

ALL THE WORLD'S A PLAYGROUND:  
AN EXAMINATION OF KṚṢṆA LĪLĀ RITUALS THROUGH THE LENS OF  
GEORGE SANTAYANA'S POETIC THEORIES OF RELIGION

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*Come forward to childhood,  
and do not despise it because it is small and it is little.  
And do not turn away greatnesses in some parts from the smallnesses,  
for the smallnesses are known [through] the greatnesses.*

- The Thunder: Perfect Mind<sup>1</sup>

Idealized religious worlds often have the effect of drawing peoples' attentions away from the present reality and instead towards a superior, divine reality. For this reason, American philosopher George Santayana calls for a metaphorical interpretation of religion, akin to the metaphorical interpretations of reality as found in poetry. Rather than living in constant anticipation of a world that is decidedly not here, Santayana hopes that religion can provide a structure that enables people to find the beautiful and infinite "more" within the here and now. The Hindu concept of *līlā* ("play," "sport") has potential to be a fitting model for Santayana. It still employs ideal worlds, but certain *līlā* practices do so in ways that promote engagement in the world we live in. Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava theology conceives of *līlā* as the play of Kṛṣṇa: the cosmos was created in play out of the singular Kṛṣṇa and as such all that we are and interact with is nothing but Kṛṣṇa and his eternal play, or *līlā*. In recognizing the divine presence in both physical manifestation and playful spirit, I contend that devotees of Kṛṣṇa can experience the divine in every aspect of the mundane world by partaking in Kṛṣṇa's *līlā* through creative and playful means. For such devotees, the divine is not far off, but intimately present.

In the following paper I will examine *līlā* practices through the lens of Santayana's theories. I will begin by exploring with the foundations of *līlā* as a theological concept and more specifically as the term used for Kṛṣṇa's play. Following this I will introduce Santayana's theories in more detail before transitioning into three practices involving *līlā* that remain significant today. The first two practices—*rāgānugā bhakti sādhana* and *rās līlā*—both involve

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<sup>1</sup> NHC VI, 2 17, 24-32, *The Nag Hammadi Library*, rev. ed., ed. James M. Robinson, trans. George W. MacRae (New York: HarperCollins, 1990), 300.

<sup>2</sup> *Bhāgavata Purāṇa (BhP BhP)* 10.8.37-39.

the embodiment of Kṛṣṇa and his *līlā* in a theatrical setting. The third practice, Ban-Yatra pilgrimage, is a journey through the very land in which Kṛṣṇa once frolicked as a way to develop a relationship with the god by accessing his essentially playful nature. Although the three practices share a foundational concept, the implementation of *līlā* differs from practice to practice, with the most striking difference being the space allotted for playful expression. We will find that while play can be relegated to a separate realm (much like idyllic religious worlds are), play also has the potential to be an effective tool for engaging people in their present world in more enriching ways.

### **An Introduction to Kṛṣṇa's *Līlā***

As Yaśodā cared for her mischievous, butter-stealing son, Kṛṣṇa, she had not a clue that contained within her rambunctious child's small mouth was the whole universe.<sup>2</sup> Her son was in fact Viṣṇu, “the supreme being, the Lord of the universe, the God of all gods,”<sup>3</sup> who had come down to the earth as a human child to play among his creations.<sup>4</sup> Though the cosmic creator was to dutifully go on to help restore order in the world, the *līlāvatāra*<sup>5</sup> spent his childhood playing freely and innocently in the land of Vraja.<sup>6</sup> While Kṛṣṇa's play exists eternally in the divine sphere, he chose to come play on earth for a finite period of time<sup>7</sup> in order to experience physical sensations such as dust beneath the feet, heat upon the back, water between the fingers, and the rest of the physical phenomena that define earthly experience.

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<sup>2</sup> *Bhāvagata Purāṇa (BhP BhP)* 10.8.37-39.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.1.20.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.8.36; Kinsley, 104.

<sup>5</sup> Hospital, 286. *Līlāvatāra* means “play-*avatāra*,” or an incarnation of a god who comes to earth for play.

<sup>6</sup> Kinsley, 57. Other spellings of “Vraja” include “Braj” and “Vraj” – all denote the place where Kṛṣṇa spent his youth on earth. Vraja is located in the modern Indian state of Uttar Pradesh, south of New Delhi (Haberman 1994, 6).

<sup>7</sup> Hawley 1992, 6; Wulff, 41; Kinsley, 113. Kṛṣṇa's play is considered both a historical event in Vraja and an eternal event that continues on in the heavenly sphere.

Why any god would choose to demote himself to a human life<sup>8</sup> may appear to be beyond our understanding, but Vaiṣṇava theologians contend that Kṛṣṇa comes to play with us as a mortal child out of his grace and mercy.<sup>9</sup> Kṛṣṇa’s childhood, specifically, is given special emphasis in the story of his life and as such, Kṛṣṇa has “inspired through his play the development of new modes of living”<sup>10</sup> that promote a more full and free engagement with the illusory world in which we live. Childhood and play are intimately related, and it is no accident that Kṛṣṇa’s childhood makes up such a large part of his overall persona.<sup>11</sup> With such a well-documented childhood, Kṛṣṇa’s essence as a god is more accessible in human terms, providing devotees with an example that they can grasp and relate to.<sup>12</sup>

Kṛṣṇa’s play is called “*līlā*,” a Sanskrit noun that translates as “play,” “sport,” or “pastime.”<sup>13</sup> However, such a translation only begins to capture what exactly *līlā* is in its many forms, uses, and manifestations. For the purposes of this paper, we will consider the three interpretations most relevant to our subject. As mentioned, *līlā* can refer to Kṛṣṇa’s play—both his eternal, ongoing play and more specifically Kṛṣṇa’s play with the *gopīs* and *gopas*<sup>14</sup> in the land of Vraja. Furthermore, theologians have used *līlā* to explain the creation of the cosmos: the gods create, maintain, and destroy for no other purpose than the simple enjoyment derived from

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<sup>8</sup> Hospital, 287. Kṛṣṇa is not truly human, but he uses the power of *māyā* to appear to live a full life on earth as a human. Although he is in some sense human, he still “belongs to another world that is not bound by social and moral convention” (Hawley 1995, 67).

<sup>9</sup> Goswami, 76.

<sup>10</sup> Mason, 49.

<sup>11</sup> Ram-Prasad, 162.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 164. “What makes emotional relationships with the Godhead possible is the concealment of the awesome form by the gentle human form” (Haberman 1988, 46).

<sup>13</sup> Schweig.

<sup>14</sup> Cowherdess and cowherder, respectively.

creating and playing.<sup>15</sup> *Līlā* thus represents “the most interior dimensions of ultimate reality,”<sup>16</sup> as everything is in existence because of and in order to creatively play.

*Līlā* thus refers to a divine event<sup>17</sup> (Kṛṣṇa’s play) and to a divine essence (the purposeless and creative activity of the gods), but it also refers to divine and human dramatic performance, as in a play that one might see at one’s local theater.<sup>18</sup> In Vaiṣṇava theology the interpretation of *līlā* as theatrical performance can be used as a metaphor for existence: our world is not ultimately real, yet it seems real in that events and actions within it beget “real” effects. Put differently, our illusory universe is like a realistic play in that we can watch the show while knowing that what is happening onstage is not really “real,” though the action is still happening: the characters involved are doing “real” things and are “really” responding to their circumstances. However, in Hindu cosmology—unlike in the theater—there is no audience that leaves to continue living their “real” lives, as the distinction between one’s real life and one’s stage life is dissolved. There is nowhere to go and no other way to be when the universe is *līlā*. Play is done for its own sake, with no other goal than the act of playing itself; it lacks linear progression and instead operates as purposeless existence. Play is the state of being fully but purposelessly engaged in an illusory world that is just as purposeless and playful itself.

