

# The Female Flute

*Kṛṣṇa's Muralī in the Poetry of Sūrdās*

Adrian Plau



REL4990, MA Dissertation in History of Religions, 60 credits

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# Abstract

A central figure in the rise of religious literature in the vernacular languages of north India in the early modern era was the poet-saint Sūrdās, whose poetry played a defining role in the spread of popular devotion, *bhakti*, to Kṛṣṇa, one of Hinduism's most well known deities. A salient feature in several of the poems ascribed to Sūrdās that depict the iconic flute-playing Kṛṣṇa is that the flute itself appears as a female persona – Muralī. This thesis is the first study to ask why the flute appears as a woman and how the motif evolves throughout these poems. These questions are important because they engage with an understudied aspect of a central Hindu deity in one of its most popular and defining representations, and because they offer a sharpened focus on the concepts of gender and devotion that deity might be perceived to embody. Utilising a theoretical outlook informed by performativity, intertextuality and gender studies, the study maps the various appearances of the female flute in both the early and late layers of the literary tradition connected with Sūrdās. It concludes that Muralī, the female flute, both functions as a religious symbol that encapsulates a general tension in the image of the flute-playing Kṛṣṇa between dichotomies such as nature and culture, gendered and ungendered, and as a rhetorical figure through which the poetry of Sūrdās can discuss competing positions on the dynamic between gender norms and religious imperatives.



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# Table of Contents

<b>1</b>	<b>Introduction</b> .....	<b>1</b>
1.1	Research questions .....	3
1.2	Structure .....	6
1.3	Usage .....	6
<b>2</b>	<b>Kṛṣṇa Muralīdhar in literature and Sūrdās in hagiography and history:</b>	
	<b>Background material and previous research</b> .....	<b>8</b>
2.1	Kṛṣṇa Muralīdhar .....	8
2.2	Sūrdās in hagiography and history .....	13
2.2.1	Hagiography and traditional perspectives .....	13
2.2.2	Traditional perspectives on the flute.....	16
2.2.3	Recent research on Sūrdās .....	18
2.3	Summary.....	22
<b>3</b>	<b>Theory, method, material</b> .....	<b>23</b>
3.1	Theory .....	23
3.1.1	Approaching Sūrdās .....	24
3.1.2	Approaching gender .....	28
3.2	Method.....	30
3.3	Material.....	31
3.4	Summary.....	34
<b>4</b>	<b>The Early Tradition: Muralī in the Bryant and Hawley <i>Sūrsāgar</i></b> .....	<b>35</b>
4.1	Poems mentioning the flute .....	35
4.2	The flute in relation to Kṛṣṇa.....	37
4.3	Muralī as conqueror .....	41
4.4	Muralī in monologue.....	45
4.5	Muralī as Mohinī .....	47
4.6	Summary.....	50
<b>5</b>	<b>The Later Tradition: The NPS <i>Sūrsāgar</i></b> .....	<b>51</b>
5.1	Praise of the Flute .....	51
5.2	The Speeches of the <i>Gopīs</i> to Muralī .....	55
5.3	The Speeches of Muralī to the <i>Gopīs</i> .....	62
5.4	The Speeches of the <i>Gopīs</i> to each other .....	64
5.5	Comparison.....	66
5.6	Summary.....	68
<b>6</b>	<b>The female flute</b> .....	<b>70</b>
6.1	Gender, nature and the pastoral.....	70
6.2	Gender, performance and Muralī.....	73
6.3	The flute, nature and performance.....	75
6.4	Summary.....	77
<b>7</b>	<b>Conclusion</b> .....	<b>78</b>
	<b>Bibliography</b> .....	<b>81</b>
	<b>Appendix A: Poems included in the analysis</b> .....	<b>86</b>



# 1 Introduction

A recurring figure in the history of religions is the flute-playing god of the forests or the wilderness, from Pan of ancient Greek myth to Kokopelli of Native American religions. Such deities and mythological characters are frequently associated with agriculture, music, fertility and sexuality (Burkert 1985, p. 172; Rogers 2007, pp. 233-255). In the South Asian context, we find a similar figure in the widely popular deity Kṛṣṇa, the eight avatar of Viṣṇu, the supreme god of the dominant Vaiṣṇava branch of Hinduism. Kṛṣṇa the flute-player appears in a wide variety of South Asian religious literature, visual art and folk culture, as well as in contemporary film and TV productions. While being immediately recognisable across the subcontinent, he is also closely associated with a particular place, for Kṛṣṇa was to have grown up among the community of cow-herders in the Braj area of today's western Uttar Pradesh of north India. The Braj region encompasses the cities of Vṛṇḍāvan and Mathurā and their surrounding countryside, and is today almost synonymous with Kṛṣṇa devotion. Here Kṛṣṇa the cow-herder boy charmed the cow-herder girls, the *gopīs*<sup>1</sup>, with the sound of his flute, inviting them to participate with him in the mystical union of the round dance in the forest (Haberman 1994, pp. 5-6, 26-27).

The history of Kṛṣṇa is also the history of some of the main currents of change in the history of Hinduism itself. One such current swept the subcontinent over a period of centuries, originating among poet-saints of the southern regions by the 7<sup>th</sup> century CE and fanning out through the north over the following centuries, and left a distinct trace on South Asian religious culture. This was the rise of *bhakti*<sup>2</sup>, a mode of devotion that emphasises the immediate communication and union between god or goddess and devotee, shifting the focus of worship away from ritual formalism towards a personal rapport with the divine. The flute-playing Kṛṣṇa flourished in this mode of devotion, the image of the round dance perfectly fitted to illustrate the mystical rapture of divine union. Integral to this image is the flute, the sound of which encapsulates the allure of Kṛṣṇa as he summons his lovers to the dance in the forest (Flood 1996, pp. 128-142). As erotic love becomes a widely popular expression of devotion, Kṛṣṇa and his flute occupies its centre stage. And as the lovesick cow-herder girls are lifted up as the model devotees, the experience and expression of being a woman becomes a central concern to devotionalism; both male performers of religious songs and

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<sup>1</sup> “Cow-herder girls”.

<sup>2</sup> “Religious devotionalism”.

male participants in rituals might emulate a gender reversal in order to attain the appropriate mind-set of devotion (Flood 1996, p. 142; Hawley 1986, p. 231).

A central figure in the development of *bhakti* in north Indian literary culture in general, and of that pertaining to Kṛṣṇa in particular, was the poet-saint Sūrdās. When poets and religious philosophers of the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, from different parts of India, travelled to Braj to seek out the physical sites of Kṛṣṇa's appearances on earth, the region became a hub for the further development of Kṛṣṇa *bhakti* (Vaudeville 1976, pp. 195-213). As different sects and philosophies proliferated, so did devotional poetry written in the vernacular Braj Bhāṣā language, conveying the fervour and devotion of the new ideas to multiple sections of society (Entwistle 1987, p. 45). And due to the sheer skill and imaginative force evidenced by his poetry, Sūrdās is widely awarded an exalted position within this stream of vernacular Kṛṣṇa *bhakti* poetry (McGregor 1984, p. 76; Entwistle 1987, p. 45). While the historical Sūrdās generally is believed to have lived and flourished in the first half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the collection of poems bearing his name, the *Sūrsāgar*<sup>3</sup>, has grown during the course of the following centuries to encompass thousands of poems. The thematic breadth and widespread appeal of the *Sūrsāgar* have given its poems, in the words of McGregor (1984, p. 79) “an important role in the moulding of values and attitudes in north India”.

Several poems of the *Sūrsāgar* depict the splendour and amorous attraction of the flute-playing Kṛṣṇa and his effect on the cow-herder girls, who often appear as the poems' narrators. But the poems also frequently focus on the flute itself, to the extent that the flute emerges as a character with a distinct persona. And a striking aspect of this flute persona, commonly referred to as Muralī, is that it is depicted as a she – a woman. Throughout the *Sūrsāgar*, she appears as the subject of a wide variety of poems. In some, the cow-herder girls envy her for her physical proximity to Kṛṣṇa and berate her for her arrogance; in others, she is praised for how she sways the entire universe, including Kṛṣṇa himself, to dance to her sound.

The flute-playing Kṛṣṇa is a religious figure that, as we have seen, is already highly concerned with the intersections of gender, sexuality and devotion; what does the addition of an ambiguous female character to this figure entail? In other words: Why is Kṛṣṇa's flute in the poems of the *Sūrsāgar* sometimes represented as a woman? Engaging with this question might shed light on a previously understudied aspect of a widely popular representation of

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<sup>3</sup> “The Ocean of Sūr”.

one of Hinduism's central deities and, due to the longevity and appeal of the *Sūrsāgar*, offer insights into some of the attitudes and values surrounding gender and devotion in north India, and how they are discussed and disseminated through the vehicle of popular, religious poetry. Such an engagement is the aim and motive of this dissertation.

## 1.1 Research questions

The dissertation seeks to answer the following two research questions:

- 1) How does the motif of the flute develop throughout the textual tradition ascribed to Sūrdās?
- 2) Why is the flute personified as a woman?

Although they are structurally separated, the two research questions are closely related; by answering them both, the dissertation seeks to establish a position from which it might consider the multiple aims outlined above. I will here outline the main elements of the respective research questions individually, and then proceed to briefly consider where the dissertation's engagement with these questions places it in the context of previous research. While this will entail some consideration of the existing research literature, a full discussion of it is found in Chapter 2<sup>4</sup>. Similarly, I outline the dissertation's theoretical and methodological approaches in Chapter 3.

The first question's wording of "textual tradition ascribed to Sūrdās" refers to the presence of two conflicting views on Sūrdās himself. One posits that Sūrdās was an initiate of the Puṣṭi Mārg, one of the religious organisations that originated in Braj in the 16th century, that the poetry contained in the *Sūrsāgar* fundamentally is a vernacular popularisation of Puṣṭi Mārg doctrines, and that it is all written by one and the same individual. The other argues that there are few, if any, traces of Puṣṭi Mārg beliefs in the earliest manuscript evidence, that the *Sūrsāgar* is the product of generations of poets adopting the distinct style of a Sūrdās tradition, and that the resulting body of poetry encompasses a variety of views, including those of the Puṣṭi Mārg. The former view is mainly found in the Puṣṭi Mārg itself, in contemporary representations of Sūrdās in Indian media, and in some of the research

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<sup>4</sup> Refer also to section 1.3 of the present chapter for an overview of the dissertation's structure.

literature. The latter view is propagated and accepted as consensus in the majority of the recent research literature.

The conflicting views are also expressed by two of the different editions of the text of the *Sūrsāgar* that are available today. One is the edition by the Vārānasī-based Nāgarī Pracāriṇī Sabhā, which consists of poems collated from a wide variety of sources, and is commonly perceived as the standard edition of the *Sūrsāgar* (Hawley 2005, p. 4). The other is the recently published edition by Bryant and Hawley (2015), *Sur: The Early Tradition*, which only contains those poems that the manuscript evidence indicates were composed and circulated in the period when a historical Sūrdās might have lived, or the instigators of the tradition bearing his name.

Without discussing the details of the two views here<sup>5</sup>, there should be no doubt that I side with that of the academic consensus. Hawley and Bryant's work in establishing a compendium of the early Sūrdās tradition is an achievement that marks a watershed for the study of Sūrdās and the *Sūrsāgar*. However, my dissertation's concern is not to participate in excavating the foundations of the Sūrdās tradition, but to engage with the shifts and permutations of one of its motifs, the flute's femininity, as it appears in both its early and later layers. While Hawley and Bryant at times appear to be dismissive towards some of the later poems, due to their occasional aesthetic shortcomings or sectarian single-mindedness<sup>6</sup>, my interest here is primarily with the totality of the *Sūrsāgar* tradition as a source to a variety of positions on the import and significance of a complex religious and literary motif: the gender of Kṛṣṇa's flute. The dissertation's first research question consequently engages with both the Nāgarī Pracāriṇī Sabhā and the Hawley and Bryant editions of the *Sūrsāgar*, adopting a comparative approach to the relevant poems in both texts to facilitate a discussion of the evolution of the motif of Kṛṣṇa's flute in the Sūrdās tradition.

That comparative discussion will provide the material for the second research question's engagement with the question of the flute's gender. As such, the two questions and their respective analyses are substantially intertwined, albeit structurally separated. Due to the variety of poems in the Sūrdās tradition that are concerned with the flute, answering the second research question will entail establishing a discussion that includes multiple theoretical perspectives on gender and its representations. But my basic assumption is that the question might be answered by attempting to understand what purposes the motif of the

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<sup>5</sup> Refer to section 2.1 for that discussion.

<sup>6</sup> For instance, Hawley (2005, p. 205) finds that certain poems of the later tradition lapse into “sloganeering”. I comment on this stance of Hawley’s in more detail in Chapter 3.

gendered flute serve within the context of the distinct body of poetry that the Sūrdās tradition represents. As that assumption makes clear, this is a study of texts. Even so, a central theoretical and methodological concern is the performative aspect of the poems of the *Sūrsāgar*; referring both to their apparent origin as oral poems, and to how they, like poems of other *bhakti* traditions, routinely are performed as songs. While the exact nature of such performances might not be fully ascertained, it does not deter us from taking this aspect into account when analysing the *Sūrsāgar* texts. So when attempting to answer the second research question, the dissertation will situate the question of the meaning of the flute's gender within the performative context of the poetry. That performative context is especially significant when we take into account that the writers and performers of several of the poems under review here are men assuming the guise of the cow-herder women pining for Kṛṣṇa, addressing the female instrument of a male god. The complex dynamic of gender reversals this entails forms a nucleus for the dissertation's approach to the question of the flute's gender.

The existing research literature includes several studies of Sūrdās and the *Sūrsāgar*, many of which are either written by or greatly influenced by Hawley (1983; 1984; 2005) and Bryant (1978). However, none of these engage directly with the flute or comment on the import of it being represented as a woman. Kinsley (1975) considers the import of Kṛṣṇa's flute in Hinduism in general, but is primarily based on Sanskrit texts, only incidentally touching on Sūrdās. Prasad (1978) offers a study of the flute in Kṛṣṇa poetry in Hindī (including Braj Bhāṣā) that includes some consideration of Sūrdās' poems, while Gautam (1983) has written the only book-length study that is wholly focused on Sūrdās' representation of the flute. However, both Prasad and Gautam approach the material from the traditional perspective, which posits that Sūrdās primarily was a propagator of the Puṣṭi Mārg and that the poems of the *Sūrsāgar* primarily serve to elucidate Puṣṭi Mārg tenets, and do not engage with the flute's gendered persona as such. Consequently, this dissertation is the first study to engage with the motif of Kṛṣṇa's flute in the poetry of Sūrdās that is informed by the recent advances in the study of Sūrdās, that considers both the early and late textual traditions of the *Sūrsāgar* in its analysis of that motif, and that engages with the question of the flute's gender.

## 1.2 Structure

The dissertation is ordered according to the following structure:

Chapter 2 presents the study's background material, and discusses the relevant research literature. Aspects covered include the general development of the flute-playing Kṛṣṇa, with a special reference to the deity's close relationship with the Braj region, and the differing stances on the historicity, biography and sectarian affiliation of Sūrdās that are expressed in the scholarly and hagiographical literatures respectively. Throughout, the chapter also presents and discusses earlier studies of the significance and meaning of Kṛṣṇa's flute.

Chapter 3 offers a discussion of the theoretical outlooks that inform the study, including the performative aspects of the subject material, the place of pastoralism, and the potential of perspectives informed by gender studies in this context. The chapter also outlines how these outlooks are applied methodologically, and presents an overview of the state and extent of the material studied.

The following three chapters constitute the analysis: Chapter 4 outlines and discusses the relevant poems of the early tradition, while Chapter 5 does the same with the later. Combined, the two chapters seek to answer the first research question. Chapter 6 draws on the findings of the two foregoing chapters to discuss possible answers to the second research question.

The concluding Chapter 7 recaps the study's aims, structure and content, restates its main findings, and presents some suggestions for areas of further research.

## 1.3 Usage

The dissertation discusses texts and concepts in Braj Bhāṣā, Modern Standard Hindī (MSH) and Sanskrit. All words from these languages that are referenced in the text are transliterated according to the IAST scheme. In accordance with what I deem to be standard procedure, the sole exception is the names of Indian scholars whose works are discussed. On its first appearance, a basic translation for each such word is given in a footnote, unless a translation is supplied in the main text. In addition to the standard dictionaries for MSH and Sanskrit, McGregor (1993) and Monier-Williams (2005) respectively, I have also used Callewaert and Sharma's (CS) 2009 dictionary of *bhakti* texts. The latter frequently features word glosses



that are not found in the others. When these lesser-known glosses are central to my understanding of a text, I reference the appropriate page in CS. In other cases, I leave the basic translations unreferenced. When discussing general concepts of Hindu philosophy or religion, I prefer the MSH form to the Sanskrit, e.g. *bhāv* instead of *bhāva*.

A special note must be made of the flute's name, Muralī, which naturally is frequently referred to. While MSH usage favours *murlī*, *muralī* is the standard form in Braj Bhāṣā poetry. To avoid confusion, I have opted for the latter variant. For the sake of uniformity, I consequently refer to Kṛṣṇa in his flute-playing form as Kṛṣṇa Muralīdhar, instead of the more common variant Kṛṣṇa Murlīdhar. All words from Indian languages are italicised, excepting proper names of characters and deities from the texts and of religious organisations. I also italicise words from Indian languages that appear in English plurals, e.g. *gopīs*, not “gopīs”.

Excepting dictionaries, distinct editions of texts and texts with especially long names, the titles of reference works are not abbreviated. Due to the already frequent referencing of verse numberings throughout the dissertation, along with the equally frequent appearances of words from Indian languages, I have deemed that the addition of a large number of abbreviations would render the text unnecessarily difficult to read. This means that I refer to the HB (Hawley and Bryant) and NPS (Nāgarī Pracāriṇī Sabhā) *Sūrsāgars*, but do not, for instance, refer to the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* as the BhP.

Finally, when I use phrases such as “the poetry of Sūrdās”, “the Sūrdās tradition” or “the *Sūrsāgar* tradition”, I am referring to the entirety of the tradition, encompassing both the HB and the NPS *Sūrsāgars*.

## 2 Kṛṣṇa Muralīdhar in literature and Sūrdās in hagiography and history: Background material and previous research.

This chapter provides an outline of the background material and previous research that frames the present study. Presenting the broad outlines of the historical rise of the imagery of Kṛṣṇa as a flute player, Kṛṣṇa Muralīdhar, in the literary record is necessary to develop a backdrop for the discussion in Chapter 3 of the study's theoretical and methodological outlook. The following section 2.2, which makes up the bulk of the chapter, engages with the central question of Sūrdās' hagiography and its relation to the latest research on his actual historicity, since the resulting divergence of views underpins the demarcation of the study's material, which is described and discussed in Chapter 3. This latter section will also entail some explication of the central elements of the Puṣṭi Mārg, the Bhakti sect established by Vallabha, in which Sūrdās is popularly believed to have been a member. Due to considerations of maintaining a chronological structure, discussions of earlier academic studies of Kṛṣṇa Muralīdhar will not be presented under a separate subheading, but are instead distributed across the various chapter headings.

### 2.1 Kṛṣṇa Muralīdhar

This overview cannot aim to give a representative presentation of the historical development of Kṛṣṇa as a deity; Kṛṣṇa's popularity across a broad linguistic and geographical spectrum forbids a comprehensive discussion in the context of this study<sup>7</sup>. Consequently, the overview will focus on those elements of Kṛṣṇa's history that are related to the rise of the Braj-dwelling, Purāṇic figure of Kṛṣṇa Muralīdhar in the north Indian cultural sphere that was Sūrdās' *locus operandi*. The content of these concepts ("Braj", "Purāṇic") will be clarified in the following. It should also be noted that the archaeological record too is beyond the scope of the present study, which primarily is rooted in textuality.

References to Kṛṣṇa as a distinct deity may be found in a variety of literature as early as the fourth century BC, from the brief mention of his patronymic Vāsudeva in the linguistic text *Aṣṭhādhyāyī* by the grammarian Pāṇinī to the enlisting of names of Viṣṇu in the *Baudhāyana Dharma Sūtra*, a text on socio-religious obligations, several of which are

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<sup>7</sup> Material for such a discussion may be found in Bryant 2007.

traditional names for his *avatār*<sup>8</sup> as Kṛṣṇa (Bryant 2007, pp. 4, 17). Greek sources, especially Megasthenes' *Indika*, also attest to the spread of a deity identifiable as Kṛṣṇa in the same period (Bryant 2003, p. xvii-xviii). Earlier references exist, but are more difficult to convincingly link to the Kṛṣṇa of later tradition (Bryant 2007, p. 4; Bryant 2003, p. xvii).

However, the first substantial appearance of Kṛṣṇa in the early literature is as the prince of the western Vṛṣṇi people, the charioteer of the warrior-prince Arjuna, and the incarnation of god supreme on earth in the classic Indian epic *Mahābhārata* (Smith 2009, p. xxxiv; Hildebeitel 2007, p. 23). Being considered to exist in an early, nucleus-form in the 9th century BC, and to start finding its full form around five hundred years later, the *Mahābhārata* tells the story of the warfare between the two branches of descendants of the Kuru throne of central North India, the Kauravas and the Paṇḍavas (Smith 2009; Bryant 2007, p. 5). Kṛṣṇa appears as a friend and helper of the Paṇḍava branch, gradually moving closer to the centre of the narrative as the decisive battle between the opposing sides approaches. When the battle is about to commence, Kṛṣṇa, in a dialogue known as the *Bhagavadgītā*, reveals his divine nature and explains the basic precepts of moral virtue according to class and caste (*varṇāśramadharmā*) and its implications to the aforementioned Arjuna (Johnson (Tr.) 1994).

It is a striking aspect of Kṛṣṇa's character in the *Mahābhārata* that even as he appears as the supreme deity, expounding in the *Bhagavadgītā* on the fundamental importance of acting according to *dharma*, and also being described by other characters in the epic as a model of virtue, he proceeds to openly break the rules of just warfare: He encourages Arjuna to attack another combatant out of engagement, orchestrates the tricking of the Kaurava hero Droṇa into downing his weapons, and talks the Paṇḍava leader Bhīma into winning a duel with his archenemy Duryodhana by ignobly striking below the belt (Smith 2009, pp. xxxviii; 444-450; 471-484; 549-554). This seeming discrepancy between the princely ideal and the trickster can be understood by the delineation of Kṛṣṇa's character into two chronologically separated subcategories: Vāsudeva Kṛṣṇa and Gopāla Kṛṣṇa. Whereas the first subcategory refers to the princely Kṛṣṇa who in his adult life rules the western state of Dvarkā, and is the Kṛṣṇa portrayed in the *Mahābhārata*, the latter is the Kṛṣṇa who grows up to maturity as a cow herder among the rural peoples living in the Braj district on the banks of the Yamunā river. This division is not total: The adult prince can, as we have seen, occasionally reveal his trickster element, and the playful youth is, as we shall see, similarly revealed to be of a royal

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<sup>8</sup> Kṛṣṇa is generally understood to be the eight incarnation (*avatār*) of Viṣṇu (Flood 1996: 116). Some Bhakti philosophies, such as that of Vallabha, argue that Kṛṣṇa rather is the supreme deity himself (Barz 1976: 14-15).

nature (Johnson 2009, p. 179). Our Kṛṣṇa Muralīdhar belongs to the Gopāla aspect of Kṛṣṇa, and so I shall briefly trace the literary history of this aspect (up till Sūrdās)<sup>9</sup>.

