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Why Śrīdhara Svāmī? The Makings of a Successful Sanskrit Commentary

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Abstract: Śrīdhara Svāmī's commentary on the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, called *Bhāvārtha-dīpikā* and composed sometime between the mid-fourteenth to the mid-fifteenth centuries, has exerted extraordinary influence on later *Bhāgavata* commentaries, and indeed, on Vaiṣṇava traditions more generally. This article raises a straightforward question: "Why Śrīdhara?" Focusing on the Caitanya Vaiṣṇava tradition, particularly Jīva Gosvāmī, for whom Śrīdhara is foundational, we ask, "What is it about Śrīdhara Svāmī's commentary—both stylistically and theologically—that made it so useful to Caitanya Vaiṣṇavas and other *Bhāgavata* commentators?" This question, to the extent that it can be answered, has implications for our understanding of Śrīdhara's theology as well as the development of the early Caitanya Vaiṣṇava tradition, but it can also lend insight into the reasons for Śrīdhara's influence more generally in early modern India.

Keywords: Śrīdhara; Bhāgavata; Purāṇa; commentary; Caitanya; Gauḍīya; Vaiṣṇavism; Jīva Gosvāmī

1. Introduction

Śrīdhara Svāmī's commentary on the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, called *Bhāvārtha-dīpikā* and composed sometime between the mid-fourteenth to the mid-fifteenth centuries, has exerted extraordinary influence on later *Bhāgavata* commentaries, and indeed, on Vaiṣṇava traditions more generally. Subsequent commentators on the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* are consistently aware of, and often deeply engaged with, the *Bhāvārtha-dīpikā*. This is particularly true of the Caitanya Vaiṣṇava commentaries by Sanātana Gosvāmī, Jīva Gosvāmī, Viśvanātha Cakravartī, and others, but also to a lesser extent Vīrarāghava Ācārya's Śrīvaiṣṇava and Vijayadhvaṇa Tīrtha's Dvaita commentaries.¹ Śrīdhara's outsize, although not universal,² influence becomes further evident as we move to vernacular commentaries on the *Bhāgavata*

¹ B.N.K. Sharma writes that there are a "couple of indications" that Vijayadhvaṇa was acquainted with Śrīdhara's commentary, as seen in the former's commentary on BhP 2.9.31. Sharma surmises that "Śrīdhara Svāmin was more or less a contemporary of Vijayadhvaṇa." (Sharma 1981, pp. 458–59).

² Vallabhācārya's *Subodhinī* commentary is either unconcerned with or dismissive of Śrīdhara. For instance, Śrīdhara regards the essential *Bhāgavata* to consist of four verses spoken by Viṣṇu to Brahṁā (2.9.32–35), whereas Vallabha points to all seven verses of Viṣṇu's speech (2.9.30–36) (Joshi 1974). Furthermore, Anand Venkatkrishnan (2018) argues that a tradition of *Bhāgavata* interpretation in Kerala, beginning with Lakṣmīdhara, author of the *Amṛta-taraṅginī* commentary, was independent of Śrīdhara.

and derivative works, such as Bahirā Jātaveda's Marathi commentary, *Bhairavī*,³ and Viṣṇupurī's anthology of *Bhāgavata* verses, called *Bhakti-ratnāvalī*.⁴

