Vishnu and Brahmā and requested them both to help. But now it is clear that even Brahmā depends on Lord Nārāyaṇa, or Vishnu, who is the Supreme Personality of Godhead.

Then the gods said to the seated Brahmā, giver of boons: “O Brahmā, we are extremely tired, and so are the Daityas and the best of serpents.

But that nectar will not come out without Nārāyaṇa, God. This churning of the ocean began a long time ago.” Then Brahmā spoke these words to Nārāyaṇa, God: “ordain strength for them, O Vishnu, for you are the ultimate shelter here.”

Vishnu said: “I shall give strength to all those who have together undertaken this task. Let everyone stir up the ocean, may Mount Mandara revolve! (MB 1.16.28-31).⁶

It has been noted that the names Nārāyaṇa and Vishnu clearly indicate the same divine person in this context. Thus in text 30, it is said “Then Brahmā spoke these words to Nārāyaṇa, God...” (*tato nārāyaṇam devaṁ brahmā vacanam abravīt*), but when Brahmā begins to speak, he addresses the Lord as Vishnu, declaring: “O Vishnu, you are the ultimate shelter here ...” (*viṣṇo bhavān atra parāyaṇam*). The word *atra*, “here” or “in this situation” is significant for all the most powerful beings in the universe are assembled, including the creator Brahmā. Yet in *that* situation, Vishnu is the ultimate shelter for all.

In text 31, we find the words *viṣṇur uvāca*, “Vishnu said...”. To grasp the significance of these two simple words, we must be aware that in the *Mahābhārata*, as well as in works such as the *Rāmāyaṇa*, and the Purāṇas in general, there are two types of quotation, which we shall call here “internal” and “external” quotation. Internal quotation occurs when a speaker, within a verse, mentions that another person or persons said something, and then goes on to state what was said by that other speaker or speakers. On the other hand, what we call external quotation occurs when above the verse we find the name of the person who is about to speak, along with the word *uvāca* (singular, “said”), *ūcatuḥ* (dual, “said”), or *ucuḥ* (plural “said”). Thus in the verse 1.16.31, we find the statement: “Vishnu said: I shall give strength to all those who have undertaken this work.”⁷

I call this quotation external, since the name of the speaker is given outside the verse format. The above verse is often rendered as follows:

Vishnu said: “I shall give strength to all those who have together undertaken this task...” etc.

This distinction between external and internal quotation is relevant to our present discussion for the following reason: we observe that when the *Mahābhārata* quotes, *through external quotation*, personalities, and even groups of persons, the text almost invariably uses a single, standard name

for that person or group, even when that person or group has many other names within the text. For example, Arjuna, the great devotee of Lord Krishna is known by many names in the *Mahābhārata*. He is *Pārtha*, son of his mother *Prthā*. Or he is *Kaunteya*, since his mother is also known as *Kuntī*. He is *Pāṇḍava*, son of King *Pāṇḍu*; *Bibhatsu*, the frightening warrior, etc. Yet whenever his speech is given in external quotation, inevitably we find the words *arjuna uvāca*, “Arjuna said.” The same rule does not hold for internal quotation in which many names of a personality are possible.

Thus, the *Mahābhārata* uses a single, standard name in external quotation, for almost all of the speakers within the text, including such prominent personalities as: *Yudhiṣṭhira*, *Arjuna*, *Bhīma*, *Vidura*, *Kuntī*, *Draupadī*, *Śakuni*, *Karṇa*, *Duryodhana*, *Dhṛtarāṣṭra*, *Vaiśampāyana*, *Janamejaya*, *Vyāsa*, *Drupada*, *Nārada*, *Sūta*, and *Śaunaka*. Similarly, common group names which are standard and unchanging in external quotation include: *ṛṣayah*, “the sages;” *devāḥ*, “the gods;” *pitaraḥ*, “the forefathers;” *mantriṇaḥ*, “the ministers (to the king);” *ṛtvijaḥ*, “the ritual priests;” *tāpasāḥ*, “the ascetics;” etc.