Gopāla Kṛṣṇa first appears in the *Harivaṃśa*, an appendix to the *Mahābhārata* (and most likely of a later date), and is the first text to present the full story of Kṛṣṇa’s birth, childhood and gradual maturity. Consequently, it represents the first full depiction of the playful Kṛṣṇa among the cow herder women of Braj. But for the purposes of the present study it is vital to note that the Kṛṣṇa of the *Harivaṃśa* never appears as a flute-player; it is the *gopīs* themselves who initiate the amorous sport, which the text never openly declares to be sexual in nature (Lorenz 2007, pp. 95-99). So while the *Harivaṃśa* is important in that it introduces Gopāla Kṛṣṇa, it offers a version of him that does not include Kṛṣṇa Muralīdhar. The flute-playing Kṛṣṇa appears later<sup>10</sup>, in a text referred to by Bryant (2007, p. 111) as the “principal textual source” within the Indian subcontinent for the story of Kṛṣṇa’s life, the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*. Due to the centrality of this text for the Kṛṣṇa tradition, and for the intertextual framework of the material analysed in this study, I will here discuss its representation of Kṛṣṇa Muralīdhar at some length. While the many theological aspects of Kṛṣṇa are a central element of the text, I will here only discuss those that are consequential to the study’s aims.

The *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* is a prominent example of the Purāṇa literature, which typically details the events of an ancient (*purāṇa*) history, and provides many of the sources for popular incidents of Hindu mythology (Johnson 2009, p. 247). The *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* consequently details the events of the many incarnations of Viṣṇu throughout a broad expanse of time. Its main focus, however, is on Viṣṇu’s incarnation as Gopāla Kṛṣṇa living among the cow herders of Braj. The tenth book of the text is wholly devoted to recounting this life of Kṛṣṇa and, making up about a fourth of the entire text, clearly establishes the centrality of Kṛṣṇa to its Viṣṇu theology (Bryant 2003, p. xiii).

It is in the tenth book that we find the introduction of Kṛṣṇa Muralīdhar, in connection with the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*’s depiction of Kṛṣṇa’s playful sport with the cow herder women,

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<sup>9</sup> While it is not of central importance to the study, it should be noted that all literary representations of Gopāla Kṛṣṇa places him in the following frame story: Kṛṣṇa is born of Devakī, the sister of the ruler of Mathurā, Kāṃsa. A prophecy informs Kāṃsa that Devakī’s eight son will be his killer, and promptly sets about killing her children as they are born. On the night of Kṛṣṇa’s birth, his father, Vasudeva, spirits the boy away to be brought up by the foster parents Yaśodā and Nanda, prominent members of the cow-herding community of Braj. The grown Kṛṣṇa returns to Mathurā, kills Kāṃsa, and begins the princely life described in the *Mahābhārata*.

<sup>10</sup> The material sufficient to produce a certain dating is not available, and the consensus of Indian and Western scholars differ. That of the latter has recently begun to move from the 9<sup>th</sup> or 10<sup>th</sup> century AD to the 8<sup>th</sup> century AD as the upper limit (Bryant 2003, pp. xi-xvi; Bryant 2002; Holdrege in Gupta and Valpey (Eds.) 2013, p. 114).

the *līlā*. While the concept of *līlā* has been used in earlier literature to denote the essentially playful character of the supreme godhead’s activities, which are not motivated by any need or necessity, in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* it takes on the more specific meaning of Kṛṣṇa’s youthful play with his friends in Braj, which has no essential purpose beyond the play itself. Bryant (2003, pp. xxii-xxvi) argues that the *līlā* of Kṛṣṇa in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* is a depiction of the supreme divinity incarnating simply for the sake of enjoying the playful company of his devotees. And it is in this context that Kṛṣṇa appears as Muralīdhar to call the women of Braj to the *līlā*. I will briefly discuss some examples of Kṛṣṇa Muralīdhar as he is depicted in the text. The first extended appearance is in chapter 21, referred to as the *Veṇugīt*<sup>11</sup>:

21.2: [...] Kṛṣṇa played his flute. 21.3: The women of Vraj<sup>12</sup> heard that flute music – music which incites Kāma (Bryant 2003, p. 100).

In this first appearance, it is explicitly stated that the sound of the flute inspires passion in the form of the god of love, Kāma Deva. A subsequent verse emphasises its overpowering quality:

21.6: The sound of the flute steals the minds of all living things, O king<sup>13</sup> (Bryant 2003, p. 101).

A theme is then introduced that is central to the motif of the flute:

21.9: O *gopīs*, what auspicious deed did this flute perform? It personally enjoys the *rasa* nectar from Dāmodara’s<sup>14</sup> lips – which should belong to the *gopīs*; whatever flavour is left over is all that remains [for us] (Bryant 2003, p. 101).

This last verse succinctly sets out theme of the *gopīs*’ envy of the flute’s proximity to Kṛṣṇa, which allows it to drink the coveted nectar of his lips, and so establishes the complex relationship between them, the flute and Kṛṣṇa. Later verses serve to acknowledge that the power of the flute extends beyond the *gopīs*, encompassing animals, rivers and clouds (Bryant 2003, pp. 102). As such, the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* sets out some of the defining characteristics of the flute, and connects them with the unfolding of the *līlā*; the sound of the flute seems to act as a summons from Kṛṣṇa to partake in the play.

<sup>11</sup> “The Song of the Flute”.

<sup>12</sup> “Braj” and “Vraj” are interchangeable forms.

<sup>13</sup> In its frame story, the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* is told by the seer Sūta as he heard it told by the sage Śuka to Kṛṣṇa’s grand-nephew, king Parīkṣit (Bryant 2003, pp. 7-8).

<sup>14</sup> “Dāmodara”, “having a rope round waist” is an epithet of Kṛṣṇa, relating to an incident in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* where Yaśodā tries to bind the overtly energetic child Kṛṣṇa with ropes, only to find that the rope is always just too short to go around him (Bryant 2003, pp. 45-47).

It is this understanding of the flute as a vehicle or an extension of Kṛṣṇa that is emphasised by Kinsley (1975, pp. 32- 41), in an early attempt to discuss the meanings of the flute. In this discussion, which draws on examples from other texts but is rooted in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, it is stated that the flute functions as an extension of Kṛṣṇa and that its call has the summoning and anarchic effect described in the present study’s introduction. The call reaches throughout the entire world and cannot be denied. In the final element of his analysis, Kinsley (1975, p. 40-41) also notes that, in some instances, Kṛṣṇa himself also seems to be under the sway of the flute; after quoting a Sūrdās poem representative of this trend, Kinsley argues that Kṛṣṇa here intoxicates himself with the flute out of his own volition.

However, I would argue that this is not a satisfactory explanation of the dynamics of the flute as it also sways its own player. For while the flute as it is presented in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, while being a powerful instrument through which Kṛṣṇa may enthrall his devotees and the rest of the world to his power, it still remains a flute: that is, a material, inanimate object. The same view is explicitly stated by Prasad (1978, p. kha) in his study of the flute in Hindī poetry (which is discussed at further length in section 2.2.2) that the flute in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* remains “keval ek vādyā”<sup>15</sup>. This can also be seen by how the text refers to the flute as just *veṇu*<sup>16</sup>; this is not the same as the flute of Sūrdās’ poetry, which is commonly referred to as *muralī*. This also means “flute”, but has the added dimension of functioning as a female given name. So while the *veṇu* of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* is an inanimate flute, the “Muralī” of Sūrdās (and the later tradition in general) is an animate flute personified as a woman. This difference might also be reflected etymologically; while *veṇu* might also simply mean “bamboo”, *muralī* is deemed by Turner (1962-1966, p. 589) to be related to the Tamil verb *mural*, “to make sound” (Fabricius 1972, p. 810). While the former word emphasises the flute’s materiality, the latter emphasises its function as an instrument and its sound, indicating that Muralī refers to a flute that becomes animated and personified when it is being played. In this light, Kinsley’s quoting of a poem by Sūrdās to illustrate how the flute may also take control over Kṛṣṇa himself is fitting, but its dynamic between player and played should be explained with reference to the distinct character of the flute that emerges in the *Sūrsāgar*. As explained in the previous, introductory chapter, it is one of the present study’s aims to do exactly that. The following section provides an overview and a discussion of some of the background information pertaining to Sūrdās that is necessary to reach this aim.

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<sup>15</sup> “Only an instrument”.

<sup>16</sup> “Flute”.

## 2.2 Sūrdās in hagiography and history

A central issue in the study of Sūrdās is the presence of two conflicting views on his historical biography, which also results in two incompatible views on the poetry found in the *Sūrsāgar*. I will first discuss the earliest of the two views, which has been formulated through hagiographical sources over several centuries, before turning to the later, which primarily has been formulated in research literature over the last few decades. Throughout these discussions, I will also outline the background material that the differing stances entail some consideration of, such as the tenets of the Puṣṭi Mārg, and the question of the poetry's performative context.

### 2.2.1 Hagiography and traditional perspectives

One of the earliest traditional sources to Sūrdās is his biography in the 17<sup>th</sup> century hagiographical text *Caurāsī Vaiṣṇavan kī Vārtā*<sup>17</sup> (*CVV*)<sup>18</sup>. The *CVV* details the lives of the first 84 members of the Puṣṭi Mārg, a Vaiṣṇava Bhakti sect founded by the ascetic scholar Vallabha in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century. Its first edition is attributed to Vallabha's grandson, Gokulnāth, and a later and broadly popular commentary to Vallabha's great nephew, Harirāy (Hawley 1984, p. 5; Barz 1992, p. 4). Sūrdās' presence in the *CVV* very clearly associates him with the Puṣṭi Mārg and Vallabha's philosophy. Before discussing the implications of this association for readings of Sūrdās' poetry that are informed by this hagiographical tradition, I will briefly outline the contents of Sūrdās' biography as it is presented in the *CVV* and in its commentary by Harirāy.

Sūrdās is blind from birth, but also has the gift of clairvoyance. This special gift wins him local fame, and he starts accepting disciples and gifts. Growing tired of what he finds to be the illusory nature of this life, he goes to the Braj country to start a new life as a devotee of Kṛṣṇa. Again he finds local fame, this time as a writer and performer of songs expressing his sense of separation (*virah*) from Kṛṣṇa. At this point Vallabha, the founder of the Puṣṭi Mārg, visits him and is unimpressed by the sombre tone of his songs. In conformity with his doctrine's understanding of the world as a partial manifestation of the divine in which the union between devotee and the divine is brought about by the active grace of (*anugraha*) of Kṛṣṇa, Vallabha challenges Sūrdās to move away from his sense of separation to write life

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<sup>17</sup> "An Account of the Eighty-four Vaiṣṇavas".

<sup>18</sup> Another early source is the *Bhaktamāl*; it is discussed in section 2.2.3.

affirming songs about Gopāla Kṛṣṇa instead. This challenge unleashes Sūrdās' poetic talent, and he quickly grows to become both a widely respected poet and, as he becomes a follower of Vallabha, a central propagator of the tenets of Puṣṭi Mārg. His blindness again becomes an asset, as it grants him the inner vision that reveals Kṛṣṇa's true splendour to him. In one episode, his universal acclaim even leads him to be brought forth at the court of the Mughal emperor Akbar. A crucial event takes place on Sūrdās' deathbed, when he confesses his belief that Vallabha and Kṛṣṇa essentially are one and the same, and that all of his poetry, while never mentioning Vallabha, actually is addressed to him as much as to Kṛṣṇa. He also expresses regret that he originally set out to compose 125 000 poems in praise of Kṛṣṇa/Vallabha, but now is about to die having only written 100 000. This is resolved as Kṛṣṇa himself manifests at the moment of Sūrdās' death and writes the remaining 25 000 (Gokulnāth and Harirāy 1971, pp. 400-442).

While variations of this story appear both in later hagiographical texts and in popular representations in modern media, the outline presented here represents the skeletal structure on which such later variations build. I will here discuss those of its implications that are central to the present study, including the main tenets of Puṣṭi Mārg philosophy, since they effect both the traditional ordering of Sūrdās' poetry and the accompanying understandings of that poetry in itself. I will finally discuss the two main examples of studies of the motif of the flute in this poetry that are highly influenced by this hagiographical understanding.

As the hagiographical story recounted above shows, Sūrdās is supposed to have composed 125 000 songs. As such, the traditional printing of the *Sūrsāgar* by the Nāgarī Pracārīṇī Sabhā (NPS) can be understood as being very incomplete, since it only gives about 5000 poems (Vajpeyi 1964). This edition also places the poems in a chronology that proceeds from the early poems of separation leading into the full blossoming of poetry praising the union with Gopāla Kṛṣṇa following Sūrdās' encounter with Vallabha. This ordering of the poems also reflects the understanding, rooted in the hagiographical tradition, that Sūrdās was a follower of Vallabha and that, as a consequence, his poetry primarily served to popularize the tenets of the Puṣṭi Mārg as they are formulated by Vallabha in his Sanskrit writings. More specifically, they are thought to be Sūrdās' translation of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* into the vernacular Braj Bhāṣā. This is reflected in the NPS *Sūrsāgar*'s ordering of the poems in chapters that correspond with the chapters of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*. Vallabha wrote a commentary on the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, the *Subodhinī*, and the hagiographical account states that Vallabha mystically revealed the essence of this commentary to Sūrdās upon his initiation into the Puṣṭi Mārg (Hawley 1984, pp. 38-39).



In sum, the hagiographical understanding of the *Sūrsāgar*, as represented by the NPS edition, dictates that the text is a translation of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* that is directly inspired by Vallabha's *Subodhinī* commentary. In the following section, I will demonstrate the implications of this stance for studies of the flute that are rooted in this traditional perspective, but we should first pause to briefly consider some of the elements of the Puṣṭi Mārg itself that are relevant to the dissertation's analysis.

As briefly mentioned above in the recounting of Sūrdās' biography according to the *vārtā* literature, Kṛṣṇa's active grace, *anugraha*, is of central importance to Vallabha's philosophy. For while it is essential that the individual devotee undertakes service (*sevā*) to Kṛṣṇa in the form of participating in or facilitating an elaborate set of rituals, Kṛṣṇa only bestows his grace on a devotee out of his own volition. The distinction is subtle, but important, for the Puṣṭi Mārg consequently understands regular Hindu worship, *pūjā*, as more of a transaction than an action of true devotion. By expecting a certain response from the deity as a reward for worship, *pūjā* is a selfish, manipulative act; *sevā*, on the other hand, is an act of unselfish devotion (Barz 1976, pp. 50-51, 86-87). Following this position, the *gopīs'* love for Kṛṣṇa is for the Puṣṭi Mārg one of several devotional passions (*bhāv*) that is perceived to exemplify the ideal devotional mood of *sevā*. However, the favoured variant of *bhāv* in the Puṣṭi Mārg has traditionally not been that of the *gopīs'* love, but that of a parent towards a child (Barz 1976, pp. 87-90).

Underlying these perspectives on the imperatives of devotion is Vallabha's emphasis on the fundamental unity of all existence within Kṛṣṇa; nothing exists that is not essentially a part of the supreme deity. As a consequence, Vallabha rejected the concept of *māyā*<sup>19</sup>, central to nondualist *advaita*-philosophy, which posits that the external world is an unreal illusion devised by a mystical force that is external to the godhead, Brahman. Vallabha restructured this concept to fit with his general outlook of pure nondualism, *śuddhādvaita*: in this framework, the world as it appears is real, and Kṛṣṇa uses his own power of illusion, *māyāśakti*, to shroud his immanence in it (Barz 1976, pp. 63-66). The world as it appears to us through Kṛṣṇa's illusion is the world of mundane (*laukika*) existence. Kṛṣṇa, through the agency of *anugraha* allows us to gain knowledge of the fundamentally transcendental (*alaukika*) nature of reality (Barz 1976, p. 71). The import of this for our present purposes is that the cultivation of a devotional *bhāv*, such as that of the *gopīs'* love for Kṛṣṇa Muralīdhar, is then seen as a vehicle through which the devotee can approach the *alaukika* plane, but that

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<sup>19</sup> "Illusion".

the final attainment of this is still dependent on Kṛṣṇa's active grace (Barz 1976, pp. 91-93). The consequences of these tenets for the present study become clear as we now turn to consider two studies of Kṛṣṇa's flute evidencing the traditional perspectives on Sūrdās.

### 2.2.2 Traditional perspectives on the flute

The traditional understanding of Sūrdās is reflected in the two available studies in Hindī of the flute in Sūrdās' poetry, Yamini Gautam's *Sūr kā veṇu darśan*<sup>20</sup> and Mahavir Prasad's *Hindī Kṛṣṇa-kāvya meṃ murlī-prasaṅg*<sup>21</sup>. Since they are both rooted in Vallabha's commentary on the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, the *Subodhinī*, I will first briefly consider the interpretations of the flute found in that text, before I outline and discuss the claims of Gautam's and Prasad's studies respectively.

Vallabha's *Subodhinī* is a commentary of the five chapters of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* that encompass a description of the *gopīs*' participation in the *līlā*, commonly referred to as the *Rāsapañcādhyāyī*<sup>22</sup>. While the flute features prominently in many of the verses of the *Rāsapañcādhyāyī*, it should be noted that it does not include the *Veṇugīt* chapter of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*. Throughout the *Subodhinī*, Vallabha emphasises the power of the flute to enthral its listeners. He also presents a demarcation of the different kinds of beings on which the flute has effect, only to conclude that the flute really is heard by all beings alike (Redington 1983, p. 310). However, there is no doubt that Vallabha regards the flute as simply a flute, albeit stating that flutes are particularly enticing instruments: "indriyānām vyāmohako veṇuḥ, rasātmakatvāt"<sup>23</sup> (Vallabhācāryā 1971, p. 145). He also mentions how the notes of music have an entrancing effect on the hearers' hearts, and that the prime quality of its sound thus is that of passion, *rajas*<sup>24</sup> (Redington 1983, p. 128, 350). In sum, while Vallabha emphasises the force of the flute's alluring sound, it remains in all respects an instrument; it is still *veṇu*, not *muralī*. So while noting its power, no coherent philosophy on the flute's religious meaning emerges in the *Subodhinī*. On this background, I now turn to consider the studies that have assessed the flute's import in Sūrdās' poetry according to Vallabha's philosophy.

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<sup>20</sup> "Sūr's Philosophy of the Flute".

<sup>21</sup> "The Subject of the Flute in Hindi Kṛṣṇa Poetry".

<sup>22</sup> "The Five Chapters on the Dance (of Kṛṣṇa and the *Gopīs*)".

<sup>23</sup> "Due to its charming nature, a flute bewilders the senses".

<sup>24</sup> Like its related concepts, *tamas* and *sattva*, *rajas* connotes a complex range of meanings, and I have here opted for what I deem to be the most appropriate in this context.

The stated goal of Gautam’s study is to understand the motif of the flute in Sūrdās’ poetry in its relation to Vallabha’s philosophy (Gautam 1983, p. 9). Gautam’s point of departure is to compare the flute-themed poems in the *Sūrsāgar* with the 21st chapter of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, the *Veṇugīt*, which was quoted and discussed at length in section 2.1. This focus on the *Veṇugīt*, which is not covered by Vallabha’s *Subodhinī*, entails that Gautam must apply her reading of Vallabha to a text that is not strictly within Vallabha’s scope. For Gautam (1983, pp. 53-56), the main characteristic of the flute that is set out in the *Veṇugīt* is its ability to subject the entire world to the hypnotic power of its tone, which, in extension, represents the transcendent power of Kṛṣṇa. As the facilitator of the cosmic dance between Kṛṣṇa, the *gopīs*, and the rest of the universe, the *līlā*, Gautam (1983, p. 56) understands the flute as the *sūtradhāraṇī*<sup>25</sup> of that transcendent union of devotees and divinity. She then proceeds to compare several of the flute-themed poems in the *Sūrsāgar* with verses from the *Veṇugīt*, arguing that they are examples of Sūrdās’ adoption of the method of *bhāvānuvād*<sup>26</sup>, and concludes that Sūrdās completely assimilates the central function of the flute as it is portrayed in the *Veṇugīt*, and that his genius as a poet resides in his ability to improve on the “sweetness” of the source material even while remaining in conformity with its outlooks (Gautam 1983, pp. 53-57).

Prasad’s study shares the same starting point, but reaches different conclusions. For Prasad (1978, p. kha), Vallabha’s reading of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* indicates that the flute may have the central importance of being *yogmāyā*, Kṛṣṇa’s own power of illusion, here employed as the summons to the devotees of the Puṣṭi Mārg to the *alaukika* union of the *līlā*. Prasad (1978, pp. 47) proceeds to discuss an example of a poem by Sūrdās that emphasises the flute’s all-pervasive power to subject people, gods, animals and nature itself, arguing that it represents an example of how Sūrdās has fully accepted the understanding of the flute in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* as it is explicated by Vallabha.

While Gautam and Prasad agree that the flute is of a special theological significance, they disagree on the exact form of that significance. For Gautam, the flute as the *sūtradhāraṇī* fulfils an essential function as the facilitator of the union between the divine and the worldly; as such it is a vehicle for the divine, represented by Kṛṣṇa, but not an element of the divinity itself. For Prasad, the flute’s status as *yogmāyā* makes it an essential aspect of the divinity, to the point that it may be seen as a manifestation of its purest form. I will briefly discuss some of the insights that may arise from these different conclusions.

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<sup>25</sup> “Puppet master”.

<sup>26</sup> “Free translation”.