Śrīdhara's pervasive influence has meant that scholars of the *Bhāgavata* have tended to assume his reading as the natural sense of the text. Daniel Sheridan argues that scholarly overreliance on Śrīdhara's commentary "does a disservice to Śrīdhara, who has not been studied in his own right by contemporary critical scholarship" (Sheridan 1994, p. 47). In other words, by assuming Śrīdhara's reading as natural, we ignore his genius in offering an interpretation of the Purāṇa that dominated the subsequent commentarial tradition. Sheridan therefore calls for further study of Śrīdhara Svāmī and his commentary, which, he says, would lead to "understanding of the reason for the great authority of Śrīdhara's ostensibly Advaitin commentary within the later Vaiṣṇava schools" (Sheridan 1994, p. 47). Indeed, despite Śrīdhara's inestimable influence on Vaiṣṇava traditions from the fifteenth century onward, he remains an enigma for both theologians and historians of Vaiṣṇavism. Śrīdhara is generally regarded as a *sannyāsī* within Śaṅkara's Advaita tradition,⁵ and yet his predilection for *bhakti* has made him a torchbearer for Vaiṣṇava commentators. In the mid-sixteenth century, the Caitanya Vaiṣṇava thinker Jīva Gosvāmī acknowledges Śrīdhara's enigmatic theology by suggesting that "the most excellent, esteemed Vaiṣṇava Śrīdhara Svāmī" sometimes included nondualist views in his commentary in order to entice Advaitins to appreciate the greatness of the personal Deity.⁶ Śrīdhara himself adds to the confusion by stating that he wrote his commentary on the insistence of his *sampradāya*.⁷ Here, we will set aside questions of commentarial intent and formal affiliation, and instead attempt to answer Sheridan's call by examining Śrīdhara's theological standpoint and its influence on later commentators.

This article raises a straightforward question: "Why Śrīdhara?" Focusing on the Caitanya Vaiṣṇava tradition, particularly Jīva Gosvāmī, for whom Śrīdhara is foundational, we shall ask, "What is it about Śrīdhara's commentary—both stylistically and theologically—that made it so useful to Caitanya Vaiṣṇavas and other *Bhāgavata* commentators?" This question, to the extent that it can be answered, has implications for our understanding of Śrīdhara's theology as well as the development of the early Caitanya Vaiṣṇava tradition, but it can also lend insight into the reasons for Śrīdhara's influence more generally in early modern India.

2. Why Choose an Advaitin?

The first matter that looms before us is the question of Śrīdhara Svāmī's Advaita leanings. Jīva Gosvāmī was clearly aware of the *Bhāgavata* commentaries found within the Mādhva school of

³ Madhavi Narsalay and Vrushali Potnis-Damle write, "It is thus amply clear that the *Bhairavī* is based on the *Bhāvārthadīpikā* Bahirā has high regard for Śrīdhara. This is evident from the many respectful references to Śrīdhara throughout his commentary on the 10th as well as the 11th *skandhas*. He addresses Śrīdhara as Tikāprakāśabhāskara (*Bhairavī* 11.10.7), Jñānarūpabhāskaru (*Bhairavī* 11.24.5), Samartha (*Bhairavī* 11.7.1), Āchārya (*Bhairavī* 11.77.8), Haridāsa (*Bhairavī* 10.6.212), Yogapāla (*Bhairavī* 10.43.2), Avatāripuruṣa (*Bhairavī* 10.1.59), Sākṣātkārī (*Bhairavī* 10.1.60), Ātmajñānī (*Bhairavī* 10.1.59) and Jīvanmukta (*Bhairavī* 10.1.61). He also refers to Śrīdhara as guru (*Bhairavī* 11.20.5) out of deep respect. Bahirā likens himself to a beggar waiting for leftovers, but still in search for Śrīdhara's bowl (*Bhairavī* 11.87.17)." (Narsalay and Potnis-Damle 2018, p. 155).

⁴ S.K. De writes, "One of the closing verses of this work [*Bhakti-ratnāvalī*] apologises for any departure the compiler might have made from the writings of the great Śrīdhara; and there can be no doubt about [sic] Śrīdhara's influence on the work." (De 1961, pp. 18–19)

⁵ Edelmann (2018) and Sukla (2010, pp. 13–22), following earlier authors, suggest that Śrīdhara Svāmī was the abbot of an Advaita monastery in Puri, Odisha. Nevertheless, Śrīdhara's institutional and sampradāyic affiliation is still a question requiring further historical research.