It is therefore remarkable that in external quotation, when the speaker is the Supreme Lord Himself, we find three different names of God in the text: *Vāsudeva*,⁸ *Krishna*⁹ (along with the variant *Śrī Krishna*¹⁰), and *Vishnu*.¹¹

Indeed, the only other person for whom we find more than one name in external quotation is *Indra*. In the first two *parvas* of the *Mahābhārata*, there are four instances of *indra uvāca*, “*Indra* said,”¹² and a single case of *śakra uvāca*, “*Śakra* said,”¹³ *Śakra* being a common name of *Indra*. There is a single variant, and not a different name, for *Arjuna*’s brother *Bhīma*, for whom we find twelve instances of *Bhīma uvāca*, “*Bhīma* said,”¹⁴ and three cases of the variant *Bhīmasena uvāca*, “*Bhīmasena* said.”¹⁵ Finally, the text three times cites the goddess *Ganges* by her own name, *Gaṅgā uvāca* (*gaṅgovāca*), “*Gaṅgā* said,”¹⁶ and later, when she appears incognito as an unknown lady, the text, consistent with her role, merely states, *stry uvāca*, “the woman said.”¹⁷ Thus, apart from *Krishna*, it is only in the case of *Indra*, sometimes cited as *Śakra*, that we find the *Mahābhārata* using more than one name for a character in external quotation. Three names are given for *Krishna*, with the additional variation of *Śrī Krishna*.

In conclusion, it is significant that in the churning of the ocean, the text uses the name *Vishnu* (MB 1.16.31) to cite the Lord’s direct speech in an external quotation. Thus in this divine history, we may take the name

Vishnu as a primary name of the Lord. It is also noteworthy that after text 1.16.31 introduces Vishnu's statement with the words *Viṣṇur uvāca*, "Vishnu said," in the very next verse, Sūta declares, "Thus hearing the statement of Nārāyaṇa, those powerful ones together once more severely shook the water of the great ocean" (MB 1.16.32).¹⁸ These two verses show quite clearly the interchangeable use of the names Vishnu and Nārāyaṇa in this section of the *Mahābhārata*.

While describing the magnificence of the ocean, chapter nineteen of the *Ādi-parva* mentions several key features of Vishnu that allow us to unmistakably identify the Vishnu of the *Mahābhārata* with the Vishnu whom Vaiṣṇavas continue to worship today. It is said there:

Beyond measure is the splendor of Vishnu, from whose navel stems the (cosmic) lotus. At the time when the cosmic age begins, He resorts to His transcendental mystic slumber, and the ocean is His resting place (MB 1.19.13).¹⁹

The Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavas refer to this form of the Lord as the Garbhodakaśāyī Vishnu, the form of the Lord who lies down in the Garbha ocean and then generates, from His navel, a lotus flower upon which the creator Brahmā takes birth.

There is further evidence that the names Vishnu and Nārāyaṇa refer to the same Personality of the Godhead, and indeed are often used to indicate the same form or mood of the Godhead. When the great bird Garuḍa first meets the Lord, it is said:

Then (Garuḍa) the son of Vinatā came across Vishnu in the sky. Nārāyaṇa was satisfied with him because of his ungreedy act (MB 1.29.12).²⁰

Further, while Vishnu is often seen as "one of the gods," even in the *Mahābhārata*, He is clearly the Supreme Godhead as well. For example, Vishnu is at times conceived as one of the gods who rule the universe, especially in relation to the Lord's incarnation as Vāmana in which He took birth as a son of Aditi, mother of eleven other famous deities. Yet the text gives special attention to Vishnu, even when listing Him as one of the gods:

Rulers of the worlds, the twelve Ādityas took birth from Aditi. O king, I shall describe them to you by name, O Bhārata: Dhātā, Mitra, Aryamā, Śakra (Indra), Varuṇa, and also Aṁśa, Bhago, Vivasvān, and Pūṣa, and

so Savitā is the tenth. Similarly the eleventh is Tvaṣṭā and Vishnu is said to be the twelfth. Although born as the most junior of all, He is superior to all the Ādityas in His qualities (MB 1.59.14–16).²¹

There is a similar statement which simultaneously lists Vishnu as the youngest of the Āditya gods, and yet recognizes His special status:

O ruler of men, the sons of Aditi, headed by Śakra (Indra), are actually twelve. Of them, the youngest is Vishnu in Whom the worlds are established (MB 1.60.35).²²

We again see the special position of Vishnu among the sons of Aditi in the following statement, in which a voice from heaven tells Queen Kuntī that her son Arjuna who has just taken birth, will be like Vishnu:

Just as Vishnu increased the pleasure of Aditi, so Arjuna, equal to Vishnu, will increase your pleasure. [1.114.30]²³