Firstly, it is clear that the approaches of Gautam and Prasad originate in their subtly different understandings of Vallabha's theology of the flute in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, and that these differences resurface in their respective readings of the relevant poems in the *Sūrsāgar*. Moreover, the poems elected in both of the studies are predominantly those that depict the flute's power to sway the world and everything in it, but, as we shall see, the flute appears throughout the *Sūrsāgar* in a variety of poems where different aspects of it are emphasised. That this variety is not taken into account by these studies, might be due to the fact that a similar variety is not found in neither the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* nor the *Subodhinī*, the texts by which both studies are heavily informed. As such, these studies do not address one of the main questions raised by this thesis, concerning the variety of flute-themed poems found in the *Sūrsāgar*. Nor do the studies address the implications of the fact that the flute found in the *Sūrsāgar* is a female character, beyond associating her with theological principles, such as *yogmāyā*, that are seen to hold feminine characteristics. This study seeks to address these questions within the framework developed by the recent research literature on Sūrdās. However, I will briefly reconsider the claims of Prasad and Gautam in Chapter 4, when I discuss poems of the variety that inform their respective studies.

### 2.2.3 Recent research on Sūrdās

The dominating voices in the research literature on Sūrdās over the last decades have been those of John Stratton Hawley and Kenneth E. Bryant, and which has resulted in the recently published critical edition of the poems making up the early tradition of the *Sūrsāgar* (Bryant and Hawley (Ed./Tr.) 2015). In the following, I will outline the main positions of this research and its resulting insights on the position of authorship within the Sūrdās tradition, and discuss the implications of these for the present study.

A striking point of divergence between the recent research literature and the traditional understandings detailed above is their different approaches to the historical Sūrdās' relationship to the Puṣṭi Mārg of Vallabha. Comparing the account of the poet's life found in the *CVV* with earlier, nonsectarian sources, Hawley (1984, pp. 22-24) finds nothing that strengthens or confirms the claims made by the *CVV*. The early 17<sup>th</sup> century *Bhaktamāl*, which is a reference work of biographies of early Bhakti poets, highlights Sūrdās as an especially skilled poet, but does neither mention his blindness (even while mentioning his

“divine vision”) nor his affiliation with the Puṣṭi Mārg (Hawley 1984, pp. 22-23)<sup>27</sup>. Similarly, the Moghul court chronicle *A’īn-i-Akbarī* lists Sūrdās among the musicians working at Akbar’s court, and calls him out as the finest of poets working with the language of Braj. This last reference opens the possibility of placing Sūrdās within a courtly context, but Hawley remains unconvinced; especially since the early manuscript material shows no trace of having developed within such a context (Hawley 1984, pp. 22-24; Hawley 2009, pp. 21-23)<sup>28</sup>.

But rather than developing alternative biographies of the historical Sūrdās, a central implication of the research represented by Hawley is the inherent difficulty of ascertaining anything as “fact” in this matter; we can not know much about the historical Sūrdās beyond that he lived in the early sixteenth century and that he was reasonably well-known in some parts of north India (Hawley 2009, p. 23). A further challenge to the perspective informed by the hagiographic tradition is found in the early manuscripts of the poetry itself. The research of Bryant and Hawley into the available manuscripts has shown that the poems found in the earliest manuscripts collectively present a different picture than that of the hagiographical tradition. I will outline some of the most striking divergences. Firstly, the early poems do not address Sūrdās’ blindness. While references to blindness are to be found, they are either to blindness of a purely spiritual quality, or to the blindness brought about by old age. Neither equals the life-long blindness and its accompanying spiritual insight depicted in the *CVV* (Hawley 1984, pp. 29-31). Another divergence is the ordering of the poems: Whereas the later tradition places the poems of separation from the divine in the earlier parts of the *Sūrsāgar*, to reflect how they were written prior to Sūrdās’ initiation to the Puṣṭi Mārg, the early manuscripts place them intermingled with the rest of the poems and even display an overarching preoccupation with this theme (Hawley 1984, pp. 49-50). And finally, whereas the later tradition contains some poems that openly reference recognisable aspects of Puṣṭi Mārg precepts and practices, such references are nowhere to be found in the early manuscripts (Hawley 1984, pp. 25-28).

Collectively, research findings such as these combine to present a very different perspective on the historical Sūrdās from the one found in the hagiographical tradition. While this is a Sūrdās of whom far less is known, or can be said to be known with a convincing

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<sup>27</sup> It should be noted that when speaking of other, famous poets, such as Mīrā, the *Bhaktamāl* does mention the motifs of their biographies that came to dominate the later traditions (Hawley and Juergensmeyer 1988, p. 123). That being said, it should also be noted that there is some uncertainty as to whether the *Bhaktamāl* is actually referring to the Sūrdās of later fame (Hawley 1988: 23).

<sup>28</sup> While I agree with Hawley’s conclusions, one should be aware of the strengthened links between Braj poetry and Islamicate courts demonstrated in the recent research by Busch (2011).

level of security, it is a Sūrdās whose poetry may be approached through different perspectives than the ones dictated by the sectarian affiliations of the *CVV* account. Most importantly for our present purposes, the research of Hawley and Bryant does not accept Sūrdās as being a translator of a Vallabha-influenced understanding of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*; the early poetry is rather characterised by a complex, intertextual relationship with that text (Hawley 2009, p. 16).

I will go into further details of this intertextuality in the following chapter on the theoretical outlooks of this study, but we must first briefly discuss another, equally fundamental, consequence of the modern research on Sūrdās: Its implications for our understanding of the *Sūrsāgar* itself, and the poems it contains. For this research stresses both the historical growth of the *Sūrsāgar* and its resulting multivocality. While the earliest manuscript, dated 1582, contains 241 poems signed by Sūrdās, the later tradition, as referenced above, has seen collections presenting thousands of poems (Hawley 1984, pp. 35-36). Moreover, the growing collections also saw an expanse of poems that were more clearly commentarial in nature, explaining or expanding on the poems of the earlier collections. Some would also introduce wholly new themes and episodes (Hawley 1984, pp. 52-53). Finally, the later poems of the *Sūrsāgar* may appear to consolidate theological positions that were left more ambiguous in the tradition's earlier layers (Hawley 2005, pp. 203-204).

The resulting multiplicity of voices and views in the poetry popularly and traditionally ascribed to Sūrdās, in this study primarily represented by the NPS printing of the *Sūrsāgar*, points to the centrality of the understanding of authorship in this discussion. Hawley (2009, pp. 24-28) sketches out two extreme positions on this issue, before placing himself firmly in the middle ground. The first of the extreme positions is more or less that of the traditional perspective, which posits that Sūrdās himself wrote every poem in the traditional NPS printing, and that more poems remain to be found. According to the perspective of the other extreme, one must rather speak of a Sūrdās tradition; the *Sūrsāgar* is made up of poems written by a large quantity of poets over several centuries, and that this tradition was inaugurated by a series of oral performers who all inhabited or made use of the mythological Sūrdās persona. While agreeing with the formal logic of the latter position, Hawley still argues that it fails to account for why such a persona should arise in the first place. This heralds the position in the middle ground, which argues that a poet working under the name of Sūrdās wrote and performed a series of highly original and recognisable poems that inaugurated a tradition or mode of poetic writing, which today is represented by the sprawling NPS *Sūrsāgar*.

It is this position that informs the 2015 edition of Sūrdās' poetry presented by Bryant and Hawley, which forms part of this study's material. However, while I broadly accept the positions of Bryant and Hawley's research, my resulting interests slightly differ, as evidenced by my inclusion of the NPS *Sūrsāgar* in the study's material. Rather than emphasising the quest to excavate an ur-Sūrdās and then proceed to analyse that Sūrdās persona's poetic use of Kṛṣṇa Muralīdhar, I am interested in understanding the dynamics and development of the imagery connected with Muralī, the flute personified as a woman, in the wider *Sūrsāgar* tradition.

I will expand on the outlooks that underpin this position in the following chapter concerning theoretical and methodological concerns, but it should first be noted that there is no extended study of Kṛṣṇa Muralīdhar corresponding to those discussed in section 2.2.2, but informed by the research advances outlined here. Bryant (1978, pp. 95-98) discusses the poems concerning Kṛṣṇa's childhood as described by Sūrdās, and also briefly comments on the poems featuring the flute: Noting that they typically fuse the seductive power of the flute with the *gopīs* envy of its physical proximity with Kṛṣṇa, Bryant proceeds to discuss a poem in which the choir of despairing *gopīs* subtly seems to describe how the dancing Kṛṣṇa is compelled by the flute to assume the characteristic *tribhaṅga* pose. What Bryant does not comment on is the flute's gendered persona or its relationship with Kṛṣṇa: Who is compelling whom?

Hawley (1983, p. 164) discusses the motif of Kṛṣṇa as a butter-thief, and notes how the poets of the later tradition also portray Muralī as a thief; by stealing Kṛṣṇa's heart, she has stolen him away from the *gopīs*. However, Hawley does not provide a wider discussion of the flute as such<sup>29</sup>. Before undertaking such a discussion in chapters 4 to 6, I will in the following outline and discuss the theoretical and methodological outlooks of the study, which are rooted in the considerations discussed in the present chapter, and provide a general overview of the state, extents and particularities of the material found in the HB and NPS *Sūrsāgars*.

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<sup>29</sup> I assume that Hawley's forthcoming volume *Into Sūr's Ocean*, to be published in 2016, will include such a discussion, but that it will be limited to the poems included in the HB *Sūrsāgar*.

## **2.3 Summary**

This chapter has offered an overview of the historical development of the figure of Kṛṣṇa Muralīdhar as it appears in texts, with a particular reference to the accompanying development of the motif of his flute. It also discussed the previous research on this motif, as it appears in two different general approaches to Sūrdās, and established the present dissertation's position within the context of the existing literature.



### 3 Theory, method, material

In this chapter, I will present and discuss the variety of theoretical outlooks and examples that inform the approaches of the study. They have been chosen in order to reflect the different pulls of the study's two research questions: The first, concerning the various aspects of the flute as it develops throughout the tradition ascribed to Sūrdās, prompts an application of the outlooks and methodologies established by earlier research on both Sūrdās and the *Sūrsāgar*, as well as navigating the dynamics established by the traditional understandings discussed in the previous chapter. The second, with its more open-ended question concerning the flute in the poetry of Sūrdās being a female character, necessitates a discussion of relevant theoretical outlooks on gender. Consequently, section 3.1.1 deals with the first of these different theoretical concerns, whereas section 3.1.2 deals with the latter. Section 3.2 will then present the methodology of how these various theoretical considerations are applied to the material at hand. Section 3.3 outlines and discusses the state and nature of that material, and also includes a discussion of the language of this material, and the necessary considerations it prompts. Section 3.4 briefly summarises the general framework established by chapters 2 and 3 and provides a starting point for the analyses undertaken in the three following chapters. The various presentations of the study's theoretical and methodological foundations are prefaced by a brief, initial consideration of the epistemological difficulties inherent in the study of religious texts in general.

#### 3.1 Theory

Following Flood's (1996, pp. 99-118) critique of the traditional, phenomenological approach to the study of religion, which stresses the inability of the individual researcher to transcend the cultural and historical contexts of his or her relation to the object of study and the narratives they entail, I acknowledge that my theoretical and methodological approaches to the present study's material are embedded in such narratives. The research questions I have formulated, and the responses they originate, must consequently be viewed in this light. On the other hand, by electing to focus on the entirety of the *Sūrsāgar*, and the study's emphasis on the multiplicity of voices found within it, I would argue that the study evades one of the pitfalls Flood (1996, p. 102) warned against: that of excluding the insider perspective of a religious or textual tradition in the search for a pristine and "correct" layer of meaning. I will

comment on these considerations and their implications for the study again in the concluding Chapter 7.

### 3.1.1 Approaching Sūrdās

A natural point of departure for a discussion of the thesis' theoretical outlook is Bryant's 1976 study *Poems to the Child-God*, which by engaging directly with, and substantially departing from, the categories established by the earlier (predominantly Hindī-language) research on Sūrdās, marks a watershed for modern studies. As Bryant argues, most of the previous research is heavily informed by the work of Rūpa Gosvāmin, a contemporary of Sūrdās. Gosvāmin developed a system in which the modes and rhetoric of *bhakti* poetry is compartmentalised according to the theory of *rasa* found in the poetics of classical Sanskrit. Gosvāmin's resulting scheme includes five distinct *bhāvs*; moods or sensations aroused in the poetry's audience that correspond to the different feelings the various inhabitants of Braj harboured towards Kṛṣṇa. The five include *vātsalya*, the parental affection of his foster-parents; *mādhurya*, the love of the *gopīs*; *sākhya*, the friendly affection of the cowherders; *dāsyā*, the mood of the servant; and *śānta*, the meditational mood (Bryant 1978, pp. 21-22; McGregor 1984, p. 85). We saw in section 2.2.1 of the preceding chapter how the concept of *bhāv* played out in the framework of Vallabha's philosophy, emphasising the aesthetic element of devotion; our concern here is how the concept might or might not be employed in the analysis of Sūrdās' poetry.

Bryant (1978, pp. 21-42) notes two consequences of this system for the study of Sūrdās' poetry. Firstly, the system suggests an intermingling of aesthetic and theological categories; through aesthetic accomplishment, the poetry should awake devotional moods or affections. Secondly, the resulting view in the critical literature was that the quality of the poetry was directly related to its ability to represent the various *bhāvs* uniquely and completely. That is, a successful poem should be in complete harmony with its intended *bhāv*. Bryant's subsequent position broadly agrees with the first of these approaches, agreeing that the stimulation of devotional moods is central to the poetry, but not with the latter: in Bryant's view, Sūrdās' special quality as a poet resides in his ability to go beyond Gosvāmin's rigid scheme. Rather than perfectly displaying the *bhāvs* in structured compartments, Sūrdās stimulates his audience into devotional moods by deliberately distorting them.

For instance, Bryant (1978, pp. 26-35) argues that an often-discussed poem depicting Yaśodā, Kṛṣṇa’s foster-mother, daydreaming about how Kṛṣṇa will grow up, features an ingenious juxtaposition of Yaśodā’s thoughts in the first seven lines and the image of the lone child playing in the courtyard as the whirlwind-demon Tṛṇāvarta approaches in final three. Throughout the first seven lines an expectation is built up of the poem ending on a harmonious *vātsalya* note, which is contradicted by the conflict set up by the poem’s ending. This conflict serves the twin purposes of both contrasting the generalities of childhood with the specific divinity of Kṛṣṇa, as evidenced by his subsequent slaying of Tṛṇāvarta, and, by merely suggesting that slaying by ending the poem at the demon’s approach, to jolt the poem’s audience into reimagining a story from the mythology surrounding Kṛṣṇa. Bryant’s reading of the poem also serves as an illustration of the intertextuality between Sūrdās’ poetry and the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* suggested by the research positions presented in section 2.2.3.

For our present purposes, it is vital to note that the poems concerning the flute traditionally are placed within the erotic *śṛṅgāra* mood, as they are routinely narrated from the perspective of the *gopīs* who are lovesick for Kṛṣṇa and see the personalised, female flute as a supreme rival (Bryant 1978, p. 96). By adopting Bryant’s approach, we may expect to see poems operating within this mood, but also to find that they expand or counteract it. Through this, we are able to analyse the complex dynamics of the flute motif even while accepting its traditional, aesthetic context.

This approach, which emphasises that a special characteristic of this poetry is its tendency to shatter the expectations of traditional, aesthetic doctrines while referencing the individual poem’s mythological surrounding, is, by Bryant’s (1978, pp. 40-42) own acknowledgment, informed by certain underlying assumptions. These are that a poem constitutes a message that is communicated from the poet to the audience both through mutual language and through shared aesthetic conventions; that the poem’s message is played out and transmitted within a sequence of time that emphasises its sequencing; that the final effect of the transmitted message is unitary, giving the poem its quality of epiphany, pointing beyond the human texture of the poetry to the divinity of Kṛṣṇa (Bryant, p. 24).

This study shares these assumptions. Like Bryant, my reading of the poetry in both the HB and NPS *Sūrsāgaras* presupposes both their performative and devotional quality. I will briefly expand on both of these, and their implications for the study. As to the performative aspect, I follow the lead of Lutgendorf (1991: 36), who in his study of the *Rāmcaritmānas*, Tulsīdās’ Avadhī retelling of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, emphasises the need for students of classical

Indian literature to account for the texts' performative aspects, and how they spill into the text under review. A seminal impetus for this perspective was formulated by Bauman (1975, pp. 290-311) when he argued for an understanding of verbal art which understands a given performance as constituting a definitive text in itself, as it unfolds within its particular linguistic, cultural and temporal context, rather than a more or less corrupt rendering of a previously defined reference-text. Following Bauman's lead, Foley (2002, pp. 85-93) explores different oral-poetic cues that function as "keys to performance" that are specific to traditions and genres. A particular example of such a cue is the widespread use in oral poetry of recurring phrases and images that serve to invoke the conceptual and imaginative context of the performed poetry to its audiences. Zoller (2004, pp. 50-64) demonstrates how the recurring appearances of such stock phrases in the poetry of the north Indian poet-saint Kabīr stimulate listeners into entering a "familiar semantic universe". I will pause to consider comparable stock phrases in the poetry of Sūrdās, and their implications, at various points in the following analysis.

As the discussion of the historical Sūrdās in the previous chapter implied, we are not able to ascertain the exact nature of this poetry's performative context. I do, however, assume that both the earlier and the later *Sūrsāgar*, along with north Indian literature of a comparable nature from the same period, were composed with some kind of performance in view<sup>30</sup>. This does not entail that I wish to understand the poetry discussed here as notations of performances as such; I rather want to emphasise their existence both as individual poems subject to the general considerations of poetry as such, and as components of collections or traditions of performance which also prompt their own considerations.

For the devotional aspect, I simply mean that I stress the religious aspect of this poetry; even if the early Sūrdās is released from the particularities of its supposed Puṣṭi Marg credentials, it remains poetry that engages with and portrays themes relating to deities and devotion. As Bryant notes, the effect of epiphany in these poems is as much religious as it is aesthetic; the two are intertwined (Bryant 1978, pp. 24-25). They may also be understood as being mutually interchangeable within the broader context of Bhakti poetry; as McGregor writes of the rise of Kṛṣṇa poetry in the vernaculars of North India from the 15<sup>th</sup> century onwards, much of what was produced blended literary skill with "imaginative and religious insight" (McGregor 1984, p. 74).

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<sup>30</sup> Cf. McGregor (1984, p. 74) on north Indian *bhakti* poetry devoted to Kṛṣṇa, originating in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries: "It consists in the first instance perhaps entirely of popular songs".

For our present purposes, this leaves us with a theoretical perspective on the material at hand that is sensitive to its particular qualities, such as its ability to provoke its audience into rethinking or reimagining stories from a broader textual framework that is shared by poet and audience. By stressing the singularity inherent in performance, it is also able to address a diverse body of poetry: While there may be a wide variety of differences between the poems of the earlier and later traditions, both of them may still be approached as being intimately interrelated. Finally, through this outlook we can both undertake a comparative study of the differences between the various traditions and remain aware of the individual poem's quality of being a statement that may be intended to stimulate religious insights that lie beyond the considerations of intertextuality.

But before I proceed to discuss the study's second theoretical outlook, concerning gender, I will briefly comment on a different theoretical consideration that should not be overlooked: To what extent the motif of Kṛṣṇa Muralīdhar may be approached through the concept of the pastoral. The concept broadly refers to a literary mode, also known as the "bucolic", which first arose in (Western) classical antiquity and resurfaced with renewed energy during the Renaissance. It is generically characterised by its depictions of nature and idyllic landscapes, and the shepherds and villagers who inhabit these landscapes (Alpers 1996, pp. 8-9, 28).

The pastoral as a mode or genre has also been the subject of extended theoretical discussions within literary studies in European and American literary studies, and Entwistle (1991) employed the analytic concepts developed through these discussions to approach the concept of the Braj-dwelling Kṛṣṇa as an example of an Indian pastoral. Emphasising the critical acknowledgment of the pastoral's allegorical quality, as it offers an artificially idealised representation of country life that functions as a critique of urban life and as encapsulating the desire to escape ordered society in favour of natural simplicity, Entwistle (1991, pp. 74-76) finds several similarities between its Western and Indian manifestations. Most importantly for our concerns, he notes that the sound of Kṛṣṇa's flute "has as magical an effect on nature as the pipes of Pan or the lute of Orpheus" (Entwistle 1991, p. 76). Entwistle (1991, pp. 80-89) proceeds to discuss the works of the 18th century court poet Nāgarīdās, which through the concept of "pastoralization" can be understood as an example of the commingling of urban and folk religious cultures. Entwistle does not mention Sūrdās or the *Sūrsāgar*.

The concept of the pastoral, and its applicability to material relating to Gopāla Kṛṣṇa, as evidenced by Entwistle, is important to the present study in that it allows a perspective through which we may approach the place of nature and rural life in the poetry under review, and the flute's close relationship to these: as we shall see, the flute may appear both as a subjugator of nature, and as a call from the forest to those living in the rural, but ordered, settlements surrounded by that nature. However, it does not on its own provide a satisfactory framework to approach the flute's status as a female persona within the Sūrdās traditions. For that we must turn to concepts and examples developed by gender theory.

### 3.1.2 Approaching gender

A sensible starting point for this outline of the theories of gender that will be applied in the following analysis is to note a basic dichotomy underlying modern gender studies, which separates between biological "sex" and cultural "gender"; whereas the former is a neutral given, the latter is a construct carrying values and norms. Later developments in the field have argued that both categories are constructed socially, and the dichotomy is still the subject of discussion (Juschka 2010, pp. 245-249). What matters for our purposes is that this general abstraction of the concept of gender allows us to approach gendered imagery in religious literature not only as representing gender, but also as constituting it. On this general background, I will here outline two theoretical reflections on the concept of gender, respectively emphasising the symbolical and performative aspects of the concept, before discussing some examples of studies of Kṛṣṇa and the *Sūrsāgar* that employ gender perspectives.

A useful supplement to the abstraction of nature and urbanity offered by the concept of the pastoral discussed above is found in Ortner's (1972, pp. 5-32) influential contention that men and masculinity are traditionally associated with culture and women and femininity with nature. Moore (1994, pp. 15-21) has challenged this assertion on the grounds that it is not universally applicable across cultures, that it does not address the question of who is doing the association, and finally, that the concepts of nature and culture in themselves too are expressions of cultural constructs.

