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On the Secondary Nature of Kaṁsa’s ‘Massacre of the Innocents’ in the Bhāgavata Purāṇa

Ronald V. Huggins

Abstract: The Herod-like “massacre of the innocents” of infants ten days old and younger contemplated by Kaṁsa and his ministers in the Bhāgavata Purāṇa book 10, is not, as Ramakrishna Gopal Bhandarker and other early Indologists suggested, due to the influence of Christianity. But it is a later embellishment on the developing story of Kaṁsa’s consultation with his ministers. This is seen in the fact that (1) the consultation itself is absent from earlier accounts of the story, (2) alternate accounts where the killing of children is mentioned do not include the detail about targeting infants ten days old and younger, and (3) the decisions of the consultation are not carried out in any systematic way in what follows in the larger narrative, which turns out to derive its shape instead from a conversation between Viṣṇu and the sage Nārada included in the Harivamsa but left out of the Bhāgavata Purāṇa. The story of Kaṁsa’s consultation with his ministers originally arose as a response to the goddess telling him that his killer had already been born, a detail not present in certain early accounts. It also serves in the Bhāgavata Purāṇa as a plot-enhancement innovation extending the shadow of Kaṁsa’s menacing presence over the entire period of Kṛṣṇa’s youth.

The story of King Kaṁsa as recorded in the Bhāgavata Purāṇa book 10 is well known not only in India but also in the West. I first read the story in the summer 1973 by flashlight in the back of a VW microbus heading south and east out of Tijuana, Mexico, across that vast expanse of nowhere and nothing known as the Sonora Desert. The story was in a copy of the first volume of A. C. Bhaktivedānta Swami’s Kṛṣṇa, the Supreme Personality of Godhead, plugged at the beginning by the Beatle George Harrison. I’d bought the book earlier that day from a shaved-headed, saffron-robed Krishna devotee I’d met on the streets of San Diego, California. At the time I did not know who Bhaktivedānta Swami was, but I did know George Harrison. And I also knew who the “Krishnas” were. I had encountered them for the first time the summer before at the first Rainbow Family Gathering of the Tribes at Granby, Colorado. One day a troupe of devotees had come up to the Gathering, presumably from Denver, where they had, and still have, a temple at 1400 Cherry Street, and led a large crowd of us in kirtana for what seemed like hours.

As I think back now to that night in the VW microbus, I still remember distinctly how the strangely enormous moon rose above and

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illuminated the lonely asphalt strip of Mexican highway stretching off into the empty distances, and how the mention of the massacre of children under ten days old jumped right off the page at me when I came to it in the book. Although I would eventually become a professor of New Testament, I had not yet read much in it in those days. I did, however, know the story of Herod. I knew it, I imagine, in pretty much the same way many Hindus know the story of Kaṁsa. It was a story that was sown into the very fabric of the culture of my youth. As a child I had once even designed the set for the Christmas play at my public elementary school and played the role of the innkeeper, who sang his excuse of no-room-at-the-inn while sending the equally musical Joseph and his pregnant wife Mary away. Everyone knew about Herod, or almost everyone, he was a part of Christmas story: Three magi (kings in the popular version) appear in Jerusalem from the east asking after the new-born King of the Jews, whose recent birth they had divined from the appearance of a new star. King Herod, alarmed at the threat this new king might pose to his throne, cunningly and with bad intent instructs the Magi to return when they find the child on the pretense that he too wants to go and worship the new-born king. But the Magi are warned in a dream not to do so and return to their own country by another way. Furious at being outwitted, Herod orders all the boys in Bethlehem two years old and under to be killed.

How similar the story I was now reading seemed: Kaṁsa takes the reins of his sister Devakī’s wedding carriage, and while they are riding along, a disembodied voice informs him that the eighth child of the woman he is transporting is going to kill him (Bhāgavata Purāṇa, henceforth ‘BhP’ 10.1.1.34). To avoid this happening Kaṁsa kills the first six of Devakī’s and Vasudeva’s children, while the seventh (Balarāma) is saved from his hand when its embryo appears to miscarry but is actually transferred to the womb of Vasudeva’s other wife Rohiṇī (BhP 10.1.2.8 and 15).

When the prophesied eighth child (Kṛṣṇa) is born, Vasudeva manages to switch him with the new-born daughter of Yaśodā before Kaṁsa discovers another birth has taken place (BhP 10.1.3.51). When he receives news that a girl child is born to Devakī, Kaṁsa takes up the child and dashes it against a rock in order to kill it. As he does, the goddess Yogamāyā, who was disguised as the girl child, rises up and rebukes him: “You rascal, how can you kill me? The child who will kill you is already born before me somewhere within this world.” But in telling Kaṁsa this she is actually deceiving him. Kṛṣṇa was not born somewhere else, but Kaṁsa will only learn what really happened when the sage Nārada tells him more than thirty chapters later, after Kṛṣṇa has already killed a series of shape-shifting demons, ending with the bull demon Ariṣṭa (BhP 10.1.36.16-18).

Kaṁsa believes the goddess and, seeing no further threat, releases Devakī and Vasudeva from the imprisonment he had imposed upon them. He then gathers his ministers to tell them about Yogamāyā’s terrifying message. They responded “Dear sir, let us now make arrangements to kill all children who were born within the last ten days in all towns, countries, villages and pasturing grounds. Let us execute this plan indiscriminately.” (BhP 10.1.4.31).

