

This session presents the story of the 14th century southern Sanskrit poet Bilvamaṅgala as found in the *Bhaktamāla* of Rāghavadāsa with the narrative commentary of Caturadāsa thereupon. Callewaert suggests the dates of these texts as 1713 CE and 1800 CE, respectively.¹ Rāghavadāsa belongs to the Dādūpanthī tradition, and I – probably wrongly – was a bit surprised to find that Bilvamaṅgala was mentioned in this *Bhaktamāla*. Those of you who have encountered what I’ve been doing with Bilvamaṅgala in past years will be familiar with some of the other versions of the story. I summarize the main points briefly here.

In 1510, Caitanya and some of his entourage went southward on a pilgrimage, following the eastern coast and stopping in Orissa along the way. Once they got to the Deccan, Caitanya heard the poems of Līlāśuka Bilvamaṅgala’s *Kṛṣṇakarṇāmṛta* (*Ambrosia for Krishna’s Ears*) recited and was enraptured by them and had his followers copy them down and take them back with them to Bengal. None of them seem to have heard of Bilvamaṅgala before this, but they were quite captivated by his work and the famous Kṛṣṇadāsa Kavirāja, author of the *Caitanyacaritāmṛta*, composed a Sanskrit commentary on Bilvamaṅgala’s text.

Kavirāja’s commentary was further commented on, expanded upon, and translated into Bangla, along with Bilvamaṅgala’s poems themselves, by Jadunandana Dāsa, a disciple of a Gauḍīya woman, Hemalatā Ṭhākuraṇī. She was a descendent of Śrīnivāsa Ācārya, the man tasked by the Gosvāmins themselves to take the newly-systematized Gauḍīya religion and its texts – including the *Caitanyacaritāmṛta* and Rūpa’s works of aesthetic theory and drama – back to Bengal from Vṛndāvana. We do not have firm dates for either Kavirāja or Jadunandana’s texts, but I place both around the end of the 16th century.

From here, the story leaves Bengal and makes its way across North India to Vṛndāvana and then, it seems, to Rajasthan. Nābhādāsa’s *Bhaktamāla* (1600) contains a version (which we read part of at the last Braj camp), and Priyādāsa’s commentary (1712) on this text contains an expanded version of the narrative. In this connection, do note that Priyādāsa was a Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava himself.

So, Rāghavadāsa’s and Priyādāsa’s versions are very close contemporaries, and Caturadāsa’s version comes almost a century later, bringing us much closer to modern times. It is with Rāghavadāsa’s version, though, that the stories of Bilvamaṅgala and Sūradāsa begin to merge. Note that Bilvamaṅgala’s entry follows that of Sūradāsa’s in Rāghavadāsa’s *Bhaktamāla*. What exactly is happening here is something I am still trying to figure out.

In the future, I would also like to fill in the gaps of my research on this story in the 18th and 19th centuries. This is a first step in that direction. Finally, in the early 20th century, Bilvamaṅgala’s biography becomes the subject of several films, including the first Bengali film (1919), and then several others, none of which I have yet seen.

¹ For the full argument, see:

Winand M. Callewaert and Rupert Snell, eds., *According to Tradition: Hagiographical Writing in India* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1994), 95-97.

Below, for reference, is my translation of the first versions of the story: this is my translation of Jadunandana Dāsa's translation/adaptation of Kṛṣṇadāsa Kavirāja's version. The versions of Nābhādāsa and Priyādāsa are also provided as a separate pdf, though I have not prepared a written translation of these two yet.