While I do agree with Moore's criticism, I would argue that Ortner's dichotomy is useful as a purely analytic device, especially when coupled with the comparable dichotomy inherent in the concept of the pastoral. Combined, they offer parameters with which we may address the dynamics of gender and its social contexts as it is expressed in the flute's

gendered persona in the *Sūrsāgar* traditions. Even so, it will also be necessary to supplement these parameters with a theoretical framework that may account for the dynamics of the poetry's performative aspect, as outlined above. This framework is found in the work of Butler (1990, pp. 189-193) on the performativity of gender, which stresses that gender is constituted through the repetition of bodily acts and gestures within a period of time. This understanding of gender emphasises the concept's temporal and social aspects, and allows us an approach that stresses the possible fluidity of gender within a given context. Coupled with Ortner's dichotomy, we have an analytic approach to gender that offers a means both to assess its symbolic parameters and the dynamics of its constitution within those parameters. Before summing up the various theoretical constructs discussed so far, I will briefly discuss some examples of studies that engage with the question of gender in the general motif of Kṛṣṇa Gopāla.

Commenting on the chapters of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* that describe the *rāsa-līlā*, the divine union in dance between Kṛṣṇa Gopāla and the *gopīs* discussed in Chapter 2, and in which the flute plays an important role by summoning the participants, Schweig (2013, pp. 117-141) notes that they exemplify the participation and experience of this union through the voices of women. The *gopīs'* selfless devotion is what allows them to be freed from their household chores and to engage in the *līlā* as supreme devotees and the most suitable recipients of Kṛṣṇa's favour; the theological implications of this, Schweig continues, is that the feminine is given an exalted position in the transcendent union of *līlā*, which lies at the heart of bhakti. As such, the *rāsa-līlā* of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* emphasises femininity as a devotional ideal for *bhaktas* of both genders. This position suggests a fluidity of gender in the theology surrounding Kṛṣṇa. Schweig (2007, pp. 441-474) has also argued that this fluidity may extend to Kṛṣṇa himself as well: His essential nature is described by various schools of theology to be both masculine and feminine, and the main *gopī* consort of Kṛṣṇa Gopāla, Rādhā, is, on a transcendental plane, similarly perceived to be undifferentiated from Kṛṣṇa. While Schweig's analysis is informed by his reading of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, the general insight concerning the fluidity of gender in the symbolism and theology of that text may also be fruitful for the study of other Kṛṣṇa-oriented textual traditions. I consequently adopt it throughout the present study as referring to a general aspect of Kṛṣṇa and devotion inspired by the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* rather than as representing the stances of a particular religious organisation.

Along similar lines, Hawley (1986, pp. 231-256) argues that sex reversal is a striking motif in Kṛṣṇa worship. For instance, male poets of North India, including Sūrdās, routinely

assume the female viewpoint of *gopīs*: Becoming a *gopī* is the only way to participate in the union of the *līlā*, and so this literary gender reversal is as much theological as it is aesthetic. On that note, Hawley proceeds to note a fundamental difference between the literary personas of Sūrdās and Mīrā, a female poet-saint of 16<sup>th</sup> century North India traditionally believed to have been of royal lineage: Whereas Mīrā’s assumption of the *gopī* in her poetry is a matter of going beyond her social standing, for Sūrdās the gesture is a more pronounced imaginative act. Even so, Hawley argues that Sūrdās seems to be going farther than Mīrā in denouncing religious activities traditionally associated with men, such as formal austerity, in favour of the direct and unpretentious devotion of the rustic *gopīs*.

I agree with the outlook of these studies, and they form a central point of reference for the present dissertation, as they provide us with awareness of the complex dynamics of gender and gender reversal at play within the body of poetry that is to be discussed. For the purposes of the present study, the combination of Ortner’s abstract dichotomy and Butler’s theory of the performativity of gender, along with the considerations of the fluidity and reversal of gender inherent in the theology of Gopāla Kṛṣṇa, provides a theoretical structure through which we can frame the research question concerning the femininity of Kṛṣṇa’s flute in the *Sūrsāgar* traditions. In the following, I will briefly summarise the different strands of theory explored above and outline how they will be applied methodologically to the material so as to answer the thesis’ two research questions.

## 3.2 Method

Before I gather the various threads of theory discussed so far and align them with their respective research questions, I will, for the sake of clarity, repeat the research questions driving this study: 1) How does the motif of the flute develop throughout the textual tradition ascribed to Sūrdās? 2) Why is the flute personified as a woman?

In section 3.1.1, I formulated a theoretical groundwork that emphasises both the poetry’s performative quality and its intertextuality, allowing us to see the individual poem as a complete statement in its own, but also with a view to its textual contexts and relations. Accordingly, I will approach the first research question by analysing the relevant material from both the HB and the NPS *Sūrsāgars* within a framework that emphasises both the individual poem’s meaning in itself, and in its wider relations.



As for the second research question, section 3.1.2 provided a frame that, on one hand, saw the abstraction of gender in its associations with nature and, on the other, the fluidity of the very concept of gender itself inherent in the emphasis of its performativity. In answering the second research question, I will approach the poems pertaining to Kṛṣṇa Muralīdhar and the flute itself in both the HB and NPS *Sūrsāgar* by analysing them according to both concepts of gender. As the following discussion will make clear, this twofold approach to the question of the flute's gendered persona may allow us an insight into the motif's centrality to the theology of Gopāla Kṛṣṇa himself.

On a practical level, I will undertake this analysis over the course of three chapters. The two first focus on each their *Sūrsāgar* edition: Chapter 4 deals with the HB, and chapter 5 with the NPS. The main purpose of these first two chapters of analysis is to answer the first research question. As a result, the second of them, Chapter 5, will feature a more comparative relation to its preceding chapter, and a concluding discussion that seeks to formulate answers to this first research question. The third and final chapter of analysis, Chapter 6, will however be devoted to answering the second research question. It will offer a broad discussion based on submitting the answers the preceding chapters offered to the first research question to the theoretical framework concerning gender that was developed in section 3.1.2. But before commencing this analysis, I will briefly discuss the general state, scope and particularities of the study's material.

### 3.3 Material

As I stated in Chapter 2, there is a marked difference between the early and the later *Sūrsāgar* traditions in sheer volume. This is also apparent in the number of poems elected from each of the two traditions to form the basis for the following analysis: While less than 30 poems of the HB *Sūrsāgar* either simply mention the flute or deal exclusively with it or Kṛṣṇa Muralīdhar, there are almost 200 poems in the *Sūrsāgar* that are directly concerned with the flute. Since all of the poems found in the HB *Sūrsāgar* also are found in the NPS edition<sup>31</sup>, this study is based on material encompassing about 160 poems. The poems range from a length of only four lines and up to twenty-two, and appear in a wide variety of metres. They

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<sup>31</sup> There are several variations between the versions of the poems printed in both the HB and the NPS. Individual words may differ, and often also their print layout. In light of the mass of material at hand, I have not attempted to account for these variations in the analysis. The HB also features an overview of variations across the manuscripts it is based on, but I have not included these variations in my analysis.

all feature Sūrdās' signature in the penultimate or ultimate line; this is a common feature of *bhakti* poetry, as much used to confer authority to the poem as to signify its actual composer.<sup>32</sup> Appendix A provides an overview of all poems included in the analysis. I cannot claim to fully account for every single poem in the respective texts that mention or consider the flute, but I will argue that my theoretically and methodologically diverse approach allows me to discuss a sufficiently large selection for the study's conclusions to carry weight.

It should be noted that the two editions of the *Sūrsāgar* follow separate structures of ordering. Whereas the NPS edition, as noted in Chapter 2, follow an ordering that closely follows the narrative of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, the HB displays a more autonomous ordering, keeping broadly in line with the Purāṇic narrative while also following the structural tendencies of the manuscript traditions on which it is based. Of prime concern for this study is that the poems concerning the flute in the HB are scattered across several sections, none of which exclusively reference the flute itself. These make up the four first sections of the text: "Krishna Growing Up", "The Pangs and Politics of Love", "Krishna Departs for Mathura, Never to Return", and "The Bee Messenger". The NPS, however, place all of the flute-oriented poems in four sections, three of which are explicitly labelled as such: "murlī-stuti"<sup>33</sup>, "gopī-vacan, murlī ke prati"<sup>34</sup>, "murlī-vacan, gopiyom ke prati"<sup>35</sup> and "gopi-bacan paraspar"<sup>36</sup>, all of which appear in the NPS' tenth part, echoing the appearances of similar material in the tenth chapter of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*.

I have chosen not to structure my analysis of the HB poems according to these categories, but rather to focus on the themes found in the variety of relevant poems it presents. For the NPS, I will however employ a different strategy and follow its traditional ordering more closely. This choice is due to the fact that the research questions raised in this study, in tandem with the theoretical outlooks and methodological concerns outlined above, primarily are concerned with extracting the flute poems of both traditions from their narrative contexts in order to approach them as performative instances whose relations to their surrounding texts are as intertextual as those towards texts such as the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* or the *CVV*. As the following analysis will make clear, the ordering of the poems in the NPS, with its emphasis on their concerns with the flute, lends itself more easily to this approach. As such, this choice should primarily be seen as a structural decision. I do not wish to imply

<sup>32</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the function of signatures in *bhakti* poetry, see Hawley 2005, pp. 21-47.

<sup>33</sup> "Praise of Muralī".

<sup>34</sup> "The Speeches of the *Gopīs* to Muralī".

<sup>35</sup> "The Speeches of Muralī to the *Gopīs*".

<sup>36</sup> "The speeches of the *Gopīs* to each other".

that the NPS ordering is more correct or authoritative than that of the HB; rather, it provides a framework through which we can approach a vast number of poems dealing with a variety of issues. Additionally, focusing on the vast number of poems the NPS itself singles out as being concerned with the flute allows me to draw a line for which poems may be included in the study. Considering every poem that might reference or mention the flute in a body of poetry encompassing more than 4000 poems is beyond the scope of this dissertation.

A few general comments should be made concerning the language of the material under review. It is all written in Braj Bhāṣā, a language that is closely related to today's Modern Standard Hindī (MSH). The HB *Sūrsāgar* prints the poems side-by-side with English translations by Hawley, while English translations of some, but far from all, of the poems found in the NPS are to be found in various publications of different intents and outlooks<sup>37</sup>. However, I have chosen to disregard all such translations in favour of supplying my own translation of every poem discussed. While this is necessary for all of the poems in the NPS that are not available in translation, it may appear as superfluous when it comes to those that are, including those of the HB edition. However, the form of Braj Bhāṣā found in poetry is often deeply ambiguous. Postpositions, which are essential to the analytic structure of MSH, are completely optional, making for several instances where there is no obvious way to construe a particular line or verse. Additionally, sentence structure itself may vary freely, and the general tendency towards elaborate punning may mask verbal roots as nouns or vice versa. Finally, the lack of orthographical norms may result in a wide variety of spellings for any given word. As a result, by providing my own translations alongside the transliterated<sup>38</sup> texts I may more effectively communicate how exactly I have construed ambiguous instances, rather than burying the analysis in technical considerations.

Finally, a note on the transliteration of the poems: in order to reflect the placing of the refrain, the *tek*, the HB chooses to repeat it with an ellipsis at the end of every relevant line. Rather than having to undertake a detailed editing, I have opted to retain these repetitions even when I quote extracts of poems where the refrain does not actually appear in the translation.

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<sup>37</sup> For instance, Hawley (2009) offers a collection of translations from the early tradition, with detailed footnotes, and stands at the scholarly end of the spectrum, whereas the translations by Alston (1993) can be understood as both more popular in presentation and more in line with the traditional perspective on Sūrdās.

<sup>38</sup> I have chosen to transliterate the originals so that readers not familiar with devanāgarī may follow the analysis as it discusses the appearances or usage of individual words.

### 3.4 Summary

In order to provide exhaustive answers to the study's two research questions, I have here outlined a theoretical and methodological approach that draws on multiple impulses. The first research question asks how the motif of Kṛṣṇa's flute develops throughout the textual tradition ascribed to Sūrdās, while the second asks how we may construe the flute's appearance as a woman in these traditions. The first question will be approached with a theoretical framework that draws on impulses from the concepts of performance and intertextuality, an approach that will be applied methodologically to the research material by first subjecting it to an analysis that considers single poems, or single groups of similar or related poems, on their own, in keeping with the performative aspect, and then considering the poems in their interrelations with other poems of the *Sūrsāgar* and other texts, reflecting the intertextual aspect. The second research question will be considered by first discussing the research material in relation to Ortner's concept of the association of femininity with nature and masculinity with culture, with a special reference to this concept's transferability to the pastoral as both a genre and an analytic approach, and finally by discussing the gender-play at work in the poems constituting a substantial portion of the research material according to the concept of the performativity of gender.

## 4 The Early Tradition: Muralī in the Bryant and Hawley *Sūrsāgar*

As already noted in the preceding chapter, the following analysis is structured according to the various kinds of poems found in the Bryant and Hawley (HB) edition of the *Sūrsāgar*. Several poems simply reference or mention Muralī; in others, she takes centre stage. Consequently, I will first deal with the poems where it is only a reference, presenting and discussing the commonalities between these references, and also noting how they may differ. I will then proceed to discuss the poems where Muralī is a key actor, according to the various representations of the flute that they present. Beginning with the poems that offer subtly different interpretations of her exact relationship towards Kṛṣṇa, I proceed to the poems where Muralī appears as a world conqueror and ruler. After offering an extended analysis of a poem that is unique in the HB *Sūrsāgar* in that it is presented as a monologue delivered by Muralī herself, I will comment on the poems that link Muralī with Mohinī, Viṣṇu’s divine form. The resulting summary restates the key arguments and findings of this analysis, before the study advances in Chapter 5 to the NPS *Sūrsāgar*.

### 4.1 Poems mentioning the flute

A common denominator for the poems where the flute only is briefly mentioned is that she appears as one of several objects characterising Kṛṣṇa. As such, these are poems that often follow or are akin to the traditional *nakha-sikha* approach to description, wherein a beloved’s qualities are itemised from “toenail-to-topknot” (Bryant 1978, p. 97). An example is found in this excerpt from HB38, which appears in the HB *Sūrsāgar*’s first section, “Krishna Growing Up”:

Mora caṃḍa sira mukuṭa birājita  
Muṣa muralī sura sahaja suhāī

On his head shines a diadem of peacock moons  
From his mouth the natural and charming sound of Muralī  
(HB38, NPS1234)

The poem proceeds to paint a full portrait of Kṛṣṇa’s face, leaving Muralī as an ornament amongst others. In other poems, she is similarly presented as one of several objects that represent Kṛṣṇa. In the following excerpt from another poem, a *gopī* enlists all of the visual characteristics and possessions of Kṛṣṇa to which she is “lost”:

Bali baumhaim bali tilaka kī sobhā  
Bali muralī bali sabada rasāla  
Bali kuṃtula bali pāga kī sobhā  
Bali kapola bali ura banamāla

Lost to his eyebrows, the beauty of his *tilak*<sup>39</sup>  
Lost to Muralī, her melodious sound  
Lost to his hair-locks, the beauty of his turban  
lost to his cheeks, the forest-flowers on his chest  
(HB72, NPS1989)

In poems such as these, Muralī does not seem to serve any function beyond completing the full image of Kṛṣṇa Muralīdhar<sup>40</sup>. In others, the mention imbibes her with a special importance. For instance, these lines appear in an enlisting poem otherwise similar in form to the two quoted above:

Āmī nidhi ānana adhara kara  
Muralikā ihi bhāi, deṣi rī...  
Manahu ubhai ambhoja bhājana  
Leta sudhā bharāi, deṣi rī...

The treasury of elixir in his face and lips  
Muralī in his hands in this way  
Seems to fill both lotus vessels  
With [that] nectar  
(HB42, NPS1245)

Here we see an indication of Muralī's ability to convey the elixir of immortality, the *amṛta*<sup>41</sup> that is said to seep from Kṛṣṇa's mouth, and possibly even to increase it. This theme is greatly expanded upon in poems discussed later in this chapter, and I will duly discuss its full implications in the relevant sections, but it should be noted that such themes evidently might appear even in poems where Muralī is not the main attraction. A similarly complex mention of the flute appears in a poem where a *gopī* appears to be comforting Rādhā, describing the various deeds of Kṛṣṇa intended to show his love for her:

Murali suṃ prīti adhika tere hita  
So aba dharani dharī rī bāma

He has more love for you than for Muralī  
O woman, now he has placed her on the ground  
(HB156, NPS3380)

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<sup>39</sup> "An ornamental and/or sectarian mark made on the forehead".

<sup>40</sup> Examples of other such poems are HB69/NPS1841, HB74/NPS1998, HB92/NPS2411, HB101/NPS2489, HB189/NPS3772, HB288/NPS4828 and HB347/NPS4873. In HB189/NPS3772, the mention is limited to half a line: "Muṣa muralī" ("With Muralī at the mouth").

<sup>41</sup> "Āmī" is a Braj form of the Sanskrit "amṛta", the divine nectar of immortality.

Here the act of putting Muralī down is presented as an act of love towards Rādhā on Kṛṣṇa’s part. Mentions such as these both serve to make Muralī a vital part of the symbolic imagery pertaining to Kṛṣṇa and to point to her complex function within that imagery. That is not to say that the poems where the mention is briefer or more formulaic are unimportant. On the contrary, the presence of poems where Muralī simply is one of several ornaments alongside poems where she is portrayed as supremely important point towards a complexity surrounding her exact function already within the HB *Sūrsāgar*, especially in her relation to Kṛṣṇa. This ambiguity is more fully unfolded in the poems under review in the following section.

## 4.2 The flute in relation to Kṛṣṇa

I will here look into two poems that represent different perspectives on the dynamics of Muralī’s relationship with Kṛṣṇa, especially regarding the question of who exactly is in charge of who. In the first, we are presented with a classic illustration of Kṛṣṇa Muralīdhar<sup>42</sup>:

Kamala muṣa  
 Sobhita suṃdara bainu, kamala muṣa...  
 Mohana raga bajāvata gāvata  
 Āvata cārai dhainu, kamala muṣa...  
 Kuṃcita kesa sudesa deṣiyata  
 Janu sājai ali sainu, kamala muṣa...  
 Sahi na sakata muralī madhu pīvata  
 Cāhata apanau ainu, kamala muṣa...  
 Bhṛkuṭī janu kara cāru cāpa lai  
 Bhayau sahāika mainu, kamala muṣa...  
 Sūradāsa prabhu adhara sudhā lagi  
 Upajyau kaṭhina kucainu, kamala muṣa...

His lotus mouth  
 Is adorned with a beautiful flute  
 Mohan is playing and singing ragas,  
 Coming back from grazing the cows.  
 His disorderly hair looks lovely  
 As if an army of black bees adorns him  
 Who cannot endure that Muralī drinks the sweet nectar  
 And wants her place itself.  
 His eyebrows make charming bows  
 As if Kāma had come as a helper;  
 From the nectar of the lips of Sūrdās’ lord  
 A great unease has arisen.  
 (HB73, NPS1995)

<sup>42</sup> In a collection of translations from the *Sūrsāgar*, Hawley (Hawley 2009, p. 85) even gave this poem the title “Flutist”.

We may trace the narrative structure of this poem through its two direct mentions of the flute: When it first appears, in the second line, it is as the masculine noun *bainu*<sup>43</sup>. As such, the focus resides with Kṛṣṇa, who is referenced in line three by his epithet *Mohan*<sup>44</sup>; it is clearly he who plays the flute. When the flute is referenced again, in the seventh line, it is as *Muralī*; from being a masculine flute, she is now the flute's feminine persona who is actively drinking the nectar of Kṛṣṇa's lips.

The “charming bows” of Kṛṣṇa's eyebrows in the ninth line refers to the particular way they are said to arch when Kṛṣṇa is playing the flute<sup>45</sup>; consequently, the image presented in the last four lines of the poem is comparable to a modern-day freeze-frame of the full expression of Kṛṣṇa Muralīdhar and the “unease” the nectar of his lips causes the *gopīs*. A particular cause of this unease seems to be the agency of Muralī in drinking this nectar, suggesting that she acts on her own within the general framework of the imagery.

On the other hand, the progression from the inanimate *bainu* that is being played to the animate *Muralī* that is actively drinking from Kṛṣṇa's lips suggests that it is Kṛṣṇa's playing, and the outpouring of his lips' nectar into the flute that it entails, is what animates her. As such, this poem indicates that it is through Kṛṣṇa's actions that the *bainu* becomes Muralī. And since the final image of the poem centres on the appearance of Kṛṣṇa as he is playing the flute, and not Muralī as the consumer of his nectar, it seems clear that she, even as an animate, active persona, is subservient to the general image of Kṛṣṇa Muralīdhar. Before advancing to the second poem of this section, it should be noted that this poem may be said to employ the “contrast” effect described by Bryant in Chapter 3, moving from the idyllic beauty of the dishevelled Kṛṣṇa returning from the pastures to ending on a note of “great unease”.

We should also note the poem's underlining of Kṛṣṇa's uncouth features, such as his “disorderly hair”, in relation to the concept of the pastoral: The poem seems to emphasise the beauty of Kṛṣṇa the cow herder, but does so without making an idyll of his rusticity. On the contrary: It is exactly Kṛṣṇa's unordered state that propels the imagery of the first lines. I will return to the significance of this motif in Chapter 6, but we must now turn to a poem that seems to offer a different take on the dynamics of the relationship between Kṛṣṇa and Muralī:

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<sup>43</sup> “Flute”.

<sup>44</sup> “The beguiler”.

<sup>45</sup> See “cāru” in CS, p. 616.



Muralī  
 Taū gupālahi bhāvai, muralī...  
 Suni rī saṣī jadapi namdalālahi  
 Nānā pāra nacāvai, muralī...  
 Rāṣathi eka pāi ṭhādhe kai  
 Ati adhikāra janāvai, muralī...  
 Komala aṅga aṅga āgyā gura  
 Kaṭi teḍhī hvai āvai, muralī...  
 Jāni adhika ādhīna kanāvaḍa  
 Giradhara nāri navāvai, muralī...  
 Āpana ulari adhara seḷyā para  
 Kara pallava palaṭāvai, muralī...  
 Brhikuṭī bhaumh naina nāsā puṭa  
 Hama para kopa kaṃpāvai, muralī...  
 Sūra prasāna jāni akau chinu  
 Dhara para sīsa halāvai, muralī...

Muralī  
 Is liked by Gopāl.  
 Listen friend: even though she makes the loved of Nanda  
 Dance to so many ends.  
 Having him stand on one foot  
 She lets her supreme authority be known.  
 On every tender limb a heavy command,  
 The waist goes crooked.  
 Knowing that he is completely submissive and servile,  
 She bows the neck of the lifter of the mountain.  
 Bounding herself on the bed of his lips  
 She makes his flower hands massage her.  
 His brows, eyes, nose and ears  
 She causes to tremble in rage against us.  
 Sūr says, if she knows him to be happy for a single moment,  
 She makes his head and body roll.  
 (HB46, NPS1273)

Before commenting on the supreme position afforded to Muralī in this poem, it should be noted that, as Bryant (1978, pp. 95-99) has shown, it cumulatively offers a description of Kṛṣṇa in a *tribhaṅga* posture, where his body is bent in three places: the knee, the waist and the neck. This pose is both well known in Indian traditional dance and sculpture, and as a classic representation of the dancing, flute-playing Kṛṣṇa. In Bryant's analysis, this means that as the *gopīs* whose voices narrate the poem speak disparagingly of Muralī for her proximity and influence over Kṛṣṇa, they unwittingly also offer a description of a well-known representation of the supreme deity. As such, the poem may be read as an accomplished example of the interrelation between aesthetic and religious sentiments.

