

A MEASURE OF *MĀYĀ*:  
DELUSION AND POWER IN THE *BHAGAVAD GĪTĀ*, THE *BHĀGAVATA PURĀNA*, AND  
ŚAṄKARA'S COMMENTARIES

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*Māyā* is a term that relates to both a state of delusion and a magical, mysterious power exhibited in certain supernatural, creative acts. As a result of this rich meaning, *māyā* sustains a level of significance throughout the movement of Indian religions. Teun Goudriaan classifies *māyā* as “an important element in Indian religious history,”<sup>1</sup> and consequently there is widespread discussion of the term, including genealogies<sup>2</sup> devoted to the concept of *māyā*. In this paper I will focus on the *Bhagavad Gītā*, the Tenth Canto of the *Bhāgavata Purāna*, and Śaṅkara’s commentaries on the *Bhagavad Gītā* and the *Vedānta Sūtras* in order to depict common patterns in the use of *māyā*. Given that I have found the scholarly discussion of *māyā* to mostly just focus on how the term functions within the texts, I would like to consider how *māyā*’s roles in these texts relates to broader social forces.

The *Gītā*, the *Bhāgavata* and the commentaries of Śaṅkara were all composed after a significant transformation of Indian religious ideas. The practices outlined in the oldest Vedic texts emphasize the maintenance of the order of the universe (*dharma*) through proper ritual, sacrifice and worship of the gods. The oldest of these texts, the *Ṛg Veda*, structures society into a hierarchy according to three or four *varṇas*—the priestly *brahmin* class, the *kṣatriya* class of warriors and royalty, the *vaiśya* class of merchants and peasants, and sometimes the *sūdra* class of servants.<sup>3</sup> This categorization paired with the emphasis upon ritual asserted the *brahmin* priests as essential, elite members of society because they

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<sup>1</sup> Goudriaan, *Māyā Divine and Human*, 1.

<sup>2</sup> See Goudriaan, *Māyā Divine and Human*; Devanandan, *The Concept of Maya*; and Reyna, *The Concept of Māyā from the Vedas to the 20th Century*.

<sup>3</sup> Smith, *Classifying the Universe*, 8.

possessed the knowledge and ability to properly perform the rituals and maintain the dharmic order.

The development of the Upaniṣads and the later rise of the heterodox sects of Buddhism and Jainism led to a shift away from these practices towards a greater emphasis on the cultivation of metaphysical knowledge and renunciation. The Upaniṣads began to recognize the universe as unified in *brahman*, the single, unchanging, eternal reality. Not only does the unity of *brahman* pose a threat to categorization according to the *varṇas*, but *brahmins* were also less essential within the framework of the Upaniṣads because these texts emphasized *mokṣa*, liberation from the world through the development of an awareness of *brahman*, rather than a focus on ritual sacrifice. Though the *Gītā*, being the earliest of the texts I will consider, appears to directly respond to these ideological threats,<sup>4</sup> the tension between the brahmanical social order and recognition of *brahman* as an ultimate monism remained unresolved, and thus, that tension is still an underlying force that the commentaries of Śaṅkara and the *Bhāgavata* struggle to reconcile centuries later.

*Māyā* is an active concept within each of these texts' attempted reconciliations. *Māyā*, as it is described in the *Bhagavād Gītā*, the *Bhāgavata Purāna*, and Śaṅkara's commentaries, creates a veil that inhibits any person from discovering a complete understanding of the true unified nature of reality. Although Śaṅkara perceives *māyā* to be an obstacle in attaining salvation, in the *Gītā* and the *Bhāgavata māyā* acts as both an obstacle to and an aid in salvation. I think that considering the use of *māyā* in these starkly different frameworks—Śaṅkara's commentaries use abstractions and logic to discuss a monistic philosophy while the *Gītā* and the *Bhāgavata* contain more narrative and poetic

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<sup>4</sup> Malinar, *The Bhagavadgītā*, 258.

aspects in their theistic discussions—augments an understanding of the dynamics of the concept of *māyā*. *Māyā* has a slightly different significance in these discourses, yet drawing out a pattern of *māyā* amidst the differences presents a broader pattern of *māyā* and its correlation to power. Additionally, though the *Gītā* and the *Bhāgavata* contain democratic soteriologies, by relating their doctrines to the elitism of Śaṅkara’s commentaries through the concept of *māyā* I hope to show that these texts also exhibit an underlying elitism.

I perceive *māyā*’s connotation of universally deluding power to have subversive potential because according to Michel Foucault, “relations of power cannot themselves be established, consolidated nor implemented without the production, accumulation, circulation and functioning of a discourse.”<sup>5</sup> So *māyā* could negate pre-existing systems of power because the concept invalidates the truth of any human discourse due to our deluded states of ignorance.

However, the texts assert their truth amidst a specific construction of *māyā*, claiming that their revelations somehow transcend *māyā*’s universal deluding effect. This pattern then sways those who accept the texts to submit to the indisputable truths in the hopes that acting in accordance with the truths will grant them liberation. The concept of *māyā* thereby reinforces the brahmanical order of power in these discourses,<sup>6</sup> as their claims to truth are elevated by *māyā*’s invalidation of all others. Accepting that “we are

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<sup>5</sup> Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, 93.

<sup>6</sup>Foucault (1978) describes power as “the moving substrate of force relations which, by virtue of their inequality, constantly engender states of power, but the latter are always local and unstable” (92–93). Thus, I am not intending to depict a brahmanical institution of power that allows for the static subjugation of lower castes. Instead I aim to explore how the discourse on *māyā* relates to the dynamic struggle within brahmanical power relations.

subjected to the production of truth through power and we cannot exercise power except through the production of truth,”<sup>7</sup> I will consider how *māyā* relates to power and the “production of truth” in the *Bhagavad Gītā*, the Tenth Canto of the *Bhāgavata Purāna*, and Śaṅkara’s commentaries. I hope to show that in these texts the principle of *māyā* indicates and perpetuates a power imbalance in the brahmanical social order because within the texts the deluding power of *māyā* only allows one to discover the truth and attain liberation through subjugation.

### **A Brief Survey of *Māyā***

Tracing *māyā* back to the oldest remaining Indian manuscripts, acts of *māyā* directly correspond to a flux in power. In the *Ṛg Veda*, the term *māyā* refers to a supernatural power, beyond complete comprehension, used by the possessor of the power to move towards some intended end. The power was not limited to the gods but could be employed by exceptional humans as well. *Māyā* could be used either to create an outward appearance out of nothing or reflexively by the possessor of the power to change his or her form. In one case the *Ṛg Veda* describes a group of magicians concealing themselves as wild animals through their *māyā* and in another passage attributes the ability of Varuna, the god of water, to present the ocean as unchanged despite the incoming flow of water from the rivers to his *māyā*.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, the ancient text associates Indra’s ability to steadily support the sky with his *māyā*.<sup>9</sup> The god Indra also takes various forms through his *māyā*. He often

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<sup>7</sup>Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, 93.

<sup>8</sup> Goudriaan, *Māyā Divine and Human*, 3.

