

Śrī Brhad-bhāgavatāmṛta

by Śrīla Sanātana Gosvāmī

Foreword

By

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THE Bṛhad-Bhāgavatāmṛta by Sanātana Gosvāmī is a consummate rendering in Sanskrit verse of Vaiṣṇava devotional spirituality as inspired by Kṛṣṇa-Caitanya, or simply Caitanya (1486–1533).

Analogous in some respects to Dante's Paradiso and more closely akin to John Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress, it depicts not one but two parallel spiritual odysseys.

The first is of Nārada, the paradigm of the devout Vaiṣṇava saint/sage; the other is of Gopa-kumāra, a simple lad in search of God.

The former travels across India and into heavenly realms in search of those devotees, human or divine, to whom God Kṛṣṇa has been most merciful.

In the course of his quest, Nārada encounters ever more profound and dedicated embodiments of devotion (bhakti) to Kṛṣṇa.

Each of these deferentially redirects him to others yet more devout—and yet more favored by Kṛṣṇa—than themselves.

The dialogues en route—subtly interpreted in an extensive auto-commentary—are so designed as to instruct, edify, and inspire devout readers or listeners.

The lad, Gopa-kumāra, likewise, provides the occasion for progressive spiritual discovery as one follows his pilgrimage from one realm to another in search of ever more sublime and quintessential manifestations of the divine.

Nārada's search culminates in the paradoxical revelation that the devotees most favored by Kṛṣṇa—those whose devotion to Him is most perfect and intense—are gopīs, simple (though divine) cowherd girls who are in torment when their beloved Kṛṣṇa is absent from them.

Gopa-kumāra's quest leads to the discovery that God Kṛṣṇa reveals Himself most perfectly in the idyllic (heavenly) realm of Goloka (and in the (terrestrial) Vṛndāvana), where He sports eternally as youthful lover of the gopīs and playmate of the cowherd boys.

Within the framework of this dual spiritual odyssey and an extensive commentary, [Dig-darśinī], the sixteenth-century author, Sanātana Gosvāmī, analyzes with delicate nuances and orchestrates in masterly fashion the theology-cum-psychology of loving devotion (prema-bhakti) to Kṛṣṇa as epitomized by Caitanya.

To readers already familiar with the Purāṇic Hindu pantheon and imagery and appreciative of the Vaisnava commitment to prema-bhakti to God Kṛṣṇa, the luxuriant transcendental scenes and unrestrained displays of ecstatic devotion need not seem exotic.

But the vividness and novelty of many vignettes and the poignant emotional vulnerability of Kṛṣṇa may evoke surprise and wonder even among seasoned Vaiṣṇava devotees.

If, of course, one does not see the point of what Sanātana was doing, one need not read on.

But even the reader new to the cosmology, mythology, and theology of Vaiṣṇava devotion, if reasonably patient and attentive, may find in the Bṛhad-bhāgavatāmṛta and Dig-darśinī a remarkably incisive, consistent, and revealing exploration of human spirituality and religious psychology.

For Vaisnava devotees in the tradition of Caitanya, the Brhad-bhāgavatāmṛta and its commentary constitute a foundational text of great value.

Sanātana Gosvāmī was the most senior of the authoritative scholar-devotees deputed by Caitanya to formulate the appropriate theology of prema-bhakti to Kṛṣṇa. Sanātana's poetic narrative, supplemented by its commentary, is the most thorough and penetrating statement of his theological ideas and spiritual sensibilities.

Significantly, I think, this, his most ambitious work, takes the form of narrative and dialogue.

Though the Brhad-bhāgavatāmṛta is carefully structured in its organization, it is dramatic and imaginative in its overt form.

Though based on the Śrīmad Bhāgavata Purāṇa, of which it aspires to express the essence, or nectar (amṛta), it is not in the form of a commentary as such.

It is itself a Purāṇa-like tale which, though composed by Sanātana, is told as if an ancient discourse by King Parīkṣit to his mother, Uttarā.

Like a Purāṇa, it presents exemplary personages, memorable incidents, and striking imagery.

All of this serves to nourish the reflection and meditation, i.e., the smaraṇa (lit. remembering), of devout readers or hearers.

The content of the text is words, but these are picture words rather than book words.

They evoke the experiential basis upon which secondary theoretical and practical elaboration may be built.

By expressing his own conception of loving devotion to God in the form of the dual odysseys of Nārada and Gopa-kumāra, Sanātana was in effect endorsing literary narrative of a poetic and dramatic sort as a preferred means for passing on to subsequent generations the crucial experience (anubhūti) of loving devotion.

For devotees of Kṛṣṇa in the modern world who are not fluent in Sanskrit, access to Sanātana's foundational poem must be by translations or paraphrase.

There are several in Bengali and Hindi and perhaps in some other Indian languages.

In English there is a translation of the Brhad-bhāgavatāmṛta by
Srīmān Bhakti Prajnan Yati Maharaja from the Sree Gaudiya Math
(Madras), but none, so far as I know, of the Dig-darśinī.

The present edition includes translations by Gopīparāṇadhana Dāsa
of both the basic poem and its commentary (plus appendices,
glossary, etc.).

This is an éxtraordinary labor of love!

The Brhad-bhāgavatāmṛta alone contains some 2,500 Sanskrit
verses, each requiring painstaking care even when (wisely) being
rendered into idiomatic English prose rather than metrical verse.