It is hard to read this last statement and not think of King Herod’s ordering the deaths of children two years old and under in Bethlehem after receiving news of Jesus’s birth in the New Testament Gospel of Matthew (2:16).
The influence of Bhaktivedānta Swami in familiarizing the West with the story of King Kaṁsa as presented in the Bhāgavata Purāṇa cannot be underestimated. I have taken the liberty to describe my own initial encounter with his works because I consider it to be typical of the experience of many of my generation. Even Edwin F. Bryant, one of the few westerners to undertake translating the Bhāgavata Purāṇa, also encountered the work and the story of Kṛṣṇa for the first time in Bhaktivedānta Swami's works.5

And yet the parallels between the stories of Kaṁsa and Herod were already well known in the West long before Bhaktivedānta Swami made his way down the gangplank of the Scindia ship line’s Jaladuta and onto the New York pier on 19 September 1965.6 They had been noted in the eighteenth century, and widely commented upon ever since.7 Indeed the parallel of the order to kill children early became a linchpin argument for trying to establish a real link between the stories of Krishna and Christ. Numerous explanations were offered, with greater or lesser plausibility. Some appealed to the parallel to prove that the story of Kaṁsa was derived from that of Herod,8 others, that the story of Herod was derived from that of Kaṁsa,9 and still others, that both stories represented variations of some earlier myth,10 or that they arose independently from the Collective Unconscious as a standard element in the archetypal Hero’s Journey motif.11 But we will argue that both arose independently, each from the soil its own historical, cultural, spiritual, and literary context.

For Bhaktivedānta Swami, the question of direction of dependence was never an issue, since he dated the Bhāgavata Purāṇa to “just prior to the beginning of the age of Kali (about five thousand years ago).”12 The broader scholarly community, however, now generally dates it to “sometime after the 8th century C.E.”13 Wendy Doniger, for example, puts it at around 950.14 Overall, the bulk of earlier scholarly discussions, especially in the West, tended to argue that the story of Kaṁsa was derived from the story of Herod and not the other way around. As Edwin F. Bryant remarks:

The similarities between this story and that of Herod in the New Testament caused some early Indologists to suppose that the Hindus had borrowed the narrative from early Christian sources. Eventually, however, it was pointed out that there was evidence to prove that the Kṛṣṇa story predated the common era.15

But the real question is not whether the Kṛṣṇa story as such predates the common era, few, so far as I know, dispute that, but whether the birth stories do, and more particularly whether certain details of the birth stories do.

Prominent among the “early Indologists” Bryant mentioned earlier was Ramakrishna Gopal Bhandarkar (d. 1925) who argued that some stories about Kṛṣṇa’s youth had been imported from Christianity via a tribe known as the Ābhīras who “must have migrated into the country in the first century,” bringing with them, “the worship of the boy-god [i.e., Jesus] and the story of his humble birth, his reputed father’s knowledge that he was not his son, and the massacre of the innocents,” by which Bhandarkar meant “Kaṁsa’s killing all children.”16

And indeed there is a “massacre of the innocents” in the Bhāgavata Purāṇa, in terms of Kaṁsa’s killing Devakī’s children, but Bhandarker was mistaken when he spoke...
generally of “Kaṁsa’s killing all children.” In the Bhāgavata Purāṇa, the suggestion that all children ten days old and younger be killed was the first of two proposals Kaṁsa’s demon ministers set before him. But Kaṁsa chose the second of their proposals not the first, namely that the demon ministers try to disempower Viṣṇu, and through him all the gods, by killing “the brāhmaṇas, the ascetics, the reciters of the Vedas, the performers of sacrifice and the cows, who provide milk for sacrifice” (BhP 10.1.4.40). Kaṁsa passes over the first proposal, that of killing children ten days old and under, and instead “decided that persecution of the brāhmaṇas was the solution” (BhP 10.1.4.43). He thus commands the demon ministers, who can “assume any form at will...to engage in the wholesale slaughter of saintly people” (BhP 10.1.4.44).

From what it says about Kaṁsa’s ministers next, namely that “The deaths of these demons were imminent” (BhP 10.1.4.45), we might be intended to understand that, although not specifically named, the demons being sent out in disguise are the same ones that Kṛṣṇa subsequently encounters one by one and kills, namely Pūtanā disguised as a handsome woman (BhP 10.1.6.4-17), Trṭṇavarta as a whirlwind (BhP 10.1.7.20-28), an unnamed calf demon (BhP 10.1.11.41-43),2 Baka as a crane (BhP 10.1.11.47-51), Agha as a giant serpent (BhP 10.1.12.14-32), Dhenuka as an ass (BhP 10.1.15.21-38), Pralamba as a cowherd boy (BhP10.1.18.17-29),18 and Arīṣṭa as a bull (BhP 10.1.36.1-14). This understanding is further reinforced by our being explicitly informed when they encounter Kṛṣṇa that a number of these demons had been sent by Kaṁsa.19

Yet these encounters took place over a number of years rather than a few days. So, for example, Pūtanā was killed first, then, when Kṛṣṇa was one year old, Trṭṇavarta (BhP 10.1.26.26.6). After that, between killing Trṭṇavarta when he was one and lifting up Mount Govardhana when he was seven, Kṛṣṇa and/or Balarāma killed the unnamed calf demon, Baka, Agha, Dhenuka, and Pralamba, leaving Arīṣṭa to be killed sometime after the lifting up of the mount (BhP 10.1.26.3).