<sup>9</sup> Forsthoefel, “*Māyā*”, 821.

uses this creative power when he competes with the *asuras*, other divine beings in competition with the Vedic deities for power, while the *asuras* attempt to overcome Indra with their own *māyā*.<sup>10</sup> In the *Ṛg Veda*, Indra transforms himself into a ram and a horsetail, for example, and he is also associated with a raptor.<sup>11</sup> In addition to the emphasis on these deities' power, the text does allude to the illusory nature of the power in verse 10.54.2, which refers to the illusion of Indra's battles.<sup>12</sup> Shastri notes that the two most common meanings of the word *māyā* in the *Ṛg Veda* are "power" and "deception."<sup>13</sup>

These connotations carried over in the transition from the Vedas to the Upaniṣads but *māyā* also became associated with other philosophical principles in the process. P.D. Devanandan claims that verse I.16 of the *Praśna Upaniṣad* is the first text to use *māyā* to describe humanity's state of ignorance (*avidyā*).<sup>14</sup> Connecting *māyā* with *avidyā* extends the deceptive quality of *māyā* to pervade all of creation. The *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad*, also conveying *māyā* as a universal force, establishes that the cosmic Lord (Śiva in this case) employs *māyā* to disguise himself through the creation of the material world.<sup>15</sup> The text states: "know then that *prakṛti* is *māyā* and the wielder of *māyā* is the Great Lord."<sup>16</sup> *Prakṛti*, in the dualistic Sāṃkhyan school of philosophy, is the active, changing material of creation, consisting of the three *guṇas* (qualities), and is distinct from *puruṣa* which is pure consciousness. Creation then results from the interaction of *prakṛti* and *puruṣa*. So in this

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<sup>10</sup>Goudriaan, *Māyā Divine and Human*, 2–3.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, 5–6.

<sup>12</sup> Forsthoefel, "Māyā", 821.

<sup>13</sup> Shastri, *The Doctrine of Māyā In the Philosophy of Vedānta*, 10.

<sup>14</sup> Devanandan, *The Concept of Maya*, 56.

<sup>15</sup> Goudriaan, *Māyā Divine and Human*, 2–3.

<sup>16</sup> Forsthoefel, "Māyā", 821.

verse *māyā* is used for the creation of the universe and is associated with the activity and change of the phenomenal world. Thus, in the development of these later texts, *māyā* becomes a universal, cosmogonic force that results in humans misinterpreting their true nature.

Jan Gonda aptly encompasses the concept of *māyā* through ages of Indian thought, defining *māyā* as “an incomprehensible wisdom and power enabling its possessor, or being able itself, to create, devise, contrive, effect, or do something.”<sup>17</sup> So the power of *māyā* provides the possessor of this power with the ability to mediate between him/her/itself and the audience. The term itself is neutral; thus the manner in which the possessor of *māyā* utilizes the power and the effects on those experiencing *māyā* determine whether the consequences of *māyā* will be beneficial or detrimental to a certain party.<sup>18</sup>

In the *Bhagavad Gītā* and the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, Kṛṣṇa’s *māyā* seems similar to *māyā* in the *Ṛg Veda* and the Upaniṣads insofar as Kṛṣṇa uses *māyā* both to create a finite form of himself and to create the entire material universe. Meanwhile, Śaṅkara focuses on the connection between *māyā* and the delusive nature of the material world. Throughout this survey and as we will see in both of these models, the basic relationship between *māyā* and power becomes clear: the dynamics of *māyā* parallel Foucault’s understanding of power as “moving substrate” through which the possessor of *māyā* often creates an imbalanced power struggle by performing an act through *māyā* that cannot be reciprocated by those who are influenced most by *māyā*.

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<sup>17</sup> Gonda, “*Māyā*,” 166.

<sup>18</sup> Goudriaan, *Māyā Divine and Human*, 2.

## Śaṅkara's Commentaries

Most assume Śaṅkara lived between 788 and 820 CE in Southern India.<sup>19</sup> If we accept that Śaṅkara lived in Southern India at that time, then he would have lived in a milieu similar to the one out of which the *Bhāgavata Purāna* arose. He would have been living in a time intensely influenced with the rise of *bhakti* (devotion) in both Vaiṣṇava and Śaiva sects. The Tamil Alvar poets<sup>20</sup> who expressed elements of *bhakti*, were often not *brahmins* themselves, and it seems that there was a struggle between the development of *bhakti* and the preservation of brahmanical orthodoxy.<sup>21</sup>

Śaṅkara professes an extreme monism and seeks to present a coherent philosophy that outlined the nature of *brahman*, and the means to developing a complete awareness of *brahman*. His understanding of *māyā* within his monistic philosophy is present in his commentaries on the *Bhagavad Gītā* and the *Vedānta Sūtras*.

Both the *Bhagavad Gītā* and the *Vedānta Sūtras* were texts that gained prominence before Śaṅkara's lifetime as they attempted to clarify material previously developed in the Upaniṣads. The *Gītā*'s discussion of *māyā* naturally leads Śaṅkara to consider *māyā* as it presents itself in the text. This commentary provides a natural connection between my

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<sup>19</sup> Suthren Hirst, *Śaṅkara's Advaita Vedānta*, 25.

<sup>20</sup>The Ālvārs were related to a history of Tamil Kṛṣṇa devotion and merged "southern '*caṅkam*' culture with this new form of sectarian Kṛṣṇaism" (Hardy 1983: 241). The *caṅkam* culture emphasized intense ecstatic experiences of possession by the divine incited by intense "sensual" worship (Hardy 1983:141). Their poetry included emotional (potentially erotic) anthropomorphized depictions of the environment (Hardy 1983: 143). A "highly emotional form of bhakti" thus characterized the Ālvār movement as it integrated Kṛṣṇaism with *caṅkam* culture (Hardy 1983: 242).

<sup>21</sup> Suthren Hirst, *Śaṅkara's Advaita Vedānta*, 27.



study of Śaṅkara and the *Gītā* and the *Bhāgavata*, which elaborates upon the *bhakti* described in the *Gītā*. Additionally, many consider his commentary on the *Vedānta Sūtras* to be his “most important work.”<sup>22</sup> It is a much more extensive commentary than his brief commentary on the *Gītā* and therefore provides a more comprehensive representation of his philosophy. The *Vedānta Sūtras*, composed as early as the 5<sup>th</sup> century, hold a “central position” in Vedāntic<sup>23</sup> thought as they attempt to summarize the essential message of the Upaniṣads by primarily addressing the question of the relationship between *ātman*, the individual self, and *brahman*.<sup>24</sup> Śaṅkara consequently considers *māyā* in this commentary because the concept closely relates to the illusion of the individual being disconnected from *brahman*. By studying Śaṅkara’s thought through these two texts together, I should be able to establish an adequate understanding of the scope of his philosophy and the role of *māyā* within it.

Though *māyā* is not a term frequently used by Śaṅkara, it is still a core concept in his advaitic philosophy. Hacker contends that the word *māyāvāda* (illusionism), which has been commonly used to identify Śaṅkara’s school of philosophy, is inappropriate as a title for his doctrine because he rarely uses the term *māyā* and “certainly develops no theory of *māyā*.”<sup>25</sup> Śaṅkara usually only employs the term when the texts to which he refers prompt him to do so. He more frequently uses the terms *avidyā* and *nāmarūpa* (name and form).<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Malkovsky, *The Role of Divine Grace in the Soteriology of Śaṅkarācārya*, 20.

<sup>23</sup> Vedānta means “end of the Vedas” and refers to the philosophy developed in the Upaniṣads and the following interpretations of those texts.

<sup>24</sup> Adams, *Structure and Meaning*, 2, 26.

<sup>25</sup> Hacker, *Philology and Confrontation*, 78.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, 78.