Contrary to such playful purposelessness, Vaiṣṇava devotees make the model, essence, and understanding of *līlā* a goal to be attained: *līlā* is used to help devotees experience union with god by understanding that all is Kṛṣṇa and his play, in which one can directly engage.<sup>19</sup> But a devotee of Kṛṣṇa need not seek her god elsewhere, in some far-off heaven. The goal becomes

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<sup>15</sup> Hospital, 286; Hein, 13.

<sup>16</sup> Schweig.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., *Līlā* is used in conjunction with other gods as well – however, it always implies the playful nature of the god or goddess it refers to.

<sup>18</sup> Haberman 1988, 45.

<sup>19</sup> Hawley 1992, 18; Solomon, 69-70; Haberman 1994, 197-199.

consistent awareness of Kṛṣṇa’s presence “not [in] a state beyond the world but a secret hidden in its midst [waiting] just beneath the shouts of civilization, in the forests of childhood that nourished it.”<sup>20</sup> Kṛṣṇa is everything and everywhere, not separated by time or space: he is your own childish play as well as the play of the cosmos; he is the ground beneath your feet and the sky above your head. The implication of this is that the spirit or essence of Kṛṣṇa—*līlā*—is everywhere and can be accessed at any and all times. Viewing the whole of creation as *līlā* and playing in it accordingly thus become both the means and the end to experiencing union with Kṛṣṇa.

According to play theorists and psychologists, however, the freedom of play is only made possible with the use of rigid frames and structures that facilitate the mood of play.<sup>21</sup> Like creativity—which goes hand in hand with play<sup>22</sup>—playful modes of behavior thrive under some basic limitations. Although the ultimate essence of play is characterized by a childish freedom and disregard for rules and order,<sup>23</sup> Vaiṣṇava institutions have established various structures to facilitate such ultimate release. Practices such as *rāgānugā bhakti sādhana*, *rās līlā* performance, and the Ban-Yatra pilgrimage enable devotees to enter the idyllic *Vraja-līlā* (Kṛṣṇa’s play world, as characterized in Vraja) in order to engage in free play with Kṛṣṇa.

Though these methods are derived from the same theological concept, they differ significantly in their approaches and as such can lead to quite different results. The *rāgānugā bhakti sādhana* is a rigorous meditative exercise that demands much training and practice in order for one to experience a breakthrough into Kṛṣṇa’s *līlā* and play freely among the *Vrajaloka*, or inhabitants of the mystical Vraja. *Rās līlā* performances that depict the *līlās* of

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<sup>20</sup> Hawley 1992, 50.

<sup>21</sup> Bateson, 187-189; Seligman et al, 84-93; Huizinga, 7, 11.

<sup>22</sup> Seligman et al., 86-87.

<sup>23</sup> Kinsley, 67.

Kṛṣṇa during his time in Vraja emphasize the experience of the audience and provide sacred spaces where devotees may love and worship the gods firsthand and gain insight into the playful nature of the universe. Finally, the Ban-Yatra pilgrimage offers pilgrims an opportunity to fully embody play within their world by experiencing Kṛṣṇa and his *līlā* in a physical and emotional way that eventually promotes a playful attitude towards life, both during the pilgrimage and throughout the pilgrim's ensuing life. Although these practices appear to share common goals, the spaces in which the divine is experienced differ from practice to practice. Studying these through the lens of George Santayana's theories on religion, we see that such differences can have significant effects on the practitioner's ability to engage with her "real" world in an enriched—even divine—way.

### **George Santayana and Religion as Poetry**

George Santayana considers religion through the lens of reason. The life of reason and the life of religion both function to establish values, define codes of ethics, and "[emancipate] man from his personal limitations."<sup>24</sup> However, the way that each goes about fulfilling these functions differs. Reason itself is a "principle" and an imposition of "potential order"<sup>25</sup> on reality so that it does not seek to change, but simply to classify the way things are. Religion, however, "is a part of experience itself,"<sup>26</sup> and seeks to not only interpret reality in certain ways but to conform reality to its image. The images that religions use as templates are idyllic worlds. Santayana's examination of religion centers on such worlds, his own brief definition of "religion" specifying that they provide "another world in which to live."<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Kinsley, 67.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

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

<sup>27</sup> Santayana 1962, 11.

For Santayana, religion and its imaginative “ideal worlds” have tremendous potential to positively impact the human experience of life. The religious imagination—often expressed through the creation of ideal worlds—can “have a most important function in vitalizing the mind and in transmitting...the lessons of experience” by creatively interpreting the world in ways that shape and cement the “moral reality”<sup>28</sup> of human existence. However, in practice religious worlds often aid in detracting from the experience of life by turning the ideal world into something unattainable in the present, something that can only be realized elsewhere. Santayana believes that ideal worlds are better suited as metaphors for life: if this were the case, people could find the divine essence in the present, rather than seek to escape it for a wholly other divine reality.<sup>29</sup> Put differently, Santayana discourages linear thinking directed solely towards goals and the search for something not present, and instead encourages finding the ideal or the goal within the here and now.

Just as Santayana discourages people from looking to religious worlds or heavens as an imaginative escape, so too does he resist advocating for a rigid, purely realist interaction with the world.<sup>30</sup> One should rather treat the world as the poet does: a poet uses her imagination to look at the world in creative ways that fit outside of the conditioned norms, but the poet is also firmly grounded in the realities<sup>31</sup> of the world.<sup>32</sup> For Santayana, “only poetry, which never pretends to literal validity, adds a pure value to existence, the value of a liberal imaginative exercise.”<sup>33</sup> Creativity and imagination are needed to interpret and reinterpret the real, concrete world around

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<sup>28</sup> Santayana 1962, 14.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 188.

<sup>30</sup> Santayana 1957, vi-vii; 1953, 4-5, 267.

<sup>31</sup> Reality is, of course, a tricky thing to define and such an exploration of the nature of reality is unfit for this paper. I will define reality (as well as “real” and other similar words) as the tangible experience of the present – it is an understanding and experience of the physical and social circumstances of the world, as shared by a vast majority of people.

<sup>32</sup> Santayana 1957, 259-261.

<sup>33</sup> Santayana 1962, 14.



us in order to continually discover *more* in a seemingly stable realm of existence.<sup>34</sup> The significance of the poetic interpretation of the world is that it finds things to be more than the everyday person who sees reality as fixed and rigid.

One must thus be grounded in both reality and the imagination. Such a position allows one to realize that “transcendence is not upward but downward” for “we dwell in *one* world, not at a point of juncture between two worlds.”<sup>35</sup> In other words, Santayana believes that people can transcend—can experience the “divine”—by taking a closer look at the incredible world in which they live; heaven is not somewhere far away, conceived in a daydream, heaven is right where we are. With this perspective, one may experience the world with an acceptance of its fixed structure, while seeing in the multitudes of experience “only images and varied symbols of some eternal good.”<sup>36</sup> Rather than seeking the divine transcendence somewhere far away, Santayana encourages those who yearn for greater meaning to root down into the world of experience—much like a poet—in order to engage in life in the fullest sense.<sup>37</sup>

For Santayana, poetry is the preeminent mode of dwelling in the world, but it deals with relatively trivial matters when compared to those of religion. Santayana thus concludes that religions and the ideal worlds that they depict are needed, but under the stipulation that such religions be treated as poetry: with creative imaginations that are firmly grounded in the realities of the “ordinary” world.<sup>38</sup> The ideal worlds depicted by religions could be used to engage with the world as it is in a more holistically fulfilling way:

...the dignity of religion, like that of poetry and of every moral ideal, lies precisely in its ideal adequacy, in its fit rendering of the meanings and values of life, in its anticipation of perfection; so that the excellence of religion is due to an idealization of

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<sup>34</sup> Santayana 1962, 14.

<sup>35</sup> Scott, 144.

<sup>36</sup> Santayana 1953, 268.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 265, 268.