The story of Kaṁsa’s consultation with his ministers in its context in the Bhāgavata Purāṇa raises questions of consistency regarding the narrative. In the first place, although the reader was privy to the fact that Kaṁsa’s killer (Kṛṣṇa) was born at the same time as the infant girl Kaṁsa dashes on the rock, Kaṁsa himself was not. The goddess only said that his killer had “already been born somewhere else,” without providing any clue as to when. Whence then the idea of killing children ten days old and younger? In suggesting that solution, Kaṁsa’s ministers seem to be acting on information available to the reader but not to Kaṁsa, and presumably not to them either. If it stood alone, this difficulty might be set aside by suggesting the narrator had never intended to explicitly include everything the goddess told Kaṁsa, that the timeframe might in fact have been given by the goddess just not mentioned in the text. But there is a second issue that is even more incongruous, namely that in what follows as the story unfolds, Kaṁsa’s demon ministers do not end up carrying out either their suggested massacre of infants or the commanded “wholesale slaughter of saintly people.”

This article argues that these lapses are part of a larger evidential picture showing that even though it is true that “the Kṛṣṇa story [i.e., the story of his childhood] predated the common era,” as Bryant pointed out,20 the same cannot be
Ronald V. Huggins said about this particular episode of Kaṁsa’s consulting with his demon ministers and afterward sending them out to massacre innocent children and/or saintly people. That whole episode, which we shall henceforth refer to simply as Kaṁsa’s “Demonic Ministers Conference” (henceforth “DMC”), is of more recent vintage, by which we mean that the DMC was not a part of the story in its earliest tellings, but arose quite naturally as a response to another development in the story’s larger plot. In certain early accounts the goddess does not tell Kaṁsa that his killer has already been born, and therefore poses an ongoing threat to Kaṁsa’s life that needs to be dealt with. Without this information there is no occasion for Kaṁsa to assemble his demonic ministers to discuss counteracting the threat, because he is not aware that the threat is there. But as soon as the goddess does tell Kaṁsa of the existence of the threat, it becomes quite natural for him to assemble his ministers as part of his course of action in trying to counteract it. To see this clearly, we need to start with earlier versions of the Kṛṣṇa story.

The Harivaṃśa (450 CE)

In the Harivaṃśa, one of the earliest accounts of the story of Kṛṣṇa’s childhood, the DMC does not appear at all. Nor is there any occasion provided for it in what is said during Kaṁsa’s encounter with the goddess (in this case Nidrā). She says nothing about his killer’s being born elsewhere, but rather represents herself as his killer:

O Kamsa! You tried to kill me. O Kamsa! You raised me and violently flung me against a rock. Therefore, when it is time for your death and you are afflicted by your enemy, I will tear apart your body with my hands and drink your warm blood (Harivaṃśa, henceforth “HV” 48.34-35). Kaṁsa reaction to these words was natural, he “thought that she [the goddess] was his death” (HV 48.37). André Couture emphasizes the goddess’s agency in Kaṁsa’s death by adding the words cause de to his translation of 48.37: “Après son départ, Kamsa se rendit compte qu’elle serait [cause de] sa mort,” i.e., she would be “the cause of his death” rather than simply ‘his death’ In the next verse Kaṁsa tells Devakī, “To avoid my death, I destroyed your babies...But it seems that my death will come from some other source” (HV 48.38).

Nor is the DMC only absent from the 1969 Critical Edition of the Harivaṃśa and translations based upon it. It is also missing from older editions, including, for example, that of M. N. Dutt, and even the first translation of the work into a European Language, namely the French edition of M. A. Langlois.

And yet the account of the incident in the Bhāgavata Purāṇa is so familiar that it has become easy for even the well-informed to take for granted that other accounts of the story have the same DMC presentation. This occurs most ironically in an editor’s note in the Critical Edition of the Harivaṃśa itself, where we read that the goddess “pronounced to Kaṁsa that his real enemy was growing elsewhere.” But again, she simply did not say that. Rather, as Benjamin Preciado-Solís has pointed out “in fact the words for ‘is already born’ do not appear in the text.”

Because there is no reference in the goddess’s message to Kaṁsa’s killer being born elsewhere, and no account of Kaṁsa’s deliberation with his demon ministers afterward, it is scarcely surprising that there is also no reference to the shape-shifting demons Kṛṣṇa encounters being sent by Kaṁsa between
the place we would have expected to find the DMC in the *Harivamśa* and the place seventeen chapters later where Nārada reveals to the King the truth about the switching of the babies (*HV* 65). The only connection made between any of the demon ministers and Kaṁsa in the *Harivamśa* is a reference to Pūtanā’s having been his nursemaid (*HV* 50.20). 31