The text clearly and repeatedly reveals to us that Vishnu is the Supreme Lord. Yet the Lord agrees to act within the universe as one of the gods who manage the cosmic affairs. Thus when Kuntī gives birth to Arjuna, whose father is mighty Indra, all the leaders of the universe join in the celebration, and among these, of course, are the twelve Ādityas, including Vishnu:

Dhātā, and Aryamā, and Mitra, Varuṇa, Aṁśa, and also Bhaga, Indra, Vivasvān, and Pūṣā, and Tvaṣṭā, and also Savitā, Parjanya as well, and Vishnu—the Ādityas like sparks of a fire, situated in space, magnified the glory of Pāṇḍu's son (B1.114.56)²⁴

Perhaps because Vishnu enjoys a dual status as the Supreme Lord and as an apparent member of the community of universal rulers, there is also a tendency in the *Mahābhārata* to compare great personalities to a variety of gods, including Vishnu. For instance, when Yayāti's royal descendents see their forefather falling from the celestial realm, they exclaim:

Seeing you stationed on the path of the gods, your power comparable to that of Śakra, Arka (the Sun), and Vishnu, we have all arisen now to receive you, for we wish to know the truth of your fall (MB 1.83.9).²⁵

Similarly, when King Yayāti's maidservant Śarmiṣṭhā seeks to persuade the monarch that no one but the king would dare to touch her, since she is part of his personal household, she declares:

Who would dare to touch a woman in the family of Soma, Indra, or Vishnu, of Yama or Varuṇa, or of you, O Nāhuṣa [Yayāti]? (MB 1.77.12).²⁶

Occasionally, Lord Vishnu appears in the company of Indra, chief of the administrative gods, for, as the creator and God of this world, the Lord deals intimately with that being empowered to manage His creation, as much as the king of a state maintains special contact with a regional representative. The ancient *Ṛg-veda* often depicts Lord Vishnu as having a special, cooperative relationship with Indra, and this same relationship is plainly visible in the *Mahābhārata*. For example, there is the following description the sons of Yayāti with his original wife, Devayāni:

Yayāti, the king, begot two sons in Devayāni, Yadu and also Tuvasu, who were like another Indra and Vishnu (MB 1.78.9).²⁷

Similarly,

Mounting the same chariot in which Indra and Vishnu went forth in the battle for Tārakā, Krishna then departed (MB2.22.16).²⁸

When Karṇa confronts Arjuna, disguised as a brāhmaṇa (when both are vying for the hand of Draupadī), Karṇa is deeply impressed by the skill of his unknown rival and asks:

Are you Rāma, the personified Military Veda,²⁹ O best of *vīpras*, or are you Indra himself or the infallible Vishnu himself? (MB 1.181.16).³⁰

The Rāma mentioned here is probably Lord Paraśurāma, who is normally considered to be an incarnation of Vishnu. Thus, Karṇa inquires if Arjuna is one of two forms of the Godhead, or Indra, best of the demigods.

Finally, there is one instance in which the aggrieved Kadrū, wife of Kaśyapa, desperately appealing to Indra to save her sons, addresses him as Vishnu:

You are the great being, the wonder is you, the king you are, best of gods. You are Vishnu, you are the thousand-eyed, you are the god, you are the shelter (MB 1.21.12).³¹

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We have shown that from its very beginning, the *Mahābhārata* recognizes Lord Vishnu, also known as Lord Nārāyaṇa, as the Supreme Personality of Godhead. In chapter 29 of the *Ādi Parva* we learn that Krishna is that same Supreme Lord. In the story of Garuḍa, the great bird carrier of Vishnu, we find this passage:

Garuḍa, son of Vinatā, then met with Vishnu up in the sky. Nārāyaṇa was satisfied with his magnanimous act. The unperishing Lord said to him, “I am a giver of boons, O sky goer.” (When Garuḍa was thus prompted by the Lord) that space traveler then said: “May I stand above you.” And again he spoke the following words to Nārāyaṇa, “May I be unaging, and undying, even without the nectar of immortality.” Having accepted these two boons, Garuḍa said to Vishnu: “Even unto You I shall give a boon. Although You are the Lord, please choose.” Krishna chose him, the mighty Garuḍa, as His carrier and the Lord also made him (the emblem on the Lord’s high-flying) banner. (And so the Lord said to him) you shall stand above Me.”³²

It is significant that in the same incident, the very same personality is described here as Vishnu, Nārāyaṇa, and Krishna. Ultimately, in the main story of the *Mahābhārata*, it is Lord Śrī Krishna who is the beloved hero of the Pāṇḍava brothers and the Supreme Lord. Thus we shall briefly review the role of Lord Krishna within the first two books of the *Mahābhārata*, showing that He is Supreme, at least according to the epic itself.