Hirst cites two potential reasons for Śaṅkara's hesitancy to use the term *māyā*, the first being that *māyā* was a central term in Buddhist doctrine, and Śaṅkara's use of other terms like *avidyā* and *nāmarūpa* may have resulted from a desire to distinguish himself from Buddhist doctrine. A second potential reason for his reluctant usage of the term derives from his primary focus on the current state of humans and the corresponding implications for liberation rather than the original causes of the human state.<sup>27</sup> Because *māyā* is associated with the mysterious power of an individual god or distinct power-holder, discussing *māyā* could easily lead to the consideration of theodicean questions addressing *māyā*. By avoiding the specific term, Śaṅkara may be attempting to direct his disciples away from a focus on questions of creation towards a focus on how they can liberate themselves from their current state. Despite Śaṅkara's infrequent usage of the term *māyā*, Hacker argues that *māyāvāda* is an appropriate title for Śaṅkara's doctrine "if the word indicates only allegiance to the school of illusionism, the theory that the phenomenal world is unreal."<sup>28</sup>

Further, the concepts of *māyā*, *avidyā*, and *nāmarūpa* are inextricably related, and thus we must consider how Śaṅkara employs these other terms in addition to *māyā* in order to understand his theory of *māyā*. As previously mentioned, in the Upaniṣads *māyā* was used to describe *avidyā*. Śaṅkara maintains this connection as he seeks to expound upon ideas discussed in the Upaniṣads. Hirst explains that Śaṅkara understood *nāmarūpa* to stem from *avidyā* and to be characterized by *māyā*.<sup>29</sup> In other words, the differentiation

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<sup>27</sup> Suthren Hirst, *Śaṅkara's Advaita Vedānta*, 94.

<sup>28</sup> Hacker, *Philology and Confrontation*, 78.

<sup>29</sup> Suthren Hirst, *Śaṅkara's Advaita Vedānta*, 98.

of the world through classification by name and form (*nāmarūpa*) resulted from our ignorance (*avidyā*) of the true unity of *brahman* and is ultimately not real but only an illusion (*māyā*). The subtle differences among these concepts are slight to start with, and Hacker notes that Śaṅkara even equates the three terms with each other several times in his commentaries on the Īśā and Kaṭha Upaniṣads.<sup>30</sup> I contend that the strong connection between these concepts and Śaṅkara's frequent usage of the terms *avidyā* and *nāmarūpa* to convey a theory of the illusory nature of the apparent world indicates the significance of the concept of *māyā* in his philosophy.

Śaṅkara's philosophy rests upon the notion that the entire manifest world of multiplicity is ultimately not the true nature of reality. He claims that the self is really *brahman* onto which a misleading, differentiated world is superimposed. In Śaṅkara's opening commentary on the *Vedānta Sūtras*, he explains that "it is wrong to superimpose upon the subject—whose Self is intelligence, and which has for its sphere the notion of the Ego—the object whose sphere is the notion of the Non-Ego, and the attributes of the object."<sup>31</sup> Here Śaṅkara alludes to what he identifies as the primary problem of superimposition which deludes humans from knowing *brahman*. He explains that these superimpositions can result from identifying oneself with the well-being of their family, with attributes of their body, with attributes of their senses (if one thinks 'I am blind' for example), or with one's "desire, intention, doubt, determination, and so on." He characterizes the superimposition of what is not the true self onto what is the true self as

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<sup>30</sup> Hacker, *Philology and Confrontation*, 80.

<sup>31</sup> Bādarāyana, *The Vedānta Sūtras*, I.1.1.

*avidyā*.<sup>32</sup> As long as someone remains deluded by this misidentification, he or she remains fixed in *saṃsāra* and cannot discover the awareness of *brahman* necessary for liberation.<sup>33</sup> Therefore, the goal of Śaṅkara's doctrine is "freeing one's self from that wrong notion which is the cause of all evil and attaining thereby the knowledge of the absolute unity of the Self."<sup>34</sup> Thus, the path to liberation lies in the realization of the nature of the self as *brahman*.

Realizing *brahman* is not a straightforward process. Śaṅkara asserts that the path to liberation is ideally through development of knowledge. For example, in his commentary on the *Gītā* he refutes the emphasis on action in its doctrine of *karmayoga* (the path of action): "Liberation is attained only from the knowledge of Reality, and not from its combination with action."<sup>35</sup> However, phrases like 'knowledge of *brahman*' are actually contradictions in the sense that they place *brahman*, the eternal subject, as the object of realization, even though *brahman*, "as the eternal subject [...] is never an object."<sup>36</sup> So logically *brahman* cannot then be conceived of as an object of knowledge.

Because *brahman* is unified and no alternative reality ultimately exists, any attempt to describe the nature of *brahman* through language would fail. Language inevitably ascribes an object to *brahman* when it is used to describe *brahman*, and therefore, the attempt to reveal the nature of *brahman* through discourse theoretically perpetuates superimposition of objects upon the self. Therefore, as Hirst articulately writes,

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<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*, I.1.1.

<sup>33</sup> Suthren Hirst, *Śaṅkara's Advaita Vedānta*, 32.

<sup>34</sup> Bādarāyana, *The Vedānta Sūtras*, I.1.1.

<sup>35</sup> Gambhirananda, trans. Bhagavad Gītā, 2.11.

<sup>36</sup> Bādarāyana, *The Vedānta Sūtras*, i, I.1.4.

“knowledge of *brahman* is not knowledge of an object but the state in which all objectivizing superimpositions have been removed.”<sup>37</sup> Now the soteriological path of knowledge that Śāṅkara asserts seems less clear. How exactly does one attain the ability to relinquish an objectifying, categorical understanding of reality that perpetuates *māyā* and thereby rediscover *brahman*?

Śāṅkara’s explains that logic and argumentation alone are insufficient in developing an understanding of the true nature of the world. *Māyā* forces a seeker of *mokṣa* to rely on an external source of knowledge because an individual’s reason is characterized by ignorance. Śāṅkara argues that the study of scripture provides a person with the necessary source to fully re-identify the self with *brahman*. He asserts that “Brahman is the source, i.e. the cause of the great body of Scripture.”<sup>38</sup> For Śāṅkara, scripture “is the expression of the consciousness of the Self (*ātman*).”<sup>39</sup> He further elevates scripture by characterizing it as eternal in his commentary on verse I.3.28 of the *Vedānta Sūtras*: “The authoritativeness of the Veda has been proved ‘from its independence,’ basing on the original (eternal) connexion [*sic*] of the word with its sense (‘the thing signified’).”<sup>40</sup> So Śāṅkara asserts the eternal nature of language as inherently related to the nature of what it describes in an attempt to establish the reliability and authenticity of scriptural language.<sup>41</sup>

He does admit that knowledge developed through “direct perception” may contradict the apparent meaning of a text. However if this is the case then “one has to

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<sup>37</sup> Suthren Hirst, *Śāṅkara’s Advaita Vedānta*, 40.

<sup>38</sup> Bādarāyana, *The Vedānta Sūtras*, I.1.3.

<sup>39</sup> Malkovsky, *The Role of Divine Grace in the Soteriology of Śāṅkarācārya*, 39.

<sup>40</sup> Bādarāyana, *The Vedānta Sūtras*, i, 201.

<sup>41</sup> Suthren Hirst, *Śāṅkara’s Advaita Vedānta*, 52–53.

assume that the intended meaning of the text is different.”<sup>42</sup> So this admission invalidates the interpretation of the scripture not the scripture itself, and thus maintains scripture’s inherent truth. Malkovsky explains that Śaṅkara prohibits the use of reason independent of scripture despite the fact that reason may be used in support of scripture.<sup>43</sup> Through the establishment of this authority of scripture, Śaṅkara seeks to prove scripture to be the necessary source for developing knowledge of *brahman*.

