

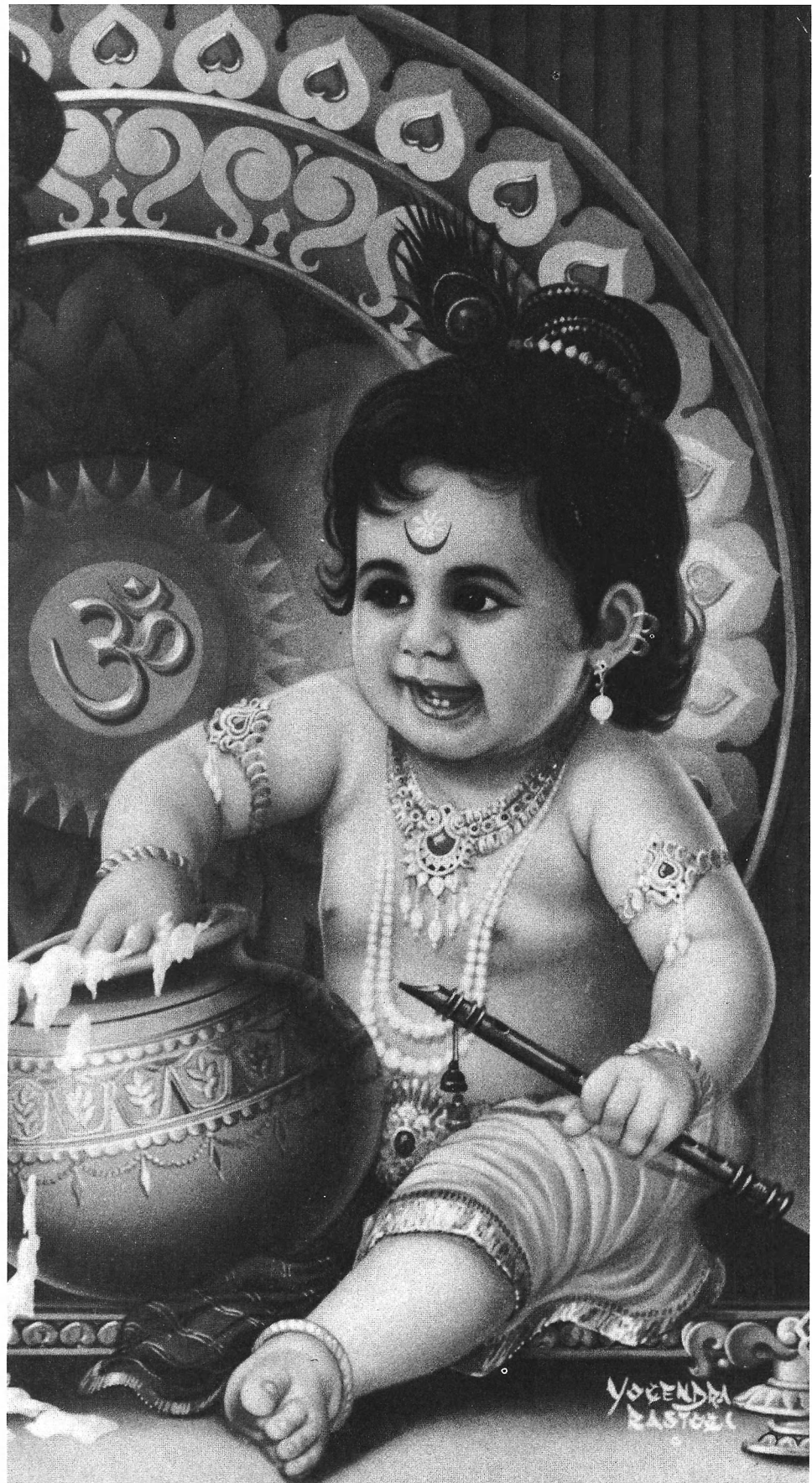
JOHN STRATTON HAWLEY

Krishna, the Butter Thief



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KRISHNA,
THE BUTTER THIEF



YOCHENDRA
RASTOGI

KRISHNA, THE BUTTER THIEF

John Stratton Hawley

PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS
PRINCETON, NEW JERSEY

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Published by Princeton University Press, 41 William St., Princeton,
New Jersey

In the United Kingdom: Princeton University Press, Guildford, Surrey

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Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data will be
found on the last printed page of this book

Publication of this book has been aided by a grant from the
Paul Mellon Fund of Princeton University Press

This book has been composed in Linotron Trump

Clothbound editions of Princeton University Press books
are printed on acid-free paper, and binding materials are
chosen for strength and durability

Printed in the United States of America by Princeton
University Press, Princeton, New Jersey

FOR ANYONE WHOSE HEART HAS EVER BEEN STOLEN

CONTENTS

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS	ix
LIST OF TABLES	xii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	xiii
TRANSLITERATION	xvi
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS	xviii
LIST OF POEMS TRANSLATED FROM THE <i>Sūr Sāgar</i>	xx
INTRODUCTION. The Butter and the Thief	3
The Myth of the Thief	6
The Central Theme	9
Plan of the Book	13
PART I. BEFORE SŪR DĀS	
CHAPTER 1. The Tradition in Literature	21
Sūr and His Sources	21
Earlier Works in Sanskrit and Prakrit	23
Tamil Works	35
Later Works in Sanskrit	45
CHAPTER 2. The Tradition in Sculpture	52
Introduction	52
Early Reliefs	54
The Middle Period in North India	68
Hoysala Innovations	76
Later Sculptures	87
PART II. THE SŪR SĀGAR	
CHAPTER 3. Sūr's Butter Thief Poems: Two Types	99
Uncovering Sūr Dās	99
Poems of Vision	104
Poems of Complaint	122
CHAPTER 4. The Butter Thief in Context	135
The Pivotal Place of the Butter Thief Poems	135
Butter, Vision, and Krishna's Childhood	140

Thievery, Complaint, and Krishna's Adolescence	143
The Language of Thievery	154
CHAPTER 5. The Legacy of Sūr's Butter Thief	162
General Developments in the Later <i>Sūr Sāgar</i>	162
Stealing Butter	167
PART III. THE <i>RĀS LĪLĀS</i>	
CHAPTER 6. The Butter Thief <i>Līlā</i>	181
The Ubiquity of the Butter Thief	181
"The Butter Thief" of Svāmī Rāmsvarūp	193
CHAPTER 7. Variations on the Butter Theme	223
Variations on the Butter Thief <i>Līlā</i>	223
"The Jeweled Pillar"	238
"The Mortar Binding"	248
Common Elements in the Butter Thief <i>Līlās</i>	255
PART IV. INTERPRETATION	
CHAPTER 8. The Unbounded Economy of Love	261
Major Themes in Braj Exegesis	261
Structure and Its Opposite: Propriety and Love	270
CHAPTER 9. Other Boundaries: An Outsider's View	288
Sexual Contradiction	289
Generational Contradiction	296
Unchurning the Milk Ocean	301
APPENDIX A. TABLES OF <i>Kṛṣṇacarita</i> SCULPTURES TO 1500 A.D.	311
APPENDIX B. INDEX OF <i>Kṛṣṇacarita</i> SCULPTURES TO 1500 A.D.	338
GLOSSARY	376
BIBLIOGRAPHY	381
INDEX	405

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

All photos are the author's except those credited to others.