⁶ Jīva Gosvāmī writes in his *Tattva-sandarbhā*: "Our interpretation of the words of the *Bhāgavata*, representing a kind of commentary, will be written in accordance with the views of the great Vaiṣṇava, the revered Śrīdhara Svāmī, only when they conform to the strict Vaiṣṇava standpoint, since his writings are interspersed with the doctrines of Advaita so that an appreciation for the greatness of bhagavat may be awakened in the Advaitins who nowadays pervade the central regions etc." (Elkman 1986, p. 119).

⁷ *sampradāyānuśāhena pauroḥparyāyānūsārataḥ | śrī-bhāgavata-bhāvārtha-dīpikayāṁ pratanyate* (verse 4 from the opening *maṅgala* verses of the *Bhāvārtha-dīpikā*).

Dvaita Vedānta. He mentions Madhva's *Bhāgavata-tātparya-nirṇaya* by name in his *Tattva-sandarbha*, and if we are to accept B.N.K. Sharma's dating of Vijayadhvaṇya Tīrtha (fl. 1410–1450), then the latter's complete commentary, which closely follows Madhva's work,⁸ was well established by Jīva's time. Furthermore, in his six-part *Bhāgavata-sandarbha*, Jīva argues forcefully against the core philosophical positions of classical Advaita,⁹ and yet he takes the *Bhāvārtha-dīpikā*—which by Jīva's own account shows clear Advaitic tendencies—as foundational for his theological project. Jīva follows—indeed, reiterates—Śrīdhara's interpretation for almost every *Bhāgavata* verse he quotes. Why?

We could, of course, point to Śrī Caitanya's well known statement in Kṛṣṇadāsa Kavirāja's *Caitanya-caritāmṛta* (3.7.133–34) that any commentary not based on Śrīdhara is illegitimate:

I know the *Bhāgavata* by Śrīdhara Svāmī's grace. Śrīdhara Svāmī is the *guru* of the world, and I take him as my *guru*. If you arrogantly write anything to surpass Śrīdhara, people will not accept such confused meanings.¹⁰

No doubt this would have been a significant factor for Jīva. Nevertheless, such an explanation only shifts the problem back by a generation, for we might ask the same question of Caitanya: "Why Śrīdhara?" Furthermore, pointing to the *Caitanya-caritāmṛta* is a tad circular, for this canonical account of Caitanya's life is deeply influenced by the theology of the Vṛndāvana Gosvāmīs, including Jīva himself.¹¹

Another way in which scholars have attempted to resolve this question is by claiming that Jīva only pays lip service to Śrīdhara (because of Caitanya's insistence) and that, in fact, Jīva is not committed to Śrīdhara because of the latter's Advaita leanings. This line of thought is put forth by Stuart Elkman, building upon similar reasoning by S.K. De (1961). Elkman writes:

... it seems likely that Jīva's claims to follow Śrīdhara represent more a concession to Caitanya's beliefs than a personal preference on his own part. In actual fact, Jīva follows Śrīdhara on only the most minor points, ignoring all of his Advaitic interpretations ...

(Elkman 1986, p. 180).¹²

Elkman and De's argument is grounded on two assumptions that turn out to be suspect, namely, that Śrīdhara's institutional affiliation makes him the type of Advaitin that Jīva argues against in his writings, and that therefore Jīva's use of Śrīdhara must be nothing more than a "concession" on "the most minor points." We shall address the first assumption in due course, but as for the second, we can note here that a careful reading of Jīva's *Bhāgavata-sandarbha* and *Krama-sandarbha* simply does not support Elkman's view. Jīva quotes, paraphrases, or draws salient points from the *Bhāvārtha-dīpikā* nearly every time he comments upon a *Bhāgavata* verse in his *Bhāgavata-sandarbha*. Jīva follows Śrīdhara's interpretation in most cases, but when the latter's Advaita tendencies create difficulties for Vaiṣṇava dualism, Jīva finds ways of supporting Śrīdhara's interpretation—first, by harnessing the Caitanyaite *bhedābheda* theology (emphasizing the nondifference side) to create space for nondualist interpretations,

⁸ See B.N.K. Sharma's analysis of the relationship between Madhva's *Bhāgavata-tātparya-nirṇaya* and Vijayadhvaṇya's *Pada-ratnāvalī* (Sharma 1981, p. 458), as well as the latter's dates (p. 456).