**Bhāsa’s *Bālacarita* (c. 300 CE)** 32

Another early account of Kṛṣṇa’s birth is the play *Bālacarita* (henceforth “BC”) by the early Indian dramatist Bhāsa. In Bhāsa’s telling it is the seventh child of Devakī rather than the eighth who is fated to kill Kaṁsa, 33 as he says when he moves to kill the infant girl child: “this is the seventh offspring risen from the power of the sage’s curse. When this infant perishes, peace will dawn upon me” (*BC* Act II, p. 261). 34 As in other accounts, the goddess (here Kātyāyanī) appears (this time with a retinue) and announces: “I…have taken my re-inarnation in the clan of Vasudeva for the ruination of Kansa’s [=Kaṁsa’s] family” (*BC* Act II, p. 263). 35 By telling Kaṁsa that she will destroy his family, the goddess successfully conceals from him the fact that the real seventh son of Devakī, Kṛṣṇa, the “slayer of Kansa,” is hidden away somewhere else (*BC* Act I, p. 215). 36 As a result, there is no DMC in Bhāsa’s play, and when Kṛṣṇa encounters the demons and kills them in Act III, no mention is made of their being sent by Kaṁsa. 37

Thus, in two early accounts, the *Harivamśa* and the *Bālacarita*, Kaṁsa is deceived by the goddess into assuming that she will be the agent of his death, not some child born elsewhere.

**Viṣṇu Purāṇa (450 CE)** 38

The Viṣṇu Purāṇa moves us away from the *Harivamśa* and *Bālacarita* and toward the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* in an interesting way. In this work the goddess does inform Kaṁsa that his killer lives: “What benefit have you derived, O Kansa by hurling me to the ground. He is born, who shall destroy thee” (*Viṣṇu Purāṇa*, henceforth “VP” 5.3.24-29). 39 It also introduced a version of the DMC in which Kaṁsa assembles his demon ministers to give them instructions after learning of his peril from the goddess. But in contrast to the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, the ministers in this case do not offer suggestions. Kaṁsa, again as a way of disempowering the gods, calls for the killing of those who are liberal in making sacrifices. But there is no suggestion in this text that all children under a certain age should be killed. Instead Kaṁsa commands his demon ministers to seek out and kill *individual* extraordinary male children (*VP* 5.4, pp. 327-28).

But perhaps the most interesting feature of the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa*’s account is its attempt to link the DMC to Kṛṣṇa’s subsequent encounters with demons by actually identifying those demons by name as the ones who were present at Kaṁsa’s DMC: “Kansa, greatly disturbed in mind, called together all the leading Asuras...and said to them...O ye, leading Asuras, Pralamba, Dhenuka, Putana, Arishta, and all others, here my words” (*VP* 5.4.1-2., p. 327). 39 This in contrast to the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, which does not name the demon ministers present at the DMC. Beyond this, the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* does even less than the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* to integrate Kaṁsa’s DMC with what follows in the story. It does not, for example, keep informing its readers that the demons Kṛṣṇa encounters and kills were sent by Kaṁsa.

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The presentation of the Viṣṇu Purāṇa is also followed in the Brahma Purāṇa, henceforth “BP” 2.73.31-32 (900-1350 CE) and the Devī Bhāgavata Purāṇa, henceforth “DBP” 4.23.44-46; (1000-1350 CE). Both of these works have the goddess informing Kaṁsa that his killer lives, and both have a consultation afterward in which the demons Kṛṣṇa will be named as being present (BP 2.74.1; DBP 4.23.50-51). In neither case, however, do the demon ministers make suggestions. They only receive directives.

Like the Viṣṇu Purāṇa, the Brahma Purāṇa does little to integrate the DMC with what comes after, and the Devī Bhāgavata Purāṇa abbreviates everything by having Kaṁsa figure out from the beginning where his killer is hidden and sending all the demons there, where they quickly meet their end before Kaṁsa’s own death takes place only a few lines later (DBP 4.24.5-12).

Interestingly, the Devī Bhāgavata Purāṇa comes closest to presenting Kaṁsa’s orders in the way it is usually thought to be presented in the Bhāgavata Purāṇa by having Kaṁsa actually order the demons to “Kill anywhere the child whom you see just born” (DBP 4.23.47-49). To sum up, then, the fact that (1) not all accounts have the DMC, (2) those that do differ as to what precise course of action should be taken to alleviate the threat to Kaṁsa’s life, and (3) the suggestion about infants ten days old and under being killed en masse is actually a distinctive feature of the Bhāgavata Purāṇa, all point to the DMC itself and, more particularly, the detail about killing infants en masse being secondary to the original story.

Do Kaṁsa’s Agents Die in the Process of Hunting Kṛṣṇa Down?

The secondary nature of Kaṁsa’s DMC in the Bhāgavata Purāṇa, and, for that matter, in the Viṣṇu Purāṇa and the Brahma Purāṇa, is also evident when approaching the issue from the perspective of the larger development of the narrative. In none of these accounts is it obvious that Kṛṣṇa’s encounters with the various shape-shifting demons occurs as the result of their carrying out a command to hunt down and kill children. To put this another way, Kaṁsa’s DMC in no way provides the controlling, organizing narrative idea that governs the development of scenes and settings in which Kṛṣṇa encounters the various shape-shifting demons in the interim between Kaṁsa’s DMC and his death at the hand of Kṛṣṇa in the arena.