Frontispiece. The Butter Thief, calendar art	ii
1. Advertisement for Vijaya butter, Bangalore	4
2. Child photographed as Krishna, Loī Bāzār, Brindavan	7
3. Child reciting the Qur'ān, calendar art	12
4. Krishna stealing butter at the churn. Courtesy, Bhārat Kalā Bhavan, Varanasi. Photo: American Institute of Indian Studies	56
5. Krishna lifting Mount Govardhan, stealing butter, and overturning a cart. From the right side of the doorframe from Mandor. Courtesy, Sardar Museum, Jodhpur	57
6. <i>Dān lilā</i> from Rangmahal, near Suratgarh. Courtesy, Bikaner Museum	59
7. Krishna scenes from the <i>gūḍhamanḍapa</i> , temple of Svarga Brahma, Alampur. Photo: American Institute of Indian Studies	61
8. Domestic scenes from the <i>kṛṣṇacarita</i> on the Upper Śivālaya, Badami	61
9. Krishna scenes from the frieze containing the <i>Mahābhārata</i> , temple of Kailāsanātha, Ellora. Photo: Rex Studios, Aurangabad	63
10. <i>Kṛṣṇacarita</i> from a pillar in the temple of Virūpākṣa, Pattadakal, north side	66
11. <i>Kṛṣṇacarita</i> from a pillar in the temple of Virūpākṣa, Pattadakal, west side	67
12. Scenes from the <i>kṛṣṇacarita</i> , temple of Kumbhaśyāma, Citor	70
13. Pillar with Krishna scenes, from Bhuili. Courtesy State Museum, Lucknow	72
14. Krishna holding a ball of butter, temple of Keśavasvāmī, Harnahadgalli. Photo: American Institute of Indian Studies	75
15. Krishna stealing butter from hanging pots, and scolded	

or threatened by two gopis, from the <i>kṛṣṇacarita</i> , temple of Hoysaleśvara, Halebid	78
16. Yaśodā (or another gopi) threatens Krishna, from the <i>kṛṣṇacarita</i> , temple of Kedāreśvara, Halebid	78
17. Yaśodā scolds Krishna as he eats butter, from the <i>kṛṣṇacarita</i> , temple of Amṛteśvara, Amritapura. Photo: G.M.M. Foekema	79
18. The gopis complain to Yaśodā and she scolds Krishna, from the <i>kṛṣṇacarita</i> , temple of Amṛteśvara, Amritapura	80
19. Krishna stealing butter at the churn, from the <i>kṛṣṇacarita</i> , temple of Amṛteśvara, Amritapura. Photo: G.M.M. Foekema	82
20. Krishna stealing butter from hanging pots, observed by gopis, from the <i>kṛṣṇacarita</i> , temple of Amṛteśvara, Amritapura. Photo: G.M.M. Foekema	83
21. Butter thief episodes, from the <i>kṛṣṇacarita</i> , temple of Keśava, Somanathapura	84
22. Krishna stealing the gopis' clothes, from the <i>kṛṣṇacarita</i> , temple of Lakṣmīnarasimha, Nuggihalli	86
23. Krishna surveying stolen clothes and pots of butter, from the <i>kṛṣṇacarita</i> , temple of Lakṣmīnarasimha, Nuggihalli	86
24. Krishna eating butter, temple of Jalakandīśvara, Vellore	91
25. Krishna crawling, with a ball of butter in hand, temple of Jalakandīśvara, Vellore	92
26. Krishna stealing butter from hanging pots, temple of Varadārājasvāmī, Kancipuram	93
27. Krishna repenting of his misdeeds, temple of Jalakandīśvara, Vellore	94
28. Krishna stealing butter at the churn, temple of Govindadeva, Brindavan	182
29. Thief's movements, from "The Jeweled Pillar" of Kanhaiyā Lāl	183
30. Gopi readies the "rope of love," from "The Butter Thief" of Prasādi Lāl	205
31. Reaching for butter from a hanging pot, from "The Butter Thief" of Rāmsvarūp	211
32. Krishna being carried through the audience by Puruṣot-tam Gosvāmī, from "The Butter Thief" of Rāmsvarūp	213
33. Krishna showing how short his arms are while singing "I didn't eat the butter, Ma," from "The Jeweled Pillar" of Kanhaiyā Lāl	221

34. Krishna's tantrum, from "The Butter Thief" of Prasādi Lāl	237
35. Krishna conversing with the "jeweled pillar," from "The Jeweled Pillar" of Kanhaiyā Lāl	239
36. Gopi apprehends the thief, from "The Jeweled Pillar" of Kanhaiyā Lāl	240
37. Yaśodā unveils the accused thief, from "The Jeweled Pillar" of Kanhaiyā Lāl	242
38. Yaśodā feeds Krishna butter, from "The Jeweled Pillar" of Kanhaiyā Lāl	243
39. Yaśodā trying to pacify Krishna with the moon. Illustrated <i>Sūr Sāgar</i> in the Jaipuri style, ca. 18th century. Courtesy, Bhārat Kalā Bhavan, Varanasi	250

LIST OF TABLES

1. Distribution of Krishna Motifs in the Temples of Varadā- rājasvāmī (Kancipuram) and Jalakandiśvara (Vellore)	89
2. Common Elements in the Butter Thief <i>Līlās</i>	256
A-1. Sites Appearing in Table A-3	313
A-2. Episodes from the Krishna Story Listed in Table A-3	315
A-3. <i>Kṛṣṇacarita</i> Sculptures to A.D. 1500	318

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

IT IS A PLEASURE to have the opportunity to thank some of the people and institutions without whose help this study could not have been sustained. A traveling fellowship from Harvard University and a foreign area fellowship from the Social Science Research Council enabled me to travel to India for a two-year period, and subsequent grants from the Center for the Study of World Religions at Harvard and the Graduate School Research Fund of the University of Washington allowed me to return for short periods later. Once in India my work was aided by numerous hands. For training in Braj Bhāṣā I am grateful to Ambikā Datt Upādhyāy, Virendra Singh, G. R. Kuriyāl, and above all Krishna Caitanya Bhaṭṭ, whose generosity of spirit afforded me some of the happiest hours I spent in Brindavan. Śrīpād Bābā also took me under his wing there, offering gentle encouragement, and Murārī Lāl Varmā tirelessly and accurately transcribed many *līlās*. To Gopī Śarmā and Svāmīs Rāmsvarūp and Kanhaiyā Lāl I owe not only fine performances of the *rās līlās* but the willingness to discuss them in spite of crowded schedules. But nothing would have been possible in Brindavan had it not been for the hospitality of Puruṣottam Gosvāmī and his son Śrīvatsa; from these men I learned that all the talk of love in Brindavan is not just talk.