Śaṅkara’s claim here is tenuous and problematic to say the least because language is thoroughly connected with the differentiated world of name and form and therefore *avidyā* and *māyā* as well. If everything in the categorized world, the world in which language operates, were characterized by *māyā* as Śaṅkara claims then it would follow that a scholar would have no better potential in achieving liberation than an illiterate peasant untrained in the logic and nuances of argumentation. However, Śaṅkara must uphold the validity of scripture to follow the conventional tradition of *brahmin* theologians. Malkovsky explains that “Śaṅkara is not so much a philosopher, whose method would depend on experience and reason alone, as he is a theologian or *śrutivādin*, i.e. one who accepts revelation and scripture as the final authority in all religious matters.”<sup>44</sup> While this veneration of scripture stands in stark contrast to the careful logic he employs in other passages, his adherence to scripture limits the potential sources for truth and liberation within the world of *māyā* to only those people qualified for scriptural study.

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<sup>42</sup> Gambhirananda, trans. Bhagavad Gītā, 18.66.

<sup>43</sup> Malkovsky, *The Role of Divine Grace in the Soteriology of Śaṅkarācārya*, 41.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid*, 27.

By following this tradition of scriptural orthodoxy, Śaṅkara outlines an explicit, elitist hierarchy in his commentaries. He refers to past scripture to assert that “the Śūdras are not qualified (for the knowledge of Brahman).” The *śūdras* are inadequate, according to Śaṅkara because, as previous scripture asserts, they are not eligible for *upanayana*, the initiatory ritual preparing a student for scriptural study.<sup>45</sup> This relates to the doctrine of *dharma* (duty/order) of *brahmins* that establishes their inherent ability and obligation to interpret religious texts while the *dharma* of lower castes does not designate them to do the same. Similarly, Śaṅkara determines that renunciation is a requirement for experiencing *mokṣa*,<sup>46</sup> and only *brahmins* are eligible to renounce worldly life while the lower three castes must perform the rites they are prescribed.<sup>47</sup> Consequently, Śaṅkara makes it clear that only members of the traditional *brahmin* caste have the potential to attain liberation in their lives. Thus his doctrine accepts an established caste hierarchy by elevating scripture and is intended solely for an audience of *brahmin* scholars. Additionally, his focus on scriptural authority reinforces the necessity of *gurus* for those seeking liberation. For Śaṅkara, a *guru* possesses a profound capacity for reasoning which allows him to interpret scriptural nuances and resolve apparent paradoxes in the texts. He compares a *guru* to a boat that can transport someone pursuing *mokṣa* “across the ocean of *saṃsāra*” to *brahman*.<sup>48</sup> So a *guru* has the unique ability to mediate between *brahman* and the deluded student.

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<sup>45</sup> Bādarāyana, *The Vedānta Sūtras*, I.3.36.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid*, III.4.50

<sup>47</sup> Victor, *Social Philosophy of Vedānta*, 135–136.

<sup>48</sup> Malkovsky, *The Role of Divine Grace in the Soteriology of Śaṅkarācārya*, 83.

Śaṅkara's twofold assertion of scripture as the source of knowledge of *brahman* and the *guru* as necessary for proper interpretation of scripture supported the importance of Śaṅkara's position in society. His commentaries sustain the authority of *brahmins* by claiming that only they have the potential to transcend *māyā* and experience liberation, while the other castes are trapped in a state of inferior delusion. He uses the concept of *māyā* to establish a system for separating what is false (the entire differentiated world) from what can be deemed true (scripture and *brahman*). Scripture then becomes the sole source of truth in this world because he connects it to *brahman*. This distinction of truth could be thought of as what Foucault considers a "régime of truth," as it circularly relates to brahmanical "systems of power."<sup>49</sup> This system of liberation through the *guru* and the *guru's* discourse could only be produced by a brahmanical social order, and it also extends the effects of that order because the discourse determines that *mokṣa* required compliance with the sacred texts and the teacher influencing those seeking liberation to rely upon scholars such as Śaṅkara.

### **The *Bhagavad Gītā* and the *Bhāgavata Purāna***

While Śaṅkara's commentaries exhibit an admittedly elitist doctrine, the brahminism of the *Gītā* and the *Bhāgavata* is not always as apparent. The texts both attempt to synthesize and assimilate various ideas and practices into a coherent doctrine which increases the ambiguity of the texts' social implications. However, I believe that the texts' connection with brahminism becomes clear after considering the function of *māyā* within their narratives.

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<sup>49</sup> Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, 132–133.



Through its synthesis, the *Gītā*, written sometime between 400 BCE and 400 CE,<sup>50</sup> seems to be a response to the changing religious landscape discussed in the introduction of this paper.<sup>51</sup> The text itself is set within the larger context of the *Mahābhārata* epic which describes the Kurukshetra war, fought between cousins. The *Gītā* is set as a dialogue between Arjuna, a skilled warrior hesitating to fight his family, and an incarnation of Kṛṣṇa, the supreme deity in the *Gītā*, as Arjuna's charioteer. Throughout the course of their conversation Kṛṣṇa attempts to convince Arjuna to fight. Kṛṣṇa's teachings in the *Gītā* synthesize many philosophical principles as he develops his argument justifying participation in the war.

Though the Tenth Canto of the *Bhāgavata Purāna* was written much later,<sup>52</sup> it shares many similarities with the *Gītā*. Both texts emphasize a doctrine of *bhakti* (devotion). The

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<sup>50</sup> Some scholars believe the text was written in response to the threat that the rise of Buddhism presented to brahminism during the rule of Aśoka (3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE). The social reforms of Aśoka, a ruler of the Mauryan Empire sympathetic to Buddhism, contributed to the rise of Buddhism. Aśoka's reforms included a social philosophy supporting a religious class that paired ascetics with the *brahmins* and the ban of animal sacrifices (Olivelle 2005: 38–39). Aśoka also developed his understanding of the role of the ruler as a “model for his people” and reinterpreted *dharma* to refer to the proper “moral and social conduct” of the people (Malinar 2007: 262–263). Others date the text as late as the Gupta Period (350–500 CE), arguing that the *Gītā* could only have successfully synthesized the divergent ideas it does in a time of peace such as the stability established in the reign of the Gupta Dynasty (Malinar 2007: 262–263).

<sup>51</sup> Malinar, *The Bhagavadgītā*, 258.

<sup>52</sup> Though there have been attempts to date the text as early as the 6<sup>th</sup> and as late as 11<sup>th</sup> century CE, Daniel Sheridan (1986: 6) cautions against supposing too early of a date because the text is not referred to in the works of the South Indian theologians, Yamunā (10<sup>th</sup> century) and Rāmānuja (12<sup>th</sup> century), who most likely would have responded to the text if it had been widely circulating at the time. Since it appears to have been influenced by the Tamil Ālvārs who

text further elaborates the *Gītā's* doctrine of *bhakti*, even quoting and alluding to the *Gītā* at times. Krishna Sharma explains that “[i]f the *Bhagavad Gītā* is regarded as the earliest scriptural text on *bhakti*, the *Bhāgavata Purāna* is recognized as its more articulate and exuberant expression.”<sup>53</sup> The latter text also resembles the *Gītā* in its attempted reconciliation of brahmanical orthodoxy with devotionism and the establishment of Kṛṣṇa as the highest god, often described in a manner that relates Kṛṣṇa to *brahman*.<sup>54</sup>

Friedhelm Hardy classifies the *Bhāgavata* as an “*opus universale*” because the text sought to unite brahminism, Vedāntic philosophy, and emotional and aesthetic characteristics of South Indian religion and religious poetry of the Ālvārs.<sup>55</sup> Due to this influence in the *Bhāgavata*, the text is imbued with poetic descriptions of erotic interactions between Kṛṣṇa and the *gopīs* as well as other folk tales of Kṛṣṇa’s childhood in Vraj. He is not portrayed exclusively as the teacher figure that he is for Arjuna in the *Gītā*. This text is structured as a story narrated by the sage Śuka to the dying King Parīkṣit, the only remaining member of the Yadava clan after the bloody, fratricidal war of the *Mahābhārata*. In the dialogue between the king and the sage, Kṛṣṇa is depicted as a child growing up and enjoying his *līlā* (play) in a cowherding community in Vraj. Some readers

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experienced their prominence in the eighth and ninth centuries, Sheridan (1986: 7) assumes a date of composition around 900 CE and an origin in South India.