<sup>38</sup> Santayana 1962, 14-15.

experience which, while making religion noble if treated as poetry, makes it necessarily false if treated as science. Its function is rather to draw from reality materials for an image of that ideal to which reality ought to conform, and to make us citizens, by anticipation, in the world we crave.<sup>39</sup>

Poetic interpretations of religious worlds should not seek to leave this reality for a wholly different one (or even to conform this reality to a wholly different one), but should seek to bring the essential nature of the ideal reality into the here and now. By this logic, one who uses ideal worlds as a metaphorical example of what this world could be is able to live in and experience the essence of that ideal here through their own vision and action: heaven comes down to earth, not in form but in essence. Such a perspective, then, promotes engaged participation and citizenship within the world of everyday experience.

A religious practice that finds the divine in the present reality with all of its “limitations and imperfections”<sup>40</sup> could, in Santayana’s opinion, allow practitioners to live in a perpetual state of “the divine life.”<sup>41</sup> But what would a practice that makes everyday experience divine look like? It would certainly exist within the “mundane” world, not separate from it; it would promote the spirit of the divine (or the ideal) *within* the mundane, rather than as something separate, attainable only in a sacred space or heaven that is removed by time and space. Further, this practice would involve creatively playing with the conditioned conceptions of reality by responding to the world in an imaginative way that expands one’s experience and understanding of the mundane. A practitioner of such a poetic religion would truly be a “citizen...in the world [she] crave[s]”<sup>42</sup> through her creativity and play.

With all this in mind, we will consider *līlā*. In theory, the interpretations and significance of *līlā* seem to perfectly embody Santayana’s religion as poetry; *līlā* certainly describes a divine

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<sup>39</sup> Santayana 1957, v-vi.

<sup>40</sup> Haberman 1994, 26.

<sup>41</sup> Santayana 1953, 268.

<sup>42</sup> Santayana 1957, vi.

world (separated by time and space in some ways), but it is also an eternal state or essence of being. *Līlā* is Kṛṣṇa in both embodied and disembodied forms, and as such, certain Vaiṣṇava schools have attempted to create practices wherein a devotee can develop a creative and playful state of being in this world that also brings him closer to Kṛṣṇa. However, do these methods aimed at eliciting the essence of *līlā* in one’s life truly promote an experience of the divine within the mundane? Or do these practices make the same “mistake” as all religions (according to Santayana) and fall into the trap of promoting *līlā* as a thing to be attained somewhere else?

### **Accessing *Līlā* through Dramatic Methods**

Theological explanations of Kṛṣṇa’s *līlā* often emphasize the world as a stage, so it only makes sense that devotees would turn to drama as a means of connecting with and entering into Kṛṣṇa’s *līlā*. Action and acting are central to the Vaiṣṇava tradition as Kṛṣṇa maintains the cosmos through his actions, and also comes to earth to act in the very play that he creates and maintains.<sup>43</sup> Recognizing and engaging in this play through dramatic means takes on different forms: one is *rāgānuṅgā bhakti sādhana* and the other is *rās līlā*, but before understanding the significance of these practices it will be helpful to understand the theoretical foundation of aesthetic practices in Hinduism.

Bharatamuni’s *Nāṭya-śāstra* (its current form completed sometime between the fourth and sixth centuries CE<sup>44</sup>) is the foundation of Indian aesthetic theory and practice.<sup>45</sup> Traditionally, the aim of devotional dramatic performance is to inspire *rāsa* within the audience, and, by some accounts, the actors as well.<sup>46</sup> *Rāsa* refers to the “aesthetic taste” of a performance, as

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<sup>43</sup> Schweig.

<sup>44</sup> Schweig and Buchta.

<sup>45</sup> Haberman 1988, 172.

<sup>46</sup> Schweig and Buchta.

experienced by the audience.<sup>47</sup> This taste is different from simple human or mundane emotion as it is a “feeling” that transcends the self so that one is present yet blissfully unattached to the illusory and mundane way of being – similar to the feeling of play or *līlā*.<sup>48</sup> In the aesthetic experience, the transcendent *rasa* is experienced by way of the very human *bhāvas* (psychological states of emotions).<sup>49</sup> *Bhāvas* are broken down into different aspects of a dramatic production<sup>50</sup> and when all the *bhāvas* work in harmony, the audience experiences *rasa*.<sup>51</sup>

In practical terms, this aesthetic model put forth by Bharatamuni (“Bharata”) could be used to create a theatrical environment designed to facilitate experiences of the transcendent divine for a religious audience.<sup>52</sup> During a performance, the audience has space to experience deep emotions that transcend the self and the mundane, so that “for the duration of the aesthetic experience, one steps out of ordinary time, space, and—most important of all—identity.”<sup>53</sup> Devotional Hindu theater was designed under this *Nāṭya-sāstra* model to transport people *out of* this world and into a higher “Ultimate Reality”; it is “a stepping out of common reality into another [sacred] realm.”<sup>54</sup> At its foundations, devotional theater promotes disengagement with the experiential, mundane world (our world) and instead aims to provide a consecrated space in which one can travel—even if just in an emotional sense—to a higher realm.<sup>55</sup> Whereas others

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<sup>47</sup> Schweig and Buchta.

<sup>48</sup> Schweig.

<sup>49</sup> Haberman 1988, 14-15.

<sup>50</sup> *Sthāyibhāvas*: “foundational emotions” expressed by the actors

*Vyabhicāribhāvas*: “transient emotions” associated with the twists and turns of a story

*Anubhāvas*: “emotional reactions” or the actions, gestures, movements of a play

*Vibhāvas*: “catalysts of emotion,” all extra aspects of a production such as set, props, lighting, etc.

(Schweig and Buchta).

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> Haberman 1988, 13-16.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>54</sup> Kinsley, 176.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 153.

may view this approach as escapism, in “Indian art the experience of *rasa* is considered precious and likened to the spiritual bliss (*ānanda*) of union with [the divine].”<sup>56</sup>

Subsequent philosophers, such as Rūpa Gosvāmī have adjusted or pulled from Bharata’s aesthetic theories to develop more specific ways of accessing Kṛṣṇa and his *līlā*. Two of these techniques—*rāgānugā bhakti sādhana* and *rās līlā* performance—will be elaborated and examined in light of Santayana’s theories.

### *Rāgānugā Bhakti Sādhana & Meditational Role Play*

In his sixteenth-century text, *Bhaktirasāmṛtasindhu*, Caitanya’s disciple Rūpa Gosvāmī outlined *rāgānugā bhakti sādhana* as a role-embodiment exercise consistent with Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava theories on Kṛṣṇa and the nature of ultimate reality.<sup>57</sup> Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism is a Kṛṣṇa tradition that aims to be united with their lord through an intense form of love.<sup>58</sup> Due to the emphasis on having a relationship with Kṛṣṇa, “the basic concept of Gaudiya Vaishnava philosophy...is expressed by the phrase *acintya-bhedabhed*: inconceivable difference in nondifference.”<sup>59</sup> Although reality is in the end non-dual for Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavas, they believe that one must differentiate between a self and an other (Kṛṣṇa) in order to experience the other: “love requires at least two bodies. For the taste of enjoyment, the nondual reality splits and becomes two bodies.”<sup>60</sup> Because of this, Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism does not exhort devotees to aim for *mokṣa* (complete liberation from *saṃsāra* and non-differentiation from the divine); instead

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<sup>56</sup>Kinsley, 152.

<sup>57</sup>Haberman 1988, 3, 165.

<sup>58</sup>Goswami, 77.

<sup>59</sup>Haberman 1994, 103.

<sup>60</sup>Ibid.