Others have been generous as well. The faculty of the K. M. Hindi Institute at Agra University, now headed by Vidyānivās Miśra, graciously permitted me access to the notes of the late Mātāprasād Gupta. Śrī Śyām Gosvāmī, Śrī Sureś Gosvāmī Mahārāj, and Śrī Kalyāṇrāy Gosvāmī Mahārāj introduced me to the Puṣṭimārgīya Sampradāy, and Tilakāyat Śrī Govind Lāl Mahārāj and Śrī Brajbhūṣaṇ Lāl Mahārāj gave me access to their libraries. Rādhākṛiṣṇa Kīrtankār of Nathdvara and Śyāmsundar Kīrtankār of Kota shared their knowledge of the musical aspects of Puṣṭimārgīya worship. Ācārya Madhukar Śāstrī and Dr. Brajmohan Jāvilā of the Rajasthan Oriental Research Institute, Dr. S. C. Kala of the Allahabad Municipal Museum, and the staff of the Nāgarī-pracārīṇī Sabhā in Benares were most helpful in making their collections available. His Highness Maharaja Bhawani Singh of

Jaipur and Dr. A. K. Das of the Royal Museum at Jaipur kindly afforded me access to the Khās Mohar group of manuscripts in the royal collection. I owe a special debt of gratitude to His Highness Karni Singh, the Maharaja of Bikaner, for permission to photograph a number of valuable manuscripts in his collection, now deposited in the Anup Sanskrit Library, and to Agar Cand Nāhtā and the late Dīnānāth Khatrī of the same city for facilitating that access.

I could not have collated the materials in Chapter 2 without the resources of the American Institute of Indian Studies in Benares and the École française de l'Extrême Orient in Pondicherry. I benefited from the cordial assistance of both staffs, particularly from the willingly shared expertise of Françoise l'Hernault and M. A. Dhaky. John Rosenfield, Pramod Chandra, N. P. Joshi, Michael W. Meister, Joanna Williams, Gary Tartakov, Daniel Ehnborn, David Sanford, Thomas Donaldson, and Robert J. Del Bontà offered many additional corrections and suggestions, time and again easing the tasks that confronted a novice in the field of art history.

This project began as a Ph.D. dissertation in Comparative Religion at Harvard University and was completed in that form in 1977 under the careful guidance of Daniel H. H. Ingalls and John B. Carman. J. L. Mehta, Kenneth E. Bryant, Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, and Donna M. Wulff also read and commented on parts of the thesis, and K.K.A. Venkatachari, C. Jagannathan, and Vasudha Narayanan explained many of the Tamil materials. Later Friedhelm Hardy was kind enough to read a draft of the section of the book concerning works in Tamil. Vimala Mehta made a unique contribution by reading the poems of Sūr Dās with me at Harvard in such a way as to keep alive the spirit that had animated them so many miles away. Translating these and other poems into English verse has not been easy for me, and I owe to Mark Jürgensmeyer the careful and imaginative revision of all the poems contained here. After countless hours of enthusiastic but painstaking labor, many of them are now more his than mine. Maria Cedargren, Barbara Harrison Bess, Maureen McFarland, Libby Sandusky, Michelle Nguyen, Dolores Luthi, and Lois Amstutz have provided meticulous assistance in preparing the manuscript; and to Laura Shapiro I am indebted for editing of a quality that no man has a right to expect from his wife. Margaret Case, who commands such an unusual combination of refinement and good sense, has made publishing with Princeton University Press a matter of pleasure and enlightenment.

The list is long. It is clear that I could have done very little of this work alone, and the flaws that remain are surely mine. To all who gave of themselves, quite beyond any requirements, my deep gratitude.

TRANSLITERATION

A NUMBER of problems of transliteration arise in a work that concerns not only Sanskrit texts but texts and oral materials in the vernacular as well. Rather than hewing to a system of transliteration that would be uniform throughout, I have thought it important to convey as accurate an impression as possible of the actual sound of the words I repeat. The only compromise this requires with the standard system for transliterating Sanskrit arises in the case of a word such as *gosvāmī*, where I adopt the Indian practice of using the nominative form rather than the root. In addition I have followed the practice of translating the velar nasal in both Sanskrit and Hindi as *ñ* rather than *ṇ*.

In rendering Hindi into the Latin alphabet I have omitted the neutral vowel at the ends of words where it is not audible in Hindi speech (*Rām*) but retained it where it follows a consonant cluster and can be heard (*sadasya*). For consistency's sake I have done the same in transliterating poetry, despite the fact that such a vowel is sometimes metrically significant. Since it is always significant within words, however, I have retained it there in poetry, whereas in speech the interstitial vowel is normally not heard (*banmālā*). The vocalic *r* is retained as in Sanskrit (*kṛṣṇacarita*). Nasalization within words is also transliterated as it would be in Sanskrit (*pāñc*), but a nasalization at the end of the word is rendered with a tilde rather than the standard *ñ* or *m̃* so as not to suggest that one hears a consonant (*padō*). If the nasalized vowel is a diphthong the tilde is placed over the first element of the diphthong.

Certain words occur both in Sanskrit and Hindi contexts and I have tried to be faithful to that context (*kāma*, *Kām*). Other terms have rather different *tatsama* and *tadbhava* forms. There again I have transliterated in accord with context (*ulūkhala-bandhana*, *ūkhalbandhan*). I regret any confusion this may cause, and have listed both forms in the glossary in case clarification is needed.

Words that have come into standard English usage are given in that form (*Krishna*). I have taken this to include most names of

cities and dynasties (Mathura, Rastrakuta), but in the case of temples I have preserved the Sanskrit form (Govindadeva) for all but the well-known temple of Śrī Nāth Jī.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

- AIIS American Institute of Indian Studies, Varanasi
ARASI *Annual Report of the Archeological Survey of India*
ARASI Mysore *Annual Report of the Mysore Archeological Department*
ARASIWC *Annual Report of the Archeological Survey of India, Western Circle*
ASI Archaeological Survey of India
B *Bālacarita* attributed to Bhāsa
Bg *Bālagopālastuti*
Bh *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*
BMAUP *Bulletin of Museums and Archaeology in U.P.*
BMPGB *Bulletin of the Museum and Picture Gallery of Baroda*
Br *Brahma Purāṇa*
BT Hawley, "The Butter Thief"
C *Cilappatikāram*
CV *Caurāsī Vaiṣṇavan kī Vārtā*. Numerical references are to *prasaṅgs* in the "Sūr Dās jī kī Vārtā."
E École française de l'Extrême Orient
G *Gargasamhitā*
H *Harivaṃśa*
HR *History of Religions*
IA Indian Antiquary
IHQ Indian Historical Quarterly
IJ Indo-Iranian Journal
J Jinasena, *Harivaṃśa Purāṇa*
JAOS *Journal of the American Oriental Society*
JASB *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*
JISOA *Journal of the Indian Society of Oriental Art*
JMPIP *Journal of the Madhya Pradesh Itihas Parishad*
JORIB *Journal of the Oriental Institute of Baroda*
JRAI *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*
JRAS *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*
JUPHS *Journal of the Uttar Pradesh Historical Society* (formerly *Journal of the United Provinces Historical Society*)