⁹ See, for example, Jīva's *Paramātmā-sandarbha*, *anuccheda* 105, for a refutation of the doctrine of *adhyāsa*, superimposition (Gupta 2007, pp. 174–77).

¹⁰ All translations from Sanskrit and Bengali sources in this article are my own, unless stated otherwise.

¹¹ See, for example, Kṛṣṇadāsa Kavirāja's prayer to Rūpa Gosvāmī (Jīva's uncle) at the end of nearly every chapter of the *Caitanya-caritāmṛta*. Kṛṣṇadāsa also names all six Gosvāmīs of Vṛndāvana, including Jīva, as his *śikṣā-gurus*, from whom he has received instruction (1.1.35–37).

¹² The polarization of Caitanya and Śrīdhara on one side and Jīva on the other is derived from S.K. De, the author of *Early History of the Vaisnava Faith and Movement in Bengal*. De writes: "It is our impression that Caitanya could not have been such an anti-Śaṅkara as depicted by Kṛṣṇadāsa Kavirāja. The Kavirāja, however, is careless enough to give us a rough idea as to what Caitanya's metaphysics could possibly have been when he makes Caitanya ridicule Vallabha Bhaṭṭa for differing from Śrīdhara's commentary on the *Bhāgavata*, and says that Śrīdhara was 'Jagad-guru.'" (De 1961, p. 151). Since the Gosvāmīs' writings were the most important theological source for Kṛṣṇadāsa, Elkman extends De's polarity by replacing Kṛṣṇadāsa with Jīva, in opposition to Śrīdhara and Caitanya.

and second, by layering atop Śrīdhara an alternate interpretation that is more appropriate to Caitanya Vaiṣṇavism.¹³ In essence, Jīva functions as an interpreter of Śrīdhara—explaining and expanding his ideas, clarifying ambiguities, rereading him in light of Caitanya Vaiṣṇava theology, and resolving potential theological conflicts, but never “ignoring” him, as Elkman suggests.¹⁴ Kiyokazu Okita finds a similarly complex dynamic at work in the *Krama-sandarbha*, where Jīva sometimes follows Śrīdhara exactly (Okita 2014, p. 82), sometimes diverges from him (p. 104), and occasionally fills in ambiguities (p. 122), but always works hard to show his conformity with Śrīdhara (pp. 105, 123). Okita concludes that given “the fact that Jīva was aware of Madhva’s works,” it is striking “how much attention he pays to Śrīdhara’s commentary” (p. 124).

So the question remains: how are we to make sense of Jīva’s commitment to Śrīdhara, given the latter’s Advaitic tendencies? Perhaps the real problem lies with the question itself, which presupposes hard boundaries between dualism and nondualism, static conceptions of *sampradāya* affiliation, and normative notions of what constitutes Advaita and Vaiṣṇava. These reifications have led many to express surprise at Śrīdhara’s devotional theology *despite* his Advaita affiliation, or Caitanya’s rejection of *māyāvāda* *despite* his love for Śrīdhara, or Jīva’s frequent use of the *Bhāvartha-dīpikā* *despite* his commitment to “pure Vaiṣṇavism.” Michael Allen has recently called for a broadening of our understanding of Advaita Vedānta, to include not only “a received canon of Sanskrit philosophical works,” such as those of Śaṅkara and Maṇḍana Miśra, but also “narratives and dramas, ‘syncretic’ works blending classical Vedāntic teachings with other traditions, and perhaps most importantly, vernacular works . . . ” (Allen 2017, p. 277)¹⁵ This larger world he calls “Greater Advaita Vedānta,” and he includes Śrīdhara Svāmī within it.¹⁶ Although Allen intentionally leaves the boundaries of this world fuzzy, he suggests that “the acceptance of *māyāvāda*, or illusionism, might provide a useful touchstone for determining how deep the influence of Advaita Vedānta runs in a given work” (Allen 2017, p. 293). If that is the case, then we will need to leave out the canonical Caitanya Vaiṣṇava texts from this rubric, as *māyāvāda* is unacceptable to all of them.