Pūtanā and Pralamba. Two of the stories in the Bhāgavata Purāṇa, though not explicitly presented as such, might seem to represent a playing out of a command given at Kaṁsa’s DMC. Pūtanā and Pralamba, who both seem to show up out of nowhere, might be understood as having been sent to try to kill Kṛṣṇa in the former case and Balarāma in the latter. But the stories of some of the other demons, such as Ariṣṭa and Dhenuka, clearly do not. The Bhāgavata Purāṇa does say of Pūtanā that she was “dispatched by Kaṁsa,” and that she went about killing children (BhP 10.1.6.2). But it is not clear that this has anything to do with an order to seek out children in particular as a way to kill Kṛṣṇa. We know this, first of all, because in the Bhāgavata Purāṇa Kaṁsa gave no such order. His instruction was to persecute the brāhmaṇas. Killing children was simply what Pūtanā was in the habit of doing (BhP 10.1.6.82). That such is the case is suggested, as Benjamin Preciado-Solís points out, by the fact that Pūtanā is described in “the Viṣṇu Purāṇa and the Bhāgavata Purāṇa as a ‘child-killer’ and by a verse included in the Viṣṇu Purāṇa: ‘That [child] to whom Pūtanā gives her breast in the night, of that child the body is...”

To sum up, then, the fact that (1) not all accounts have the DMC, (2) those that do differ as to what precise course of action should be taken to alleviate the threat to Kaṁsa’s life, and (3) the suggestion about infants ten days old and under being killed en masse is actually a distinctive feature of the Bhāgavata Purāṇa, all point to the DMC itself and, more particularly, the detail about killing infants en masse being secondary to the original story.
killed in an instant.” This indicates that Pūtanā was in the habit of killing children in general and that Kṛṣṇa was just another victim in her career.” We see this as well in the Devī Bhāgavata Purāṇa, where Pūtanā’s specialization in killing infants is also acknowledged: “Let Pūtanā, expert in killing children go today to Nanda’s Gokula” (DBP 4.23.50).

Ariṣṭa: The Bhāgavata Purāṇa implies that Ariṣṭa the bull demon was among those sent by Kaṁsa (BṛP 10.1.36.18, cf. 10.1.36.13-34), and he is named as being present at the DMC in the Viṣṇu Purāṇa (VP 5.4.1-2) and Brahma Purāṇa (BP 2.74.2). And yet when Ariṣṭa shows up in the Bhāgavata Purāṇa he is not looking for children to kill, but rather harassing the cows and terrifying the community of cowherds. The people cry for Kṛṣṇa’s help and he confronts Ariṣṭa saying, “Why have you terrified these cowherders and animals in my presence? You fool! I am the chastiser of evildoers like you, O worst of miscreants” (BṛP 10.1.36.7-8). Enraged, Ariṣṭa, attacks Kṛṣṇa and is killed. Ariṣṭa was not looking for Kṛṣṇa. It was Kṛṣṇa who drew Ariṣṭa’s attention away from others and into a confrontation with himself (cf. HV 64, VP 5.14, BP 2.81).

Dhenuka: The Viṣṇu Purāṇa, Brahma Purāṇa, and the Devī Bhāgavata Purāṇa all present the asSEM- demon Dhenuka as having been present at Kaṁsa’s DMC and included in the command to go seek out and destroy his recently born killer (VP 5.4.2; BP 2.74.2; DBP 4.23.47-51).

A uniform feature of accounts of the incident is that Dhenuka was not looking for Kṛṣṇa and Balarāma. Rather, Kṛṣṇa and Balarāma, attracted by the pleasant smell of the fruit, entered Dhenuka’s jealously guarded grove of Palmyra trees (BṛP 10.1.15.22-38, cf. HV 57.12-23; BC Act III, p. 273; VP 5.8, p. 340; BP 2.78.1-14). They shook the trees and as the fruit hit the ground Dhenuka heard the sound, attacked them, and was killed by Balarāma. Curiously, the Bhāgavata Purāṇa does not explicitly say that Dhenuka was sent by Kaṁsa. Perhaps its restraint was due to how obvious it was in the standard telling that Dhenuka was not being cast in the role of one of Kaṁsa’s demon assassins.

A Governing Narrative Framework?

If it was not Kaṁsa’s DMC that sets the stage for Kṛṣṇa’s encounters with the demons Pūtanā, Trṇavarta, the unnamed calf demon, Baka, Agha, Dhenuka, Pralamba, and Ariṣṭa, what does? We find the answer in a conversation between the sage Närada and Viṣṇu in Harivaṁśa 44-45. Närada informs Viṣṇu that a number of the demons he had previously killed in the Tārakāmaya war had been reborn on the earth and were again causing trouble there (HV 44.61,75). He exhorts Viṣṇu to take a body and go to earth to deal with them once again. Närada tells Viṣṇu what each of them is up to and/or where they can be found. The powerful Kalanemi, Närada explains, was reborn as Karṁsa (HV 44.60-61), Khara as Dhenuka, who “dwells in a forest of palm trees and exterminates all the people who come there” (HV 44.72), Lamba as Pralamba, who “dwells in a banyan tree in the Bhandira forest” (HV 44.71), and Ariṣṭa, who is not said to be reborn but rather to have “assumed the form of a bull, bearing enmity towards cows” (HV 44.69).

When Närada finishes speaking, Viṣṇu answers that he already knows what Närada had told him about the demons he had killed, and also about Pūtanā and Kāliya “who can be seen inside a pool in Yamuna.” (These two Närada hadn’t mentioned [HV 45.6-7]). And then Viṣṇu
assures Nārada that he is indeed intending to take a body to go and destroy these demons. And so, once Viṣṇu is born as Kṛṣṇa, we see him encountering the demons and dealing with them one by one in the places and/or under the circumstances described in his conversation with Nārada.