- K *Kṛṣṇakarmāṃṛta* attributed to Bilvamaṅgala
MASI *Memoirs of the Archaeological Survey of India*
P *Padma Purāṇa*
pari. *pariśiṣṭ*, i.e., additional poems added at the back of the
Nāgarīpracāriṇī Sabhā Sūr Sāgar
Pt *Tirumaṅkai Ālvār, Periyatirumoli*
S the Nāgarīpracāriṇī Sabhā edition of the Sūr Sāgar (vol. 1, 1972
edition; vol. 2, 1976 edition)
Skt. Sanskrit
T *Puṣpadanta, Trisaṭṭhimahāpurisaguṇālaṃkāra*
Tm *Periyālvār, Tirumoli*
Tp *Āṇṭāl, Tiruppāvai*
Tv *Nammālvār, Tiruvāymoli*
V *Viṣṇu Purāṇa*
var. variant reading
ZDMG *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesell-
schaft*

LIST OF POEMS TRANSLATED FROM THE *SŪR SĀGAR*

<i>Title and Nāgarīpracārīṇī Sabhā Number</i>	<i>Page</i>
1. Syām, whatever brings you here? (S 897)	47
2. Far off and furtive, Gopāl's in the butter (S 901)	106
3. Behold—curd lifted to the son of curd! (S 790)	109
4. Arise, Gopāl, my lovely child (S 777)	112
5. Come, Yaśodā, and see (S 894)	113
6. What if he took some butter? So what? (S 972)	116
7. I give my all to dear little you (S 709)	118
8. Yaśodā, behold his beautiful boyish face (S 969)	120
9. Why can't you control that boy? (S 909)	123
10. Yaśodā, how can I hold my peace? (S 898)	124
11. Madam, listen here about your son (S 908)	125
12. You girls have a pride as big as a house (S 1392)	127
13. When did his hands turn to butter thieves? (S 923)	127
14. Yaśodā, in answer to what you have said (S 933)	128
15. Why, why wander off to someone else? (S 926)	129
16. Yaśodā, you're such a miserly one (S 943)	130
17. Fasten your vision on your poor son's face (S 975)	132
18. Look up, Ma, Kānh is crying in hiccups (S 965)	133
19. Look there near the jeweled pillar, my friend (S 885)	143
20. You've pestered me, you've badgered me since the dawn of day (S 2082)	144
21. Why did he hold to the curd that I owned (S 2289)	145
22. No justice reigns in this realm, Radha (S 3393)	147
23. Gopāl has slipped in and stolen my heart, friend (S 2490)	148
24. We haven't ten or twenty hearts (S 4344)	151
25. So Hari has studied some statecraft, has he! (S 4608)	152
26. Our hidden hearts are open, Ūdho (S 4364)	153
27. This is more than simply butter stealing (S 2549)	154
28. "Who are you, my fair one?" the Dark One asks (S 1291)	169
29. Hari's snitching butter for the very first time (S 886)	175

30. His little mouth's atremble	195
31. The time's come for leaving the butter thieving behind	213
32. Let's visit Yaśodā, fairest friends (S 904)	216
33. I didn't eat the butter, Ma (S 952)	219
34. Syām slipped into the milkmaid's house (S 883)	238
35. Mommy, Dāu keeps teasing me (S 833)	241
36. A maiden from Braj, standing near (S 882)	244
37. Ma, I want my toy, the moon! (S 811)	249

NOTE: Some poems attributed to Sūr Dās are quoted, at times partially, in the *rās līlās* but do not occur in the Sabhā edition. For them no number is given.

KRISHNA,
THE BUTTER THIEF

INTRODUCTION

The Butter and the Thief

ON THE WHOLE I lived an upright boyhood, but at the age of nine I began to steal quarters from my mother. She kept them in a little purse on top of the refrigerator, so it was quite a climb to reach them. The dangers were great: in those days a quarter was a considerable sum, and discovery would mean a punishment certain and severe. But the rewards were commensurate. A new ice cream store had just been established in town and the price of a butterscotch sundae was twenty-five cents. Daily I made the happy journey from the refrigerator to the ice cream counter until one dark day my mother chanced to drive by on the way home from the market and I was forced to confess.

In Illinois all this was an aberration. In India, however, it is an archetype, for the god Krishna is frequently represented, and best loved, as an unruly child and thief. Songs celebrate his exploits—today from loud-speakers and cinema screens as well as the lips of village women—and, as the frontispiece shows, the calendars that provide the land with most of its popular art often feature a chubby, blueish boy who reaches his hand deep into a pot overflowing with creamy froth. This is Krishna stealing butter: he lifts it to his mouth and smears it all over his face in one of his most characteristic acts. Some calendars, in fact, place the butter thief directly at the center of the mythology of Krishna; the other significant elements and episodes of his life and personality are arrayed around the mischievous child like a great garland.

This is a book in pursuit of the butter thief. Why must God steal? Why does he have such a special taste for butter? And why have Indians for centuries welcomed the divine thief with such open arms? The answers to these questions lead us to the very heart of the worship of Krishna, revealing as perhaps no other motif can the particular way in which Indians approach their God of Love.

Almost anywhere one looks in modern India, the butter thief has left his imprint. At one of the major intersections in the

southern city of Bangalore, for instance, a billboard pictures a young lad slinging a big sack over his shoulder and looking out at you and me with an expression of pronounced self-satisfaction (figure 1). Next to him a refrigerator door swings wide open, and the black band across his eyes leaves no doubt about his nefarious intentions: "the butter thief strikes again," the caption says. The purpose of the advertisement is to interest passersby in the products of a new dairy that is trying to make inroads on the national market of another company, Amul. Amul too advertises its butter with the image of a childish thief; in fact, one can send away for a poster of the Amul butter thief, suitable for hanging on the wall. And Narayan Dairy, a Bombay concern, announces itself to thousands of commuters in suburban railway stations by pairing its name with that of the familiar child. This time he adopts one of



1. Advertisement for Vijaya butter, Bangalore

the traditional poses, crawling across the floor with one hand raised invitingly in front of him, holding up a big ball of butter. What modern dairies market is the rectangular yellow lump we meet in the West, but India's traditional butter is a white, semi-liquid substance that is churned from curd rather than cream and tastes far sweeter than what we know. It is this that the butter thief so happily holds out.