The first chapter of the *Mahābhārata* reveals that Krishna and Arjuna are Nara-Nārāyaṇa, the Supreme Lord and His pure devotee. Thus in his lament for the tragedy of the Kurukṣetra war, the old King Dhṛtarāṣṭra says:

When I heard from Nārada, who stated that Krishna and Arjuna are actually Nara and Nārāyaṇa, and when Nārada said, “I always see them in Brahma-loka, the highest planet of the universe, then, O Sañjaya, I no longer hoped for victory.”

It is significant that an exalted servant of the Lord, Nārada Muni, revealed the spiritual identity of Krishna and Arjuna. This is the normal

process by which spiritual knowledge is transmitted, according to the *Mahābhārata*.

It is understood in the *Mahābhārata* that Lord Krishna is behind the heroic deeds of the Pāṇḍavas. Indeed in the *Bhagavad-gītā*, Lord Krishna said to Arjuna, “Just become the instrument, Arjuna, for that which I am going to do” (cf. Bg 11.33–34). An example of this understanding, that the Pāṇḍavas are the instruments of the will of God, is found in the second chapter of the *Mahābhārata* within a description of the contents of the entire work. As we shall see, in the second book, the *Sabhā Parva*, Lord Krishna, Bhīma, and Arjuna journey together to the kingdom of the evil Jarāsandha, and there Bhīma slays him. With the death of Jarāsandha, thousands of pious kings whom the evil monarch kept imprisoned and prepared to slaughter, gained their freedom. And yet in summarizing this incident, the *Mahābhārata* states that, “In Girirāja (the capital of Jarāsandha) Krishna freed the imprisoned kings.”³³ In other words, Bhīma and Arjuna were just instruments of the Lord, while Krishna Himself was considered that actual “Player,” or “Doer.”

Certainly, within the same general description, the *Mahābhārata* tells us that it was by taking shelter of Lord Krishna’s strength that the five Pāṇḍavas, and the great archer Satyaki, were the sole survivors of the battle of Kurukṣetra:

In that (battle) those five sons of Pṛthā were saved by taking shelter of Krishna’s strength, also Sātyaki, the great archer. All the rest went to perdition.³⁴

Chapter 55 of the *Ādi Parva* gives further evidence that there is no difference between Lord Krishna and Vishnu, Nārāyaṇa. It is well known that Śrī, the Goddess of Fortune, also known as Lakṣmī, is the wife of Lord Nārāyaṇa, Vishnu. And yet we find this statement in the *Mahābhārata*:

The joyful Subhadrā was joined with Arjuna, son of Paṇḍu, just as Śaci was joined with the great Indra or as Śrī, the Goddess of Fortune is united with Krishna.³⁵

Lord Krishna is omniscient, and therefore, within the story of the *Mahābhārata*, He can understand what no one else can comprehend. For example, when the five Pāṇḍava brothers journey incognito to the the *svayam-*

vara ceremony of Draupadī, wherein the beautiful princess would choose a husband, only Lord Krishna, among all the leaders of the world can recognize the Pāṇḍavas (MB 1.180.17–21).

Chapter 189 of the *Ādi Parva* states that when there was great calamity on the earth and the demigods approached Lord Nārāyaṇa for help, the Lord then did the following:

And so that Lord plucked out two hairs, one was white and the other was black. And those two hairs entered two women of the Yadu clan, Rohinī and Devakī. Of the two hairs, one became Baladeva and the second arose as Krishna Keśava.³⁶

The *Śrī Caitanya-caritāmṛta* (2.22.117–18)³⁷, an important Gauḍiya Vaiṣṇava text, comments on this description. What follows is the *Śrī Caitanya-caritāmṛta* statement along with the commentary of Śrīla A.C Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupāda, for it sheds light on the entire subject under discussion.

