

## Śrīmad Bhāgavatam – Brief notes

The Śrīmad Bhāgavatam is perhaps the most famous of the Purāṇas, the ancient teachings of the Vedic tradition. It is organized in twelve ‘skandha’ or sections. The tenth and eleventh skandhas deal with the life of Kṛṣṇa. The action of the Purāṇa starts shortly after the battle of Kurukṣetra, which is described in the Mahābhārata.

King Parikṣit, the grandson of Arjuna, has been bitten by a snake and has only a short time to live. He asks the sage Śrī Śuka various questions. Śrī Śuka reports a conversation that took place between Vidura and the divine sage Maitreya, who speaks of the beginnings of creation, and, amongst other things, tells the story of Kardama Prajāpati and Dhruva.

### Kardama Prajāpati

Kardama performs austerities. The Lord appears to Kardama, and Kardama requests a wife. The Lord says that Manu will come to Kardama and give him his daughter in marriage. This happens, and Kardama accepts Devahūti as wife, but says he will only stay with her until all the required issue are begotten, after which he shall renounce the world. Kardama and Devahūti enjoy a honeymoon in an aerial mansion. Devahūti gives birth to nine daughters and Kardama is about to leave her when Devahūti pleads with him to stay. Kardama says that Viṣṇu will now be born to Devahūti as Kapila, a great sage, and that this son will teach her the knowledge of Brahman. Kardama departs.

### Dhruva

Manu had a son called **Uttanapada** who had two wives, **Suniti** and **Suruci**. Suruci had a son called Uttama, Suniti a son called Dhruva. Uttanapada favoured Suruci and her son Uttama. When Suruci sees Dhruva seeking to sit on Uttanapada’s lap, she scolds him, and says that if he wishes to sit on the king’s lap, he needs to worship the Lord, and by His grace be born in her womb. Suniti instructs her son to bear no ill will, but to follow the advice and worship the Lord. Dhruva, taking this advice decides to renounce the world even as a small boy. The sage Nārada tries to dissuade him at first, but then tells him to go and worship the Lord on the banks of the Yamuna. Dhruva departs, and performs great austerities, worshipping the Lord. The Lord appears to Dhruva, saying that Dhruva will return to the kingdom as king, and that Uttama will die hunting. Dhruva realizes that his worship of the Lord was accompanied by a desire for worldly achievement, and now repents for this. He is welcomed back and becomes emperor.

The remaining stories are told by Śrī Śuka directly to King Parikṣit in response to his questions.

### Bharata

The kingly sage Bharata sits meditating on a river bank, and sees a pregnant deer jumping over the river and simultaneously delivering. Bharata saves the fawn from the river, looks after it and becomes attached to it. Hence Bharata is born as a deer in his next life, but lives in a hermitage, and is next born as the son of a Brāhmaṇa. Though his father wishes him to be learned, Bharata feigns stupidity, is rejected by the family, and becomes a beggar. He is taken by some brigands as a human sacrifice to the goddess Kali, but as they are about to decapitate him, the goddess comes to his rescue, cuts off the heads of the brigands, and uses them as footballs. Bharata is then forced to become a palanquin bearer for King **Rāhugaṇa**, but since he tries to avoid stepping on creatures, he disturbs the smooth ride of the king, who chides him. Bharata replies that the king and he are the same Ātman. **Rāhugaṇa**, recognizing the true wisdom of Bharata, accepts Bharata as his teacher. Bharata instructs Rāhugaṇa.

### Ajāmila

Ajāmila became corrupted by living with a harlot in his later life. He had ten sons with the harlot, the youngest of which was called Nārāyaṇa. At the time of death, the emissaries of Yama, the god of death, came to take his soul away, but as the old man cried out 'Nārāyaṇa', the name of his favourite son, the emissaries of Nārāyaṇa, (another name for Viṣṇu) also came there, and argued that because Ajāmila had called out the name of Viṣṇu at the time of his death, he should go to Viṣṇu's abode. It is revealed that Ajāmila had previously been a holy man, but had been corrupted by watching a lascivious couple. There follows an in depth discussion about the power of repeating the name of the Lord.

At one point Śrī Śuka tells King Parikṣit about a conversation that took place when Yudhiṣṭhira asked the sage Nārāda some questions. The following story was one of those told by Nārāda:

### Prahlāda

Prahlāda is the son of the demon king Hiranyakaśipu. When his father discovered that Prahlāda was devoted to Lord Viṣṇu, he employed two teachers, **Sanda** and **Amarka**, to teach Prahlāda to only concern himself with the worldly considerations of

kāma artha and dharma. However, when Hiraṇyakaśipu asks Prahlāda what he has learnt, Prahlāda replies:

‘Hearing about Viṣṇu, singing about Him, remembering Him, serving Him, worshipping Him, saluting Him, being His servant, being his comrade, and surrendering oneself and everything that is one’s own to Him – these are the nine aspects of bhakti or devotion.’ (7.5.23)

Hiraṇyakaśipu is furious, and tries to have his son executed, but every method of execution fails, whether it be being trampled by elephants, bitten by serpents or starved. Prahlāda now teaches his fellow students to worship Viṣṇu. Finally Hiraṇyakaśipu is killed by the half-man half lion Narasiṃha incarnation of Viṣṇu.

### Advent of Kṛṣṇa

Parikṣit now ask Śrī Śuka about the life of Kṛṣṇa, and Śrī Śuka describes everything in detail.

Vasudeva and Devakī are driven off on their honeymoon by Kaṁsa, Devakī’s cousin. A voice from heaven warns the evil Kaṁsa that the eighth issue of Devakī will kill him. Kaṁsa almost kills Devakī, but is persuaded by Vasudeva to save her life. Kaṁsa imprisons the couple and begins to kill their offspring as they are born. After six infants have been killed, Yogamaya is commanded by Viṣṇu to transplant the seventh child of Devakī from her womb to that of **Rohini**, Vasudeva’s other wife, who had taken refuge from Kaṁsa in the village of Vraja. This is done. Now the Supreme Lord enters into the mind of Vasudeva, and Vasudeva transmits this to Devakī, who again becomes pregnant, and is resplendent. Kaṁsa notices this, concludes that Viṣṇu is being incarnated, but still does not dare to kill his own relative, and awaits the birth of the child, whom he intends to kill.

### Birth of Kṛṣṇa

Kṛṣṇa is born in prison at night, and Vasudeva picks up the child and miraculously walks out of the prison, while all the guards sleep. Kṛṣṇa is taken to Yasodā in Vraja. Yasodā has just given birth to a girl. Kṛṣṇa is left with Yasodā, and the girl taken by Vasudeva back into prison. The following morning Kaṁsa finds the girl, assumes her to be the eighth issue, and kills her. Kaṁsa discovers that the girl was an incarnation of Yogamaya, who warns Kaṁsa that he should search out his real enemy. Kaṁsa starts a campaign of killing all babies and good people, in order to overcome the allies of Viṣṇu.