To the Westerner it may come as a surprise that this child Krishna is so prominent in Indian eyes. Westerners tend to know Krishna in other guises. They may have heard of the splendid king who is celebrated in Sanskrit texts as reigning over the kingdom of Dvaraka, but Indians pay this royal Krishna real attention only in the region surrounding Dvaraka itself: in the state of Gujarat and its environs. Another phase of Krishna's adult life is even better known to Westerners, that in which he serves as intermediary and advisor in the earthshaking struggle between the Pāṇḍava and Kaurava clans that is portrayed in India's great epic, the *Mahābhārata*. This Krishna is a teacher, the orator who sang the immortal *Bhagavad Gītā*, the Krishna to whom Gandhi looked for support and consolation. Because Indological scholarship is usually based in Sanskrit, and because no single Sanskrit text is more widely known around the subcontinent than the *Gītā*, many Westerners and some educated Indians have assumed that this Krishna exerts the greatest influence over Indian life. But the Krishna of whom the *Gītā* speaks is a somewhat rarefied figure, and Sanskrit was never the people's language; hence the *Gītā*'s mature Krishna has never succeeded in capturing the popular imagination as has his younger counterpart. This more youthful Krishna is famous as an adolescent lover surrounded by a myriad of adoring cowherd maidens (*gopis*), but perhaps even better known as the active, mischievous child the dairy ads celebrate.

The import of the butter thief extends far beyond the dairy industry, of course: one meets him in almost every corner of Indian culture. He is a familiar presence in home and temple altars, appearing typically as a little bronze image two or three inches high, and he casts his spell beyond the realms of ritual that belong by rights to him. In Maharashtra, in western India, the elephant god Ganesh is especially popular, but he has become yoked with the butter thief in a story that tells how Krishna stole milk sweets intended for him.¹ In southern India a special reverence is paid to the god Murukan, and one shrine in particular,

¹ Paul B. Courtright, private communication, August 10, 1981.

Palni in Tamil Nadu, celebrates this god as a child. But not him alone: pilgrims go away with images not only of the child *Murugaṇ* but of the butter thief as well.²

The butter thief is in the movies, too. A recent Hindi film called "*Yaśodā Mā*" was entirely devoted to his mother's attempts to cope with him. And in dance; if one goes to a performance of *bhārat nāṭyam*, the classical form with the widest appeal, one is more apt to see a butter thief scene acted out than any other episode from the vast store of Hindu legend. Furthermore, as these pages will show, the most influential form of Krishna drama in the country, the *rās līlās* of the Braj region just south of Delhi, features the butter thief time and again, even when his participation is not strictly called for by the plot. Many Indians address their own little boys with one or another of Krishna's childhood epithets—*Gopāl*, for instance—and children are sometimes dressed up as the butter thief to have their pictures taken (figure 2). But if one has no butter thief of one's own in the family, one can always purchase a picture of him on one of the gaudy, mass-produced calendars that blanket the subcontinent. Film stars, gurus of renown, and popular political figures may also appear on these calendars, but more than anything else they picture the gods. The gods provide the lexicon of symbols and images that most successfully unifies India's diverse peoples, and one of the most frequent gods to appear is the lad who dips his hand into the butter pot.

THE MYTH OF THE THIEF

I have often stepped into one of the many shops that display these calendar icons and asked the proprietor to talk about this well-fed little boy. A long and loving account of the adventurous childhood of Krishna ensues as the shopkeeper willingly loses himself in the much-traveled paths of legend. He calls to mind stories that Hindu children have been told by their mothers and aunts from the time they were three. Somehow these vignettes do not lose their fascination for adults in India, as fairy tales are apt to in the West. For they are more than fairy tales; they are images of the living God.

The storekeeper will tell how Krishna was born of noble parentage in the city of Mathura. His mother Devakī was a member

² Diana L. Eck, private communication, August 20, 1981.



2. Child photographed as Krishna, Loī Bāzār, Brindavan

of the family of the very tyrant, Kaṁsa, whom he had come to slay. The wrathful Kaṁsa kept constant vigil, but on the night

Krishna was born the infant was spirited away across the monsoon-swollen waters of the Jumna by his father Vasudeva. Vasudeva exchanged him for a girl child who had been born the same night to Yaśodā and her husband Nanda, the chief cowherders in the Braj countryside that surrounds Mathura. Under their care Krishna waxed and flourished, and it was not long before he began to show an enormous appetite for butter and other milk products—curd particularly, but also milk itself. Of them all, though, butter, with its creamy concentration, was his favorite, and he would do almost anything to get it.

Sometimes he pursued it right at home. His mother Yaśodā would often try to wake him in the morning, ready to feed him a full plate of delicacies that she had specially prepared. But somehow Krishna was always too sleepy to be roused. Finally his mother would give up trying to shake him awake—if sleep was what his body needed, then let him have it—and off she would go about her household chores. That was just when Krishna would come to life, and with an appetite bigger than any normal child's. The first thing he thought of to satisfy his hunger was butter, and with his mother nowhere in sight he would sneak into the back room of the house, where she had been churning, and help himself. Then the great scene unfolds: if he was alone he slathered himself and the room with butter, and if he called in some of his little cowherd friends it became an even more vigorous fray. Sometimes, too, he would feed the leftovers to unruly, meddlesome monkeys.

On other occasions he would hear the call of butter from a house nearby. After all, Yaśodā was not the only gopi who churned her curd daily, and other women, other girls, were beckoned away on errands, too. Krishna had an unfailing sense for when they would be gone and where they had stashed their butter. Perhaps they had been careful enough to hang it in pots from the ceiling, just to keep it from monkeys or avid little boys, but to no avail. Krishna was always able to reach it—by mounting the shoulders of a friend, if necessary, and knocking it down with a stick—and in no time the precious white substance was spattered everywhere.

Sometimes the gopi whose dairy was under attack would return home while the destruction was still going on, and then she was apt to find herself too transfixed by the beauty of her little marauder to step forward and intervene. Or maybe she was angry—this may not have been the first such incident she had witnessed—

and then she would attempt to tie him up with a rope she found handy. Krishna's mother was also often driven to such lengths. Not only was she the most frequent victim of his thievery, after all, but she constantly had to deal with a barrage of complaints from others about her son's behavior. One time she was so incensed and exhausted that she roped her little boy to a huge, heavy mortar so that she would not have to worry about policing his moves for a time. But somehow or other none of the efforts to control Krishna succeeded. He always escaped, and the very gopis who had earlier bemoaned Yaśodā's permissiveness and begged her to restrain him would suddenly begin to charge that she was a harsh and merciless mother—no mother, really, at all. With the butter thief, emotions run high, and no one but he ever truly wins.