Translation:

Illusory stories opposed to the conclusions of Kṛṣṇa consciousness concern the destruction of the Yadu dynasty, Kṛṣṇa's disappearance, the story that Kṛṣṇa and Balarāma arise from a black hair and a white hair of Kṣīrodakaśāyī Viṣṇu, and the story about the kidnapping of the queens. Śrī Caitanya Mahāprabhu explained to Sanātana Gosvāmī the proper conclusions of these stories.

Purport:

Due to envy, many *asuras* describe Kṛṣṇa to be like a black crow or an incarnation of a hair. Śrī Caitanya Mahāprabhu told Sanātana Gosvāmī how to counteract all these asuric explanations of Kṛṣṇa. The word *Kāka* means crow, and *keśa* means hair. The *asuras* describe Kṛṣṇa as incarnation of a crow, an incarnation of a *śudra* (a blackish tribe) and an incarnation of a hair, not knowing that the word *keśa* means *ka-īśa* and that *ka* means Lord Brahmā and *īśa* means Lord. Thus Kṛṣṇa is the Lord of Lord Brahmā.

Some of Lord Kṛṣṇa's pastimes are mentioned in the *Mahābhārata* as *mauṣala-līlā*. These include the stories of the destruction of the Yadu dynasty, Kṛṣṇa's disappearance, His being pierced by a hunter's arrow, the story of Kṛṣṇa's being an incarnation of a piece of hair (*keśa-avatāra*) as well as *mahiṣī-haraṇa*, the kidnapping of Kṛṣṇa's queens. Actually these are not factual but are related for the bewilderment of the *asuras* who

want to prove that Kṛṣṇa is an ordinary human being. They are false in the sense that these pastimes are not eternal, nor are they transcendental or spiritual. There are many people who are by nature averse to the supremacy of the Supreme Personality of Godhead, Viṣṇu. Such people are called *asuras*. They have mistaken ideas about Kṛṣṇa. As stated in *Bhāgavad-gītā*, the *asuras* are given a chance to forget Kṛṣṇa more and more, birth after birth. Thus they make their appearance in a family of *asuras* and continue this process, being kept in bewilderment about Kṛṣṇa. *Asuras* in the dress of *sannyāsīs* even explain *Bhāgavad-gītā* and *Śrīmad Bhāgavatam* in different ways according to their own imaginations. Thus they continue to remain *asuras* birth after birth.

As far as the *keśa-avatāra* (incarnation of hair) is concerned, it is mentioned in *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* (2.7.26). The *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* also states: *ujjahārātmanaḥ keśau sita-kṛṣṇau mahā-bala...*

Thus in *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam*, *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* and *Mahābhārata* there are references to Kṛṣṇa and Balarāma being incarnations of a black hair and a white hair. It is stated that Lord Viṣṇu snatched two hairs—one white and one black—from His head. These two hairs entered the wombs of Rohiṇī and Devakī, members of the Yādu dynasty. Balarāma was born from Rohiṇī, and Kṛṣṇa was born of Devakī. Thus Balarāma appeared from the first hair, and Kṛṣṇa appeared from the second hair. It was also foretold that all the *asuras*, who are enemies of the demigods, would be cut down by Lord Viṣṇu by His white and black plenary expansions and that the Supreme Personality of Godhead would appear and perform wonderful activities. In this connection, one should see *Laghū-bhāgavatāmṛta*, the chapter called *Kṛṣṇāmṛta*, verses 156-164. Śrīla Rūpa Gosvāmī has refuted this argument about the hair incarnation, and his refutation is supported by Śrī Baladeva Visyābhūṣaṇa's commentaries. This matter is further discussed in the *Kṛṣṇa-sandarbhā* (29) and in the commentary known as *Sarva-saṁvādinī*, by Śrīla Jīva Gosvāmī.

The Ādi Parva ends with the spectacular burning of the Khāṇḍava forest. The fire god Agni, in the form of a brilliant Brāhmaṇa, approaches Krishna and Arjuna and asks them to allow him to consume the Khāṇḍava forest. The god Indra had repeatedly thwarted Agni's attempt to consume the valuable herbs in the forest, which Agni desperately needed for his health, and of course for the benefit of the world. Lord Krishna and Arjuna agree and in the ensuing conflagration many creatures of various species perish.