Vaiṣṇavas aim to maintain differentiation in order to access the highest love for Kṛṣṇa and thus experience union with him.<sup>61</sup>

The problem is that such love for Kṛṣṇa is beyond the average person's limited capacity.<sup>62</sup> Rūpa's solution was to apply Bharatamuni's *rasa* theories of mundane transcendence to the practice of *rāgānugā bhakti sādhana* that would enable a *bhakta*—devotee—to attain union with Kṛṣṇa by cultivating a *sthāyibhāva* of love for Kṛṣṇa alone.<sup>63</sup> Rūpa determined there to be one, ultimate *bhakti-rasa* from which all other *rasas* are derived: Kṛṣṇa-*prema*, or the *rasa* of Love.<sup>64</sup> Rūpa believed that humans were limited and thus incapable of loving Kṛṣṇa fully. Given that he also believed that one needs a differentiated identity to love another, he devised a system whereby a *bhakta* could transform his limited identity into one more capable of loving Kṛṣṇa by entering into the *Vraja-līlā* (Kṛṣṇa's realm of play) and embodying one of the “*Vrajaloka*” (Kṛṣṇa's play companions in Vraja).<sup>65</sup> Here, *rasa* is not an abstract feeling, but a transcendent love directed specifically at Kṛṣṇa.

But how does one go about “assuming one of the exemplary emotional roles displayed by the original characters of Vraja (*Vrajaloka-anusāra*)”<sup>66</sup> in order to more directly experience Kṛṣṇa? First, the *bhakta* becomes familiar with Vaiṣṇava scripture by following scriptural commandments that center on service and worship of Kṛṣṇa.<sup>67</sup> During this phase, “the *bhakta* is still acting within his or her ordinary self-identity, but begins to surrender that self through acts of service.”<sup>68</sup> To get to the next step, the devotee undergoes an initiation to discover his “true”<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Goswami, 78; Haberman 1994, 25.

<sup>62</sup> Haberman 1988, 39.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 39; Haberman 1994, 25, 30-35.

<sup>64</sup> Haberman 1988, 33.

<sup>65</sup> Haberman 1988, 34, 65.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, this step is called “*Vaidhī Bhakti Sādhana*.”

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

identity, his eternal identity within the *Vraja-līlā*. In *rāgānugā bhakti sādhana*, the devotee finally abandons his ordinary identity after a great amount of “vigorous and long practice,”<sup>70</sup> involving visualization techniques and deep meditation.

A devotee is finally considered to be successful in his practice when he is able to engage in the *Vraja-līlā* in “spontaneous” ways not mentioned in the foundational texts.<sup>71</sup> In other words, successful fulfillment of the practice is determined when one moves past “conscious and mechanical” imitation and instead engages in the other world in (creative) “free expressions of true inner experience.”<sup>72</sup> Once a practitioner has truly taken on his eternal identity within the *Vraja-līlā*, the possibilities become limitless. Ironically, such rigorous practice gives way to blissful involvement in a divine world that abounds in free expression and joyful play.<sup>73</sup>

Play—as it is defined both in theological terms with reference to Kṛṣṇa’s *līlā* and in theoretical terms by modern scholars—is dependent on freedom and creativity.<sup>74</sup> Play theorists often note that the employment of the imagination in “play worlds” engenders a healthy and creative relationship with the “real” world.<sup>75</sup> However, this is not the case in *rāgānugā bhakti sādhana*. When a devotee crosses out of the “play world” of *Vraja-līlā* and back into the mundane world, such creative and playful energy does not necessarily translate over. Instead, the devotee only yearns to leave his mundane world again—and as quickly as possible! In fact, the *bhaktas* have such a strong belief in and attachment to the *Vraja-līlā* world, that there is an “assumption that [this] imaginative meditative experience does not create illusion, but rather

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 86.

<sup>70</sup> Kinsley, 147.

<sup>71</sup> Haberman 1988, 131, 144.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 144.

<sup>73</sup> Kinsley, 128-129.

<sup>74</sup> Huizinga, 7; Kinsley, 68.

<sup>75</sup> Seligman et al, 87.

illuminates reality,”<sup>76</sup> meaning that the *Vraja-līlā* becomes even more real than mundane reality. For *bhaktas*, play is only an accessible mode of being in the “real” world of *Vraja-līlā*.

By emphasizing the transient nature of the mundane world, *rāgānugā bhakti sādhana* encourages active and perpetual dissociation from it. However, it does not encourage devotees to abandon identity altogether: “Loss of identity is not the goal—one cannot meaningfully exist without an identity—rather, the goal is the discovery and realization of the true identity (*abhimāna*) which connects the *bhakta* to Kṛṣṇa and the world of Vraja.”<sup>77</sup> One need not abandon identity entirely; one must simply transform her identity in order to “[make] entrance into the *Vraja-līlā* possible.”<sup>78</sup> In abandoning her ephemeral, earthly identity, the devotee attains a true and enduring identity within the more real world of Kṛṣṇa’s eternal *līlā*.<sup>79</sup>

This transformation may not be a temporary one, either. Scholars emphasize that Rūpa Gosvāmī’s theories differ from other Hindu aesthetic theories because “the process that he outlines is not limited to a single dramatic performance lasting only a few hours, but is conceived as extending through a devotee’s entire lifetime.”<sup>80</sup> At first, statements such as these seem to suggest that the divine world comes to be seen in the mundane world, and vice versa. However, it is less that practitioners of *rāgānugā bhakti sādhana* find the experience of the *Vraja-līlā* in everyday life, and more that they are implored to live “in a state of constant absorption in this eternal drama,”<sup>81</sup> so that they cease to be fully present in the mundane world.<sup>82</sup> In other words, not only does *rāgānugā bhakti sādhana* separate practitioners from the mundane world for a few

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<sup>76</sup> Haberman 1988, 93.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

<sup>78</sup> Haberman 1988, 76.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

<sup>80</sup> Wulff, 26.

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

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 27, 34.



hours (as in the theater), it aims to mentally separate them from mundane reality for the rest of their lives!

In this sense, *rāgānugā bhakti sādhana* perfectly embodies what Santayana sees as being “wrong” with religion: rather than promoting the *essence* or metaphor of Kṛṣṇa’s *līlā*, Rūpa Gosvāmī claims that divine play can only occur in a different world—a more ideal one. Not only is *Vraja-līlā* more ideal, it is also more real than this world, which serves to devalue the experiences within mundane existence as explicitly un-real. Practitioners thus disengage and actively resist the ordinary world (and their identities within it) to live in perpetual mental involvement with the other, divine world; practitioners can physically exist within the mundane world, but mentally they are engaged elsewhere. Finally, the means of the practice do not embody the ends: one must go through several stages of initiation that serve to draw them away from the world and closer to the goal of Kṛṣṇa.<sup>83</sup> Even when the “goal” is reached, there is yet another goal: upon death to enter into the eternal *Vraja-līlā*.<sup>84</sup> Thus, the ends are never truly reached, and practitioners of *rāgānugā bhakti sādhana* begin to view the mundane world as a limiting thing rather than as an enriched space. Here, play is a state of being reserved for another realm. Though *bhaktas* experience a “more”<sup>85</sup> in a divine, other reality, they miss out on the infinite “more” that Santayana finds potential in conventional reality, a tangible realm where “behind the discovered there is the discoverable, beyond the actual, the possible.”<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Haberman 1988, 116-123; Kinsley, 147.

<sup>84</sup> Kinsley, 140.

<sup>85</sup> James, 510ff. In defining “more,” William James says, “there is actually and literally more life in our total soul than we are at any time aware of,” going on to suggest that experiencing the more is what is meant by “religious experience” (511). Here, “more” refers to experiencing something that feels beyond everyday convention: for *bhaktas* this is Kṛṣṇa’s *līlā*, for poets, this is noticing the extraordinary and surprising details within the conventional world, which continually serve to enrich one’s experience.

<sup>86</sup> Santayana 1957, 21.