Incidents like these, told with a hundred little variations, are at the heart of the butter thief story, and they are always recounted with enormous relish and indulgence. The little boy in the calendar on the wall does indeed live in the hearts of those who post him there. Sometimes, in fact, ordinary discourse seems inadequate to convey the magic of the myth and the storyteller begins to sing—most often a song familiar all over north India whose refrain may be translated "I didn't eat the butter, Ma." It tells how Krishna, apprehended by one of the gopis whose house has been invaded, testifies to his mother that these charges are all just a pack of lies. How could stubby little arms like his reach up to the slings where the butter was stored? No, the lyrics continue, it's all just a frame-up, a plot, and the fact that his mother could be taken in, says Krishna, shows that he's just some adopted child (a secret that not even Yaśodā knows), not a real son. When her motherly affection is challenged she relents, and as the song concludes she laughingly takes her sulking, argumentative little boy to her breast. For the moment the story is ended, but every time Krishna's insatiable appetites are reawakened it begins all over again. And someone is always ready to tell, sing, dance, act out, or even worship another episode.

THE CENTRAL THEME

This is a story meant to delight, and perhaps it is appropriate that the systematic texts of Hindu religion, the scholarly treatises and theological narrations, say virtually nothing about the butter thief. Even the manuals that explain bhakti—the fervent, devotional

side of Hindu faith—make little reference to him. Moreover, the very people who respond with immediate warmth to any mention of the butter thief and stand ready to recount in detail his exploits in story and song are often baffled at the idea that this motif might be treated as the subject for serious academic discussion. This myth is genuinely a popular one; it has always been more a feature of ordinary piety than of official celebration. It almost seems to have found its way into the religious realm specifically as an antidote to “serious” religiosity. Yet it is a great deal more than a nursery rhyme or bedtime story. It moves people, and not just because it evokes the long-gone freedoms of childhood. Beneath its playful surface lies a tension so insistent in human experience that for some it comes close to monopolizing the experience of God: the tension between love and fear.

This intimate opposition between love and fear is symbolized in the very name of the myth. Butter designates one pole; thievery, the other. Butter is love, for it is the most concentrated form of the substance that flows forth uniquely from love: milk, the liquid that nourishes the beloved and propels both the beloved and love itself into ever increasing maturity. The symbolism of butter is especially apt because the giving and receiving of milk does indeed lead to a concentration of experience. The more one gives, the more one experiences a churning of the heart as the emotions intensify around the object of one’s love. Butter is thick and rich. It stands appropriately for everything about love that ties us so deeply to those with whom we share our relation and substance. But the very intensity of this sharing is its undoing. To be in love is to be defenseless and vulnerable, as the women of Braj are when they leave their butter out for Krishna. Love leaves itself exposed, and the image conjured up by that reality is the thief. Nothing is so open to being stolen as love, the most private possession of all, for love can never be truly possessed.

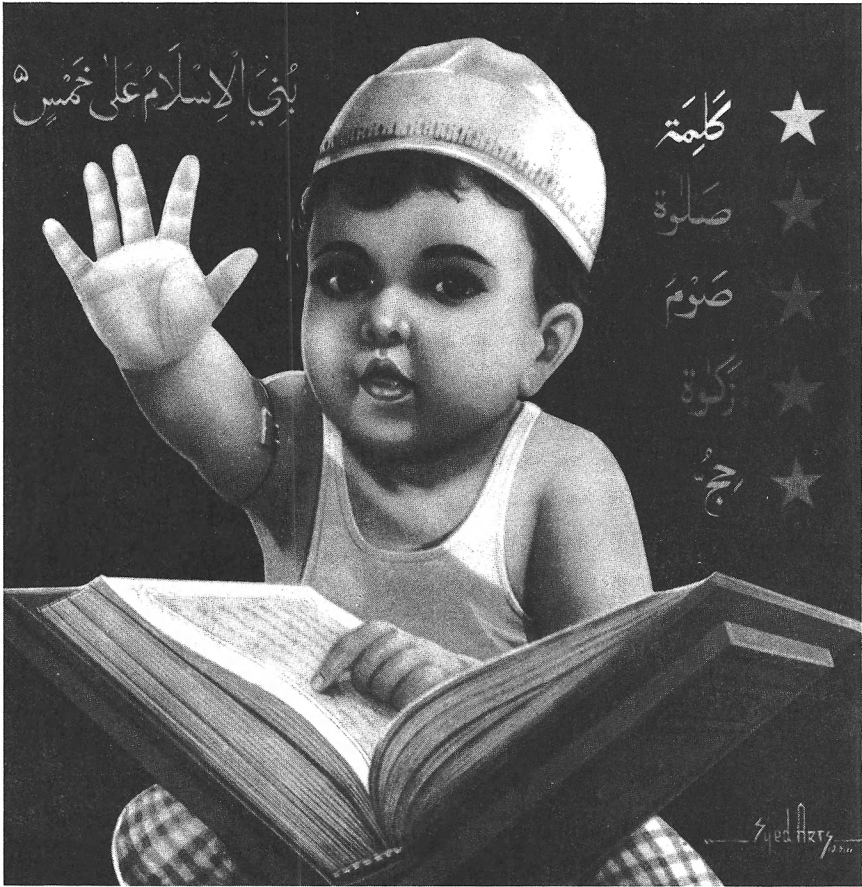
In the myth of the butter thief other polarities amplify this intimate conflict between butter and the thief, between the possessing and dispossessing power of love. Aspects of the story allude to a fundamental tension between childhood and adulthood, and to the very different affections that are appropriate to each. For this reason, as we shall see, it is rarely clear just how young or old the butter thief is. Sometimes he seems an infant, sometimes fully adolescent, and because of this ambiguity his story serves to express tensions arising not only from the interdependency of adults and children, but also from the inderdependency

of the sexes. These two frictions often reinforce one another, making a peculiarly powerful figure of the boy who excites amorous passions in the women who offer him their milk to drink. As a child, Krishna expresses the values of the most basic institution in human life, the family; as a thief he destroys those very same values and emerges as an antihero who defies all authority, legality, and filial solidarity.

The images of child and thief are unusually powerful in Indian society. It would be hard to think of a place where children are more shamelessly indulged and idolized, particularly the boys. In contrast to the rigid social strictures and often appalling physical harshness that attend adult life in the subcontinent, childhood seems a charmed and special state. Hence the ubiquitous calendars of the land display not only the youthful Krishna, a literal idol, but many other infants as well. Some attend to each other's ills in make-believe doctors' offices, others raise their hands to speak in parliament, and for Muslim audiences there are still others who recite the Qur'an at the age of eighteen or twenty months (figure 3).

It is the same with the thief. The modern media—now movies rather than calendars—project him everywhere. Titles such as "Three Thieves," "Thief of Thieves," and a host of others appeal to what is almost a national obsession, and few plots are complete without a robber or criminal of some kind. India can boast what must be the world's largest assortment of locks, suitable for protecting the inviolability of everything from palaces to biscuit boxes. And the reality of the threat of incursion was great enough in previous centuries to transfer the Hindi term "thug" to the English language. In a society that pays such marked attention to social differentiation and preserves such wide disparities of status and wealth, it is no wonder that the image of a thief, breaker of boundaries, should excite such special horror and fascination.