I seek refuge in Lord Caitanya, whose compassion is a flood of nectar filling the universe, even while it appears only to trickle down to us below. I praise the arcs of the crescents of the toenails of my master's lotus-like feet, by which difficulties are destroyed and all desires met. Ambrosia for Krishna's Ears is a captivating work. The Lord Chaitanya, son of Śacī, relished it with Rāmānanda Rāya in the town of Vidyānagara; he savored the enigmatic meaning of the Ambrosia. Līlāsuka's language is ocean-deep; even the wisest can't fathom it, for it comes from feeling. Because of the loving sweetness of Krishna's play, it is richly imbued with nectar; because of Krishna's beauty, its sweetness is sweet indeed. Drenched in feeling, Kṛṣṇadāsa Kavirāja has written a beautiful commentary. Yet I am quite small-minded, so what do I understand of its meaning? I simply write what I hear from the mouths of the wise. I bow to the feet of the Vaiṣṇava Lord who uplifted many wicked people in this Kali Age. May there be no sin when I am at your feet! Through your innate virtues, grant me just this grace. Flooded with feeling, Līlāsuka and his poems exist in two forms: each verse has an internal and an external state. I will not discuss the external state here; instead, I address the internal state, as best as I can. Listen attentively to Līlāsuka's words – you will feel them, for they adore Krishna. The Krishnavenva River is in the South – in the Deccan; he lived on its western bank. His name was Bilvamangala and he was a learned Brahmin, the princeliest of poets, famed across the whole world. In the past, bad inclinations pulled him in and his mind drowned in striving after lust. A prostitute dwelled on the eastern bank of that river. Cintāmaṇi was her name and she was a beautiful young woman. His addiction for her grew and grew until he never thought of anything else beyond his urge for her. One day in the rainy season on a terribly frightful night, clouds rumbled and torrents of rain fell ceaselessly. This triggered the drive for lust within him and he became blinded by his yearning for her; nothing else shone in his mind. Without hindrance or fear he went to the riverbank – he simply left his home and went to the whorehouse. There was no boat, so he could not cross the river. Instead, he grabbed a corpse and crossed over. He went to her gate, but the bolt was locked. Unable to enter, his lustful cravings swelled even more. He ran around the fence in all directions calling out loud, but because of the clouds' roar no one could hear him. At that moment he saw a black cobra inside a hole in the wall. Half of its body had slithered into the crevice, and the other half lay outside. He grabbed its tail, leapt over the fence, and fell into the gutter. Upon falling he fainted and became unconscious. Hearing the sound, the prostitute took a look with her girlfriends. Seeing him then by the glimmer of lightning, they quickly brought him back. Crying, she took great pains in nursing and stabilizing him. Then he recounted to her the story of his arrival – the manner in which he crossed the river, and the rest. Hearing the whole tale, she began to tremble. Uneasy and restless, she began speaking. "There's no other like you – an idiot, though trained in the disciplines! You destroy yourself for the sake of a joyless joy. O! Alas, alas, may the weight of my sins not slay me! I know I am a wicked slut. Having deceived men with so many different tricks, I steal their minds and their money, cheating them again. If such an addiction could be born for Krishna, then what would not be my gain? I would be passionately in love with Krishna! Tomorrow at dawn I will quit everything. I will worship Krishna's feet single-mindedly." Thus did she nurse him that night with her friends, despairing all the while. Krishna and Radha together, dancing in the bower, at play: of this did they sing in unison. Hearing her, noble Līlāsuka cursed himself; his mind troubled, he murmured, "Tomorrow at dawn I too shall quit all this. I will worship Krishna's feet single-mindedly." But sleep did not

come, for he was constantly anxious inside. He lied awake, listening closely to every note and syllable as they sang the song of Radha and Krishna's play. The instant he heard of their play, the chains of Illusion disappeared. Only then was the budding love that had been conceived before truly born. "For me, the soul of Krishna – Radha's Lover – is worth a million souls. Who would I worship besides Him?" Līlāśuka spent the night mulling over all this in his head. At dawn he awoke and bowed down with adulation and reverence at the prostitute's feet. He left by the same path, back down that same riverbank and went to Somagiri's place, where the Vaiṣṇavas were. He told them his story. He was initiated with the sacred Gopāla mantra. Just as he took the mantra – well, what more can I say? – an intense passion arose in him. His feelings erupted in torpor, trembling, goosebumps, tears. His body, convulsive, was in disarray and he couldn't be controlled. Though he longed to go on a pilgrimage to Vṛndāvana, the groves where Krishna once played, he stayed awhile longer to serve his master, Somagiri. He wrote many books describing Krishna's play and more. In honor of this, his master gave him the title 'Līlāśuka.' To avoid the misfortunes of domestic life, he became a renunciate and gave up the sacred thread. After that, the deep longing in his heart increased. He begged his master for permission to leave and received it. At dawn he set out on the journey to the groves of Vrindavana. As he went forth on the path, Krishna's apparition came to him, causing a great flood of love to swell. He tumbled in waves of longing, again and again. As he sank, he came to believe his Self to be nearly nothing and prayed for the further appearance of the marvelous play. In this fashion he arrived near the city of Mathura, where Krishna was born. It was here that Krishna's marvelous play appeared to him. This appearance caused an ocean of passion to well up in him and his mind was drawn completely into a whirlpool of desire. He then prayed for a clear vision of Krishna and went into the city of Mathura, taking many people with him. There he faithfully contemplated the image of Krishna that came to be in front of his eyes. Then he went to the forests of Vṛndāvana, his mind full of longing. It was there that he witnessed Krishna, the Son of the Prince of Vraja, in person – a sight that words can't describe, a thing the mind can't comprehend. He depicted this in verse, and his Vaiṣṇava followers wrote down and preserved all that he related while raving in delirium. He remained in Vṛndāvana for many more days and then passed away into Krishna's eternal play. This is the legend of Līlāśuka according to my teachers' tradition; these are the words I've heard from the preeminent masters. I have spoken of the deeds of Līlāśuka – listen to them, and you will find Krishna quickly. I bow profusely at Līlāśuka's feet, for he is the one who converses with Krishna in person.