<sup>53</sup> Sharma, *Bhakti and the Bhakti Movement*, 120.

<sup>54</sup> The exact origins of Kṛṣṇa of the *Gītā* and the *Bhāgavata* and how his paramount status in these texts was established are not altogether clear. Kṛṣṇa is not identified as the same deity in earlier Vedic texts. Most scholars believe that multiple deities were syncretized into this figure of Kṛṣṇa. Once the process of assimilation occurred, Kṛṣṇa retained certain characteristics from his origins in older devotional cults but now related to Vedāntic and brahmanical ideals as the supreme orthodox god (Kosambi 1978: 254; Jaiswal 1967: 39, 80).

<sup>55</sup> Hardy, 493.

are consequently inclined, as Ithamar Theodor is, to focus on the aesthetic nature of the text as its “height or depth” in stimulating an understanding of the divine.<sup>56</sup> However, solely focusing on the text’s aesthetic character could lead to neglect of the philosophical and social tensions embedded in the text which I would like to consider. I think that a comparison of the *Gītā* and *Bhāgavata* through the concept of *māyā* and *bhakti* as my bridge will allow me to address these tensions.

Kṛṣṇa’s *māyā* in the *Gītā* and the *Bhāgavata* displays multiple aspects. On one hand, the use of the term in the *Gītā* suggests that *māyā* is Kṛṣṇa’s power to control *prakṛti* which includes Kṛṣṇa’s ability to take an incarnate form. Meanwhile, the term can also refer to the product of Kṛṣṇa’s creation itself in which case *prakṛti*, under Kṛṣṇa’s power, can be equated with *māyā* as a source of delusion,<sup>57</sup> similar to the earlier passage I cited in the *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad*. In the *Bhāgavata*, *māyā* also refers to Kṛṣṇa power over *prakṛti* and leads to the delusion of his devotees. *Māyā* relates to both Kṛṣṇa’s power and the product of his power. The *Bhāgavata* personifies Kṛṣṇa’s *māyā*, or *Yogamāyā*, as an aspect of the Goddess who is under the jurisdiction of Kṛṣṇa.<sup>58</sup> Despite this difference in the *Bhāgavata*, both texts present *māyā* as Kṛṣṇa’s power over creation, and in verse 7.15 of the *Gītā* and throughout the *Bhāgavata* the two texts refer to the deceptive nature of *māyā*.<sup>59</sup>

In these two texts *māyā* aids in the attempted exaltation of Kṛṣṇa as the ultimate ruler of the universe and the supreme self. Both texts use the concept of *māyā* to present Kṛṣṇa as “both the mighty ruler and creator of the world and its dharmic order, as well as

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<sup>56</sup> Theodor, "Ascending Notions of Personhood in the Bhāgavata Purāṇa," 52.

<sup>57</sup> Malinar, *The Bhagavadgītā*, 96–97.

<sup>58</sup> Bryant, trans. *Krishna*, 10.2.14, 10.4.13, 10.13.37, 10.56.36.

<sup>59</sup> Gambhirananda, trans. *Bhagavad Gītā*, 7.15.

the ever-liberated and transcendent ‘highest self’ (*paramātmān*; *puruṣottama*).<sup>60</sup> In verse 4.6 of the *Gītā* Kṛṣṇa explains to Arjuna: “Though I am birthless, undecaying by nature, and the Lord of beings, (still) by subjugating My *Prakṛti*, I take birth by means of My own *Māyā*.”<sup>61</sup> The *Bhāgavata* similarly describes Kṛṣṇa, “[a]s the supreme being...He has assumed the form of a human through his divine power called *māyā*.”<sup>62</sup> Both passages recognize the tension between Kṛṣṇa as the supreme being and his ability to incarnate himself, but recognize *māyā* as the source of Kṛṣṇa’s paradoxical power which allows him to intervene on Earth while remaining transcendent to this world. Sheridan eloquently identifies *māyā* as “the mediating principle of the *Bhāgavata* between the formless Lord and the formed universe, allowing and preserving the non-duality of the Bhagavān and also the reality of the universe.”<sup>63</sup> This statement seems to aptly apply to the *Gītā* as well. *Māyā*’s connotation of illusion allows for the resolution that Kṛṣṇa’s incarnation is not ultimately real in relation to his status as the highest self (and is an illusion in that sense). Therefore, he can take action in an incarnated form while remaining ultimately unaffected by that action.

The two texts thereby depict the supreme Kṛṣṇa as seeking to uphold *dharma*, which now refers to both a cosmic order and an individual’s respective duty, through the incarnations that *māyā* makes possible. In the *Bhāgavata*, Kṛṣṇa explains that he “assumed a different body for the protection of *dharma* and also the elimination of non-*dharma*

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<sup>60</sup> Malinar, *The Bhagavadgītā*, 6.

<sup>61</sup> Gambhirananda, trans. Bhagavad Gītā, 4.6.

<sup>62</sup> Bryant, trans. *Krishna*, 10.1.7.

<sup>63</sup> Sheridan, *The Advaitic Theism of the Bhāgavata Purāna*, 31.

whenever it arises in the course of time.”<sup>64</sup> Continued through the narrative, Kṛṣṇa’s incarnation is consistently associated with the preservation of *dharma*.<sup>65</sup> In the *Gītā* he proclaims, “[t]hese worlds will be ruined if I do not perform action. And I shall become the agent of intermingling (of castes), and shall be destroying these beings.”<sup>66</sup> Therefore, Kṛṣṇa “take[s] birth by means of [his] own *Māyā* [...] whenever there is a decline of virtue and an increase of vice[...]for the protection of the pious, the destruction of the evil-doers, and establishing virtue.”<sup>67</sup> So the texts present *māyā* as Kṛṣṇa’s paradoxical power of creation and through this concept are able to identify Kṛṣṇa with the dharmic code.

Accordingly, Kṛṣṇa guides Arjuna when he hesitates to follow his *dharma*. In verse 3.35 and verse 18.47, Kṛṣṇa explains to Arjuna that performing one’s own *dharma* poorly is better than performing another’s *dharma* well.<sup>68</sup> Yet Arjuna finds himself troubled by a convoluted dilemma as he stands on a battlefield between two armies consisting of his family on either side. He must either fight to fulfill his *kṣatriya-dharma* and kill his cousins, transgressing his family *dharma* in the process, or do the opposite. Either way, he will violate an aspect of his duty. The text is more focused on *kṣatriya-dharma*, however.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Bryant, trans. *Krishna*, 10.50.10.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid*, 10.4.39, 10.27.5, 10.33.26–27, 10.69.14, 10.89.60, 10.90.50 for example.

<sup>66</sup> Gambhirananda, trans. Bhagavad Gītā, 3.24.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid*, 4.6–7.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid*, 18.47.