A doubt may arise as to why Lord Krishna and Arjuna, even in the service of the god Agni, played an essential role in such a violent event. The *Mahābhārata* gives us a hint in chapter 58 of the *Ādi Parva*. There we discov-

er that prior to Lord Krishna's descent to this world, the gods of the higher worlds defeated the wicked *asuras*, driving them from their positions in the higher planets. At that time the *asuras* sought to reestablish their power on the earth and they began to take birth in various species. Thus descending into all sorts of human, animal, and bird species, they wicked *asuras* began to persecute the innocent inhabitants of the earth. Thus it is plausible that many of those *asuras* were dwelling in the Khāṇḍava forest, and thus Lord Krishna, fulfilling His vow spoken in the *Bhagavad-gītā* to rid the world of evil elements, arranged to remove them from the earth. Thus at the end of this incident we find a statement in the *Mahābhārata*, near the end of the *Ādi Parva*:

And the lord (the fire god Agni) of fierce rays, together with the two Krishnas (Lord Krishna and Arjuna) burnt the blazing Khāṇḍava forest, thus freeing the world from danger.³⁸

Perhaps the most significant fact of the Khāṇḍava episode, and the reason for which Vyāsadeva placed it at the end of the first book, is the following. In the act of defending Agni as he consumed the forest, Lord Krishna, assisted by His devotee Arjuna, defeated all of the most powerful beings of the universe, using methods that could only be employed by God Himself. Thus, in the dramatic climax to its first book, the *Mahābhārata* establishes that Krishna is the Supreme Lord, the Almighty. All of the gods in the universe and indeed all of the most powerful demons gathered at the Khāṇḍava forest determined to stop Lord Krishna and Arjuna, but all these most powerful entities failed, and Lord Krishna, by defeating them, was clearly revealed as the Supreme Personality of Godhead. The *Mahābhārata* stated this fact in the very beginning, early in the first chapter, and now at the end of the first book, Lord Krishna and Arjuna clearly establish their supremacy once again.

The second book of the *Mahābhārata*, the *Sabhā Parva*, also clearly establishes the supremacy of Krishna, not only in His power, but in His all-attractiveness, which brings out intense love in His devotees.

Chapters 18 through 22 narrate the killing of Jarāsandha. As usual, King Yudhiṣṭhira and the Pāṇḍavas are completely dependent on the will of Lord Krishna and are always eager to please their worshipable master. As mentioned earlier, although Bhīma physically killed Jarāsandha, it is understood that Lord Krishna, acting through His devotee, brought about

the demise of that evil monarch.

Chapters 37 through 42 tell the famous story in which Lord Krishna slays Śiśupāla in the midst of the Rājasiya sacrifice. Significantly, the venerable Bhīṣma declared that of all the great personalities present, indeed the leading personalities of the earth, it was Lord Krishna who was in fact the supreme personality and most worthy of the first portion. Wicked Śiśupāla, burning with envy, violently protested the glorification of Krishna and in every conceivable way sought to criticize the Lord. The Lord's devotees defended His honor, explaining the sublime meaning of the Lord's activities. Thus through this well known incident, the *Mahābhārata* teaches the glories of Krishna and answers many of the doubts that arise in the minds of mortals when they hear the pastimes of the Lord.

The *Mahābhārata*'s second book ends with the equally famous gambling match, in which the Kurus, led by wicked Śakuni, cheat the innocent Pāṇḍavas in a game of dice and steal the kingdom. Perhaps the most famous episode within this narration is the attempt to strip and humiliate the godly Draupadī. That extraordinary woman appeals to Lord Krishna, who defends her honor and decides to enforce her curse: that all of the offending men shall die. It is only because Krishna's potency is supreme that He is able to bring ruination to universal rulers such as those involved in the Draupadī atrocity.

Thus ends the second book of the *Mahābhārata*, which, like the first, clearly establishes the glory and the supremacy of the Lord, call Him Vishnu or Krishna, the Supreme Personality of Godhead.

