

Vaishnavism as Fine Literature

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The Celibate Seducer: Vedānta Deśika's Domestication of Kṛṣṇa's Sexuality in the Yādavābhyudaya

Vedānta Deśika produced his monumental poetic biography of Kṛṣṇa in a time when Kṛṣṇa-centered devotionalism was expanding to become perhaps the dominant mode of bhakti across South Asia. Central to this phenomenon is the growing popularity of the Bhāgavatapurāṇa, and especially of its exploration of Kṛṣṇa's erotic play with the gopīs in his youth. Troubled by the unrestrained and seemingly adharmic sexuality of Kṛṣṇa, Deśika uses the literary techniques and narrative paradigms of the mahākāvya to assimilate but also domesticate this increasingly important Bhāgavata episode: Kṛṣṇa's eroticism remains central but confined within more conventional marital norms and thus made dharmically and theologically acceptable.