Nevertheless, it is indisputable that the early theologians of the Caitanya school were actively engaged with the Advaita tradition, freely borrowing key ideas and terminology. After all, the doctrine of *acintya-bhedābheda* includes *abheda*, nondifference, as one of its key components, even if it is preceded by *bheda*, or difference. In his *Bhāgavata-sandarbha*, Jīva is quite happy to adopt concepts from Advaita theologies, including the notion of a *kevala-viśeṣya* Brahman,¹⁷ an unattributed, transcendent reality that would have been anathema to Rāmānuja; the possibility of *jīvan-mukti*, liberation while living; the categories of *svarūpa-lakṣaṇa* (essential characteristics) and *taṭastha-lakṣaṇa* (contingent characteristics) to describe the nature of Brahman;¹⁸ and the insistence that ultimate reality is nondual (*advaya*)¹⁹ and thus all beings are part of Kṛṣṇa’s nature, an idea quite unacceptable to Madhva. Each of these concepts is developed differently than in classical Advaita Vedānta, but each also represents a choice on the part

¹³ For examples of both these dynamics at work in Jīva’s relationship with Śrīdhara, see the section “Svāmī and Gosvāmī” in Gupta (2007, pp. 65–84).

¹⁴ On a few occasions, Jīva does directly contradict Śrīdhara when the latter’s Advaitic statements become impossible to harmonize with Caitanya Vaiṣṇava theology, as we shall discuss later in this article. However, Elkman’s example of Jīva refuting Śrīdhara (in *Tattva-sandarbha*, *anuccheda* 60) turns out to be based on a misreading of the Sanskrit. As Gupta (2007, pp. 77–80) shows, *anuccheda* 60 is a fine example of Jīva functioning as an interpreter of Śrīdhara, affirming Śrīdhara’s interpretation and then redeploying it in the service of Caitanya Vaiṣṇava theology.

¹⁵ Venkatkrishnan has argued along similar lines: “Instead of assuming the coherence of Advaita Vedānta as school of philosophy, and singling out individual authors for their deviations from a norm, we might instead consider the tradition itself fragmented and fractured” (Venkatkrishnan 2015a, p. 234).

¹⁶ Allen remarks, “The degree of Advaitic influence in Śrīdhara’s commentary has been debated; . . . Without entering the debate, I might simply note that much hinges on how broadly Advaita Vedānta is defined.” (Allen 2017, p. 292, n38).

¹⁷ See *Bhagavat-sandarbha*, *anuccheda* 3: *arūpaṁ pāṇi-pādādy asāmyutam itīdāṁ brahmākhyā-kevala-viśeṣyāvīrbhāva-niṣṭham*.

¹⁸ See Jīva Gosvāmī’s *Paramātmā-sandarbha*, *anuccheda* 105.

¹⁹ The insistence on an ultimate, nondual reality is grounded on the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 1.2.11, “Knowers of reality declare that reality to be nondual consciousness, called ‘Brahman,’ ‘Paramātmā,’ and ‘Bhagavān.’” This verse is crucial for Caitanya Vaiṣṇava theology, for it simultaneously affirms the singular nature of Divinity while also introducing distinctions within him, thus leading to the doctrine of *acintya-bhedābheda*.

of the early Caitanya Vaiṣṇava theologians to not only engage with, but to also adopt concepts from, a tradition whose soteriology they rejected.