NOTES

¹ 20. *sūta uvāca*

*ādyam puruṣam īśānam puru-hūtam puru-ṣṭutam
ṛtam ekākṣaram brahma vyaktāvyaktaṁ sanātanam*

21. *asac ca sac caiva ca yad viśvam sad asataḥ param
parāvarāṇām sraṣṭāram purāṇam param avyavayam*

22. *maṅgalyam maṅgalam viṣṇum vareṇyam anagham śucim
namas-kṛtya hṛṣīkeśam carācara-gurum harim [1.1.20-22]*

² 11. *tatra nārāyaṇo devo brahmāṇam idam abravīt
cintayatsu sureṣu evaṁ mantrayatsu ca sarvaśaḥ*

12. *devair asura-saṅghaiś ca mathyatām kalaśodadhīḥ*

*bhaviṣyaty amṛtam tatra mathyamāne mahodadhau
13. sarvaauśadhīḥ samāvāpya sarva-ratnāni caiva hi*

manthadhvam udadhiṃ devā vetsyadhvam amṛtaṃ tataḥ [1.15.11-13]

³ 4. *tam uddhartuṃ na śaktā vai sarve deva-gaṇās tadā*
viṣṇum āsīnam abhyetya brahmāṇaṃ cedam abruvan
 5. *bhavantāv atra kurutām buddhiṃ naiḥśreyasiṃ parām*
mandaroddharaṇe yatnaḥ kriyatām ca hitāya naḥ
 6. *tatheti cābravid viṣṇur brahmaṇā saha bhārgava*
tato 'nantaḥ samutthāya brahmaṇā paricoditaḥ
nārāyaṇena cāpy uktas tasmīn karmaṇi vīryavān
 7. *atha parvata-rājānaṃ tam ananto mahā-balaḥ*
ujjahāra balād brahman sa-vanaṃ sa-vanaukasam [1.16.4-7]

⁴ *ananto bhagavān devo yato nārāyaṇas tataḥ*
śira udyamya nāgasya punaḥ punar avākṣipat [1.16.14]

⁵ 10. *ūcuś ca kūrma-rājānam akūpāraṃ surāsurāḥ*
gīrer adhiṣṭhānam asya bhavān bhavitum arhati
 11. *kūrmeṇa tu tathety uktvā pṛṣṭham asya samarpitam* [1.16.10-11]

⁶ 28. *tato brahmāṇam āsīnam devā vara-dam abruvan*
śrāntāḥ sma subhṛṣaṃ brahman nodbhavaty amṛtaṃ ca tat
 29. *ṛte nārāyaṇaṃ devaṃ daiṭyā nāgottamās tathā*
cirārabdham idaṃ cāpi sāgarasyāpi manthanam
 30. *tato nārāyaṇaṃ devaṃ brahmā vacanam abravīt*
vidhatsvaiśāṃ balaṃ viṣṇo bhavān atra parāyaṇam
 31. *viṣṇur uvāca*
balaṃ dadāmi sarveṣāṃ karmaīdā ye samāsthitaḥ
kṣobhyatām kalaśaḥ sarvair mandaraḥ parivartyatām [1.16.28-31]

⁷ *viṣṇur uvāca*
balaṃ dadāmi sarveṣāṃ karmaīdā ye samāsthitaḥ.

⁸ 1.211.21; 1.214.16; 2.16.1; 2.18.1; 2.19.1; 2.20.6.

⁹ 2.14.10; 2.16.11; 2.16.27; 2.17.4; 2.40.22.

¹⁰ 2.13.1

¹¹ 1.16.31

¹² 1.57.5; 1.83.1,3,5.

¹³ 1.30.10

¹⁴ 1.134.18; 1.139.27, 30; 1.140.7; 1.142.20, 25; 1.143.1; 1.145.16; 2.14.7;
 2.61.1; 2.63.7; 2.64.10.

¹⁵ 2.61.10; 2.68.16, 20.

¹⁶ 1.91.17,19; 1.94.31.

¹⁷ 1.92.5,7,12,48.

¹⁸ *sūta uvāca*

*nārāyaṇa-vacaḥ śrutvā balinas te mahodadheḥ
tat payaḥ sahita bhūyaś cakrire bhṣam ākulam* [1.16.32]

19 *adhyātma-yoga-nidrām ca padma-nābhasya sevataḥ
yugādi-kāla-śayanam viṣṇor amita-tejasaḥ* [1.19.13]

20 *viṣṇunā tu tadākāśe vainateyaḥ sameyivān
tasya nārāyaṇas tuṣṭas tenālaulyena karmaṇā* [1.29.12]

21 14. *adityām dvādaśādityāḥ sambhūtā bhuvaneśvarāḥ
ye rājan nāmatas tāms te kirtayiṣyāmi bhārata*

15. *dhātā mitro 'ryamā śakro varuṇas cāmśa eva ca
bhago vivasvān pūṣā ca savitā daśamas tathā*