<sup>69</sup> The legitimacy of the *kṣatriya varṇa* had been threatened by the development of the ideal of non-violence. Hildebeitel (2011: 518) argues that an “all-encompassing Brahmanical social order” was directly related to the status of the *kṣatriya varṇa* and the rapport between the *brahmin* and *kṣatriya varṇas*. So the texts attempt to restore the relationship between these castes, ideally preserving the potential royal patronage of *brahmins*, and attempt to redeem the

Kṛṣṇa, as the preserver of *dharma* manifesting himself as Arjuna's charioteer, consequently instructs Arjuna to fight in accordance with his duty as a warrior. The deity responds to Arjuna's hesitations with a series of arguments such as a lecture on the impermanence of the body, and the idea that the material world is ultimately unreal because it is subject to change and decay,<sup>70</sup> and a threat of the dishonor and shame Arjuna would experience by not fighting.<sup>71</sup> Thus the power of *māyā* allows Kṛṣṇa to take the form of Arjuna's charioteer and dictate to him an explicit argument outlining the supreme importance of *kṣatriya-dharma* despite the lack of clarity surrounding Arjuna's predicament. Throughout the argument, Kṛṣṇa alludes to the idea of *svadharma* (one's own *dharma*) which supports the caste system because *svadharma* emphasizes distinctions between the four *varṇas*, suggesting that every individual possesses inherent attributes according to their caste and those attributes dictate their duty.<sup>72</sup>

Like the *Gītā*, the *Bhāgavata* recognizes *dharma* as an essential element in its doctrine. While the *Gītā* primarily focuses on *kṣatriya-dharma*, the *Bhāgavata* enforces the importance of householder *dharma* through the lectures of Kṛṣṇa. Kṛṣṇa, after provoking the *gopīs* to abandon their duties and come to Kṛṣṇa one night, tells those *gopīs* that the "highest *dharma* of a woman is to serve her husband faithfully, to ensure the well-being of her relatives, and to nourish her children."<sup>73</sup> The text later describes Kṛṣṇa with 16,100

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*kṣatriyas'* authority by arguing that the maintenance of the dharmic order requires violent action at times.

<sup>70</sup> Gambhirananda, Swami, trans. Bhagavad Gītā, 2.18.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid*, 2.35–36.

<sup>72</sup> Hildebeitel, *Dharma*, 540.

<sup>73</sup> Bryant, trans. *Krishna*, 10.29.24.

wives,<sup>74</sup> and with each one, he adheres to “the strictest standards of *dharma* as expressed in the Veda, [and] continually demonstrated that the household is the best place for pursuing *dharma*.”<sup>75</sup> So in the *Bhāgavata māyā* allows Kṛṣṇa to advocate for observance of one’s own *dharma* by allowing him to lecture his devotees on proper *dharma* and also model it at times. Thus, both texts emphasize Kṛṣṇa’s sponsorship of *dharma* suggesting that the supreme god uses his *māyā* specifically to uphold *dharma* and thereby asserts *dharma* to be an absolute truth that ignorant humans should follow.

While *māyā* is construed as having a positive effect on Kṛṣṇa’s devotees in that it allows Kṛṣṇa to enter the world and guide them, his *māyā* is also a source of illusion and confusion, incapacitating his devotees. Verses 7.13–14 of the *Gītā* states that “being enveloped by *yoga-māyā*, I do not become manifest to all. This deluded world does not know [Kṛṣṇa].”<sup>76</sup> Similarly in verse 10.23.40 and 10.23.50 the *brahmins*, repenting their neglect of Kṛṣṇa when they refused to bring him food, acknowledge the deluding power of *māyā*: “Truly the *māyā* of *Bhagavān* bewilders even the *yogis* [...] We are wandering on the path of *karma*, our intelligence bewildered by his *māyā*.”<sup>77</sup> Because of the pervasiveness of *māyā*, people are ignorant of the ultimate reality and dependent on Kṛṣṇa to decipher proper conduct in the world. Such ignorance of course augments the authority of Kṛṣṇa’s requirement for properly acting in accordance with the dharmic code because humans cannot independently justify their actions in their ignorant state. So Kṛṣṇa’s power of *māyā*

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<sup>74</sup> He obtained 16,000 princesses as wives after he defeats Bhauma, who had held these princesses captive, in a war.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid*, 10.90.28.

<sup>76</sup> Gambhirananda trans, Bhagavad Gītā, 7.25.

<sup>77</sup> Bryant, trans. *Krishna*, 10.23.40.

establishes his superiority by deluding humans, making them inferior, and allowing him to orchestrate the proper *dharma*. Consequently, people have little potential for salvation through independent means. In this way, the power of *māyā* makes Kṛṣṇa's devotees subservient to him and the dharmic code. Here the effects of *māyā* corresponds to a brahmanical order in which the distinction of castes fosters the impression of inferiority.

Though the ignorance caused by *māyā* does not allow an individual to be aware of the unified reality, these texts present the ignorance as acceptable and even encourage it on occasion. The acceptance of ignorance becomes apparent in the passages where Kṛṣṇa reveals his transcendent form to specified devotees and later conceals that form to comfort his devotees.

In the *Gītā*, this revelation occurs when Arjuna is unsatisfied with only hearing Kṛṣṇa proclaim his supremacy and requests to see Kṛṣṇa's true form behind the illusory figure he cast in *māyā*.<sup>78</sup> Kṛṣṇa responds to Arjuna's request by explaining, "you are not able to see Me merely with this eye of yours. I grant you the supernatural eye; behold My divine Yoga."<sup>79</sup> Here Kṛṣṇa suggests that the delusion resulting from his *māyā* creates a divine solipsism. This solipsism corresponds with the practice of devotees receiving *darśan* (seeing). Diana Eck explains that "'seeing' in the religious sense is not an act which is initiated by the worshiper. Rather, the deity presents itself to be seen."<sup>80</sup> Furthermore, the tradition emphasizes seeing as a reliable form of knowing.<sup>81</sup> According to these notions, Kṛṣṇa further reinforces his transcendence, for only Kṛṣṇa himself can see his true form

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<sup>78</sup> Gambhirananda trans, Bhagavad Gītā, 11.4.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid*, 11.8.

<sup>80</sup> Eck, *Darśan*, 6.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid*, 9.



while humans can only perceive Kṛṣṇa in the form created through his *māyā*. To see Kṛṣṇa's true form and thus know his true reality requires divine sight. So obtaining any knowledge of the divine requires divine grace.

When Arjuna perceives Kṛṣṇa through Kṛṣṇa's eyes he is understandably shocked by the reality. He sees "many faces and eyes, possessing wonderful sights, adorned with numerous celestial ornaments, holding many uplifted weapons."<sup>82</sup> His numerous body parts and weapons relate the theophany to a tradition of ascribing many facilities to a deity to depict the deity's incomprehensible power and ability to transform a unified existence into a multifarious one.<sup>83</sup> This sight, more brilliantly radiating than "the effulgence of a thousand suns,"<sup>84</sup> with Kṛṣṇa devouring all humans who rush towards his many mouths "as moths enter with increased haste into a glowing fire,"<sup>85</sup> inspired Arjuna's respect and fear of the inescapable Lord of the cosmos.<sup>86</sup> Angelika Malinar notes that the image of "a thousand suns" relates Kṛṣṇa's theophany to notions of fire being associated with a king's power.<sup>87</sup> Arjuna responds to the graphic display of authority by bowing and offering excessive praise to Kṛṣṇa. In this single vision, the *Gītā* explicitly depicts Kṛṣṇa as both the chief ruler of the universe and the entire universe itself.

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<sup>82</sup> Gambhirananda, trans. Bhagavad Gītā, 11.10.

<sup>83</sup> Malinar, *The Bhagavadgītā*, 169.

<sup>84</sup> Gambhirananda, trans. Bhagavad Gītā, 11.12.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid*, 11.29.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid*, 11.35.

<sup>87</sup> Malinar, *The Bhagavadgītā*, 168.