## Rās līlās and the Experience of the Devoted Audience

We find a quite different approach in the dramatic performances called *rās līlās*<sup>87</sup> described by David V. Mason. *Rās līlā* casts are predominantly composed of minimally-trained child actors, and as such the genre is defined less by “a coherent technique”<sup>88</sup> of theatrical style, and more by the array of narratives depicted from performance to performance.<sup>89</sup> Performances are made up of two distinct parts: the *rās* and the *līlā*. The *rās* often comes first and is filled with dancing to depict the magnificent “circle dance” in the *Bhāvagata Purāṇa*, when Kṛṣṇa uses the power of *māyā* to multiply himself and dance with each of the *gopīs*.<sup>90</sup> Each night, the *līlā* depicts a different episode from Kṛṣṇa’s time in Vraja,<sup>91</sup> and it is this part of the performance that has the most powerful emotional impact on devotional audiences; it is the *līlā* that solidifies the performance as not just a theatrical event but as a means of devotional worship. Although *rās līlā* performances are often wrought with comical chaos,<sup>92</sup> the purpose of *rās līlā* theater is certainly no joke. *Rās līlā* performances do not just represent Vraja or Kṛṣṇa; performances quite literally manifest the eternal play of Kṛṣṇa in the theatrical space so that the audience is watching the “real”<sup>93</sup> Kṛṣṇa and all of the “real” *Vrajaloka* themselves.<sup>94</sup> As such, *rās līlā* theater is not a space for simple aesthetic enjoyment; it is a place for devotion, similar to “temple worship.”<sup>95</sup> Devotees at these performances act accordingly, making offerings and bowing down in respect to

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<sup>87</sup> Mason studies *rās līlā* performances in and around Vraja, and for this reason I will focus on the same.

<sup>88</sup> Mason, 27.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 27-30; Wulff, 20.

<sup>91</sup> Mason, 28-29. The majority of the material is of course taken from the *Bhāvagata Purāṇa*’s tenth book.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>93</sup> I put “real” in quotations because Kṛṣṇa is, in the end, everything (*BhP* 10.14.21-27). However, in the *rās līlā* performances, the “real” Kṛṣṇa refers to the embodiment of Kṛṣṇa the divine as he appeared on earth in the land of Vraja.

<sup>94</sup> Kinsley, 111; Mason, 41.

<sup>95</sup> Hawley 1992, 16.

Kṛṣṇa.<sup>96</sup> The actor who plays Kṛṣṇa becomes at once god and a sign for god; the devotees recognize him as a human child, and they also recognize him as the divine Kṛṣṇa, but such “duality perplexes no one.”<sup>97</sup>

It is this seemingly paradoxical understanding of the performance as worldly and otherworldly that leads Mason to emphasize the crucial role that the audience plays in *rās līlā* performances. The true power of the performance does not rest on the shoulders of the actors, but on the devotional attitude of the audience.<sup>98</sup> Unlike *rāgānugā bhakti sādhana*, *rās līlā* is more closely in line with Bharata’s *rasa* theories in that performances aim to inspire *rasa* within the audience members so that they might transcend the confines of self. However, devoted audiences do not transcend merely by reacting emotionally to the stories and characters; ideally, they walk out of the theater with a new way of being in the world.<sup>99</sup> In the theater, they see and experience Kṛṣṇa, but this viewing experience is not only a delightful moment in their day, it opens them up to the divine essence that is *līlā*, so that *rās līlā* theater is “not only a means of salvation, but salvation itself.”<sup>100</sup> *Rās līlā* is not a window unto Ultimate Reality: it is Ultimate Reality.

Despite the solemn nature of the performance space, *rās līlās* are described by Mason as possessing a “haphazardness”<sup>101</sup> marked by “clumsy dancing,” “giggling and fidgeting,”<sup>102</sup> onstage coaching from the troupe director, and other various mishaps.<sup>103</sup> However, such “inevitable comic moments do not overwhelm sincere drama in those *līlas* that concern matters

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<sup>96</sup> Mason, 25-26; Hawley 1992, 15; Wulff, 19-20.

<sup>97</sup> Mason, 19.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 135.

<sup>99</sup> Hawley 1992, 6-7, 18.

<sup>100</sup> Mason, 37.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 82.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 140.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 82, 140, 100.

of devotional seriousness.”<sup>104</sup> Mason contends that the chaotic atmosphere is no mistake: “the theatricality very often aims at engendering a spirit that is unconcerned with conventional social mores.”<sup>105</sup> The child actors, the wild atmosphere, and the breaking of the fourth wall into the sphere of the audience all serve to embody the playfulness and the wiliness of Kṛṣṇa during his years in and around Vraja. Such an environment serves not only to give the audience a more visceral taste of Kṛṣṇa and his play, but also to demarcate the theater as a special space:

*Rās līla* performances, then, are the preeminent escapism. [...] an effective diversion from mundane life. Furthermore, inasmuch as Vaishnava theology regards these episodes as exemplary, which is to say, as expressions of *play* as a divine principal [sic], the *rās līla* provides a model for the way life should be lived.<sup>106</sup>

Play is experienced, not just watched. In this way, audience members directly engage in Kṛṣṇa’s *līlā* by partaking in the chaotic play that pervades the theater. Devotees are not aiming to understand what Kṛṣṇa’s play is, but are aiming to be swept up in it.

“The presence of God as experienced by devotees means that, in the practice of *bhakti*, acts of devotion are not necessarily a means to an end, but are themselves the desired end of devotion.”<sup>107</sup> One need not grow irritated with the world while waiting for an eventual entrance into heaven, a devotee simply need attend a *rās līlā* performance to truly experience heaven. This differs from *rāgānugā bhakti sādhana* because in the meditational practice, *bhaktas* aim to detach themselves from the mundane world so that they are physically present, but mentally elsewhere. For *rās līlā* patrons, by contrast, there is a more distinct boundary between the sacred space within the theater and the mundane world outside. *Rās līlā* audience members have a space where the means are the ends, and they are happy leaving it at that. Unlike the meditational *bhaktas*, they do not strive to make the whole world conform to the *Vraja-līlā*. Audience

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<sup>104</sup> Mason, 12.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 37.

members find the divine space in the *rās līlā* to be fulfilling in and of itself, and are able to then exit the theater after the performance ends and be physically and mentally present in the mundane world outside. However, this distinction does create an inherent division between the “profane” world outside the theater and a “sacred” world within the theater.

While the divine is certainly present on earth during the performance, this presence only exists within a demarcated environment. Mason tells the story of a devotee who waited patiently next to the actor who was getting dressed to play Kṛṣṇa.<sup>108</sup> As soon as the final touch was put on the costume, a transformation took place wherein the actor ceased to be a child getting ready for a performance, and suddenly became Kṛṣṇa himself. The devotee responded accordingly and made an offering of sweets to be anointed by Kṛṣṇa incarnate. This example illustrates that there is a distinct barrier between the mundane and the divine. One can certainly cross between the mundane and the divine, as the child actor does, but the barrier between the two worlds remains; the divine and the mundane are never holistically one and the same. Devotees thus go to the *rās līlā* performances to experience the divine and to attain a sense of “salvation,” but when they walk out of the theater, they walk out of the salvific, divine space into a very separate mundane world.<sup>109</sup>

Even though devotees must leave the divine space of the theater, there is a hope that the experience within the sacred sphere has a lasting effect. By watching the performance, devotees are more able to understand that the whole world is play, so that what they just watched was a play within a play: all of life is a play.<sup>110</sup> Such meta-cognition is intended to lead one to the realization that life should be lived *as līlā*.<sup>111</sup> The model for the playful life is Kṛṣṇa himself; a

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<sup>108</sup> Mason, 25.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 3, 33.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 140-141; Hawley 1995, 128-129.