Even the image of Krishna as a thief needs to be justified by a kind of divine immunity. I remember a painful conversation in the heart of the Braj country recently when a normally good-natured devotee of Krishna chanced upon some translation work I had been doing and turned on me in shock and disgust. "Thievery!" she said, repeating the English word that had occurred in the translation. "How dare you use such a word to describe our dear little Krishna?" I tried to defend myself by pointing out that the word I had translated (*corī*) means just that in all its contexts. But this woman, whose daily devotion brought her before the



3. Child reciting the Qur'ān

butter thief, could not bear the idea that he would be interpreted as a robber in the outside world. His thievery could not possibly be confused with the thievery of others, as my translation seemed to her to be doing.

Some Hindus, then, regard the experience of the little thief as essentially incommunicable to outsiders. Others see it as so accessible that they simply burst into song to convey it. In both cases there is an intensity of feeling that compels one to try to understand the butter thief as he appears to Indians before making a more general assessment. This means not merely recording what Hindus themselves have to say about their mischievous child-

god, but analyzing the principal media in which they encounter him. These are not primarily discursive, theoretical media but expressive ones, and for north India two are definitive: the songs attributed to the celebrated sixteenth-century poet Sūr Dās, and the religious dramas (*rās līlās*) of his, and Krishna's, native Braj region. To understand the butter thief as he emerges in these settings is to venture into literary criticism and the analysis of dramatic structure, and to appreciate their background is to enter still other realms: legend and iconography. What follows, then, is necessarily a composite study, for to investigate a myth such as this is to study religious culture as a whole.

PLAN OF THE BOOK

We begin with background (Part I). First we survey allusions to the butter thief that occur in literature from all over the Indian subcontinent up to the sixteenth century, the time when Sūr Dās began to sing and the period when the *rās līlās* probably came to be known more or less in their modern form. It emerges that in the Puranas, brahmanical Sanskrit texts with a clear religious import, the mark of the butter thief is slight, especially at the beginning. Other Sanskrit and Prakrit texts, however—the *Bāla-carita*, a drama, and the Puranas of the Jain community—accord the butter thief a more prominent place. It seems they register the influence of popular religion more strongly. Most eloquent of all, not surprisingly, are vernacular texts, which are preserved from this early period primarily in south India. One learns more about the butter thief in Tamil devotional poetry than in any other early literary medium.

Sculpture is another important resource for this early period, and we examine it in Chapter 2. This visual record reinforces one's sense that the texts of the high, pan-Indian, Sanskrit tradition did slight a significant element in popular devotion to Krishna. The sculptures of the deeds of Krishna display his butter thievery in a role of relative prominence, and from early on. Moreover, because of the spareness of the medium—words are cheap, but stone is hard to carve—one can see with a clarity the texts sometimes obscure how Krishna's childhood became increasingly important in the personality of the god as time went on. In fact, as one arrives in the sixteenth century and surveys the Krishna statuary preserved so amply from the Vijayanagara domains of

south India, one sees scarcely anything else, and motifs related to the butter thief are especially common.

Once the stage has been set, we proceed to the most loving portrait of the butter thief that north India has ever produced. This is found in the *Sūr Sāgar*, the "Ocean" of verse attributed to Sūr Dās; the *Sūr Sāgar* is the subject of Part II, comprising the next three chapters. Sūr, as he is often called, composed in Braj Bhāṣā, the most influential dialect of literary Hindi and the one that is natively spoken in the Braj region where Krishna himself chose to dwell. Hindi has never produced a greater poet of Krishna's—or anyone's—childhood than Sūr, and Hindi speakers are often distressed that the world does not know him better. Indeed there can be nothing ordinary about Sūr's portraits of Krishna's childhood, for tradition pronounces the poet blind, even blind from birth. It follows that his depictions of the butter thief are entirely pure, uncolored by any worldly element. It is no wonder that the people of north India turn to him so automatically to find words to express their love of the butter thief. This is what happens every time one hears "I didn't eat the butter, Ma." It is the best known poem attributed to Sūr.

It is not, however, among the oldest, and that is an important point, for the *Sūr Sāgar* is more a cumulative tradition than a single text. It is composed of independent poems that were attributed to the blind poet from the sixteenth century onward; the oldest manuscripts contain only a fraction of the five thousand one finds in today's most influential edition. In the earlier strata of the *Sūr Sāgar*, which we begin to analyze in Chapter 3, the poet presents the two sides of the butter thief in clear contrast. In one genre, poems of satisfied vision (*darśan*), the poet feasts his eyes on the beautiful child who is indulged with gifts of butter and love. In another genre, comprising poems of complaint (*urahan*), the scandal of thievery bursts through. These are typically poems in which Yaśodā and the gopis lock horns over Krishna's alleged outrages—the former in his defense, the latter to accuse. Sūr refuses to resolve the tension between plaintiffs and defendants, thus drawing the audience into active participation in the debate, and he refuses equally to resolve the tension between this evidently provocative side of the butter thief and the side that is so charming as to "liquefy" the spectator at the very sight of it. Furthermore, an element of tension is present even in the affectionate poems of vision, for one sees a figure who is able to encompass the world's boldest contradictions, represented in visual

terms through the contrast of black and white. In Sūr's poems of vision and complaint, then, the basic contrast of butter and thief is expressed, and it is reinforced in subsidiary tensions that amplify the motif.

In Chapter 4 we spread our net more widely among the poems of the early *Sūr Sāgar* in an attempt to discover how the butter thief poems contribute to Sūr's image of Krishna as a whole. Again they prove to mediate between the two sides of various tensions. They act as a pivot between infancy and adolescence, between parental and amorous emotions, and between consummated love and love in separation. The poems of vision recapitulate the satisfaction of childhood, which Sūr depicts in other poems, but these moments of happiness turn to frustration once Krishna's adolescence sets in. The gopis find their beloved boy more absent than present, and their sad fate is sealed when he departs forever from the cowherding settlements of Braj to dwell in great Mathura. As the butter thief poems that emphasize vision serve as a culmination of the joys of Krishna's infancy, so the poems of complaint set the stage for this painful disjunction, and in the motif of Krishna as a thief of hearts this separation is closely tied to the effects of his butter thievery.

Later contributors to the *Sūr Sāgar*, whose compositions we explore in Chapter 5, reinforced this link between the butter thief and the thief of hearts, and extended the spell of thievery to realms where Sūr had not imagined it, especially in a number of episodes involving the cleverness of his favorite sweetheart among the gopis, Radha. But as the poetry expanded, it was modified, for in these later poems the dramatic tension that had been the hallmark of Sūr's poems of complaint was largely lost. These later poets were at pains to make clear that since the context of all Krishna's thievery is love, the gopis' protests could not be genuine. They espoused a softer theology whose effect was to remove the scandal of thievery and to leave in its place only the milder affections toward Krishna. Through the years, then, we see a gradual sweetening of the butter thief, an attempt to downplay and explain away the tart contours that must at the same time have continued to give this figure much of his interest.