After his display of divine authority, Arjuna admits that he is still baffled by Kṛṣṇa.<sup>88</sup> He realizes that he would prefer to see Kṛṣṇa in his previous form.<sup>89</sup> So in response to Arjuna's fear and confusion, Kṛṣṇa conceals his cosmic form.<sup>90</sup> After Kṛṣṇa returns to a human form in Arjuna's chariot, Arjuna returns to a calm state<sup>91</sup> but still retains some recognition of Kṛṣṇa's ultimate divinity.

There are several revelations by Kṛṣṇa in the *Bhāgavata* as well. In one instance, Kṛṣṇa reveals his cosmic form to the secondary creator god Brahmā. Brahmā had led the cowherd boys and their calves away while Kṛṣṇa was searching for them. After realizing what Brahmā had done, Kṛṣṇa duplicated the young *gopas* and calves, confusing the deity, who could not distinguish between the real and not real boys and calves.<sup>92</sup> Kṛṣṇa follows the act by transforming each one of the boys and calves to appear like Kṛṣṇa. Through this vision, "Brahmā, the unborn one, saw everything simultaneously as the personal self of the supreme *brahman*," and consequently prostrated himself to Kṛṣṇa and began excessively praising him after discovering the truth of his nature.<sup>93</sup> Once again, Kṛṣṇa asserts his ultimate authority, this time over Brahmā by overcoming Brahmā's *māyā* with his own.

Two other theophanies occur when Kṛṣṇa as child opens his mouth and his mother, Yaśodā, peers in. In the first episode, Yaśodā is breastfeeding the baby deity when he yawns and she looks in his open mouth. "Seeing the universe so suddenly [...] she began to

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<sup>88</sup> Gambhirananda, trans. *Bhagavad Gītā*, 11.31.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid*, 11.46

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid*, 11.49

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid*, 11.51

<sup>92</sup> Bryant, trans. *Krishna*, 10.13.15–10.13.41.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid*, 10.13.56.

tremble.”<sup>94</sup> In the second occurrence, Yaśodā demands that Kṛṣṇa open his mouth after children snatched to Yaśodā, telling her that he had eaten mud. When he does open it, Yaśodā sees the universe again, which included herself, within his gaping mouth. She becomes confused and recognizes her son as the supreme god, but Kṛṣṇa then erases her memory of the theophany by recasting his *yogamāyā* so that she can return to ignorantly loving Kṛṣṇa in her motherly way.<sup>95</sup>

Given the roles of Arjuna, as a warrior under Kṛṣṇa’s teaching and jurisdiction, and Brahmā, as a lesser deity, the two figures must at least partially understand Kṛṣṇa’s true nature to recognize his authority and act accordingly. Arjuna was unconvinced by Kṛṣṇa’s lecture and Brahmā had attempted to deceive Kṛṣṇa. By revealing his divine form in response, Kṛṣṇa subdues the pride of Brahma and further convinces Arjuna of his power. Thus, Brahmā and Arjuna must remain aware Kṛṣṇa’s transcendence after the vision for the revelation to have the proper effect. However, Yaśodā does not need to remember Kṛṣṇa’s divine status and recognize his supremacy because she is already fully devoted to him as his mother and understanding Kṛṣṇa’s true nature only impedes her maternal devotion. Thus, the reactions of the devotees point to the texts’ recognition of the different roles of the male and female figures. Yaśodā does not need to develop her capacity for knowledge, she perfectly fulfills her *dharma* as an ignorant and devoted householder, but Arjuna, as a male warrior, must develop greater knowledge to understand and perform his duty as a warrior.

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<sup>94</sup> *Ibid*, 10.8.34–10.8.37.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid*, 10.8.33–10.8.45.

Nonetheless, in each of these cases, Kṛṣṇa graciously conceals his limitlessness through his *māyā* in response to Arjuna's and Yaśodā's shock, suggesting that perceiving Kṛṣṇa as the infinite and all-powerful unifying force of the universe conflicts with human conduct in everyday life and is of lesser importance than solely and submissively devoting oneself to Kṛṣṇa which can complement proper conduct. Ignorance, on some level, then becomes encouraged as long as one fully devotes him or herself to Kṛṣṇa.

Thus these texts do not perceive knowledge to provide the same soteriological function that it does in Śaṅkara's philosophy. Kṛṣṇa explains in the *Gītā* that liberation is facilitated by focusing on the finite illusion of Kṛṣṇa rather than focusing on the unmanifest.<sup>96</sup> In the *Bhāgavata*, during Brahma's praise of Kṛṣṇa he explains that "those who have rejected *bhakti*, the most beneficial path, toil hard to obtain knowledge exclusively." He then states that "there were many *yogis* in this world, who attained your supreme destination, O universal one. With their efforts dedicated to you, they became enlightened through *bhakti*,"<sup>97</sup> In other words, both texts suggest that *bhakti* is superior to the path of knowledge. However, knowledge is not fully rejected in these doctrines either—it can be complementary to *bhakti*. Kṛṣṇa describes the *bhakta* who is also "the man of Knowledge" as the one who "excels."<sup>98</sup> Similarly, in the *Bhāgavata*, an understanding of Kṛṣṇa's identity can complement *bhakti* because the knowledge seems to be primarily helpful in subduing the pride of individuals so that they will surrender to Kṛṣṇa. Thus, the *Gītā* and the *Bhāgavata* share the principle that while the cultivation of knowledge has its

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<sup>96</sup> Gambhirananda, trans. Bhagavad Gītā, 12.5

<sup>97</sup> Bryant, trans. *Krishna*, 10.14.5.

<sup>98</sup> Gambhirananda, trans. Bhagavad Gītā, 7.17.

merit in complementing *bhakti, bhakti*, made possible through Kṛṣṇa's *māyā*, is the ideal path to salvation because knowledge of Kṛṣṇa's true nature is nearly unintelligible due to our state of ignorance.

In accordance with this idea, ignorant devotees enjoy the presence of Kṛṣṇa's finite form throughout the Tenth Canto of the *Bhāgavata*. After Kṛṣṇa defeats King Kaṁsa who had sought to kill Kṛṣṇa from his birth, he releases his birth parents from their imprisonment and then deludes his mother and father because they do not embrace him as their son after they "realized the truth."<sup>99</sup> This scene parallels Kṛṣṇa's interaction with Yaśodā. Kṛṣṇa rewards his parents with ignorance because they have been faithfully devoted to him and ignorance grants them the joy of loving him. In another scene, Kṛṣṇa "called upon his divine power of *yogamāyā*, and turned his thoughts towards enjoying love." He aroused the *gopīs* with the song of his flute, causing many to leave their homes to enjoy the presence of Kṛṣṇa.<sup>100</sup> Later Kṛṣṇa, rewarding the *gopīs* for their unreciprocated devotion to him, multiplies himself so that each woman could experience the bliss "from the contact of his limbs."<sup>101</sup> Similarly, Kṛṣṇa provides the *gopas* with pleasure and love. After herding the cows through the countryside and wrestling along the way, he would lie with the cowherding boys and let them sing for him and massage his feet which provided them with joy.<sup>102</sup> Through these interactions, the *Bhāgavata* emphasizes that loving devotion to Kṛṣṇa provides happiness regardless of ignorance.

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<sup>99</sup> Bryant, trans. *Krishna*, 10.44.50–10.45.2.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid*, 10.29.1–10.29.7.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid*, 10.33.17.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid*, 10.15.17–10.15.18.

This model of devotion then provides a universal source of pleasure and salvation because it can be devoid of knowledge so anyone can be a *bhakta*. Kṛṣṇa explicitly outlines an analogous message in the *Gītā* when he tells Arjuna that “even those who are born of sin—women, Vaiśyas, as also Śūdras—, even they reach the highest Goal by taking shelter under Me.”<sup>103</sup> In the *Bhāgavata*, the *gopīs* represent the ideal *bhaktas* through their intense, unwavering devotion to Kṛṣṇa.<sup>104</sup> The text does not fault them for being women who are ignorant of the true identity of Kṛṣṇa. Because of this inclusive soteriology, one might attempt to argue that the form of *bhakti* described in these texts presents a socially liberating message.