<sup>111</sup> Goodwin, 56, 69.

true player is free and creative in his approach to the world.<sup>112</sup> Although no mortal trapped in *saṃsāra* can be as free as Kṛṣṇa, the realization of the world as play can lead one to take socially constructed conceptions less seriously, leading to more creative engagement and a more genuine relationship with the world.<sup>113</sup>

This is getting closer to Santayana’s dream of ideal worlds or divine characters used to inspire a creative and engaged essence within religious persons. However, there is still an emphasis on the separateness of the divine and the mundane. Although the hope is that audiences leave the performances with a new understanding of the world, the fact that the theater is considered a temporary sacred space most likely perpetuates the notion that the divine is not to be found in the everyday. Perhaps audience members have taken the performances to be metaphors for all of life, but more likely than not, most—if not all—have walked out of the *rās līlā* amazed by their encounter with Kṛṣṇa, looking forward to the next time they can interact with the god himself. Santayana would certainly tell those devotees that there is no need to return to the theater or the temple in search of the divine, for the divine is present in the everyday minutiae of the mundane world; Kṛṣṇa, is utterly accessible within the here and now.

### **Accessing *Līlā* in Pilgrimage**

*It is goal-oriented activity—striving for some other condition—that causes unhappiness and takes us away from enjoying the form that the lila assumes right here, right now. The promise of a more perfect goal creates a sense of imperfection in that which is. But in Braj all natural forms are accepted as lila, with all their apparent limitations and imperfections.*<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> Kinsley, 67-68.

<sup>113</sup> Goodwin, 54-55; Santayana 1957, viii-ix.

<sup>114</sup> Haberman 1994, 26.

While Mason’s claim that “Vrindavan *is* a stage”<sup>115</sup> is true in many regards, there is no question that Ban-Yatra pilgrims play on the Vrindavan “stage” in a very different way than the actors and audiences discussed thus far. The Ban-Yatra is not only the penultimate Vaiṣṇava pilgrimage but also *sine qua non* of devotional experiences<sup>116</sup> for those devoted to Kṛṣṇa, as they can see, feel, and fully experience Kṛṣṇa and his play first-hand. One *rās līlā* audience member preparing for the pilgrimage demonstrates the heightened devotional nature of the Ban-Yatra telling another pilgrim, “Today we see the lilas performed onstage; soon we will see where they actually occurred.”<sup>117</sup> The land of Vraja *is* Kṛṣṇa himself, and to experience Vraja with one’s body and mind is to literally and directly experience the god of all gods.<sup>118</sup> Such encounters on this “journey through the forests”<sup>119</sup> result in a deep understanding of the divine essence and a lasting sense of play that extends outside the boundaries of Vraja. Indeed, the Vraja pilgrimage may be getting closer to Santayana’s ideal view of religion: a religious exercise that does not promote an opportunity for mere escape from the world, but instead advocates an enriched engagement within the world—with all of its unpredictability and force.

David Haberman is a professor of Religious Studies at Indiana University who walked the Ban-Yatra pilgrimage in the summer of 1988. Using the vivid descriptions of his own experiences as well as the experiences of other pilgrims expressed in interviews in his book *Journey Through the Twelve Forests*, we will examine how the Ban-Yatra promotes *līlā* not just in an alternate divine sphere, but also in the world, as it exists in the everyday. In fact, for Ban-Yatra pilgrims like David Haberman, the divine *līlā* appears to pervade the mundane earth so that

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<sup>115</sup> Mason, 116.

<sup>116</sup> Haberman 1994, 50-51.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, 126.

<sup>119</sup> Haberman 1994, 48. “Ban-Yatra” means “journey through the forests.”

the sacred and the profane are not separate but are perfectly congruent with one another in the same realm of being.

Unlike most pilgrimages, the Ban-Yatra is a “circular journey that resists the center and has no clear destination.”<sup>120</sup> Circles are a prominent theme in the religion of Vraja;<sup>121</sup> rather than seeking some singular, essential point of a thing, Vraja devotees notice and experience each thing as it is, which may lead to a shift in perspective or new understanding of the thing itself.<sup>122</sup> Pilgrims start and end their journey in the same place (often, Vrindavan) and circumambulate landmarks such as temples and mountains along the way. Such a journey does not seek to obtain something from Kṛṣṇa nor does it even follow the Kṛṣṇa narrative in any linear fashion, but rather it wanders from place to place, enjoying the special significance and beauty of each.<sup>123</sup> Haberman thus calls the Ban-Yatra a “purposeless”<sup>124</sup> pilgrimage in which devotees come to know Kṛṣṇa just by blissfully meandering through the land where he played and continues to play. By enjoying what is and participating in the play of it all, pilgrims come away with “a new perspective, namely, that all life is *lila*, or purposeless play.”<sup>125</sup>

Thus, a pilgrim must begin to play in the circular Ban-Yatra by defining and entering into the demarcated “play world.” The Yamuna River serves as such a “barrier;”<sup>126</sup> it marks both the physical boundaries of the *Vraja-līlā* (Vraja, the land of Kṛṣṇa’s earthly and eternal play) as well as the identity or behavior that is embodied within that space. Before beginning their journey, pilgrims must bathe in the Yamuna River to transform themselves into *gopīs*.<sup>127</sup> Similar to the

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<sup>120</sup> Haberman 1994, 71.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid., 68-70.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 25-26.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid., xvi.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid., viii. We will examine the validity of this statement at a later point.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., 19, 23.



*rāgānugā bhakti sādhana*, pilgrims cannot fully experience Kṛṣṇa’s play without this sacred identity. The *gopī* identity is particularly apt for pilgrims because not only are the *gopīs* exalted for their extraordinary love of Kṛṣṇa,<sup>128</sup> they are also appropriate models for play. The *gopīs* see Kṛṣṇa everywhere in Vraja<sup>129</sup> and even when he is not physically present, they embody him and his *līlā* in play of their own<sup>130</sup>; as *gopīs*, therefore, pilgrims are able to more easily access and embody the spirit of play as a devotional act.

After bathing to become a *gopī* and crossing into the land of Vraja, pilgrims are physically and symbolically separated from the mundane world. This boundary between the sacred play world of *Vraja-līlā* and the ordinary world outside of it is crucial in the theological context of *līlā*, and also in general theories of play as well. One of the most defining aspects of play is that it takes place within certain limits of time and space, so that a separate “play world” is created.<sup>131</sup> As such, play worlds necessitate boundaries, which delineate not only the separate space of a play world, but also the special rules and circumstances that define it.<sup>132</sup> Further, players’ adherence to these rules or circumstances is less important than their acceptance of the circumstances as a given fact of the reality. In other words, spoilsports are viewed as far more threatening to the play world than are the cheaters.<sup>133</sup>

Boundaries can often create separate and enclosed spaces, but those that define play worlds do not seek to limit the players inside. Rather, the boundaries of play worlds such as Vraja seek to create space for creative and free modes of being: “A space is something that has been made room for, something that has been freed, namely, within a boundary...A boundary is

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<sup>128</sup> *BhP* 10.47.58.

<sup>129</sup> *BhP* 10.47.9-38, 49-51.

<sup>130</sup> *BhP* 10.30.2-23.

<sup>131</sup> Huizinga, 7-11.

<sup>132</sup> Seligman et al., 73.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

not that at which something stops but...the boundary is that from which something *begins its essential unfolding*.”<sup>134</sup> Conceived in these terms, boundaries allow spaces to open up, to assert themselves as something more expansive, stretching forth from the delineated boundary. The structure provides a container that enables creative play, which is precisely what occurs when one recognizes and then crosses the boundary of Vraja to enter the *Vraja-līlā*.