It was this discussion between Nārada and Viṣṇu, in a work likely written before any version of the DMC had been thought of, that provided the organizing narrative framework governing the presentation of Kṛṣṇa’s encounters with the shape-shifting demons in the Harivaṃśa and then ultimately in the Bhāgavata Purāṇa.

This makes sense, for example, of the behavior of Ariṣṭa and Dhenuka in the Bhāgavata Purāṇa. In the Harivaṃśa, Nārada described Ariṣṭa as “bearing enmity towards cows” (HV 44.69), and of Dhenuka as dwelling “in a forest of palm [palmyra] trees and exterminating people who come there” (HV 44.72). In each case that is precisely what we find these two figures doing when Kṛṣṇa encounters them in the Bhāgavata Purāṇa.

Further, when Pralamba seems to appear out of nowhere in the Bhāgavata Purāṇa, it is partly because the context cues provided at the level of the Harivaṃśa had become blurred. Nārada had said that Pralamba “dwells in a banyan tree in the Bhandira forest” (HV 44.71). In the Harivaṃśa’s account of the death of Pralamba we learn that while carrying Balarāma, the demon “exhibited his own form, which was like the banyan tree Bhandira” (HV 58.25). The allusion can very easily be missed, however, when all we read in the Bhāgavata Purāṇa is that “the boys were led by Kṛṣṇa to a banyan tree called Bhāndiraka” (BhP 10.1.18.22).

What appears to have happened then was that the stories of Kṛṣṇa’s encounters with the demons passed over more or less intact from the Harivaṃśa to the Bhāgavata Purāṇa, but the orienting conversation between Nārada and Viṣṇu in Harivaṃśa 44-45, which provided them with their plot reference point and narrative framework, was lost sight of. This effectively left the reader of the Bhāgavata Purāṇa to try to make sense of the encounters as somehow flowing from the decisions made and directives issued at Kaṁsa’s DMC.

**Whence Kaṁsa’s DMC?**

As noted earlier, an occasion for the DMC follows very naturally on the heels of a change in the message of the goddess. In the Harivaṃśa, Kaṁsa comes away from his encounter with the goddess believing that she would be the agent of his death (HV 48.37). It was a reasonable surmise after her telling him that she would personally “tear apart [his] body with [her] hands and drink [his] warm blood” (HV 48.35). That it had indeed been the intent of the goddess in the Harivaṃśa to successfully deceive Kaṁsa can be seen during the planning stages where Viṣṇu stressed the importance of the success of their joint ruse: “By confounding Kamsa, you will alone save the universe. When I come of age, I will myself kill Kamsa” (HV 47.56).46

One of the narrative consequences of having the ruse be entirely successful, as it was in the Harivaṃśa (and in Bhāsa’s Bālacarita), is that the role of Kaṁsa as a character in the unfolding story essentially comes to a full stop after his meeting with the goddess, so that it is only much later, when Nārada visits him again and tells him about the switching of the babies, that he, as it were, gets reactivated as an endangering presence in the story.
But what if at some point someone felt it would enhance the plot to keep Kaṁsa “activated” as a menacing shadow running in the background right through the period of Kṛṣṇa’s youthful adventures? All that would be necessary to accomplish that would be to have the goddess, during her confrontation with Kaṁsa, let slip the fact that Kaṁsa’s killer had been born and was living elsewhere. Once that was done, the occasion for some form of the DMC would emerge naturally, indeed almost necessarily, as the next step in the developing plot. Kaṁsa has learned that the one who is to kill him is out there somewhere. What will his next step be? Will he act alone to try to save himself, or in concert with others? Kaṁsa’s calling together his demon ministers, consulting with them, instructing them what to do, and then sending them out to do it, is perhaps as reasonable a plot solution as any.

Conclusion

The suggestion that children under ten days old be killed in the Bhāgavata Purāṇa’s DMC, was not Kaṁsa’s idea, was not ordered by him, was not described as being systematically carried out, does not fit well in its larger narrative context, and does not appear in the same form in the parallel accounts we have surveyed. Its secondary character therefore seems, in our view at least, quite certain. Our examination of the larger incident (the DMC) in which that detail appears, suggests that it came to be included quite naturally in response to the inner logic of the developing story itself. Because that is so, seeking an explanation for the development in the borrowing of the story from a more remote source, such as the story of Herod in the New Testament, makes no sense whatsoever. At the same time, the texts that do include the DMC are far too late to have influenced the Herod story in the second chapter of the Gospel of Matthew. In short, Hemchandra Raychaudhuri was right when he said: “No one can help being struck by the points of resemblance between the story of the child Kṛishṇa and that of the child Christ. When one investigates, however, one finds that the hypothesis of a plagiarism rests on a weak basis.” The best solution, therefore, is to consider the two stories as arising independently.