However, the egalitarian soteriology does not subvert the caste hierarchy. The potential for liberation provides oppressed individuals with hope that by surrendering to Kṛṣṇa they will experience joy and eventually liberation. Foucault perceives that “power is tolerable only on the condition that it mask a substantial part of itself. Its success is proportional to its ability to hide its own mechanisms.”<sup>105</sup> Accordingly, the model of devotion to Kṛṣṇa “masks” the system of power in a sense and could portray the caste system as “tolerable.” For instance, after depicting the joy that Yaśodā experiences in her devotion to Kṛṣṇa, Śuka explains to Parīkṣit that “[t]hrough this *bhakti*, one can easily overcome the miseries of the world.”<sup>106</sup> Experiencing the presence of Kṛṣṇa provides his devotees with a pleasurable distraction, an outlet in the form of hope for liberation. Once Arjuna and Yaśodā recover from their paralyzing states of shock caused by the truth of

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<sup>103</sup> Gambhirananda, trans. *Bhagavad Gītā*, 9.32.

<sup>104</sup> Bryant, trans. *Krishna*, lv.

<sup>105</sup> Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 86.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid*, 10.8.49.

Kṛṣṇa and return to relative states of ignorance, they perform their respective duties as a warrior and a devoted mother. So by remaining deluded of the monistic reality, the devotees can properly perform their *dharma* and better enjoy pleasing Kṛṣṇa. The description of the happy devotees then supports the hierarchy by portraying the situation in which those “born of sin” find their situations enjoyable. Meanwhile, the exaltation of unthinking devotion as the primary soteriological path above the cultivation of knowledge promotes a dangerous model of subservience. The emphasis upon the value of *bhakti* within the world of *māyā* therefore reinforces the social hierarchy. D.D. Kosambi claims *bhakti* was a model that reinforced a feudal society that depended upon a “chain of personal loyalty which binds retainer to chief, tenant to lord, and baron to king or emperor.”<sup>107</sup> Vijay Kumar Thakur, in accordance with Kosambi, recognizes the extreme loyalty promoted in the *Gītā*’s doctrine of *bhakti* as dangerous because it models willing subordination to a feudal lord. Thus in the development of *bhakti* ideals, *bhakti* emphasized not just loving devotion but also the devotee’s recognition of his or her inferior status.<sup>108</sup> The notion expressed in verse 18.58 of the *Gītā* that the devoted will be rewarded with salvation while those who are not devoted will be punished reinforces the consequences of disregarding one’s subservience.<sup>109</sup> The same message is also found in the *Bhāgavata* in Brahma’s praise of Kṛṣṇa when Brahma says “[s]o long as people do not become your devotees, O Kṛṣṇa, qualities such as attachment [that steal away their lives] act as thieves,

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<sup>107</sup> Kosambi, *Myth and Reality*, 31.

<sup>108</sup> Jaiswal, *The Origin and Development of Vaiṣṇavism*, 112.

<sup>109</sup> Thakur, “Social Roots of the Bhagavad-Gītā”, 296.

the house is a prison, and illusion remains a foot-shackle.”<sup>110</sup> The message of retribution supports the positions of religious and political officials. So the *Gītā* and *Bhāgavata* contain material that had the potential to promote complete subservience to authority figures.

To this end, the texts establish the infallibility of Kṛṣṇa. Following Kṛṣṇa’s erotic dance with the *gopīs* in the *Bhāgavata*, Śuka explains that “blatant transgressions of *dharma* by the more powerful of rulers are not faults. One who is not a powerful being should certainly never behave in that fashion.”<sup>111</sup> Furthermore, since *māyā* does not allow devotees to completely understand Kṛṣṇa, *māyā* reinforces his invulnerability since criticism of his conduct could not be justified in our ignorance. Consequently, the texts leave devotees with the one option of blindly surrendering to the lord, for *bhakti* is the only clear means to transcending *māyā*. Thereby, the texts create a model of blindly trusting those in positions of authority because such loyalty is the only source for liberation.

Consequently, *māyā* provides the model of *bhakti* in the *Bhāgavata* and the *Gītā* with the dangerous potential that Kosambi and Thakur perceive. *Māyā* allows Kṛṣṇa to control the dharmic order and hold Arjuna and the residents of Vraja both responsible for their dharmic roles and relatively ignorant while he remains invulnerable. Kosambi writes that “[o]nce it is admitted that material reality is gross illusion, the rest follows quite simply; the world of ‘doublethink’ is the only one that matters.”<sup>112</sup> Because the world is deluded by *māyā*, Kṛṣṇa, who is free from the effects of *māyā*, can convince Arjuna to renounce attachment to the results of action, dispel any notions of dualities and then fight a righteous

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<sup>110</sup> Bryant, trans. *Krishna*, 10.14.36.

<sup>111</sup> Bryant, trans. *Krishna*, 10.33.29.

<sup>112</sup> Kosambi, *Myth and Reality*, 17.



war because somehow the duality of *dharma* and *adharma* and acting out of an attachment to the preservation *dharma* remains valid. Similarly, Kṛṣṇa can claim that the caste system is legitimate even if ultimately everything is unified in Kṛṣṇa. Hence the concept of *māyā* allows for the hypocrisy that supports the caste hierarchy.

### Concluding Remarks

The implications of the *Gītā*'s and the *Bhāgavata*'s doctrines of *māyā* are then analogous to Śaṅkara's. The fact that *māyā* is both an aid and an obstacle in reaching liberation in the *Gītā* and the *Bhāgavata* should not delude us from perceiving the similarity of *māyā* in the commentaries of Śaṅkara. In both cases, *māyā* establishes inferiority and encourages subservience. The people deluded by *māyā* become dependent upon the power of truth to overcome the power of *māyā*, but that truth is asserted by those allegedly unencumbered by the effects of *māyā* and consequently reinforces the established power dynamic. Thus the limitations created by *māyā* present submission as the path to freedom, and an individual seeking liberation is left with no other option.

In the *Gītā* and the *Bhāgavata* people must devote themselves to Kṛṣṇa and consequently to the dharmic code. For Śaṅkara, people must devote themselves to the *guru* and to scripture. Thus, while these texts do place restrictions on behavior according to caste, their presentations of adherence to brahmanical authority—whether it is through *guru* and scripture, or Kṛṣṇa and *dharma*—as appealing and beneficial further perpetuates the social order. Foucault understands power as more than just a prohibitive force. Thus, power does not establish its strength in explicit regulation alone. Rather, "If [...] power is strong this is because, as we are beginning to realize, it produces effects at the level of

desire—and also at the level of knowledge.”<sup>113</sup> Analogously, all of these texts consolidate the power of the caste hierarchy through their emphasis on the effects of *māyā* and the corresponding desire to transcend *māyā* through the search for the established truth.

However, since these texts suggest that liberation occurs if and only if unity is both recognized and experienced then it is necessary to first recognize that the inequitable constraint of *māyā* is nothing more than an illusory reflection of brahmanical power. Due to a certain state of brahmanical power, it follows that these texts emphasize the vast confines of human delusion rather than the social implications of an underlying monism. These texts in question all accept that everyone is unified in *brahman*, a truly subversive claim, yet they extend the continued delusion of the social order, and project a philosophical focus on the overwhelming restrictions of *māyā* and further perpetuate brahmanical power.

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<sup>113</sup> Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, 59.

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