The commentary is considerably longer and, although in Sanskrit prose, is far from easy to convey in readable accurate English.

Yet the task has been done and done well, an impressive achievement indeed.

When I began to examine the proofs for this book, I was pleased to find that Gopīparāṇadhana Dāsa's English prose version reads clearly and crisply.

Moreover, it conveys the excitement, wonder, and devotion of spiritual discovery that animates Sanātana's own composition.

The more I read, the more fascinated I became with Sanātana's novel and brilliant retelling of themes emanating from the Śrīmad Bhāgavata (but developed into much that is not found explicitly in that revered text).

Depictions of progressively more intense and intimate modes of loving devotion build to a climax in the remarkable portrayal of Kṛṣṇa at Dvārakā, depressed and anguished in absence from Rādhā and the gopīs and restored to "normal" consciousness only by an artful ruse.

The further I read, the less was I conscious that I was reading a translation, so naturally does one unit of the narrative flow into the next.

When I did shift to the task of comparing portions of the translation with the Sanskrit, I was pleased to discover that the English prose is indeed very faithful to the Sanskrit original.

One might quibble over the choice of certain idiomatic English phrases, but even these convey the basic sense.

From the literal meaning of the original, little is left out, and very little is added, in the passage from Sanskrit to English.

Inevitably, of course, some resonance is lost in any transition from poetic verse to prose translation.

But, fortunately, because the Bṛhad-bhāgavatāmṛta is mostly narrative and dialogue, it lends itself more readily to prose rendering than would other types of poetic verse.

I would like to think that Sanātana Gosvāmī would welcome his modern prose translator as a kindred spirit and an able expositor of his work.

The Dig-darśinī, being itself prose, but prose in the peculiar form of Sanskrit textual commentary, presents the translator with a different set of challenges. In size, it is twice the length of the document which it interprets.

In form and function, it resembles the complex footnotes of modern scholarship.

In orientation, it assumes broadly ranging acquaintance with traditional Vaiṣṇava themes, Sanskrit religious literature, and technical points of devotional aesthetics, theology, and philosophy.

Faced with such challenges, many a translator—and, if not he or she, then the publisher—would resort to a paraphrase that drastically cuts down the size and simplifies the scholarship of the commentary and perhaps introduces an ersatz ideological or rhetorical interpretation in place of the more demanding and sophisticated orientation of the author.

Not so the present translator and publisher.

Both ~~Gopīparādhana~~ Dāsa and the Bhaktivedanta Book Trust are to be commended for respecting Sanātana's auto-commentary as it is, in all its bulk and sophistication.

The Brhad-bhāgavatāmṛta and Dig-darśinī together comprise a classic of religious literature whose integrity ought not be compromised.

On a narrow scale, it is a classic in that it is the template for the theology and spiritual psychology that have remained authoritative for the Caitanya Vaiṣṇava tradition.

And though till now scarcely known beyond that tradition and those who study it, it is—or merits being so recognized—a classic on a global scale as well.

Sanātana Gosvāmī's ^{master piece} chef d'oeuvre is a masterful exploration, grounded in Vaiṣṇava devotional faith, of human spirituality and religious psychology, for the first time being made accessible in its entirety to the English-reading world.

As the translator acknowledges, the English version of the Digdarśinī is a paraphrase, not a line-by-line translation.

As such, it does not replace a close reading of the Sanskrit original for scholars equipped to do one.

But, as the translator points out (and illustrates in the appendices), the paraphrasing is largely a matter of arrangement, not of selective excision or augmentation.

From the portions of Volume One that I have compared closely, it is evident that Gopīparānadhana Dāsa has managed to retain virtually all of the content of the original commentary, though with considerable rearrangement to facilitate reading.

Were it his aim to produce a rigorously literal English rendering, some of his paraphrasing of Sanātana's formulations might well have to be revisited.

But, all things considered, he has done an admirable job of conveying the informational content and spiritual verve of the author—without bowdlerizing or truncating—in an idiom understandable to patient and attentive (though not necessarily expert) readers.

I presume that the level attained in Volume One has been maintained through Volumes Two and Three.

There is a special significance to this publication over and above its making accessible to readers of English a Sanskrit classic of spiritual literature.

This is the first publication by the Bhaktivedanta Book Trust of a major Vaiṣṇava theological text which disciples of the late Swami A.C. Bhaktivedanta Prabhupāda have accomplished without his immediate presence.

It follows the widely disseminated versions of the Bhagavad-gītā in many languages and multi-volume translations of the Śrīmad Bhāgavata Purāṇa and the Caitanya-caritāmṛta, each of which is accompanied by an elaborate commentary.

These prior publications were substantially the work of Prabhupāda himself, with certain of his Sanskrit-trained devotees, including Gopīparāṇadhana Dāsa, serving as apprentices.

The appearance of the Brhad-bhāgavatāmṛta thus marks a new phase of textual theological scholarship by members of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness.

They have, as it were, come into their maturity as responsible for faithful transmission of the Caitanya Vaiṣṇava tradition of prema-bhakti, loving devotion to God Kṛṣṇa.

What better way to assure ^{clarity} fidelity to the words and spirit of Caitanya Mahāprabhu and his circle of immediate disciples than to enable devotees and attentive seekers to read, hear, and visualize the foundational texts of those very scholar-devotees who had experienced the charismatic presence of Kṛṣṇa-Caitanya himself!