In the poem's tenth line, Kṛṣṇa is mentioned with his epithet Giridhārī<sup>46</sup>, which refers to an episode appearing in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* where Kṛṣṇa shelters the inhabitants of Braj from a torrential rainstorm set off by a jealous Indra, the Vedic thunder-god, by lifting

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<sup>46</sup> "The lifter of the mountain".

up the mountain Govardhana as an umbrella (Bryant (Tr.) 2003, pp. 115-118). The poem's use of this epithet comes in a context where Muralī makes Kṛṣṇa bend his neck (and so assuming a part of the *tribhaṅga* pose), underlining that the divinity who was able to lift an entire mountain now is under the sway of a flute. There is no doubt of Muralī's complete control in this poem: Kṛṣṇa is even said to be "submissive". Even so, it is important that the speakers of the poem are *gopīs*: suffering the pangs of jealousy, they may be prone to exaggerate Muralī's influence. This possibility is most forcefully pronounced in lines 11-12, where the emphasis on the force and ungentle nature of Muralī's orders is supplanted by a depiction of how she enjoys her physical proximity to Kṛṣṇa's hands and lips, bringing out the poem's *śṛṅgāra* potential. This is significant in that it is not the sound of the flute itself that appeals to the *gopīs* here, but Kṛṣṇa himself, to whom Muralī denies them access. As such, the poem establishes the potential of Muralī even to subject the divinity revealed by Kṛṣṇa in his form as Giridhārī, while at the same time suggesting that his resulting form, that of Muralīdhar, is both highly attractive and forbiddingly unavailable: The flute functions both as vehicle of control and a barrier.

The two poems deepen the impression that the exact nature of the relationship between Kṛṣṇa and Muralī remain ambiguous. In HB73/NPS1995 the animate Muralī only arises from the inanimate flute when Kṛṣṇa is playing it; in HB46/NPS1273 she appears as the leading character from the outset, and there is no mention of her being played. In the former, the concluding image is one where Muralī appears as one of several elements of Kṛṣṇa's Muralīdhar form; in the latter, she appears as the force that commands Kṛṣṇa to assume this form. However, they both describe (the animate) Muralī as a character infused with a particular form of divinity or power that appears to be distinct from that of Kṛṣṇa: in both poems, she acts as an independent agent within the general framework of the Muralīdhar imagery, albeit with different degrees of authority. In the following section, I will discuss poems where Muralī's authority extends beyond this imagery to act upon the surrounding world.

### 4.3 Muralī as conqueror

I will in this section primarily focus on a single poem, and supplement my reading of it with quotations from other poems featuring a similar imagery. All of them present Muralī as conqueror and a ruler of the entire world, expanding the scope of her influence from the poems discussed in section 4.2. As in HB46, it is the *gopīs* that speak in the following poem:

Muralī ati garva kāhu  
Vadati nāhi āju  
Hari kau muṣa kamala deṣa  
Pāyau suṣa rāju  
Baiṭhati kara pīṭha dhīṭha  
Adhara chatra chāṃha  
Cikura cavara rājata hai  
Surabhi sabhā māṃh  
Jamunā ke jalahi nāhi  
Jaladhi jāna deta  
Surapura te sura vivāna  
Bhū bulāi leta  
Sthāvara cara jaṅgama jaḍa  
Kahati jīti jīti  
Bidhihū kaṃ meṭi calati  
Apanī nai rīti  
Bāsī basa sakala sūra  
Sura muni nara nāga  
Śrīpatu hū śrī bisāri  
Ehī anurāga

Muralī has become extremely proud;  
She does not speak at all.  
In the country of Hari's lotus mouth  
She has found a kingdom of joy.  
With bold back she sits in his hands  
In the shade of his umbrella lips;  
She reigns with his whisk-hair  
In the assembly of his beautiful teeth.  
The waters of the Yamunā she does not  
Allow going to the ocean.  
The vehicles of the gods from the city of the gods  
She calls to the earth.  
The immoveable becomes moving; the moving inert  
She calls both victories.  
Abolishing every rite, she sets up  
Her own new custom.  
Everyone is in the flute's power, says Sūr,  
gods, sages, men and snakes.  
Even Śiva forgets his Śrī  
By this passion  
(HB45, NPS1271)

In this poem, we see Muralī reigning over rivers, gods and men, and both moving and immoveable things; as such, it offers a panoramic view of the *trilok*, the three worlds of

Hindu cosmology, encompassing heaven, the atmosphere and the earth (Johnson 2009, p. 188). Approaching the poem from the theoretical perspective that stresses the tendency of Sūrdās' poetry to challenge traditional aesthetic expectations, it is striking that it ends with the word *anurāga*, which both refers to “passion” in general, but also a particular kind of passion that is deemed to be connected with the *śṛṅgāra* mode that the flute poems are traditionally ascribed to. At the same time, the poem features an elaborate imagery of formal royalty. As she establishes her kingdom in Kṛṣṇa's mouth, his hands, lips, hair and teeth are likened to different paraphernalia of royalty and courtly life. The irony of this interplay between royal and sensual imagery is underlined in lines 15-16, where Muralī abolishes every *bidhi*<sup>47</sup> in favour of her own *rīti*<sup>48</sup>, since the formality of the words employed contrast with the apparent lack of established “customs” in the scenes that are unfolding: rivers freezing in their flow and gods descending from heaven. It also hints at the subversive sexuality inherent in the attractiveness of Kṛṣṇa, for many of the *gopīs* are married women (Hawley 1986, p. 232).

A similar irony can be found in the way the poem names Muralī. Like HB73/NPS1995, this poem mentions Muralī both as the animate *Muralī* and as a less distinct *bāsī*, which simply means “bamboo flute”. But while first mention appears as the first word of the poem's first line, the latter only appears in the couplet that forms the poem's conclusion. In between the two mentions lays a cosmic panorama detailing Muralī's influence, and so the final mention reminds one that while it may appear to be so, this *bāsī* is no typical bamboo flute. It also serves to draw the focus of the poem back to Muralī as a flute, and by reference to remind that the figure of Kṛṣṇa Muralīdhar forms the centre of the celestial and worldly panorama of the poem.

As such, the central image of this poem remains that of those discussed in the previous section. The central difference is the reach and power of the flute's influence within this image, and so we should briefly consider the claims of Gautam and Prasad discussed in Chapter 2, who respectively argued that the flute is either a facilitator of the meeting between the divine and the worldly, the *sūtradhāraṇī*, or a personification of Kṛṣṇa's illusory power, the *yogmāyā*. Both studies focus on poems like HB45/NPS1271 that portray Muralī as a universal ruler. While it is clearly possible to understand the power exerted by the flute in this poem as an example of either of these theological concepts at work, none of them sufficiently

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<sup>47</sup> “Manner; ritual”.

<sup>48</sup> “Custom; manner”.

accounts for the poem’s emphasis on Muralī’s quality as a particular, female character, or how its royal imagery is ingeniously intertwined with strongly sensuous overtones.<sup>49</sup>

This element points to the importance of the *gopīs* as the narrators of the poem, for HB45/NPS1271, like HB46/NPS1273, is framed by the voices of the envious *gopīs*. In keeping with the emphasis of our theoretical approach on the performative quality of this poetry, which stresses that performed texts may constitute definitive texts in themselves, I would argue that central element of this poem is the tone of the characters who are performing it. The *gopīs*’ main concern here is not the exact nature of the universal power wielded by the flute, but the arrogance of the personality from which it emanates. As already mentioned, the poem constitutes another example of the contrasting quality of Sūrdās’ poetry, couching the formality of world conquering in sensuality. Through this approach we see the plight and perspective of the *gopīs* clearer: Being swayed and attracted is one thing, but what matters is physical proximity to Kṛṣṇa, of the kind that Muralī enjoys. And the attribution of personal characteristics such as “pride” to the flute underlines the point that the main point for the *gopīs* is that Muralī is a particular female, and not a general feminine principle. The dual imagery of royalty and sensuality might also be understood as an expression of this particular perspective.

However, in keeping with the questions raised in the preceding section, it is important to note how the relationship between Kṛṣṇa and Muralī varies across other poems stressing the royalty and supreme control of Kṛṣṇa Muralīdhar. In a different poem, where the *gopīs* bewail their separation from Kṛṣṇa, who at this point has left for Mathura, this imagery of royalty reappears in a striking juxtaposition:

Uhaṃ deṣiyata nriṇa bheṣa śyāma jū  
Ihaṃ dina beṇu layai, kāhā...

There [that] Śyām is seen in the dress of kings who  
Here at a time was seen with a flute.  
(HB282, NPS4339)

As Kṛṣṇa leaves to assume his position as a worldly king, the *gopīs* here recount how he, as Muralīdhar, appeared as a king of the entire universe. As in HB45/NPS1271, the *gopīs* emphasise that it is the Kṛṣṇa that appears in their physical vicinity that matters. However, in

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<sup>49</sup> In his work on Braj pilgrimage dramas, Hawley (1981, pp. 155-226) presents a performance where Yogmāyā appears as a distinct character on stage that infuses Muralī with her power. Even so, Kṛṣṇa proceeds to address Muralī as his “third *yogmāyā*”, which Hawley (1981, p. 300) construes as an example of how Muralī is a particular kind of feminine, beguiling power that is distinct from the more universal *yogmāyā*.

this poem the flute, which is only mentioned with the general *beṇu*, no longer is a source of envy, but an object that signifies Kṛṣṇa in the form most favoured by the *gopīs*. As such, it does not have the active autonomy and individual personality of Muralī, as in HB45/NPS1271. A third position is found in a different poem, which in many respects are similar to HB45/NPS1271:

Muralī  
Adhara saji balabīra, muralī...  
Nāda prati banitā vimohī  
Bisare ura cīra,...

Muralī  
Adorns the lips of Balarām’s brother<sup>50</sup>  
Hearing its sound the women are infatuated  
Forgetting the clothes on their breasts  
(HB47, NPS1276)

After proceeding to describe how animals and nature are stopped in their tracks by this sound, the poem ends with the following lines:

Sūra mohana nāda suni thaki  
Rahata jamunā nīra, muralī...

Sūr says, hearing the infatuating sound,  
The waters of the Yamunā stand still.  
(HB47, NPS1276)

We here see the power of Muralī to subjugate the world presented along lines that are very similar to those of HB45/NPS1271. However, while the latter employs a complex royal imagery to this end, HB47/NPS1276 explicitly states that the effect stems from its sound. It repeats the same word, *nāda*<sup>51</sup>, twice, both in its opening and concluding couplets. And in the latter, the sound is described with the adjective *mohana*<sup>52</sup>, which is also an epithet of Kṛṣṇa, *Mohan*<sup>53</sup>. This may be understood as a subtle underlining of the fact that it is Kṛṣṇa’s playing that infuses Muralī with her power. Such a reading is strengthened by how Muralī, in the

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<sup>50</sup> Balarām is Kṛṣṇa’s older brother (Johnson 2009, pp. 42-43).

<sup>51</sup> “Sound”.

<sup>52</sup> “Infatuating; beguiling”.

<sup>53</sup> “The beguiler”.

second line, is said to “adorn” Kṛṣṇa’s lips; this is reminiscent of the descriptions of the flute as an ornament that we saw in section 4.1<sup>54</sup>.

On the other hand, HB47/NPS1276 is clearly not narrated by the *gopīs*, who appear in lines 3-4 as the women who are so deeply infatuated by the sound of the flute that they are oblivious to their clothes slipping off their breasts. This is significant: As in the preceding section, a tendency emerges where Muralī assumes a more central significance and active persona in the poems that are narrated and performed by the *gopīs*. I will discuss the full implications of this tendency in Chapter 6, but will now turn to a poem that is unique in the HB *Sūrsāgar* in that the narrator of the poem is none other than Muralī herself.

#### 4.4 Muralī in monologue

We find a useful starting point for our discussion of HB71/NPS1948, which sees Muralī speaking in monologue, by briefly looking at the following excerpt from another poem, where the *gopīs*, as in HB282/NPS4339, address the Kṛṣṇa who has departed from Braj:

Bisari gayau griha bana kau nātau  
Aura hamārau aṅga, pareṣau...  
Sūra dāsa prabhu gaī sagāi  
Vā muralī kai saṅga, pareṣau...

He has forgotten his bonds to forest, home  
And to our bodies.  
The lord of Sūrdās has gone from his engagement with us  
To the company of that Muralī.  
(HB194, NPS3810)

While the complaint of the *gopīs* here refers to how Kṛṣṇa by returning to his actual parents rejects the familial and caste-based affiliations of his foster parents in Braj, the general tone is still one of reproach for the illicitness of Muralī’s pairing with Kṛṣṇa. It is to accusations such as these, and the general tone of envy and resentment in some of the poems explored above, Muralī seems to be responding when she speaks of her own accord:

Gvāli tuma  
Kaba ba urāhanu dehu, gvāli tuma...  
Būjhau dhau yaha bāta syāma sau  
Kite duṣa juryau saneha, gvāli tuma...  
Janamata hī te bhāi birata cita

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<sup>54</sup> Cf. also 2.2, where it was reported how the word *muralī* might be etymologically related to a Tamil verb for the making of sound. *Bāsi* and *bainu* are respectively related to the Sanskrit terms for “bamboo” and “stick”.

Chāḍi grāma guna greha, gvāli tuma...  
 Ekahi carana rahī hama ṭhāḍhī  
 Hima grīṣama aru mehu, gvāli tuma...  
 Tajyau mūla sāṣā patrani jyau  
 Soca sukānī dehu, gvāli tuma...  
 Muryo nahī manu agini sulāṣata  
 Vikāṭa banāvaṭa behu, gvāli tuma...  
 Kata hau bakati bāsurī jānai  
 Kari kari tāmasa tehu, gvāli tuma...  
 Sūradāsa prabhu tumahi rījhai kari  
 Tumahu adhara rasa lehu, gvāli tuma...

Cow herder women,  
 Why do you reproach me now?  
 Truly, ask about this from Śyām:  
 How much pain to join with his love?  
 Even from birth my heart was detached  
 I abandoned town, skills and home.  
 I stood on one leg,  
 In winter, summer and rain.  
 I renounced roots, branches, leaves.  
 Worries dried up my body.  
 I did not turn while that fiery rod  
 Made the fearsome holes.  
 Why chatter that I'm a bamboo flute?  
 Why do you rage about that?  
 Please the lord of Sūrdās,  
 And you too can take nectar from his lips.  
 (HB71, NPS1948)

As in HB45/NPS1271, we here see a striking combination of imagery. While the former poem infused the sensuality of Muralī's physical closeness to Kṛṣṇa with the formality of kingship, HB71/NPS1948 couches the technicality of making a flute from bamboo in the language of asceticism. For instance, Muralī's abandoning of her "roots, branches, leaves" is described with the verb *taj-*, which is cognate with the Sanskrit verbal root *tyaj*, and is commonly used to refer to ascetic renunciation<sup>55</sup>. Through this rhetoric imagery, Muralī initially reproaches the *gopīs* for not recognising the depths of her austerity and steadfastness, and details the various kinds of pain and renunciation she has patiently endured, before concluding that anyone willing to go to the same extremes to "please" Kṛṣṇa will also be able to drink "nectar from his lips".

This insistence on the primacy of devotion is in keeping with the general outlook of the traditions surrounding Gopāla Kṛṣṇa. Already in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, Kṛṣṇa states that he engages the *gopīs* in the *līlā* because of their supreme devotion to him, as evidenced by their leaving their husbands (Bryant (Tr.) 2003, pp. 138-139). It is on this background we might understand Muralī's reproaching the *gopīs* in lines 13-14 for not getting over her being

<sup>55</sup> Cf. Hindī *tyāgī* – "ascetic".



a bamboo flute: it is the level of devotion that matters, not the particularities of the individual devotee. Even so, the following two lines, which combine with the preceding to form the poem's final couplet, with their sly *tumahu*<sup>56</sup>, can be understood to portray Muralī as the supreme devotee.

It is a subtle argument, as it allows Muralī to attack the *gopīs* for their failure to recognise the centrality of selfless devotion in reaching Kṛṣṇa, while at the same time implying that she herself is a model of such devotion. And by delivering this argument, Muralī may be accused of displaying exactly that pride which the *gopīs* accused her of in HB45/NPS1271. This final element is especially clearly drawn out in the context of our theoretical emphasis on performativity and its intertextual dynamics. The full force of the poem arises from it being understood in relation to a series of other poems that berate Muralī for this behaviour, especially since it is the only one of its kind in the HB *Sūrsāgar*. It is also significant that we here meet a Muralī that possibly may have been given life by coming into touch with Kṛṣṇa's lips, but even so proceeds to act as a separate entity with her own identity and characteristics. I interpret this as the result of she being the Muralī of the *gopīs*: by addressing them specifically – the poem opens with the vocative “Cow herder women” – Muralī is engaging with their outlooks and concerns. And, as the fourth line implies, the essential point for both parties is to attain Kṛṣṇa's love, *sanehu*<sup>57</sup>.

Before presenting a summary of the variety of depictions of Muralī in the poems discussed so far, I will discuss the last group of poems under review, where she appears in yet another figuration: in these poems she is intermittently likened to and explicitly stated to have become Mohinī, the female incarnation of Viṣṇu.

#### 4.5 Muralī as Mohinī

Before citing and discussing the poems where Muralī appears as Mohinī, it will be useful to briefly outline the characteristics of Mohinī herself. What arguably is the defining appearance of Mohinī in Hindu mythology is her participation in the *samudramanthana*<sup>58</sup> episode, which first appears in the *Mahābhārata* (Johnson 2009, p. 89). In that text, the story tells how the gods use the mountain Mandara, with the serpent-king Vāsuki as rope, to churn the ocean in an effort to produce *amṛta*, the nectar of immortality. When the nectar appears, Viṣṇu

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<sup>56</sup> “You too”.

<sup>57</sup> *Sanehu* is a Braj Bhāṣā variant of the Sanskrit *sneha*.

<sup>58</sup> “The Churning of the Ocean”.

assumes the female form of Mohinī to lure the demons into letting the gods retain the nectar (Smith (Tr.) 2009, p. 5; Johnson 2009, p. 89). The story resurfaces as a reference point for the following HB *Sūrsāgar* poem:

Muralī  
Mohanī bhaī, muralī...  
Karī ju karani deva danujani kahum  
Vaha bidhi pheri ṭhāī, muralī...  
Uni paya nidhi hama brata sāgara mathi  
pāī piyūṣa naī, muralī...  
Siṃdhu sudhā hari badana iṃdu kī  
Ihi chali chīni laī, muralī...  
Āpu acai acavāha sapta sura  
Kīnai diga bijaī, muralī...  
Ekahi puṭa uta amṛta sūra ita  
Madirā madana maī, muralī...

Muralī  
Has become Mohinī.  
Those deeds she did to the gods and demons  
Arise again in the same way.  
They churned a milky ocean; we, a sea of vows,  
And found a new nectar.  
The ocean liquid of Hari's moon face,  
That she stole away by stealth.  
She pours it down and serves us a scale of tones  
as she undertakes a victory tour.  
A single vessel once held elixir, says Sūr, but now  
intoxicating liquor.  
(HB70, NPS1893)

As the poem opens by declaring that "Muralī has become Mohinī", it proceeds to merge the image of Muralī on Kṛṣṇa's lips as he plays with that of Mohinī stealing away with the nectar churned up by the gods. While earlier references to this nectar in other poems have seen it explicitly named as *amṛta*, such as in HB42/NPS1245 discussed in section 4.1, this poem goes further in linking it with the nectar of the *samudramanthana* story. But if it is of a comparable nature, the nectar on Kṛṣṇa's lips is not the same as that arising from the milky, primeval ocean. In lines 3-6, the *gopīs*, who again are the narrators, liken themselves with the gods and demons of the earlier story. However, their sea is not one of milk, but of vows: This must refer to the devotion discussed in the previous section, which is the prerequisite for meeting with Kṛṣṇa in the *līlā*. But Muralī, acting as Mohinī, fulfils the same function in both stories by stealing away the *amṛta*. This dual meaning is underlined in the fourth line, where Mohinī/Muralī's act of repeating her acts in the *samudramanthana* story is described with the verb *ṭhai-*, which primarily means "to arise", but also "to appear to be heard": as beguiling as the acts arising from Mohinī are the sounds heard from Muralī. A similar pun can be found in

the poem's penultimate line, where the word *puṭa* means “vessel”, but also the “cup (of the ears)”, possibly hinting at how the nectar flows from its vessel, the flute, into the ears of the listeners to its sound. The poem also very clearly states how the music of the flute is the allocation of the remainder of the *amṛta* to the *gopīs*. By describing this act as Muralī undertaking a *diga bijat*<sup>59</sup>, the victory tour of conquering kings, the poem also explicitly links this distribution with royal imagery comparable to what we saw in HB45/NPS1271.

A similar effect is seen in the following excerpt from HB44/NPS1266, which follows directly after a description of the variety of *rāgas* Kṛṣṇa plays on the flute:

Juga juga jari bara beṣa sayala mathi  
 Badana payodhi amṛita upajāvata  
 Manau mauhanī bheṣa dharyau dhara  
 Muralī mohana muṣa madhu pyāvata

A pair of supreme roots churning [the flute] in the form of a mountain  
 Produces *amṛta* from his face  
 As if taking the appearance of Mohinī on earth,  
 Muralī serves the sweet nectar from the mouth of Mohan.  
 (HB44, NPS1266)

The poem continues to depict how the effect of the sound of the flute overpowers the inhabitants of all the worlds and nature itself, in a style similar to HB45/NPS1271. While the imagery of this poem is comparable to HB70/NPS1983 in that it too uses the framework of the *samudramanthana* story to describe the effect of Kṛṣṇa's playing of the flute, a crucial difference is the use of the word *manau* – “as if” – to describe how Muralī appears as Mohinī. As we saw, HB70/NPS1983 opens with the more direct “muralī mohanī bhā” – “Muralī has become Mohinī”. Again, I attribute the difference to the fact that HB70/NPS1983 clearly is narrated by the *gopīs*, while HB44/NPS1266 has a less specific speaker<sup>60</sup>.