Once inside the boundary of Vraja, the pilgrim is opened up to experiencing Kṛṣṇa and his *līlā* in an intensely physical way that is inaccessible in other forms of devotion. Given that Vraja is Kṛṣṇa and Kṛṣṇa is Vraja in all its physical manifestations,<sup>135</sup> “[t]he text of Braj is not to be read with the eyes alone but with the whole body.”<sup>136</sup> Every square centimeter of Vraja is a form of Kṛṣṇa, “every particle of dust, is considered divine”<sup>137</sup> so contact with and the physical experience of the land itself serves to increase devotion in the hearts of pilgrims.<sup>138</sup> Every moment of the walking<sup>139</sup> pilgrimage is sacred; visits to temples and ponds, the circumambulation of Mount Govardhan, and *darśan* (“seeing”) of sacred objects like Kṛṣṇa’s footprint all promote a constant awareness of and connection to Kṛṣṇa.<sup>140</sup> Not only the experiencing of physical forms, but the personal, sensory experience of the body undergoing such a painful, strenuous journey serves to increase one’s awareness of and devotion to Kṛṣṇa: “The pounding sun produces sweat, rocks cause one to stumble, flower scents reach the nose, the song of a bird delights the ear, dust can be tasted, and the breeze touches the body; one has time

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<sup>134</sup> Heidegger 1993, 356.

<sup>135</sup> Haberman 1994, 124-126.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, 171.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, 130, 151. It is important to note that not all pilgrims walk. Some take cars and buses to see the sites, but Haberman laments that these modes of performing the pilgrimage fail to engage with the spirit and experience of the Ban-Yatra as a whole-body experience.

<sup>140</sup> Haberman 1994, 83.

to sense and study the shape of the world.”<sup>141</sup> No matter how messy or grueling, pilgrims revel in the “concrete bodily experience of the material”<sup>142</sup> in order to find bliss.<sup>143</sup>

Though the ultimate purpose of the Ban-Yatra is to realize that all is Kṛṣṇa’s *līlā* and to thus experience pure *ānanda* (bliss),<sup>144</sup> such a physical experience of the sacred forests is not always so pleasant. The experience of *ānanda* as found in physical suffering<sup>145</sup> eluded Haberman for most of his journey. While the other pilgrims seemed to be reveling in the physical bounty of the strenuous journey, Haberman was suffering miserably through much of it. For the most part, his pilgrimage experience was defined by his efforts to escape the sweltering heat in small patches of shade and by the agony of walking for days on end with little sleep; Haberman experienced the Ban-Yatra not through the lens of bliss, but through the lens of pain caused by his blisters—or were they really “bliss-ters”?

David Haberman vividly describes the moment when he realized that he needed to cease focusing on the negative aspects of his journey, and instead had to surrender to the presence of joy within the moment,<sup>146</sup> no matter how grueling. Caught in a rainstorm that caused the walking paths to be slippery with mud—if not covered with several feet of water—Haberman found himself trying unsuccessfully to stay dry and as such he was “in a state of despair...[wanting] desperately for things to be different from what they were.”<sup>147</sup> However, as he tiptoed across a muddy ridge to bypass a particularly large puddle, the ground beneath his feet gave way and he slipped into the threatening pool of water, completely drenching himself. Realizing that staying dry was pointless and that there was nothing he could do to change his surrounding situation, he

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<sup>141</sup> Haberman 1994, 151.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid., 188.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid., 87, 150.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid., 154.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid., 108.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid., 197-200.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid., 197.

instead changed his perspective on the situations and found himself not crying, but laughing—and playing.

In a moment, Haberman surrendered to the reality of his situation, and in doing so he experienced the *ānanda* that many other pilgrims had been experiencing all along.<sup>148</sup> Haberman finally understood the pilgrimage as “an exercise in uncovering and becoming aware of [the] ever-present bliss.”<sup>149</sup> For Vaiṣṇava pilgrims such playful *ānanda* is not a detached, unspecified feeling, but the direct experience of Kṛṣṇa himself and inclusion in the *līlā* that he is perpetually engaged in. To have a relationship with Kṛṣṇa, pilgrims must embody his essence and they do so by embodying all that he stands for, by playing in a state of “ananda, that pointless ‘enjoyment’ which transcends the dualistic distinction of happiness and unhappiness.”<sup>150</sup> Through blistering heat and torrential rainstorms alike, Ban-Yatra pilgrims devote their whole bodies—their whole beings—to playing without care.

There is no doubt that the Ban-Yatra tests the limits of the body, but Haberman found that in the end, one of the greatest lessons of the pilgrimage lay in the painful experiences; the unsavory aspects of the Ban-Yatra—and life in general—need not be endured as so unpleasant. Rather, when one comes to surrender oneself fully to Kṛṣṇa and to the experience of the world as it is, when one’s perspective shifts from one of criticism to one of embrace, then one’s experience of the whole world becomes *ānanda*.<sup>151</sup> Rather than focusing on the blisters on one’s feet, a devoted pilgrim may instead walk in gratitude, as the very dust they walk on is itself sacred. The Ban-Yatra is full of potential for holistic experience; it is the pilgrims’ choice to find

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<sup>148</sup> Haberman 1994, 26, 86-87, 108, 150, 197

<sup>149</sup> Ibid., 209

<sup>150</sup> Ibid., 26

<sup>151</sup> Ibid., 198-199.

it painful or blissful, but either way there is no way to get around the physicality of the pilgrimage on foot.

What occurs on the Ban-Yatra pilgrimage is a shift of perspective from seeing the world as a limited and unfair space, to seeing it as a realm ripe with potential for more than what initially appears, where the divine is “constantly unfolding” in play. There is no need to search for the divine in a far-off location; blissful experience of the divine is found in the pounding rain or the scorching heat, out in the mud or dust. Unlike linear pilgrimages, which journey to a “sacred ‘center out there’ [that] serves as a symbol of the ideal and provides relief from the burdens of ordinary existence,”<sup>152</sup> the Ban-Yatra encourages pilgrims to remain with the “burdens” of existence, and realize that they are only burdens if viewed as such. The Ban-Yatra is certainly about the journey, not the destination. Rather than seek a singular goal or destination, pilgrims meander through the sacred space of Vraja in a circular fashion so as to more fully experience and appreciate the wonderful and detailed aspects of the journey itself.<sup>153</sup>

“It is in the forests that one truly comes to know something of Krishna,”<sup>154</sup> but coming to know Kṛṣṇa is coming to know that he is not found only in the forest. By circling back to the beginning, pilgrims recall the boundary that they had to cross to begin the Ban-Yatra. This boundary defined Vraja as a land of play and bliss, separate from the ordinary. But after stepping into the bounded space of the Ban-Yatra and truly experiencing the play of Kṛṣṇa, pilgrims have a “perspectival awakening” as they come to realize that “that which is present in Braj in an intensified form is also available elsewhere.”<sup>155</sup> In Vraja, pilgrims come to recognize every feature—every piece of dust, every tree, every rock—as Kṛṣṇa and when they fully understand

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<sup>152</sup> Haberman 1994, 70, 70-75.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid., 71.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid., 64.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid., 73.

this, pilgrims recognize that Kṛṣṇa does not just exist in the earth, trees, and rocks of Vraja but Kṛṣṇa resides in every corner of the world.<sup>156</sup>

Thus, “[t]here is no need to search for a passageway out of this world, there is no need for radical change, for this very world is itself divine. Once this realization takes place, the [original] frame suddenly appears artificial.”<sup>157</sup> The pilgrim has gone from seeking the divine within Vraja, to realizing that the divine is everywhere; the boundary between the sacred and the profane becomes obsolete as the profane is sacred and the sacred is profane. Although the boundary between the two realms is ultimately non-existent, the realization of its non-existence can only take place by crossing from the mundane into the *Vraja-līlā*; it is only by crossing boundaries from one space to the next that one comes to a true awareness of the nature of the spaces that these boundaries delineate.<sup>158</sup> In this sense, the boundary created in the Ban-Yatra is ultimately what allows playful pilgrims to recognize the “essential unfolding” of the greater world beyond Vraja.