Take for example, the notion of *jīvan-mukti*. Rūpa Gosvāmī defines it quite differently from the way it is understood in Advaita Vedānta,²⁰ but his use of the concept nevertheless represents something significant; Rūpa could have just as easily rejected the possibility of *jīvan-mukti* altogether, as does Rāmānuja, whose influence is strongly felt in other ways within early Caitanya Vaiṣṇava theology.²¹ Along similar lines, Rūpa and Jīva are willing to accept the possibility of a state of liberation, namely, *sāyujya-mukti*, where the individual experiences a state of ontological oneness with Brahman—similar to the way in which Madhusūdana Sarasvatī describes *sāyujya-mukti* (Lutjeharms 2018, p. 397). The Gosvāmīs regarded such a state as extremely undesirable for a *bhakta*, but they affirmed its possibility nonetheless. As Rembert Lutjeharms has shown, “the consistent attempt to make space for the experiences of the Advaitins among early Chaitanya Vaishnava theologians seems particularly remarkable” because it forces them to “relinquish” the term *mokṣa* to the Lutjeharms (2018, p. 403).

We shall give one last example: Jīva Gosvāmī, in his commentary on the third aphorism of the *Brahma-sūtra*, accepts Śaṅkara’s interpretation of *śāstra-yonitvāt*, namely, that Brahman is the source of scripture, even though this interpretation is rejected by both Rāmānuja and Madhva. Jīva’s theology takes an eclectic approach toward other Vedāntins,²² and he was working in a milieu where Advaitins were innovative, *bhakti*-oriented, and open to practices of *kīrtana*.²³ We see evidence of this milieu in the *Caitanya-caritāmṛta*, where Kṛṣṇadāsa describes a debate between Caitanya and an erudite Advaita *sannyāsī* of Benaras, Prakāśānanda Sarasvatī. When he meets Caitanya, Prakāśānanda presents a social argument against *kīrtana*, but not a philosophical one; he praises *bhakti* as salutary and pleasing, but objects to Caitanya engaging in public singing and dancing in the company of sentimental commoners, instead of studying Vedānta among his *sannyāsī* peers.²⁴ Indeed, the religious landscape in which early Caitanya Vaiṣṇavas flourished was saturated with an Advaita that was itself saturated with Kṛṣṇa-*bhakti*.²⁵ Lutjeharms lists no less than twenty-two *sannyāsī* companions of Caitanya who possibly belonged to an Advaita order, as Caitanya himself did (Lutjeharms 2018, pp. 401–2).

Seen in this context, Śrīdhara’s commitment to Vaiṣṇava-*bhakti*, Caitanya’s commitment to Śrīdhara, and Jīva’s skillful ease in harmonizing Śrīdhara’s Advaita with Caitanya Vaiṣṇava theology—all become less of a surprise and less of a problem.

3. When Not to Choose Śrīdhara

Nevertheless, the “Why Śrīdhara?” question persists. As we have seen, the Vṛndāvana Gosvāmīs are adept at adopting elements of Advaita that are suitable to their theology. But they are not Advaitins, and there are limits to their willingness to walk that path. What then do we make of Jīva’s statement

²⁰ See Rūpa Gosvāmī’s *Bhakti-rasāmṛta-sindhu* (1.2.187): *īhā yasya harer dāsyē karmanā manasā girā nikhilāsv apy avasthāsu jīvan-muktaḥ sa ucyate*, “One whose every effort—in mind, speech, and action, and in all circumstances—is in the service of Hari, that person is called *jīvan-mukta*, liberated while living.”

²¹ For example, Jīva’s commentary on the first five sūtras of the *Brahma-sūtra* (found in *Paramātmā-sandarbhā*, anuccheda 105 and translated in Gupta 2007, chp. 7) often quotes from Rāmānuja’s *Śrī-bhāṣya*. Gopāla Bhaṭṭa Gosvāmī’s *Hari-bhakti-vilāsa*, the main Caitanya Vaiṣṇava ritual manual, also displays the influence of Śrīvaiṣṇavism.