Notes


2 Bhaktivedānta Swami, Kṛṣṇa I, 33 = (BhP 10.1.4.12).

3 I.e., the last demon Kṛṣṇa kills before Kaṁsa learns about the switching the babies.


5 Bryant, Beautiful Legend, [viii], xiii.
6 Green, Stranger, 84.
7 See, e.g., Augustin Antonio Giorgi, Alphabetum Tibetanum (Rome: Typis sacrae congregationis de propaganda fide, 1762), 256.
13 Edwin F. Bryant, “The Date and Provenance of the Bhāgavata Purāṇa and the Viṣṇuṣṭha Permiḻ Temple,” Journal of Vaishnava Studies 11.1 (Sept 2002): 52. Bryant offers this as the consensus gentium, which he disputes in the article, arguing instead for “the Gupta Period [4th to 6th cent. AD] as the latest probable date at which the final, complete version of the Bhāgavata Purāṇa [=Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam] could have been written,” (p. 69).
15 Bryant, Beautiful Legend, 429, n. 5. There seems little doubt that the birth stories of Kṛṣṇa are at least as old as the New Testament story of Herod’s massacre of the innocents. New Testament scholars all but universally agree that the Gospel of Matthew was written in the later first-century C.E. (see Raymond E. Brown, The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke [new ed.; New York: Doubleday, 1993], 177-232). So if the early first-century C.E. date is correct for the base relief showing the infant Kṛṣṇa being carried across the Yamunā river discovered near Mathura (BhP 10.1.3.50), it effectively rules out definitive assertions about Kṛṣṇa’s childhood stories being derived from the New Testament.

And there are other relevant pieces of the Kṛṣṇa story that are even earlier, such the reference to Kṛṣṇa’s slaying Kaṁsa in Patañjali’s second-century B.C.E. Mahābhāṣya 3.1.26. (See, Edwin F. Bryant, “Introduction,” Krishna: A Sourcebook [ed. Edwin F. Bryant; New York: Oxford University Press, 2007], 5; Ramakrishna Gopal Bhandarkar, “Allusions to Kṛṣṇa in Patañjali’s Mahābhāṣya,” Indian Antiquary 3 [1874]: 15). And, in addition, there is the fact that Kṛṣṇa was already called the son of Devaki centuries earlier in the c. sixth century-B.C.E. Chāndogya Upaniṣad 3:17 (see, Benjamín Preciado-Solís, The Kṛṣṇa Cycle in the Purāṇas [Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1984], 19. For a general discussion of the early evidence on Kṛṣṇa, see ibid., 19-37).
Coming at the evidence from another direction, in the 1930s Hemchandra Raychaudhuri wrote: “Even if we assume, for argument’s sake, that there was some external influence, it could not have been the influence of Christianity, because Krishṇa was already worshipped as the God of gods two centuries before the birth of Christ” (Materials for the Study of the Early History of the Vaishnava Sect [2nd ed.; Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1920], 132).

In the second-century B.C.E. inscription of Hēliodoros on the Besnagar Pillar, near Vidisha in Madhya Pradesh, Vāsudeva (Kṛṣṇa) is referred to as the “the god of gods” (Richard Salomon, Indian Epigraphy: A Guide to the Study of Inscriptions in Sanskrit, Prakrit, and the Other Indo-Aryan Languages [New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998], 265-266). Is it really so surprising that the story of a god come to earth might involve an account of a miraculous birth, or that the particular demon king he came to destroy might try to destroy him first? It is here that the mention of Kṛṣṇa’s killing Kaṁsa in Patañjali’s second-century B.C.E. Mahābhāṣya takes on special significance. Without knowing the rest of the story, we already have enough information in these two pre-Common Era items to inquire into the source was of the “god of gods” of the Hēliodoros inscription and Kaṁsa being killed in the Mahābhāṣya? What is the back story of that hostility? What was its origin? Might it have had something to do with the reason the god of gods put in an appearance on earth in the first place? Isn’t this why Kṛṣṇa generally appears on earth, namely to rid it of the burden of evil doers and demons (see, e.g., Bhagavad Ăīta 4.8; BhP 10.1.3.21)? And is not Kaṁsa, as we come to know him in later texts, just the sort of individual Kṛṣṇa might conceivably appear in order to destroy? As the Bhāgavata Purāṇa puts it: “avaricious kings on the earth, who are addicted to life’s pleasures, can kill mothers, fathers, brothers and well-wishers” (BhP 10.1.1.67).


We are told (v. 41) that this demon “came to the banks of the Yamunā, intending to kill Kṛṣṇa and Balarāma.”

A general summary up to this point along with some chronological references is given in BhP 10.1.26.3-11.

BhP 10.1.6.2 (Pūtanā), 10.1.7.20 (Ṭṛṇāvarta), 10.1.12.14 (Agha), and 10.1.36.18 (Ariṣṭa).

Bryant, Beautiful Legend, 429, n. 5.

The dates given for the documents discussed here come mainly from Wendy Doniger, *On Hinduism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), xviii-xix, keeping in mind the caution expressed by Edwin F. Bryant:

The Purāṇas are a fluid body of literature that went on transforming along the centuries through the process of transmission and adaption. These texts were composed for oral recitation, often in specific ritualistic contexts, and their reciters openly modified them in accordance with time and place as well as sectarian considerations. Accordingly, there are several versions of most Purāṇas, some of them differing considerably, making the construction of critical editions a daunting prospect (“The Date and Provenance of the Bhāgavata Purāna and the Viakuṇṭha Permāl Temple,” *Journal of Vaishnava Studies* 11.1 [2002]: 51).


Which contained a great deal more material. On the comparative sizes, see Ekkehard Lorenz, “*The Harivamsha: The Dynasty of Krishna,*” in Bryan, *Krishna: A Sourcebook*, 95 & 107, nn. 4-5.