So we see an emerging pattern of similar imagery and concepts employed in different poems, but the exact importance and understanding of these varying according to the poems' differing narrators. I will comment on this in more detail in the following summary of this chapter, but we should first briefly consider the theological implications of Muralī appearing as Mohinī, allegorically or not. Since Mohinī is a form of Viṣṇu, the appearance of the two side by side in the same image, that of Kṛṣṇa Muralīdhar, can be understood as a union of both the male and the female potentials of the supreme divinity underlying them both. I will consider the implications of this for my second research question in Chapter 6, but at the

<sup>59</sup> Sanskrit *digvijaya*.

<sup>60</sup> The only indication of it being narrated by anyone in particular, except the formulaic “Sūr says” in its final couplet, is the imperative “āi sunahu” (“come and listen”) in its second line.

present moment it is sufficient to note how this representation of Muralī adds to the complexity and variation on view in the HB *Sūrsāgar* alone.

## 4.6 Summary

In this chapter, I have explored the many appearances of Muralī in the HB *Sūrsāgar*, ranging from being described as an ornamental prop to being ascribed an influence over Kṛṣṇa of such a completeness that we must raise the question of who is playing who. Within this broad range I argue that we can discern a pull between two positions. In one, Muralī is ascribed varying degrees of autonomy and control, but there is seldom any doubt that these qualities only are allowed her as a result of Kṛṣṇa playing her. It is this position we see in poems such as HB73/NPS, where she evolves from “flute” to Muralī; HB47/NPS1276, where the world-conquering Muralī simply “adorns” Kṛṣṇa’s lips; and HB44/NPS1266, where Muralī only allegorically assumes the form of Mohinī. The other position leaves the question of Muralī’s autonomy more open, focusing instead on the particular traits of her personality. This position was seen in poems such as HB46/NPS1273, which emphasised how Muralī subjects the dancing Kṛṣṇa to her commands; HB45/NPS1271, which detailed the pride displayed by Muralī as she rules the worlds through her proximity to Kṛṣṇa; HB71/NPS1948, where she schools the *gopīs* in singular devotion; and HB70/NPS1893, where she not only seems like Mohinī, but becomes her. As repeatedly evidenced throughout the above analysis, the latter position only appears in the poems that are either narrated by the *gopīs* or addressed directly to them. In keeping with my theoretical approach, this can be understood as an illustration of the performative perspective on this poetry, for as the *gopīs* speak it is the distinct personality of Muralī that matters. As for the intertextual aspect, it should be clear that the full force of the particularity of the *gopīs*’ perspective comes into fruition when it appears alongside the poems expressing the less personalised position. As such, the Muralī of the HB *Sūrsāgar* appears through a nexus of performance and intertextuality where different narrators accord here different meanings. In the following, I will compare these tendencies with those of her appearances in the NPS *Sūrsāgar*.

## 5 The Later Tradition: The NPS *Sūrsāgar*

The main purpose of the following analysis is to approach a position from which we may answer the study's first research question: How does the motif of the flute develop throughout the textual traditions ascribed to Surdas? Having outlined the dominant themes pertaining to this motif in the HB *Sūrsāgar* in the preceding chapter, I will here first provide a similar outline for the NPS *Sūrsāgar*, and then proceed to undertake a comparative discussion of the findings so far. A final summary will offer a framework for the following chapter, which engages with the second research question. As already discussed in section 3.3 of Chapter 3, the number of poems in the NPS *Sūrsāgar* that are relevant to this study is far higher than that of the HB equivalent. As a consequence, the following analysis cannot fully account for all of these poems. In many cases, only brief quotations from a single poem will have to represent tendencies that are on display in many<sup>61</sup>. As noted in Chapter 3, I will here follow the traditional ordering of the NPS more closely than I followed that of the HB in the preceding chapter. Consequently, I will in section 5.1 discuss the poems that appear in its first relevant section, "Praise of the Flute", those of "The Speeches of the *Gopīs* to Muralī" in section 5.2, those of "The Speeches of Muralī to the *Gopīs*" in section 5.3, and those of "The Speeches of the *Gopīs* to each other" in section 5.4. Section 5.5 features the comparative discussion, including proposed answers to the first research question, while section 5.6 gives a brief summary of the chapter.

### 5.1 Praise of the Flute

This first section of the NPS of poems concerning Muralī comprises 39 poems. They broadly fall in two categories, but before discussing these it should be noted that the speakers of the poems are not so clearly separated as the titles of the three sections under review suggest. For instance, while the titles of the latter sections appear to indicate that they are the ones featuring the *gopīs*, NPS1250 of this first section is clearly narrated by them, as it opens with the words "dekhi sakhī"<sup>62</sup>. Additionally, some poems are so similar to each other that may be regarded as close relations rather than wholly distinct poems. An example is NPS1252 and NPS1262, both of which are structured around a similar opening to most of their lines.

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<sup>61</sup> For a complete overview of poems included in the analysis, consult Appendix A.

<sup>62</sup> "Look, my [female] friend". Similar vocatives normally seen in *gopī* poems also appear in NPS1266 and NPS1247 of the same section.

Consequently, the different sections are neither unrelated to each other nor concerned with developing a narrative devoid of repetition. They may rather, as the following discussions will underline, be approached as compendiums of poems sharing outlook, tone and thematic concerns. Additionally, such similarities may be understood as the stock phrases of oral performance, as discussed in section 3.1.1.

The first category of this first section includes poems describing the figure of Kṛṣṇa Muralīdhar, often leaving the flute to be briefly mentioned as an element among others.<sup>63</sup> Several of them can be read as examples of the *nakha-sikha* variety explored in section 4.1, due to their descriptive approach. An illustrative example is found in NPS1242:

Taru tamāla tare tribhaṅgī kānha kuṃvara thārṇe haiṃ sām̐vare subarana  
Mora-mukuṭa pītāmbara banamālā rājata ura braja-jana-mana-harana  
Sakhā-aṃsu para bhujī dīnhe līnhe muralī adhara madhura bisva-bharana  
Sūradāsa kamala-nayana ko na kie bilok gobardhan-dharana

Underneath the *tamāla* tree the young Kṛṣṇa stands triply bent – the dark-complexioned, golden  
With a crown of peacock feathers, yellow-robed, a garland of forest flowers adorning his chest, the stealer of the  
minds of the people of Braj.  
He puts the arm on the shoulder of his friend and takes Muralī to the lips, the sweet filler of the world  
Sūrdās says, what did not the lotus-eyed do? Behold the lifter of the mountain.  
(NPS1242).

Unlike HB46/NPS1273, which was discussed in section 4.2 and also appears in the same section of the NPS as NPS1242, this poem explicitly states that it is describing Kṛṣṇa as he appears in the *tribhaṅga* pose associated with his Muralīdhar form. We should also note that Muralī here appears as an integrated element of the imagery, rather than the more autonomous character we encountered in sections 4.3 and 4.5. On another end, NPS1248 offers the following description of Kṛṣṇa’s face and head:

Adhara anūpa nāsikā suṃdara kuṃḍala lalita sudesa kapola  
Mukha musukyāta mahā chabi lāgati sravana sunata suṭhi mīṭhe bola

The lips incomparable, the nose beautiful, the earrings lovely, the cheeks beautiful  
The smiling mouth gives a great charm; the ears hear a very sweet speech  
(NPS1248)

We here see the same elements that routinely appear in descriptions of Kṛṣṇa Muralīdhar, such as Kṛṣṇa’s lips, only missing Muralī. This is even more apparent when the poem states “the ears hear a very sweet speech”, which may not even be the sound of the flute. As such, the poems of this first category range from those noting the flute’s presence in the general

<sup>63</sup> I include NPS1242-1262 in this category.

imagery to those whose full focus on Kṛṣṇa within this imagery threatens to leave the flute out entirely.

The other category is however more concerned with the effects of the sound of the flute on its listeners and the world in general. As such, it can be understood as a continuation of the theme discussed in section 4.3, where Muralī appears as a conqueror and a universal ruler. I will begin by considering a full poem that may represent this category.

Basī banarāja āju āī rana rīti  
Meṭati hai apanai bala sabahina kī rīti  
Biḍare gaja-jūṭha sīla saina-lāja bhājī  
Ghuṃghaṭa paṭa koṭa ṭūṭe chūṭe drgā tājī  
Kāhūṃ pati geḥa taje kāhū tana-prāna  
Kāhūṃ sukha sarana layau sonata sujasa-gāna  
Koū paga parasi gae apāne-apāne desa  
Koū rasa raṅka bhae hute je naresa  
Deta madana māruta mili dasaṃ disi duhāī  
Sūra śrīgupāla lāla bāsī-basa māī

The flute of the king of the forest comes today and wins the battle  
With her power she abolishes everyone's rules  
The morals of the frightened elephants and honour of the army flees  
The fort of garment and veils is broken, the horses of the eyes run free  
Some husbands leave the house, some their body and breath  
Some takes a pleasant refuge hearing the song of praise  
Some touch the foot in obeisance and go back to their own lands  
Some become misers in joy, who used to be lords of men  
Together the god of love and the wind proclaim [the victory] everywhere  
Sūr says, it is the dear Gopāla Kṛṣṇa, oh sister, with the force of the flute.  
(NPS1268)

As in many of the poems in the “Praise of the Flute” section of the NPS, the flute is here only referred to with variations of *bāsī*, the generic term for a bamboo flute. Similarly, the only evidence of the poem being performed by the *gopīs* is a single, feminine vocative in its final line.

The poem describes the flute as a victor of a battle, as the fighting moral of the opposing army dissolves upon hearing its sound. But the fourth line complicates the imagery, as the fort the troops were defending is revealed to be “the fort of garment and veils”. As such, the poem uses the imagery of warfare to describe the overpowering effect of the flute and, in extension, Kṛṣṇa to stimulate the *gopīs* into abandoning their homes in favour of the union afforded by the *līlā*. It also spends four lines detailing the varied reactions of the *gopīs*' husbands, emphasising that they are all powerless to stop the flute's advances and its consequences.

A significant detail is the epithet used to reference Kṛṣṇa in the poem’s first line, *banrāj*<sup>64</sup>, since it links both the flute and Kṛṣṇa himself with the forest. In the light of this link, the dissolution of morals and rules entailed by the conquering flute’s advances may be read as the dissolution of formal order upon the meeting with the wilderness connected with the forest. This link is made explicit in another poem of the same section:

Jihim tana anala dahyau apanau kula tasoṃ kaisaiṃ hota bhalāi  
Ab suni sūra kauna bidhi kījai bana kī byādhi māṃjha ghara āi

Those whose bodies are set alight, what good is there for them in their families?  
Hear now, says Sūrdās, what customs it [the flute] has made – the affliction of the forest has come into the house.  
(NPS1272)

This poem presents a quite familiar description of the flute (here referred to as Muralī) drinking and dispensing the nectar from Kṛṣṇa’s lips. However, the term “bana kī byādhi”<sup>65</sup> makes the link clear that was implied in NPS1268. A similar link is made in the following poem:

Sunata bana muralī-dhuni kī bājan  
Papiha guṃja kokila bana kūṃjata aru morani kiyau gājana  
Yahai sabda suniyata gokula maiṃ mohana-rūpa birājana  
Sūradāsa prabhu milī rādhikā aṃga aṃga kari sājana

Hearing the forest, the instrument of the tunes of Muralī  
The *papihā* birds hum, the black cuckoos warble in the forest, and the peacocks rumble  
When these sounds are heard the shape of Kṛṣṇa the beguiler shines in Gokul  
Rādhā meets with Sūrdās’ lord and decorates his every limb  
(NPS1240)

Here the sound of the flute is equated with the sounds of the forest, making their union into an aural representative of Kṛṣṇa, whose form is suggested throughout Braj as these sounds are heard. But other poems in the section suggest that the forest imagery relates more to Muralī than to Kṛṣṇa himself, as seen in the following excerpt:

Dhanya sugharī sīla kula chāṃḍe rāṃcī vā anurāga  
Ab hari sīṃci<sup>66</sup> sudhā-rāsa meṭata tana ke pahile dāga  
Nīdari hamaiṃ adharani rasa pīvati paṛḥī dūtīkā bhāi  
Sūradāsa kumjani taiṃ pragaṭī corī sauti bhaī āi

<sup>64</sup> “King of the forest”.

<sup>65</sup> “Affliction of the forest”.

<sup>66</sup> I have amended this from the printed copy’s *soṃcī* (“worry”), which must be a misprint.



The melodious lady abandoned good conduct and family and was attracted to that passion  
Now watered by the essence of Hari's nectar, her body's first marks dissolve  
Disrespecting us, she drinks the essence from his lips and becomes a literate messenger  
Sūrdās says, she came from the groves and, by stealth, became his co-wife  
(NPS1274)

Here it is Muralī (named as such earlier in the poem) who comes “from the groves” to stealthily become Kṛṣṇa's co-wife. In this perspective, it is she who carries the connotations with the forest. We should also note that this poem too is clearly narrated by the *gopīs*, as seen in the beginning of the third line in the quote above: “disrespecting us”. However, the central theme in these poems is the affinity of the flute and Kṛṣṇa Muralīdhar with the forest and the corroding power of their combined force. Even so, there is an ambiguity concerning whether this affinity stems from the flute, Kṛṣṇa himself, or both. This ambiguity resurfaces in the following section, but I will first provide a brief summary of the findings so far.

Taken together, this variety of poems found under this same heading in the NPS *Sūrsāgar*, “Praise of the Flute”, points to quite different tendencies; from the more formulaic mentions of the flute in NPS1242 and similar poems to the descriptions of her overpowering effect as a ruler and conqueror, as in NPS1268. We saw similar poems in the HB *Sūrsāgar* in sections 4.1 and 4.3 of the preceding chapter. However, what is new is the heightened emphasis on Kṛṣṇa Muralīdhar's proximity to the forest, as opposed to the ordered life from which the flute's listeners are compelled to stray. While a similar emphasis on the rusticity of Kṛṣṇa as a cow herder returning from the pastures was apparent in HB73/NPS1995, it was not equally focused on establishing this aspect as an opposite to ordered life. That is not to say that the Kṛṣṇa Muralīdhar of the HB *Sūrsāgar* does not have a potentially subversive influence on the social life of the villages of Braj, but rather that the exact nature and implications of this influence seem to be brought more to the foreground in the NPS edition. I will return to this theme both as it reappears in the poems considered in the following section, and in the relevant parts of Chapter 6.

## 5.2 The Speeches of the *Gopīs* to Muralī

As it includes 113 poems, “The Speeches of the *Gopīs* to Muralī” is by far the largest section of flute-related poems in the NPS *Sūrsāgar*. Due to this sheer volume, I will in this section proceed by discussing the poems more or less as they appear chronologically, rather than breaking them down into thematically separate clusters, as I have done so far. Organising such categories may prove to be impractical when the number of poems is so large and, as we

shall see, the section eventually takes on a discursive quality that might not appear as clearly if the poems are considered in analytically separate clusters.

The first series of poems in the section, roughly encompassing NPS1834 to NPS1846, offers more poems where the flute appears in a conquering mode. A representative example is found in the following excerpt:

Hari ke barābara benu koū na bajāvai  
Jaga-jīvana vidita munani nāca jo nacāyau  
Caturānana paṃcānana sahasānana dhyāvai  
Gvāla bāla liye jamuna-kaccha bacha carāvai

No one may play the flute, Hari's equal  
It has caused all the life-forms of the world and the knowing sages to dance a dance  
The clever councils in their thousands may meditate  
The cow herder takes the young calves to the banks of the Yamunā and lets them graze  
(NPS1836)

Symptomatically, the poem goes from describing the flute as equal to Kṛṣṇa, though not referencing it as Muralī, to primarily focusing on Kṛṣṇa himself. It is also symptomatic in that it, like other poems of the series, is more occupied with the effect of the flute than the *gopīs'* reaction to it. This changes in the following series of poems, ranging from NPS1847 to NPS1859, where a tone of envy is more apparent, alongside a tendency to see Kṛṣṇa as being subjected to Muralī's control. The following quotation is illustrative:

Muralī syāma adhara nahim tārata  
Bārambāra bajāvata gāvata ura taiṃ nahim bisārata  
Yaha tau ati pyārī hai hari kī kahatiṃ paraspara nārī  
Yākaiṃ basya rahata haiṃ aise giri-gobardhana-dhārī

Muralī is not removed from the lips of Kṛṣṇa  
Time and again he plays and sings, it does not rest by his chest  
She is Hari's most beloved, say the women to each other  
He is her subject, such is the holder of the Govardhana mountain  
(NPS1848)

As in HB46/NPS1273, Muralī is here presented as the one who is in control, even to the extent of describing Kṛṣṇa as her *basya*<sup>67</sup>. But in its third line, the poem also mentions that this is the view voiced by the women. Consequently, we are now in a stylistic territory reminiscent of the poems discussed in Chapter 4 that are characterised by the *gopīs'* narrative voice and the greater space allowed for depicting Muralī as an autonomous character. The poem following NPS1848 continues the theme:

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<sup>67</sup> "Subject".

Muralī kaiṃ basa syāma bhae rī  
Adharani taiṃ nahim karata ninārī vākaiṃ raṃga rae rī

Kṛṣṇa is in the power of Muralī, o friend  
She is inseparable from his lips, he is dyed in her colours, o friend  
(NPS1849)

We here see a strengthening of the same tendency, where Muralī is deemed to be in control over Kṛṣṇa. This poem also introduces the half-line “adharni taiṃ nahim karata ninārī”<sup>68</sup>, which reappears, either as a variation<sup>69</sup> or in identical form, in several other poems of the same section, such as NPS1850, NPS1854, NPS1855 and NPS1857. This recurrence of the same phrase underlines the affinity between these poems and can be seen as an illustration of the general tone and style of the NPS *Sūrsāgar*.

Another emerging concern in the NPS1847-NPS1859 cycle is Muralī’s position as a co-wife (*sauti*) of Kṛṣṇa. We have already seen the theme appear in NPS1274 of the previous section, but it receives a more exclusive focus here. For instance, NPS1850 (which is also among the poems featuring the stock-phrase mentioned above) ends on a note of despair over Muralī’s new status:

Kahā bhayau muṃha lāgī kari kaiṃ bacanani liye riḥhā  
Sūra syāma kauṃ bibasa karāvati kahā sauti sī aī

How could she become fixed to Hari’s mouth, taking pleasure in his speech?  
Sūr says, she has made Kṛṣṇa powerless – how could she come to be like a co-wife?  
(NPS1850)

A similar complaint is found at the end of NPS1857:

Roma-roma nakha-sikha rasa pāgī anurāgini hari pyārī hai  
Sūra syāma vākaiṃ rasa lubadhe jānī sauti hamārī hai

Every hair from top to toe is immersed in nectar, the loving [Muralī] is Hari’s beloved  
Sūr says, Kṛṣṇa is obsessed by her nectar and knows her as a co-wife of ours  
(NPS1857)

As these quotations show, Muralī’s status as a co-wife bestows her with more influence over Kṛṣṇa; in NPS1857, even to the point where it is she that enthrals Kṛṣṇa and not the other way around. As the theme develops, she is increasingly accused of stealing Kṛṣṇa away, as in this excerpt from NPS1856:

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<sup>68</sup> “She is inseparable from his lips”,

<sup>69</sup> Cf. NPS1857: “aba vaha hari taiṃ hoti na nyārī” – “now she is inseparable from Hari”.

Adharani ko amṛta puni aṃcavati hari ke manahiṃ curāvai rī  
Giridhara kaṃ apanaiṃ basa kīnhe nānā nāca nacāvai rī

Again she quaffs down the nectar of the lips and steals Hari’s mind, o friend  
She has made the power of the mountain lifter her own and makes him dance in myriad ways, o friend  
(NPS1856)

This is significant in that it suggests that by stealing Kṛṣṇa away from the *gopīs*, Muralī is bestowed with even more agency and autonomy. It is perhaps natural that the editors of the NPS have chosen to let this cycle be followed with a series of poems where Muralī’s hold on Kṛṣṇa is merged with the well-known conquer and rule-mode, such as in NPS1866:

Muralī nahīṃ karata syāma adharani taiṃ nyārī  
ṭhārhe hvai eka pāi rahata tanu tribhaṅga karata bharata nada muralī suni vasya puhumi sari  
thāvāra cara cara thāvāra jaṃgama jaṛa jaṛa jaṃgama saritā ulaṭai pravāh pavana thakita bhāri

Muralī is inseparable from Kṛṣṇa’s lips  
She makes him stand on one foot with his body in the *tribhaṅga* pose; filled with hearing her sound, the entire world becomes the servant of Muralī  
The immoveable moves, the moving goes immobile, the living fixed, the fixed living, the flow of the rivers reverses, the clouds stop completely  
(NPS1866)

At this point, we should stop to further note the many similarities between these lines and other poems already considered. Firstly, its very first line is yet another variation of the stock phrase “Muralī is inseparable from Kṛṣṇa’s lips”, already seen in NPS1849 and others. The first half of its second line features a description of Kṛṣṇa being forced by Muralī to assume the *tribhaṅga* pose that echoes HB46/NPS1273, especially in the wording of “makes him stand on one foot”, but then, unlike the HB poem, but in a manner similar to NPS1242, which was discussed in the previous section, proceeds to explicitly reference that pose. Finally, the first half of the third line’s description of how the world’s various entities bend to the flute’s will features the exact same wording as line 13 of HB45/NPS1275, albeit with each phrase repeated in an inverted form.

As we have already encountered similar examples, this extended use of quotations may be understood as a characteristic quality of the NPS *Sūrsāgar*. In accordance with the discussion of oral poetry in Chapter 3, we might understand these reoccurrences of phrases as indications of the poems’ orality. By employing quotations from poems that, as we have seen, highlight different aspects of Muralī and Kṛṣṇa Muralīdhar, NPS1866 efficiently provides an aggregate of the different levels of this imagery. When read according to our theoretical underlining of the defining power inherent in a single performance, which is strengthened by the intertextual relations of the individual text, poems such as NPS1866

emerge not only as compilations of well-known phrases and images, but powerful summations of the various tendencies at display in a large body of poetry. Even so, this reading becomes possible by insisting on the poem’s intertextuality. As such, it can be understood as an emblematic poem that functions as an individual representative of a wider tradition. It also clearly points to how the flute-themed poems of the NPS *Sūrsāgar* are aware of being a part of this tradition, in a sense that is comparable to Bryant’s description of the “conflicting” tendency of Sūrdās’ poetry. A striking example is the following line from NPS1857, which was quoted above:

Roma-roma nakha-sikha rasa pāgī anurāgini hari pyārī hai

Every hair from top to toe is immersed in nectar, the loving [Muralī] is Hari’s beloved (NPS1857)

As it describes how Muralī is immersed in the nectar of Kṛṣṇa, the poem both explicitly references the concept *nakha-śikha*, the describing of a beloved from the toes to the topknot, and names Muralī with an epithet derived from *anurāg*, meaning both “passion” and, as we have seen, the mode of poetry in which the *nakha-śikha* concept traditionally appeared. Such mentioning of the poem’s traditional aesthetic framework is broadly in keeping with similar techniques we saw evidenced in the HB *Sūrsāgar*, such as the sly ending of HB45/NPS1271 with the very word “anurāg”. Such examples clearly indicate, as Hawley and Bryant’s research argues, a Sūrdās mode of writing poetry that outlived any historical initiator of the tradition. However, the discussion above raises the question of whether certain poems of this tradition might not evidence an even stronger element of “contrasting”, since they have the possibility not only of referencing texts external to the *Sūrsāgar* itself, but also earlier layers of the same text, or textual tradition, that they themselves are a part of. As we proceed to consider the later cycles of poems in the “The Speeches of the *Gopīs* to Muralī” section of the HB *Sūrsāgar*, several poems present good opportunities to extend this analysis into the comparative discussion of section 5.5.