16. *ekādaśas tathā tvaṣṭā viṣṇur dvādaśa ucyate
jaghanya-jah sa sarveṣām ādityānām guṇādhikah* [1.59.14-16]

22 35. *dvādaśaiivāditeḥ putrāḥ śakra-mukhyā narādhipa
teṣām avara-jo viṣṇur yatra lokāḥ pratiṣṭhitāḥ* [1.60.35]

23 *adityā viṣṇunā prītir yathābhūd abhivardhitā
tathā viṣṇu-samaḥ prītim vardhayiṣyati te 'rjunaḥ* [1.114.30].

24 55. *dhātāryamā ca mitras ca varuṇo 'mśo bhagas tathā
īndro vivasvān pūṣā ca tvaṣṭā ca savitā tathā*

56. *parjanyaś caiva viṣṇuś ca ādityāḥ pāvakaṛciṣaḥ
mahimānam pāṇḍavasya vardhayanto 'mbare sthitāḥ* [1.114.56]

25 *dyṣṭvā ca tvām viṣṭhitam deva-mārge śakrārka-viṣṇu-pratima-prabhāvam
abhyudgatās tvām vayam adya sarve tattvam pāte tava jijñāsamānāḥ* [1.83.9]

26 *somasyendrasya viṣṇor vā yamasya varuṇasya vā
tava vā nāhuṣa kule kaḥ striyam spraṣṭum arhati* [1.77.12]

27 *yayātir devayānyām tu putrāv ajanayan nṛpaḥ
yaduṃ ca turvasuṃ caiva śakra-viṣṇū ivāparau* [1.78.9]

28 *śakra-viṣṇū hi saṅgrāme ceratus tārakā-maye
rathena tena tam kṛṣṇa upāruhya yayau tadā* [2.22.16]

29 *sākṣād dhanur-vedaḥ*

30 *kiṃ tvām sākṣād dhanur-vedo rāmo vā vipra-sattama
atha sākṣād dhari-hayaḥ sākṣād vā viṣṇur acyutaḥ* [1.181.16]

31 *tvām mahad bhūtam āścaryam tvām rājā tvām surottamaḥ
tvām viṣṇus tvām sahasrākṣas tvām devas tvam pārāyaṇam* [1.21.12]

32 12. *viṣṇunā tu tadākāśe vainateyaḥ sameyivān
tasya nārāyaṇas tuṣṭas tenālaulyena karmaṇā*

13. *tam uvācavyayo devo varado 'smīti khecaram
sa vavre tava tiṣṭheyam uparīty antarikṣa-gaḥ*

14. *uvāca cainaṃ bhūyo 'pi nārāyaṇam idaṃ vacaḥ
ajaraś cāmaras ca syām amṛtena vināḥṣy aham*

15. *pratigṛhya varau tau ca garuḍo viṣṇum abravūt
bhavate 'pi varam dadmi vṛṇītām bhagavān api*

16. *taṃ vavre vāhanam kṛṣṇo garutmantaṃ mahā-balam
dhvajam ca cakre bhagavān upari sthāsyaśītī tam (MB 1.29.12–16).*

³³ *giri-vraje niruddhānām rājñām kṛṣṇena mokṣaṇam (MB 1.2.99).*

³⁴ *yatrāmucyanta pārthās te pañca kṛṣṇa-balāśrayāt
sātyakiś ca maheṣvāsaḥ śeṣās ca nidhanam gatāḥ (MB 1.2.182).*

³⁵ *sā śacīva mahendreṇa śrīḥ kṛṣṇeneva saṅgatā
subhadrā yuyuje prītā pāṇḍavenārjunena ha (MB 1.55.34).*

³⁶ *sa cāpi keśau harir udbabarha śuklam ekam aparam cāpi kṛṣṇam
tau cāpi keśau viśatām yadūnām kule striyau rohiṇīm devakīm ca
taylor eko baladevo babhūva kṛṣṇo dvitīyaḥ keśavaḥ sambabhūva (MB 1.189.31).*

³⁷ Translation and purport by His Divine Grace A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupāda.

³⁸ *bhagavān api tigṃāṃśuḥ samiddham khāṇḍavaṃ vanam
dadāha saha kṛṣṇābhyāṃ janayāṅ jagato 'bhayam (MB 1.225.5).*