*Harivamsa: First Time Critically Edited*, 1.794.

Personal communication from Benjamin Preciado-Solís to the author (Sept 18, 2013), clarifying a note that might seem to suggest that the words were included in the *Harivamša* in his *The Kṛṣṇa Cycle in the Purāṇas* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1984), 55, col. 2, n. 1.

Appearing in this case in the form of a bird.

Dating Bhāsa is difficult, but since he is spoken of as a long-established figure in the prologue to the playwright Kālidāsa’s *Mālavikāgnimitram*, we at least know he was earlier than Kālidāsa. The latter is usually dated to the fourth and fifth century C.E., though that dating too is not without difficulties. In any case Bhāsa may well be the earliest of the texts discussed.

As opposed to the eighth, as in the BhP 10.1.1.34 and HV 47.10.


As the goddess leaves Kāṁsa’s presence she says to her companions: “We shall go down to the hamlet, disguised as cowherds, in order to experience the childhood exploits of Lord Viṣṇu” (*BC* Act II, p. 265). There is no indication in what follows that Kāṁsa overheard the remark.
36 They appear in the following order: Pūtanā (disguised as Nanda’s wife), which takes place when Kṛṣṇa is ten days old (BC Act III, 271), Śakaṭa (as a personified cart), Yamala and Arjuna (two arjuna trees in other versions), Pralambha (killed by Balarāma), Dhenuka, Keśin, and Ariṣṭa.

37 Doniger considers the Viṣṇu Purāṇa to be “one of the earliest Puranas” (Against Dharma: Dissent in the Ancient Indian Sciences of Sex and Politics [New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2018], 142). Yet its presentation of the DMC is more closely aligned with later Purāṇas than with the Harivamsa and Bhāsa’s Bālacarita.


39 Keśi is also mentioned, but in most accounts he is sent out after Nārada tells Kaṁsa what really happened (VP 5.4.1, c.f. 5.15.1-3 and 5.15.9; BhP 10.1.37.1 and 10.1.36.16-18; BP 2.82.1-4 and 2.82.22).


41 Preciado-Solís’ brackets. Also, cf. BP 2.75.8.

42 Preciado-Solís, The Kṛṣṇa Cycle, 57. In footnote 8 on the same page, Preciado-Solís adds that “Belief in Pūtanā as a destroyed of small children must have been widespread. Pūtanā occurs as the name of some of the nine garhas causing diseases in infants.” The remark was made in response to Monier Monier-Williams’ defining “Pūtanā” in part as, “N[ame]. of a female demon (said to cause a particular disease in children...)” and “a kind of disease in a child (ascribed to the demon P[ūtanā]).” (Monier Monier-Williams, Sanskrit-English Dictionary [new edition, with collaboration of E. Leumann and C. Cappeller, et al.; New Dehli: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1981 (orig. Oxford: Clarendon, 1899), 641 col. 2]).

43 Śrimad Devī Bhāgavatam I, 340.

44 In almost all these accounts Ariṣṭa’s main interest is in making trouble for the cows and cowherd community. Interestingly the only account that has Ariṣṭa looking for Kṛṣṇa is BC Act III, p. 281, where the the bull demon actually asks the whereabouts of “Nanda’s son.” The Viṣṇu Purāṇa does include, by way of linking the incident with Kaṁsa’s directive, Ariṣṭa harassing not only the cows and bulls and the cowherd, but also the ascetics.

45 Nārada further mentions as being in this same group demons who try to kill Kṛṣṇa after Kaṁsa learned from this same Nārada what happened with the switching of the babies. These included Hayagriva reborn as Keśi, who “skilled in neighing...sports a mane...resides in Vrindavana, devouring the flesh of men,” and Varāha and Kiśora, who “reborn as the wrestlers Cāṇūra and Muṣṭika...are found in the arena” (HV 44.73). After learning that Kṛṣṇa was the prophesied eighth child of Devakī, Kaṁsa sends out the horse demon Keśi to destroy him (HV 67.3; BhP 10.1.37.1), and then pits the wrestlers Cāṇūra and Muṣṭika against Kṛṣṇa and Balarāma (HV 75; BhP 10.1.44).

46 See the translation variations offered in Preciado-Solís (The Kṛṣṇa Cycle, 55), which, in any case, still present the goddess as acting agent.

47 Italics mine.

48 Perhaps constructed on the basis of the Harivamsa passage in which Kaṁsa’s reincarnated associates from the Tārakāmaya war were urged by him to “strike all those who abuse our side,” and “Find out about the progress of all those who are expecting on
earth.” In the Harivaṃśa it is Nārada (rather than a disembodied voice) that informs Kaṁsa of Viṣṇu’s plan to be born as the eighth child of Devakī in order to kill him. The above command was given as soon as that information was received (HV 46.27). If that passage was the source, it would account in a fairly straightforward manner for the form of Kaṁsa’s DMC found in the Viṣṇu Purāṇa and associated accounts. The form of the story found in the Bhāgavata Purāṇa, then, would simply represent a variation in which (1) the names of the demon ministers at the consultation were dropped in favor of noting that particular ones Kṛṣṇa encountered had been sent by Kaṁsa, and then (2) by the shift from having the demons seek out only extraordinary male children with no particular timeline in view, with the suggestion that they kill all the children ten days old and under.

49 Raychaudhuri, Materials, 145.