But first it should be noted that the growing preoccupation with the flute’s relation with the forest reappears in several of the section’s cycles. In NPS1868, we again see the phrase “ban kī byādhi”<sup>70</sup>, which we first met in NPS1272 in the previous section:

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<sup>70</sup> “The affliction of the forest”.

Muralī taiṃ hari hamahiṃ bisārī  
Bana kī byādhi kahā yaha āi detiṃ sabai mili gārī  
Ghara-ghara taiṃ saba niṭhura karāiṃ mahā apata yaha nārī  
Kahā bhayau jo hari-mukha lāgī apanī prakṛti na ṭārī

Hari has forgotten us because of Muralī  
How could the affliction of the forest come here, cursing everyone it meets?  
All is wicked evil in every house - extremely shameless is this lady  
How could it be that she was attached to Hari's mouth, not breaking his illusion?  
(NPS1868)

As in poems like NPS1274, it is here Muralī who is associated with the forest and, in extension, the corroding power of its influence. But the questions raised by NPS1868, concerning exactly how it came to be that Muralī could claim this influence over Kṛṣṇa, are in the main focus of several poems of this section, starting with NPS1872:

Muralī pragata bhaī dhaum kaise  
Kahām hutī kaise dhaum āi gīdhe syāma anaise  
Mātu pita kaise hem yāke yākī gati mati aisī  
Aise niṭhura hohige teū jaise kī yaha taisī  
Yaha tuma nahīm sunī ho sajanī yāke kula kau dharmā  
Sūra sunata abahīm sukha pihau karani uttama karma

So how did Muralī become manifest?  
How can she be? How did that impertinent vulture come to Kṛṣṇa?  
How are her mother and father that her manner and thought can be like this?  
They must have been so cruel since she is like this  
You haven't heard this, sweetheart, about familial dharmā  
Sūr says, hearing it right now you will find joy in performing the highest duty  
(NPS1872)

This open wonder about how Muralī came to be in the first place is a theme that has not appeared previously, and is not equally present in the HB *Sūrsāgar*. By raising the question of Muralī's family, NPS1872 also points to the possibility of discussing Muralī's actions from the perspective of familial obligations, a possibility it leaps upon in its closing couplet, where the *dharmā*<sup>71</sup> of family is set up to rhyme with performing the utmost *karmā*. However, the poem is ambiguous as to whether the vocative in its penultimate line is addressed to Muralī herself or a fellow *gopī*, leaving the question open of whether "joy" is found by abiding to the conventionally understood familial *dharmā* or by that of Muralī's. Either way, it leaves open the exact nature of Muralī's parents. Not so in NPS1874:

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<sup>71</sup> *Dharma* is a word that carries an exceptionally broad range of possible meanings, but may in the present context perhaps best be understood as denoting "the religious and social duties that a Hindu should fulfill" or just "(socially defined) virtue".

Sunahu rī muralī kī utapatti  
 Bana maim rahati bāmsa kula yākau yaha tau yākī jatti  
 Jaladhara pita dharani hai mātā avaguna kahaum ughāri  
 Banahūm taim yākau ghara nyāro nipaṭahim jahām ujāri  
 Ika taim eka junani haim pure mātu pitā aru āpu  
 Nahi jāniyai kauna phala pragatyau atihim krpā pratāpa  
 Bisavāsina para kāja na jānai yākaī kula ko dharma  
 Sunahu sūra meghani kī karanī aru dharanī ke karma

Hear, my friend, the origin of Muralī  
 It is in the forest, her family is the bamboo; that is her caste  
 Her father is the clouds, her mother the earth; how were her sins uncovered?  
 Her house is separate from the forest, where it is so very desolate  
 One by one they fill the womb, mother, father and herself  
 It is not known from which flower she arose, most merciful and brilliant.  
 Not to serve the purposes of the treacherous, that is the *dharma* of her family  
 Listen, says Sūr, [that are] the deeds of the clouds, the *karma* of the earth  
 (NPS1874)

This poem not only emphasises that Muralī is a product of nature, but that she, like her parents, the clouds and the earth, acts in accordance with a familial *dharma* that does not consider earthly interests. This is especially made clear by the ambiguous nature of the word “bisavāsina” in the penultimate line, as it can be glossed as both “trustworthy” and “treacherous” – an unimportant difference to the clouds and the earth, who cater for both alike. As such, the poem very clearly aligns Muralī with the forces of nature, while also underlining the disregard of these forces for societal *dharma*. I will return to the general theme of the relation between nature and *dharma* and Muralī’s position in between them in Chapter 6, but in the following I will focus on how the question of *dharma* itself becomes an overarching concern to the *gopīs* as they consider Muralī’s actions. However, we should note that the poems discussed above have strengthened the impression established in section 5.1, that the influence of nature appears as a more urgent concern in the flute poems of the NPS *Sūrsāgar* in comparison with those of the HB edition.

The preoccupation with how the acts of Muralī relate to the obligations of caste and familial duty is a main concern of the later poems of the section. NPS1880 opens with a voicing of concern:

Yākī jāti syāma nahim jānī  
 Binu bājhaiṃ binahim anumānaiṃ kari baiṭhe paṭarānī  
 Bārahim bāra leta āliṅgana suni-suni madhuri bānī

Kṛṣṇa didn’t know her caste  
 Without enquiring, without realising, he had her sit in his hands as an equal  
 Time and time again he embraces her and listens to the sweet sound  
 (NPS1880)

Here Muralī’s influence is framed as a transgression of caste, but the poem is unclear about whether this transgression should be seen as a positive or a negative thing. What we primarily should note is how the questions raised in these poems combine the theme of Muralī’s association with nature and the subversive power of her influence with the general envy of the *gopīs* towards her proximity to Kṛṣṇa, making Muralī a nexus through which multiple concerns might be raised. I will discuss the further implications of this in the comparative section 5.5, but we must first turn to the final two sections of flute-themed poems in the NPS *Sūrsāgar*.

### 5.3 The Speeches of Muralī to the *Gopīs*

Including only 9 poems, this section is easily the shortest of the four under consideration here. The first of these is HB71/NPS1948, which was discussed at length in section 4.4. The added 8 poems are of a similar tone, but broaden the scope of Muralī’s retorts. An example is NPS1951:

Mo para gvāli kahā risāti  
 Kahā gārī deti mokaum kahā ughaṭati jāti  
 Jau baṛī tuma āpuhī kaum tumahi hohu kulīna  
 Maiṃ baṃsuriyā bāṃsa kī jau tau bhai akulīna  
 Pīra merī kauna jānai chāṃḍi ika karatāra  
 Sūra-prabhu-saṃga dekhi kāhaiṃ khijhati bāraṃbāra

Why are you angry with me, cow herder women?  
 Why do you curse me, why do you speak of caste?  
 That is great to you, that you are of a high family,  
 I am a flute of bamboo, so I am not.  
 Who knows my pain? A maker set me free  
 Sūr says, seeing her union with the lord they are vexed again and again.  
 (NPS1951)

Here we see Muralī responding to the theme of caste and familial duty that was introduced in the poems discussed above, suggesting that it is an irrelevant concern for her, since she, being made of bamboo, has no such constraints. In another poem, this response takes another form:

Gvārini mohiṃ para satarānī  
 Jau kulīna akulīna bhaiṃ hama tuma tau baṛī sayānī  
 Nānā rūpa bakhāna karati hau kāhaiṃ bṛthā risānī  
 Tumahiṃ kahau kaha doṣa hamārau? Khoṭī kyom pahicānī  
 Jo srama maiṃ apanaiṃ tana kīnhau sau saba kahaum bakhānī  
 Sūradāsa-prabhu bana-bhītar taiṃ taba apanaiṃ ghara ānī



You're angry with me, cow herder women  
You are of family, while I am not, so you are very wise  
You describe me in many ways, but everyone is angry in vain  
How can you blame me? Why do you think me wicked?  
You describe all the efforts I have done with my body  
Sūr's lord is within the forest, so come from your house  
(NPS1949)

In this poem, Muralī reminds the *gopīs* that the asceticism she has subjected her body to, as described in HB71/NPS1948, transcends the obligations of caste and family. But, possibly more importantly, by reminding them that Kṛṣṇa Muralīdhar too dwells in the forest, she reverts the argument by implying that it is exactly such obligations, which are connected with the household and settled life, that is the issue, and not the other way round. This reverted argument is also present in the second line's ironic statement that those of good family necessarily must be wise. A similar view is voiced in NPS1956:

Srama karihau jaba merī sī  
Taba tuma adhara-sudhā-rasa bilasahu maim hvai rahihaum cerī sī  
Bina kaṣṭa yaha phala na pāihau jānati hau avaḍerī sī

When you make an effort like mine  
Then you will become like a serving devotee in the enjoyment of the nectar of his lips  
This fruit will not be attained without hardship, known to be like abandonment  
(NPS1956)

So we see in these poems both a general exhortation to undertake austerities in the same manner as Muralī and an engagement with the caste and family aspects of her character that was raised by the poems discussed in the previous section. I understand this as an example of the NPS *Sūrsāgar*'s ability to include more specific concerns raised by the implications of the poems of the earlier traditions, and to discuss these concerns within the general, aesthetic parameters of the Sūrdās tradition. But before undertaking a comparative review of the findings of the study so far, in order to provide answer to its first research question, we must consider the poems of the final, relevant section of the NPS *Sūrsāgar*.

## 5.4 The Speeches of the *Gopīs* to each other

While the title of this last section does not necessarily suggest that it takes Muralī as its subject matter, nearly everyone of its 29 poems either reference or fully focus on her. Several of them, like NPS1957 to NPS1959 are similar to NPS1866 in that they serve as generic restatements of the themes seen so far, rather than introducing new ones. However, some, like NPS1960, expand on the questions raised in the previous sections:

Muralī jaisaiṃ tapa kiyau kaisaiṃ tuma karihau  
ṣataritu ika paga kyaum rahau abahīṃ larakharihau  
vaha kāṭata murakī nahīṃ tuma tau saba marihau  
vaha sulāka kaiseṃ sahou parasata hīṃ jarihau  
tuma aneka vaha eka hai vāsaum jani larihau  
sūra syāma jihim dhari mile nahim jītau harihau

How will you do ascetics like Muralī has done?  
How will you stand on one leg in wintertime, you're staggering already now?  
She did not move while being cut, while you all will move away  
She endured the holes, you will burn the moment you're touched  
You are many, she is one; the person who will fight with her  
Sūr says, whosoever staggers in meeting Kṛṣṇa does not win, but will lose  
(NPS1960)

Like in other poems of the same section, such as NPS1965, which is very similarly worded, we here see that some of the *gopīs* now have shifted position and have considered undertaking asceticism following the model set by Muralī. This is met by criticism by other *gopīs*, since there is no way to surpass Muralī in this respect. What is striking here is how Muralī now has moved from being chastised for her disregard for societal structures to be upheld as an unreachable ideal of asceticism. It is also notable how lines 2 to 4 use the same imagery of austerity as HB71/NPS1948, the single poem of the HB *Sūrsāgar* that presented Muralī in monologue. As such, we can understand these poems of the NPS *Sūrsāgar* as yet another illustration of the later tradition's tendency to both draw on and comment on the phrasings and imagery established by the earlier tradition. Another poem from the same section extends the praise of Muralī:

Muralī saum aba pṛīti karau rī  
Merī kahī māni mana rākhau ura-risa dūri dharau rī  
Tumahī suniṃ muralī kī bātaiṃ dīna hoi batarānī  
Kāhaiṃ na dharaiṃ syāma tā ūpara kyom na hoi paṭarānī  
Hama jānyau yaha garva bhārī hai sādhu na yātaiṃ aura  
Rijhai liyau hari kaum tapa kaiṃ bala brthā karau tuma sora  
Sūra syāma bahunāyak sajanī yahau milī ika āi  
Tuma apane jau nem rahaugī nema na kara taiṃ jāi

Now, love Muralī, my friend  
 Accept what I say and keep it in mind, take the anger far from your breast  
 You have heard the wretched things Muralī say:  
 Has Kṛṣṇa ever staggered from her? Why is no one her equal?  
 We know she is full of pride, but not more so than an ascetic  
 Hari takes pleasure in the power of her asceticism, so you chatter in vain  
 Sūr says, the great hero Kṛṣṇa’s darling, one has come to be that.  
 The rules you must keep for yourself do not come from rules.  
 (NPS1962)

In the fifth line of this poem, we see that the standard accusation of Muralī of being proud is dropped – not because it is not true, but because all ascetics are proud. And since Kṛṣṇa “takes pleasure” in this asceticism, she is again uplifted as a model example of virtue. However, as the poem’s final line subtly points out, this is not the virtue of formalities. The word used, *nema*, denotes “rules”, but in *bhakti* literature more specifically any form of external religious rites and observances, deemed to be useless in comparison with true devotion. In the context of the many questions raised in other poems concerning the implications of Muralī’s actions for the observation of caste and familial obligations, this point is significant in that it suggests that it is the disregard for such considerations, as exemplified by Muralī, that will please Kṛṣṇa. Equally significantly, the tone of envy, and sometimes outright anger, evidenced in earlier poems here give way to open admiration for Muralī, as seen in the opening injunction to “love” her. This mode is taken to its extremes in the later poems of the section, such as in the following extract from NPS1982:

Dhanya muralī dhanya tapa tumhārau  
 Dhanya-dhani mātu dhani dhanya bhrātā-pitā bahuri dhani dhanya tuva-bhagati-sārau  
 Dhanya-vaha bāṃsa dhani dhanya jahaṃ tū rahī dhanya banajhāra to taim̃ baṛāī  
 Dhanya tapa kiyau ṣaṭa ritu rahī eka paga ḍuli nahim̃ dhanya mana kī dṛḍhāī

Blessed is Muralī, blessed is your asceticism  
 Greatly blessed is your mother; greatly blessed your brother and father; exceedingly blessed is your accomplishment of *bhakti*  
 Blessed that bamboo, greatly blessed the place you resided, blessed the forest-thicket from which you grew  
 Blessed the asceticism you performed, standing on one leg in winter without swaying; blessed is the firmness of your mind  
 (NPS1982)

In this poem, Muralī is lifted to a degree of benediction that we would normally expect to see in poems exclusively directed towards Kṛṣṇa. It is also striking that Muralī’s family is included in the praise. By the ending of the line in which they appear, they seem to be considered as contributing factors to Muralī’s “accomplishment of *bhakti*”. Combined with the blessings of her origins in the forest, the poem embraces those subversive influences of

nature that in poems like NPS1868 are, as we have seen, considered a curse. Finally, the last poem of the section features the following opening lines:

Mohana kī muralī maiṃ Mohinī basata hai  
Jaba taiṃ sunī sravana rahyau na parai bhavana deha taiṃ manahum prāna aba nikasata hai  
Kahā karaum merī ālī bāmsurī kī dhuni sālī māta-pitā pati baṃdhu atihīṃ trasata hai  
Madana agini aru biraha kī jvālā jarī jaisaiṃ jala-hīna mīna taṭa darasata hai  
Atihi tapati chātī lāgati hai prema kāmtī phūlnī kī mālā manau byāla hvai ḍasata hai  
Sūra syāma milata kaum ātura braja kī bāla eka-eka pala juga-juga ज्याum khasata hai

In the beguiler's Muralī dwells Mohinī  
Since ears heard it the world could not but fall, as if the vital breath now comes out from the bodies  
What should I do, my friend, with the torture of the sound of the flute? Mother, father, husband and relatives are exceedingly frightened  
As if burned by the fire of intoxication and the flame of separation, the water-less fish sees the shore  
On the greatly burning chest hangs a garland of the thorny flowers of love like a biting snake  
Sūr says, the excessive power of Braj, where every age trembles within every moment, is Kṛṣṇa's.  
(NPS1985)

And so the theme of Muralī's potential divinity as Mohinī appears in a poem that also takes care to remind of the correlation between Kṛṣṇa's appearance in Braj and his position as the supreme deity. This identification of Muralī with Mohinī might be understood as a natural continuation of the benedictions offered her in NPS1982. By mentioning the *gopīs'* relatives, who are frightened by the sound of Muralī, the poem also references the recurring theme of the colliding interests of familial duties and the ascetic abandon required for the union with Kṛṣṇa. It is the longing for this union that is depicted in lines 4 and 5, couched in the imagery of lovesickness. The final line's statement that every age is contained within a moment of time in Braj, which is infused by the power of Kṛṣṇa, offers a clear reminder of the transcendental implications of the romantic union with Kṛṣṇa Muralīdhar in Braj. In the following section, I will undertake a comparative review of the findings so far.

## 5.5 Comparison

The study's first research question asked how the motif of Kṛṣṇa's flute develops throughout the textual tradition ascribed to Sūrdās. In this and the preceding chapter, I have singled out a variety of distinctive themes related to the flute in both the HB and the NPS *Sūrsāgars*, representing the early and the late tradition respectively. I will here discuss comparatively what I would argue are the salient findings of this approach, beginning with the similarities and moving to the differences.

In both the early and the later tradition we see the flute appearing in broadly similar categories, ranging from general depictions of Kṛṣṇa Muralīdhar to those detailing the effect of the flute’s sound on the world in general, and the *gopīs* in particular. Within these categories, we see in both the early and later traditions a range of interpretations of the dynamics of the relationship between her and Kṛṣṇa. She might simply be an important, but ornamental, element in the general image of Kṛṣṇa Muralīdhar, such as in HB38/NPS1234 and NPS1242. In others, like HB46/NPS1273 and NPS1849, she appears as the one who drives the relationship, with Kṛṣṇa being “in her power”. And in both traditions we have seen that the later perspective most frequently appears in the poems that are narrated by the *gopīs*. It is also in these *gopī* poems that the flute most clearly appears as the female persona Muralī.

Where the traditions differ is in what they emphasise. As we saw in sections 5.1 and 5.2, the flute’s association with nature emerges as a more pronounced concern in the later tradition. While this concern is also present in the earlier tradition, we do not, for instance, find anything similar to the recurring phrase “bana kī byādhi”<sup>72</sup> that, as we have seen, appear in several poems of the NPS. Similarly, the implications of Muralī’s allure and example for the *gopīs*’ obligations to caste and familial duty emerges as a far more voiced concern in the NPS, as we saw epitomized in NPS1872’s blunt reference to “kula kau dharma”<sup>73</sup>. But I would argue that the prime point of these differences between the traditions is not in what manner the flute is depicted, but in how the poems’ narrators relate to these depictions. Throughout sections 5.2 to 5.4 we have followed a gradually unfolding discussion, in which both the *gopīs* and Muralī herself have participated, concerning a variety of issues that seem to be encapsulated by Muralī’s character. That is not to say that a similar collage of perceptions of Muralī and her implications is not on view in the HB *Sūrsāgar*, but rather that the poems of the later tradition greatly expand this collage. For instance, we have seen that several of the NPS poems are more specific in the questions they raise, such as NPS1872, which asks how exactly it was that Muralī came to be in the first place.

When read intertextually, these poems can be understood as a conversation between the *gopīs* themselves and between the *gopīs* and Muralī, in which the *gopīs* strive to resolve the tensions arising from Muralī’s presence. It is as the various positions of this discussion are represented by the various, individual poems that we find perspectives and descriptions of the flute that have no equal in the early tradition, such as the detailing of her family in NPS1874 and the benediction of her as the supreme devotee in NPS1982. Even so, I would

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<sup>72</sup> “The affliction of the forest”.

<sup>73</sup> “The *dharma* of the family”.

argue that these poems do not introduce thematic elements that are foreign to the patterns established by the earlier tradition, but rather that they embellish and concretise the finer details of those patterns.

As such, my interpretation of these differences is not dissimilar to Hawley's (2005, pp. 203-207) description of the later tradition as "commentary", in that the later additions to the text attempt to resolve tensions and ambiguities in the early tradition. It might be argued that the above discussions have pointed to how the flute occupies a more ambiguous position in the HB *Sūrsāgar* than in the NPS. However, if we approach the poems from our theoretical perspective of performance, which allows them to constitute autonomous interpretations in themselves, I would argue that the NPS poems constituting the discourse explored above not only comments on the early tradition, but also represent a tradition in themselves. And the turning point of this discursive tradition is the figure of Muralī, not as the elusive instrument of Kṛṣṇa, but as a character whose personality instigates a framework through which general concerns of devotion may be discussed. For how exactly should the individual devotee resolve the tension between the subversive imperatives of *bhakti* and the obligations of traditional morality? As such, I would argue that whereas the flute of Kṛṣṇa in the early Sūrdās tradition is an ambiguous character that primarily assumes a female persona when described by the *gopīs* as narrators, it appears in the later tradition, by virtue of her active persona as Muralī, as a nexus for a wider discussion of the prerogatives and imperatives of women. However, the implications of this suggested answer to my first research question become more complex when we pause to remember that the *gopīs* of this poetry really are men assuming a feminine position, due to the theological outlooks of Kṛṣṇa *bhakti*. I will address these complexities in the following chapter, as I engage with the study's second research question: Why is the flute personified as a woman?