Upon the dissolution of the boundary that separates the sacred Vraja from the profane ordinary world, pilgrims are free to make the world their playground. Pilgrims may not seek this goal on the pilgrimage, emphasizing the Ban-Yatra as a circular “exercise in uncovering and becoming aware of that ever-present bliss.”<sup>159</sup> Though pilgrims each have their own purpose for going on the pilgrimage, the general purpose and its attainment is found in the action itself; the means to the purpose are the end itself, and the end of the purpose defines the purpose to begin with—making the whole process a circular journey of realization, rather than a linear path to the attainment of a goal. A pilgrimage to Vraja, then, is perhaps not without purpose, but simply

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<sup>156</sup> Haberman 1994, viii, 73, 223.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid., 73.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid., 215; Seligman et al., 84-85, 93-94.

<sup>159</sup> Haberman 1994, 209.

without a goal. And to lack a goal is to lack expectation and to go through life with “acceptance and enjoyment of the whole show, in whatever form it takes.”<sup>160</sup>

As you may have guessed, this journey is well suited to Santayana’s ideal vision of religion. Devotees do certainly cross a boundary, implying that they seek the divine elsewhere. However, pilgrims circle back around to realize that the boundary that separates the divine world from the mundane one is in the end illusory. It is only by entering the bounded playing space that one can realize the ever-presence of the divine within the world itself. The divine and the mundane come to simultaneously occupy the same realm; neither tries to conform or to get the other to conform to its own circumstance, but rather both exist in harmony. Ban-Yatra pilgrims take home the ultimate souvenir: an abiding sense of the divine, no matter where they go.

## **Conclusion**

The circular Ban-Yatra thus ends where it began. One returns to the beginning by unwinding all the limiting perceptions and expectations developed in one’s life. The Ban-Yatra succeeds in erasing the boundaries that limit ultimate awareness by creating a play reality in which one can come to experience the true nature of things. Pilgrims dissolve the distance between the divine and the mundane through play, and in so doing expand the potential for ongoing creative and playful engagement throughout their lives. Pilgrims are invited to return to a state of child-like clarity; not only has the child “not yet assimilated social conventions and so is not yet limited by them,”<sup>161</sup> but also childhood is defined by a natural curiosity and craving to find more within the mundane. Thus, in order to imaginatively and creatively root down into the

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<sup>160</sup> Haberman 1994, 26.

<sup>161</sup> Kinsley, 67.

world of experience, “a man must play like a child.”<sup>162</sup> For this reason, play and childhood are the models for Santayana’s “spiritual man,” the embodiment of his theories on poetic interpretations of religion.

Like a child, the spiritual man is defined by his open innocence, which allows him to perceive what truly is. But unlike a child, he has experience and an ability to act and to do great things with his clarity of intellect: “Only when the disordered impulses and perceptions settle down into a trained instinct, a steady, vital response and adequate preparation for the world, do clear ideas and successful purposes arise in the mind.”<sup>163</sup> The spiritual man is balanced between the experience of a grown person and the wonder, curiosity, and creativity of a child, and this balance allows him to clear away the mental clutter and to evoke a remarkable mental clarity. The world ceases to be limiting, and instead the structures and boundaries of the world become blank canvases, the beginnings of the ‘essential unfoldings’ of space.

Unlike Santayana’s spiritual man, in Vaiṣṇava theology there is already a layer of paint on the canvas, as all the world is perceived to be Kṛṣṇa. However, this viewpoint does not limit the devotee’s interpretation of the world in the slightest. Given that Kṛṣṇa is manifold, declaring that all is Kṛṣṇa does not define everything in rigid ways, but instead opens up the expansive, playful mode of the world and imbues each aspect and moment of reality with divine significance (or, in *līlā* theology, insignificance). Kṛṣṇa as the *līlā* of the cosmos bestows a special nature to the world normally only afforded to far-off realms, and Kṛṣṇa as the child that plays in Vraja is the model<sup>164</sup> for those wishing to worship and to have a relationship with the

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<sup>162</sup> Huizinga, 199.

<sup>163</sup> Santayana 1953, 266.

<sup>164</sup> Again, Kṛṣṇa is the god of all gods and as such cannot be a precise model for human devotees, but his playful essence can still serve as an example of *līlā* to be emulated.



sacred world around them. As such, Kṛṣṇa's *līlā* (when practiced in the mundane world) provides an access point for devotees to engage in the world in rich and creative ways.

Without boundaries to divide the limitless divine and the limited mundane, the ordinary experience of life starts to unfold into something more. The whole world becomes a playground for the imagination, now free to exist within the structure of reality, without being limited by precisely defined expectations. But play is not just enjoyable for the player; it enriches the world in an observable way. Play is the outward manifestation of imagination grounded in reality and can lead to such beautiful and extraordinary things as art, literature, science, religion theses, and even the cosmos itself. Secular or religious, play is a mode of engaging in the world in creative, opening ways. For the religious, play is finding the divine in every aspect of being; for the secular, play is redefining and connecting with the world in greater ways. Regardless of purpose, all modes of play open the world up to more than we have been trained to view it as and promote hands-on engagement.

Poetic interpretations of religion can effectively open people up to finding the limitless within a seemingly limited world. Used improperly (by Santayana's estimation), ideal religious worlds can limit peoples' perceptions by keeping them focused on something better that is also decidedly not here. But used correctly, these worlds provide a metaphorical lens through which to view our existence. Using gods like Kṛṣṇa as metaphors for the limitless play available in the here and now, religious worlds grant people access to creative interpretations of the world around them. Taken in this way, religious worlds allow one to play by providing a framework in which to play. This play world is none other than our very own; religious ideals are not telescopes pointed towards other worlds, but kaleidoscopes through which to view the bounty of our existence.

## Glossary

**Ānanda:** (spiritual) bliss

**Ban Yatra:** directly translates as “journey through the twelve forests,” and refers to a circular pilgrimage that travels through the land of Vraja

**Bhaktas:** devotees of Kṛṣṇa

**Bhāvas:** psychological states of emotion used as a starting point to experience higher states (*rasas*) in *rāgānugā bhakti sādhana*

**Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism:** founded by Caitanya in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century, Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism centers on the worship of Kṛṣṇa, recognizing him as the supreme creator and source of all *avatāras* including Viṣṇu

**Gopīs:** cowherdesses who played with Kṛṣṇa in the mythical Vraja

**Kṛṣṇa:** Hindu god who came to prominence in epic and puranic texts. By some he is considered to be an incarnation of Viṣṇu, by others Viṣṇu is an incarnation of Kṛṣṇa, who is the creator and source of all things

**Līlā:** Translates as play or sport. Like the English word “play,” *līlā* has many connotations such as dramatic plays and play as an action (as in child’s play). *Līlā* also refers to Kṛṣṇa’s divine play or sport

**Māyā:** illusion

**Mokṣa:** complete liberation from *saṃsāra*, the cycle of death and rebirth, and non-differentiation from the divine

**Nāṭya-Śāstra:** text composed by Bharata that first outlined Indian aesthetic theory and practice

**Rāgānugā Bhakti Sādhana:** a meditational practice in which practitioners take on the identity of a *gopī* in the *Vraja-līlā* in order to become closer to Kṛṣṇa in his eternal play

**Rasa:** the aesthetic “taste” of a performance, as experienced by the audience, likened to a religious experience

**Rās Līlā:** dramatic performances that depict the exploits of Kṛṣṇa in Vraja

**Rūpa Gosvāmī:** Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava theologian and disciple of Caitanya in the sixteenth century who developed *rāgānugā bhakti sādhana* as a way of becoming closer to Kṛṣṇa

**Saṃsāra:** cycle of karma and rebirth, characterized by desire, attachment, and suffering

**Vraja:** earthly place where Kṛṣṇa played during his youth. Vraja is located in the modern Indian state of Uttar Pradesh, south of New Delhi

**Vraja-līlā:** Kṛṣṇa's realm of play, both eternally and during his specific time as a youth in Vraja

**Vrajaloka:** Kṛṣṇa's play companions in Vraja

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