We know that this tart side persisted because we can see it today, even in settings where such an irenic theology has become all but standard. Nowhere is this plainer than in the Krishna dramas of Brindavan, the greatest pilgrimage center in modern-day Braj. There Krishna's provocative actions are repeated for all

to see in a series of dramas (*rās lilās*) that provide the next major context in which we shall study the butter thief (Part III). This milieu is not entirely disjunct from the earlier one, for the plays now performed in Brindavan have been staged—with alterations, of course—since the time of Sūr himself. Furthermore these are musical dramas, and in them songs attributed to Sūr are sung more frequently than any others.

The *lilās* of Brindavan almost necessarily keep alive the tension that Sūr so vividly conveys in his poems of complaint. The action, to be dramatic, practically requires it, for all parties must state their case. A sense of the liveliness of both plot and dialogue will, I hope, be conveyed in the translation of the most frequently performed of the butter thief *lilās* (Chapter 6); partial translations of two others are also included (Chapter 7). As an analysis of the common elements in these dramas will show (Chapter 7), they are no less effective at keeping to the fore Sūr's emphasis on entranced vision than they are in realizing the dramatic tensions to which Sūr gave such great attention. In each of the butter thief *lilās* one is given the opportunity of seeing the central action not once but several times, and some of these scenes are truly classic tableaux, bringing to life moments that found expression not just in the poems of Sūr but in sculptures fashioned as much as a thousand years earlier. In the *rās lilās*, then, Krishna's buttery and thievish sides continue to coexist in an ongoing tension, and the moods of attraction and offense that they stimulate spread the tension among those who observe. The means are somewhat different from those that Sūr uses to hold these two poles together, but the effect is similar.

In Part IV we advance into the realm of interpretation. First we record what the people of Braj (*brajbāsīs*) themselves have to say about the butter thief (Chapter 8), and then we consider other perspectives—psychological and structural—that may further serve to clarify the force of the motif (Chapter 9). As in the case of the transition between the *Sūr Sāgar* and the *rās lilās*, the transition from drama to interpretation is a smooth one, for the plays themselves contain sermonic interludes intended to illuminate the deeper meanings of plot and verse. In these moments Krishna himself affirms that he would rather be called the butter thief than any other name, and begins to suggest why. It is partly, he says, because of the directness of it: when the gopis call him a thief, they address him with the intensity of a curse. One understands from the way he couches the whole matter that this curse

is a testimony of their love, so again the tension between attraction and offense is clear.

When one asks natives of Braj to comment further on the meaning of the butter thief, one comes at last to something like a systematic attempt to account for the tensions that seem endemic to the theme. *Brajbāsīs* explain how the butter thief *līlās* serve to draw a contrast between love, which is their ultimate subject, and propriety. When Krishna acts as a thief, they say, his purpose is to rend the fabric of respectable society in such a way as to make it plain that love goes totally beyond it and defies the very logic that holds it together. A butter pot upended and broken is a testament to the creative force of love, drawing into a single, measureless continuum that which the world only artificially separates. It takes the assault of a thief to make this plain.

Krishna breaks boundaries. As the final chapter will show, he breaks down some of the most basic boundaries that serve to structure human life, the boundaries of generation and sex. The roles associated with these give us our identity, but at the same time they force us into contradictions that we cannot solve once we have accepted the limitations that they imply. Such antinomies are not, however, impermeable to the gods, and the realm of myth provides an arena in which they can be, if not resolved, at least given a full narrative enactment. The myth of the butter thief does this, overcoming contradictions that men and women necessarily feel in relation to one another and that bedevil the interactions between children and adults. It does so in part by restating, in an inverse way, one of Hinduism's oldest and most influential myths, the cosmogonic churning of the milk ocean. One aspect of that story is its demonstration of how the oppositions that torment this world came to be; the story of the butter thief suggests in what dimension they are overcome.

Hinduism has a word for this dimension. It is a word we have already met—*līlā*—and it conveys the meaning of “play” not only in the thespian sense but in all other senses as well. It means fun, mischief, and ease, and it is what the child Krishna so evidently represents. Hindus have long affirmed that the gods created the world in an act of play and that they continue to play through it, but few images of divinity make that playfulness more vivid than that of the butter thief. By learning to play in Krishna, Hindus learn to contemplate some of life's most troubling antinomies with a measure of comprehension and joy. The butter thief makes it possible for them, and perhaps for us, to apprehend the limiting

conditions of our existence without having to conclude that they simply cancel one another out and render our lives meaningless. The hopeful image of a child automatically suggests this fructifying possibility, but even Krishna's more provocative side has this effect. When Hindus call him "the exemplar of thieves and rogues" (*cor jār śikhāmaṇi*) they remember that his stealing (*cor*) and womanizing (*jār*) are of a specific sort, and are intertwined. His tastes run almost exclusively to butter and hearts. Little else interests him, but that is enough to absorb him completely, as a game can be totally absorbing, a *līlā*. By exploring the legend, sculpture, poetry, drama, and conversation that surround the butter thief, we shall see with increasing clarity how and why this is so. And in the process we will come to understand why the butter thief is one of the most powerful symbols India has ever produced.

PART I

Before Sūr Dās

CHAPTER 1

The Tradition in Literature

SŪR AND HIS SOURCES

NO ONE has described the childhood of Krishna more lovingly than Sūr Dās. Every nuance and naughty caper of childhood seem to have been second nature to Sūr, and for half a millennium his compositions describing Krishna's infancy have reigned as the most popular in Braj Bhāṣā, Hindi's most influential literary dialect. Of all these poems, the most highly prized are those that tell of how Krishna pirated butter from his mother and the other gopis. This series of vignettes has come to be known as the butter thievery game (*mākhān corī līlā* in Braj Bhāṣā, *navanītacaurya* in Sanskrit), but there are two variations on the theme of thievery that also make their appearance. One is the *dān līlā*, in which a slightly older Krishna blocks the road as the gopis make their way to nearby Mathura to sell their milk products. In this somewhat more sophisticated form of butter thievery Krishna demands a tax, a tithe in butter and curd, before he will let the girls pass—or as the title of this episode or game (*līlā*) ironically puts it, a "gift" (*dān*). The other is the *cīr haraṇ līlā* (in Braj Bhāṣā; *vas-trāharaṇa* or *vastrāpaharaṇa* in Sanskrit), in which Krishna spirits away the gopis' clothes as they perform their early-morning ablutions in the Jumna River.

For a Westerner it is striking that a divinity should be depicted so young and so scandalous, and to a certain degree it is uncharacteristic even within the Hindu tradition. Classical brahmanical Sanskrit texts scarcely hint at Krishna's kleptomania; certainly they do not emphasize it. Hence there is ample reason to wonder where all this comes from. Most people, peasants and scholars alike, say that Sūr derived his inspiration in this respect, as in all others, from the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, the tenth-century text that has become, along with the *Bhagavad Gītā*, the most influential