## 5.6 Summary

This chapter tackled the far larger number of poems relevant to the analysis than in Chapter 4 by following the structure given by the editors of the NPS. Throughout the resulting discussions, I especially focused on the sporadically high frequency of standard phrases, and argued that these may be understood as a creative engagement, and, in keeping with the theoretical emphasis on performativity outlined in section 3.1.1, as indications of the oral, performative nature of the poems. In keeping with this outlook, I interpreted the range of

perspectives on the flute that emerged throughout the study as representing different responses within a broader discussion that seeks to resolve the various challenges posed by the figure of Muralī to the individual devotee of Kṛṣṇa. In the concluding, comparative discussion I consequently argued that the dissertation's first research question, concerning how Kṛṣṇa's flute develops throughout the Sūrdās tradition, may be answered by maintaining that while the early tradition sets out the general framework within which the motif of the flute, or Muralī, emerges, the later tradition greatly expands on this motif within the perimeters of that framework, in a manner that allows the flute to develop from being an ambiguous element in the image of Kṛṣṇa Muralīdhar to become a prism through which multiple views on *bhakti* devotion might be voiced.

## 6 The female flute

This chapter discusses possible answers to the dissertation's second research question: Why is the flute personified as a woman? Following the demarcation in Chapter 3 of two distinct theoretical approaches to this question, the chapter first discusses each approach in separate sections, 6.1 and 6.2. In the first, I will primarily engage with the poems highlighted in chapters 4 and 5 as focusing on the flute's close association with nature, in a discussion informed by the outlooks suggested by Ortner and the concept of the pastoral. In the latter, I will approach the many poems where the *gopīs* appear as narrators from the perspective of the performativity of gender, as voiced by Butler. In the following section 6.3, I merge the findings of the two discussions and present the resulting responses to the question of the flute's gender. The overarching discussion of the chapter is then recapped in a brief summary.

### 6.1 Gender, nature and the pastoral

Several of the poems surveyed above, but primarily those of Chapter 5, feature a strong emphasis on Muralī's close association with nature. Both NPS1874 and NPS1982 described her origins in the forest, with the latter even mentioning the "forest-thicket" from which she grew. And while NPS1274 describes how Muralī comes from the groves of the forest to steal Kṛṣṇa away from the *gopīs*, NPS1272 is one of several poems where the combined force of Kṛṣṇa and Muralī brings the "affliction of the forest" into the houses of settled life, prompting a series of questions in later poems surrounding the conflicting pulls of devotional abandon and the bonds of settled life. In poems like NPS1872 and NPS1874, it is commented how the familial *dharma* Muralī thus represents is at odds with that of life in an ordered household, and in NPS1880, how Kṛṣṇa disregards her caste. The tendencies of these poems to equate Muralī with nature and to underline nature's disruptive effects on ordered life fits well with the scheme of Ortner's assertion of the traditionally understood association of femininity with disorderly nature and masculinity with ordered culture.

Yet the image grows more complex when we also consider the many poems that depict the flute's impact on nature itself. Already in the early HB45/NPS1271 we saw Muralī appear as a world ruler by whose force rivers, clouds and both animate and inanimate beings are swayed. And we saw that poem's phrasings reappear in the later NPS1866, strengthening the theme's presence in the Sūrdās tradition in general. Similarly,



NPS1985 portrays Muralī’s ability to imbue both fish and people with the disruptive power of amorous longing. This tendency might be explained if we consider that Muralī, when being played by Kṛṣṇa, operates as a herald of Kṛṣṇa’s divinity, or, in the poems where it appears that it is Muralī who controls Kṛṣṇa, an aural manifestation of that divinity, sometimes also manifested as Mohinī, Viṣṇu’s female manifestation.

But in order to become this herald, she must be transformed from an object of nature, bamboo, into an instrument, and a vital element in this transformation is her asceticism. For the asceticism undertaken by Muralī in order to attain her proximity to Kṛṣṇa, detailed in poems such as HB71/NPS1948 and NPS1960, is to undergo the operations that make a piece of bamboo into a flute; being cut off from the thicket and have holes made by burning. Through this process, the finished flute, while originating in the wildness of the forest, becomes an ordered thing – an object of culture. Even so, through her association with Kṛṣṇa the cow-herder and “the affliction of the forest” she retains an element of her natural origin, and the *gopīs*, as the accusations concerning caste and familial duty show, do not forget her origins. So in these poems, Muralī, being distinct from both, appears as neither wholly nature nor wholly culture: she rather appears to straddle the divide between the two categories.

This straddling of the divide has implications for our understanding of Muralī’s gender and, in extension, the applicability of Ortner’s dichotomy between male culture and female nature to our material. On one hand, we may argue that it is by becoming a flute, and so attaining the order of culture, that Muralī becomes a woman. From this perspective, it is not a matter of culture representing masculinity, but rather a matter of culture representing the ordering of gender itself. And so nature does not represent disordered femininity, but the fluidity of unordered gender, for it is in the forest that the gender reversal of the *līlā* dance takes place. On the other hand, a recurring theme in several poems explored throughout the preceding chapters’ analysis, such as HB73/NPS1995, is how Muralī becomes a female flute by being played by Kṛṣṇa. This is significant when we also consider the poems underlining the virtuosity of Muralī’s asceticism, such as NPS1960 and HB71/NPS1948. So from this other perspective, the tendency is that attaining Kṛṣṇa’s proximity through devotion leads to femininity. But this is neither the disordered femininity of the forest nor the society-controlled femininity of the city; rather it is the femininity of the successful devotee, who may be male or female.

Combined, the two perspectives outlined above suggest a modification of Ortner’s dichotomy to allow for an outlook in which culture represents ordered gender and nature represents gender in its fluidity, and that Muralī, by occupying the middle ground between

the two spaces, embodies a particular expression of gender where the category's fluidity is utilised to express the feminine posture of devotion to Kṛṣṇa. And so it might be argued that the motif of the female flute, by pointing to the ruptures between dichotomies such as male and female, order and chaos, and nature and culture, encapsulates the transcending of such dichotomies that the union of the *līlā* entails, and the centrality of harnessing the performativity of gender to attain that union. But before we turn to further consider the import of gender performance within the context of this material, we must also briefly engage with the implications of this position for the perception of nature in this poetry in its relations to the pastoral.

As noted in section 3.1.1, a common trait of the pastoral is its contrasting of natural idyll with urbane rigidity. The view of nature, and particularly the forest, posited above, presents a picture where the allure of nature resides not so much in its idyllic peace, but in its quality as a site where culturally endorsed norms are less rigid. When Gopāla Kṛṣṇa appears to summon the *gopīs* to the forest through the sound of Muralī, he negates such norms by inviting to the transcending *līlā*. However, we have seen in poems such as HB47/NPS1276 that the impact of the “affliction of the forest” also extend to disrupt the flow of the rivers of Braj, such as the Yamunā. So this power of transgression does not necessarily reside in all of nature, but primarily in the forest; the forest is the mysterious place where the *gopīs* meet with Kṛṣṇa in the *līlā*, and where bamboo sticks become female flutes. And since Gopāla Kṛṣṇa roams freely around all of Braj<sup>74</sup>, it might be argued that the motif of the flute's femininity thus serves to underline the association of his Muralīdhar form with the forest and the fluidity of formal distinctions within it. But that is just half of the picture, for the participation in the *līlā* dance in the forest is not only dependent on release from ordered categories, but also on the application of other categories. Shedding the rigidities of particular expressions of gender is not sufficient, for Kṛṣṇa Muralīdhar must be approached in the guise of a *gopī*. As such, the forest appears as a site wherein a particular performance of gender is possible, but it is not an end in itself. The following section deals with the position of the flute within this concept of gender performance.

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<sup>74</sup> For instance, the butter-stealing Gopāla Kṛṣṇa primarily appears in and around households (Hawley 1983).

## 6.2 Gender, performance and Muralī

Before commencing the following discussion on gender performance in relation to the imagery of Muralī, I would like to briefly consider a situation from a very different literary context; a scene that occurs in Shakespeare’s *As You Like It*. The play portrays the female protagonist Rosalind’s escape from her hostile uncle’s ducal court into the surrounding forest of Arden. Safely arrived in the forest, disguised as a man, Rosalind falls in love with another refugee, the nobleman Orlando. In a central scene, Orlando, who has fallen in love with Rosalind but does not recognise her in her male disguise, asks the “male” Rosalind to pretend to be a woman, so that he may practise his skills of courtship (Shakespeare 2005, IV,i, pp. 68-73). This wide array of gender reversals is further complicated when we consider that the play was written to be performed by an all-male ensemble; Rosalind was a man from the outset. I reference this scene here because it, despite its very different context from our Sūrdās material, might serve to elucidate the complex layers of gender reversals and gender performances of that material.

As mentioned in Chapter 3, it is a recurring feature of *bhakti* poetry addressed to Kṛṣṇa, including that of Sūrdās, that male poets and performers assume the perspective of the female *gopīs*, as it is only the *gopīs* who may participate in the *līlā* with Kṛṣṇa. But the presence of another female, Muralī, complicates the image, and a situation arises where a male poet or performer assumes the identity of a woman in order to address the female instrument of a male god. Like Shakespeare’s Rosalind, I would argue that this complex layering of gender identities points to the centrality of the performativity of gender within the poem’s (or play’s) aesthetic and performative context. The added element to the Sūrdās poems is, of course, the theological imperative of the gender reversal in the union with Kṛṣṇa. In the following, I will discuss three different ways to approach the question of Muralī’s gender through this emphasis on gender performance.

The first approach focuses on how the presence of Muralī allows the poems to address the gender reversal the figure of Kṛṣṇa Muralīdhar entails. This tendency is especially voiced by poems such as NPS1872, where the *gopīs* wonder how Muralī came to be in the first place, and NPS1874, which enlists Muralī’s origins in nature. A central concern of these poems is how Muralī came to be and, more specifically, how she came to be a woman. This concern with the constitution of Muralī’s femininity might be understood as a counterpoint to the male poet’s similar assuming of the *gopīs*’ femininity. By engaging directly with the

peculiarity of the flute appearing as a woman, the poets or performers of the poetry indirectly also reference their own performance of the *gopīs*' gender. The resulting effect is not dissimilar to the contrasting quality described by Bryant in relation to other Sūrdās poems. For rather than embracing the *bhāv* of the lovesick *gopīs* and attempting to frame its accompanying gender reversal in harmonious terms, poems such as NPS1872 and NPS1874 seem to emphasise the shattering of gender norms that *bhāv* entails.

The second approach focuses on the many poems of the NPS *Sūrsāgar* that were construed in the preceding chapter to constitute elements of a discussion on norms relating to asceticism and familial duty, such as NPS1956 and NPS1960. When we consider that the *gopīs* of these poems, who are concerned with whether or not to eschew settled life in favour of performing ascetics on the model of Muralī, and with whether to criticise Muralī as a shameless corruptor of social decorum or to uplift her as a supreme devotee, are men striving to attain the devotional mind-set of the *gopīs*, the poems take on a particular theological perspective. For the discussion of the correct mode of asceticism does not then relate to the social reality of women, but of the aesthetic and theological considerations of the *gopīs*' amorous *bhāv*; if the men are to perform the part of women in their devotion, then how exactly should that performance be?

While I will not attempt to extract a definite position on this question from the NPS *Sūrsāgar*, it should be noted that this relatively open-ended discussion on what forms the ideal devotion of a woman should take does not fit very well with the perspective of the Puṣṭi Mārg on devotion, that were described in section 2.2.1. For while Vallabha and the Puṣṭi Mārg clearly dictate that it is through Kṛṣṇa's active grace alone that a devotee may attain the transcendental union, the discussion held throughout these poems does not rule out that the union may be attained through the force of supreme asceticism. This idea of forcing Kṛṣṇa's grace through asceticism goes very much against the grain of Vallabha's philosophy, and serves to demonstrate that the presence of Muralī as a female flute in Sūrdās' poetry can be construed as an indication of even the later layers of that poetry's relative independence from the Puṣṭi Mārg outlook.

The third and final approach construes the performance of gender within this material as an expression of the transcendence of gender within the *līlā* of ultimate Kṛṣṇa devotion. Like the multiple gender reversals by Shakespeare's Rosalind, the setting up of a similarly complex dynamic, where both devotee and deity appear either in the guise of a woman or by the means of a female instrument, can be understood as another example of the contrasting effect. But whereas the appearance of that effect in the first approach discussed above,

centering on poems that wondered about the flute's origins, served to underline the performance of gender in this poetry, poems like HB44/NPS1266 and NPS1985, where Muralī appears as Mohinī, offer an effect where the appearance of both male and female aspects of the same deity complements the similar duality of the male performing as a woman; in its complementary nature, the resulting image is contrasting in that it points to the transcendence of gender that the union with Kṛṣṇa ultimately entails.

The three approaches I have explored here represent different strands of poems within the wider current of the *Sūrsāgar* tradition, as it was analysed in chapters 4 and 5. In their varied representations of the relationship between Kṛṣṇa, Muralī and the *gopīs*, the various strands all point in different directions. But they all serve to underline the fluid perception of gender categories within Kṛṣṇa *bhakti*. In the following section, I will unite the two threads of analysis in this chapter to frame a possible answer to the dissertation's second research question.

### **6.3 The flute, nature and performance**

A striking aspect of Rosalind's scene of multiple gender reversals is that it takes place within a forest. As Wells (2005, xxiv) writes, "For Rosalind, the forest offers [...] an opportunity to escape the restrictions of life as a young woman". This relation in Shakespeare's play between gender fluidity and the forest may serve as an illuminating entry point as we now turn to consider the combined effect of the gender approaches discussed above. On one hand, I have established a perspective that focuses on the flute's relation to nature, and particularly to the forest, and the fluidity of gender within the forest. On the other, I have explored different approaches to the flute that centre on the performance of gender. As with Rosalind, a theme emerges where place and performance are related, even as they express subtly different perspectives on gender. I will outline the patterns of this theme to arrive at a response to the question of the flute's femininity.

As we have seen, the union with Kṛṣṇa in the *līlā*, as it is imagined in the *Sūrsāgar* tradition, is constituted by two elements. The forest is the site of the union, and is the place where gender and social categories in general become vague and fluid. But the union also requires the devotees to intentionally assume the form of the *gopīs*. So there are two different conceptions of gender at work, one dependent on the other: the fluidity allowing the performance, and the performance pointing towards the fluidity. My argument is that Muralī,

the female flute, expresses the ambiguous tension between the two stances. She is both a product of the forest and of culture, and both an inanimate flute and a distinct woman. And so within Muralī, the two perceptions of gender are reconciled and expressed, formulating a religious and literary motif that encapsulates the complex dynamic of gender inherent in the figure of Kṛṣṇa Muralīdhar. In the female flute, the Sūrdās tradition has a nexus through which it can address both the particular concerns of how gender should and should not be expressed for the purpose of devotion and the ultimate transcendence of gender itself in devotion to Kṛṣṇa.

Viewed through this perspective, the flute can be understood as both a potent rhetorical instrument, and as an elaborate theological symbol. When she addresses the *gopīs* directly, such as in HB71/NPS1948 and NPS1951, or when the *gopīs* discuss the merit of her asceticism, such as in NPS1960 and NPS1962, she allows the poems to address both the considerations of devotion in general, and the tension between social and religious duties, and so functions as a motif through which both social and religious concerns might be discussed. And when, in poems like NPS1268 and HB45/NPS1271, she appears as a conqueror, or, as in HB73/NPS1995, where she appears as the centrepiece of the figure of Kṛṣṇa Muralīdhar, she emerges as an integrated element of the object of devotion itself. And yet both tendencies contain elements of the other; Muralī's asceticism might be an object of veneration, and in her conquering mode she might be accused of pride. This is also in line with the motif's ability to straddle divides; Muralī is both symbol and a vehicle of rhetoric.

To sum up my argument, a possible response to the study's second research question, asking why the flute is personified as a woman, is that it provides the Sūrdās tradition with a motif through which it can express and discuss the myriad tensions surrounding gender within Kṛṣṇa *bhakti*. And in addition to providing a vehicle through which this discussion can take place, it also expresses the imperative within this branch of *bhakti* to both perceive gender as a fluid category that does not, in the final union with Kṛṣṇa, ultimately exist, while at the same time approaching Kṛṣṇa through the performance of a particular expression of gender. When we consider the findings of the previous chapter, where I argued that the motif grows more elaborate throughout the later layer of the tradition, even while keeping within the general categories established by the early layer, it might also be argued that the motif of the female flute serves as a potent illustration of the dynamic discussions that South Asian textual and oral traditions can contain. For as Muralī appears in ever more distinct forms and modes throughout the *Sūrsāgar*, she can be understood as the resonance of on-going discussions of the position of both women and gender in general in Kṛṣṇa *bhakti*.

## 6.4 Summary

This chapter approached the study's second research question through the perspectives of Ortner's concept of gendered categories of nature and culture in its relation to the pastoral, and through the concept of gender performance. After utilising these perspectives to discuss the study's material, as it has been demarcated and understood in the preceding two chapters' response to the study's first research question, I combined the outcomes of the various discussions in a proposed answer to the question of why the flute appears as a personified woman in the poetry of Sūrdās. This answer suggested that the female flute, by virtue of its associations with opposing categories, such as nature and culture, the gendered and the ungendered, serves to express a similar liminality that is central to the figure of Kṛṣṇa Muralīdhar and its implications for gender and *bhakti* devotion. In the following, and concluding, chapter, I will recount the study's analyses and suggest some areas for further research.

## 7 Conclusion

The aim of this study has been to engage with how and why Kṛṣṇa's flute appears as a woman in the poetry of Sūrdās. At the outset, I enlisted several intentions for undertaking such an inquiry. The first was to establish a new assessment of an understudied element of Sūrdās' poetry and its representation of a central Hindu deity, grounded in the recent advances in scholarship on Sūrdās and the *Sūrsāgar* tradition. The second was to use the motif of the female flute as it appears throughout this tradition as an entrance point to discuss its diverse attitudes towards gender and devotion. In its extension, I expressed hope that the study also might stimulate to general insights into how the ever-evolving literary traditions of north India might function as sites of discussions on both social and religious themes.

The first research question of the study asked how the motif of the flute develops throughout the textual tradition ascribed to Sūrdās. In accepting the understanding of this textual tradition as being constituted by a variety of poets working within a general framework, possibly initiated by a historical figure about whom not much is known, I emphasised that the main interest of the study was to engage with the resulting tradition in its totality, in order to map the evolution of the flute motif throughout it, and to include the variety of its connected modes, images and styles in the study's analysis. As a result, the first research question was discussed over two chapters, one concerned with the early tradition, and one with its later incarnations. The following comparative analysis of the two chapters' findings stressed that the later tradition, while keeping within the bonds of the framework of the earlier tradition, evidences a broader range of stances towards the flute and its femininity. I consequently argued that the main development of the motif of the flute in the Sūrdās tradition is that it evolves from being an ambiguous figure, that only intermittently assumes a female form, to become a defined character who functions as the nexus of a broad discussion concerning the social mores of gender and devotion. Throughout the analysis, I also stressed the increased signs of oral origins in the later traditions poems, and consequently argued that these tendencies, combined with the more varied stances towards the flute this later tradition displays, demonstrate that, for the historian of religion, the later *Sūrsāgar* might be approached as a dynamic compendium of diverse beliefs, rather than as a corruption of a pristine source.



The study's second research question asked why the flute is personified as a woman. I attempted to answer it by subjecting the variety of poems discussed in relation with the first research question to an analysis that drew on the concept of the pastoral, Ortner's dichotomy of male culture and female nature, and Butler's idea of the performance of gender. After exploring the many possible interpretations this theoretically diverse outlook allowed, I arrived at a position that begins by modifying Ortner's dichotomy to construct a perception of the pastoral nature, specifically centred in the forest, which does not express femininity, but rather fluidity of gender categories, proceeds to assert the primacy of performing the part of a distinct gender within this site of gender fluidity, and arrives at the conclusion that the female flute is a motif that allows the Sūrdās tradition both to express these complex and ambiguous stances of Kṛṣṇa devotion towards gender, and to discuss the social consequences they entail. I also argued that the endorsement of an instrumental perspective on asceticism that these discussions voice might be interpreted as evidence that not only the early *Sūrsāgar*, but also its later layer contains religious outlooks that are at odds with those of the Puṣṭi Mārg.

The study is, of course, not without weaknesses. Beyond the limitations of outlook discussed in Chapter 3, it is also clear that the response to the question of the flute's femininity outlined above cannot pretend to be a complete summation of the motif's aspects. As the many poems explored throughout the study have demonstrated, the female flute is a strikingly complex motif. If the study had been rooted in other theoretical outlooks and assumptions, the result would naturally have appeared differently. But as I stated in the study's introduction, and restated in the beginning of this concluding chapter, the study's aim was to provoke new considerations of the female flute's position in the Sūrdās tradition. Rather than being an item of iconographical paraphernalia, the study has repeatedly argued that the female flute is of vital importance to our understanding of how the poems of Sūrdās imagine gender. And by emphasising the popular appeal and longevity of this poetry in the religious life of Hindus of north India, the study has argued that the demonstrable variety of positions and outlooks surrounding the flute that its voices can be approached as a medium for the expression of changing attitudes and opinions concerning gender.

Proceeding to map these changes in their exact social contexts would entail undertaking a detailed study of the individual poems' histories of recensions, and has been beyond the scope of the present study. A more expansive study would also be able to consider the flute poems of the *Sūrsāgar* in their relations with the other poems of the different variants of the texts. So rather than presenting the dissertation as a definitive study of the female flute, it might be understood as stimulating to further studies of this complex

and dynamic motif. I would for instance argue that the study might serve as the starting point for a wider consideration of the figure of Kṛṣṇa Muralīdhar in *bhakti* poetry in general. Such studies could ask how the motif of the flute in Sūrdās' poetry compares to similar appearances in the works of other *bhakti* poets, such as Mīrābāī and Raskhān, and similarly use the motif as a parameter to assess those poets' understanding of the interplay between gender and devotion.

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# Appendix A: Poems included in the analysis

This appendix enlists all poems that are directly discussed or referenced in the study's text.

## Poems from the HB *Sūrsāgar*

HB38 (NPS1234), HB42 (NPS1245), HB44 (NPS1266), HB45 (NPS1271), HB46 (NPS1273), HB47 (NPS1276), HB69 (NPS1841), HB70 (NPS1893), HB71 (NPS1948), HB72 (NPS1989), HB73 (NPS1995), HB74 (NPS1998), HB92 (NPS2411), HB101 (NPS2489), HB156 (NPS3380), HB189 (NPS3772), HB194 (NPS3810), HB282 (NPS4339), HB288 (NPS4828), HB347 (NPS4873).

## Poems from the NPS *Sūrsāgar*

NPS1240, NPS1242, NPS1247, NPS1248, NPS1250, NPS1252, NPS1262, NPS1266, NPS1268, NPS1272, NPS1274, NPS1836, NPS1848, NPS1849, NPS1850, NPS1856, NPS1857, NPS1866, NPS1868, NPS1872, NPS1874, NPS1880, NPS1949, NPS1951, NPS1956, NPS1960, NPS1962, NPS1982, NPS1985.