²² For a detailed discussion of the sources of Jīva’s Vedānta theology, including Śrīdhara, Rāmānuja, Madhva, and Śaṅkara, see Gupta (2007, chp. 3).

²³ See Venkatkrishnan (2015b).

²⁴ See *Caitanya-caritāmṛta* 1.7.66–70, and especially 1.7.101: “Do *bhakti* for Kṛṣṇa—we’re all happy about that. But why don’t you study Vedānta? What’s wrong with it?” Venkatkrishnan describes a similar argument against *kīrtana* in the writings of Anantadeva of Benaras in the late sixteenth century—an argument that Anantadeva rejects. “The opponent here concedes that the public act of devotional singing may be accorded scriptural sanction, but only for those who do not belong to the three self-appointed upper classes. *Bhakti* in the opponent’s eyes is not an activity suited to the serious, scholarly lifestyle of the Brahmin.” (Venkatkrishnan 2015b, p. 155)

²⁵ See Friedhelm Hardy’s well-known 1974 article for a discussion of Advaita’s development in relation to South Indian *bhakti* as well as Bengal Vaiṣṇavism.

that he only accepts Śrīdhara in so far as his views are consistent with pure Vaiṣṇavism? What does Jīva mean by the “pure Vaiṣṇava thesis” (*śuddha-vaiṣṇava-siddhānta*), and which “doctrines of Advaita” (*advaita-vāda*), interspersed in Śrīdhara’s commentary, does he find unacceptable?²⁶ Centuries later, the Caitanya Vaiṣṇava Vedāntist Baladeva Vidyābhūṣaṇa describes Śrīdhara’s Advaitic statements as “meat on the end of a hook, meant to lure fish” (Elkman 1986, pp. 119–20). What, exactly, is the meat?

Given the presence of multiple influences in Caitanya theology, B.N.K. Sharma’s claim that “pure Vaiṣṇavism” refers to Madhva’s Vedānta appears untenable (Sharma 1981, p. 528). I would suggest, rather, that Jīva can find a way to incorporate nearly all of Śrīdhara’s Advaitic statements into Caitanya Vaiṣṇava theology except for those that employ Advaita theories of illusion, particularly the notion of *māyā*. The problem is not with *māyā* as the Lord’s illusive power; that, indeed, is quite compatible with the Caitanya Vaiṣṇava concept of *śakti*, Kṛṣṇa’s multifaceted energies. Rather, the problem lies with *māyā* when, in Jīva’s eyes, it is “weaponized” by Advaitins to deny the transcendent reality of Kṛṣṇa’s form, the eternal individuality of living beings, and the substantive nature of this world, thus precluding the possibility of *bhakti* in the liberated state. As Caitanya says in his conversation with Sārvabhauma Bhāṭṭācārya, “Bhagavān has a blissful form replete with six kinds of majesty, and you call him formless? . . . Listening to the commentary of a *māyāvādī* destroys everything!” (Caitanya-caritāmṛta 2.6.152–69).²⁷ Indeed, it is in the context of discussions about *māyā* that Jīva argues against Advaita in both *Tattva-sandarbha* and *Paramātma-sandarbha*,²⁸ speaking strongly against *adhyāsa* and *āropa* (superimposition), *vivarta* (apparent transformation), *eka-jīva-vāda* (a single living being), *pratibimba-vāda* (doctrine of reflection), and other concepts grounded in Advaitic ideas of ignorance and illusion. He dedicates significant space in the *Bhagavat-sandarbha* to arguing that Bhagavān and his abode, associates, and accoutrements are nonmaterial (*aprākṛta*) and inherent to the Lord’s nature (*svābhāvika*).

To be sure, Śrīdhara himself is not keen on “weaponizing” *māyā*. He often explains *māyā* as the veiling, multi-faceted power of the Lord, without recourse to heavyweight Advaita terminology. He repeatedly misses opportunities to discuss *avidyā*, *āropa*, *anirvacanīya*, *vivarta*, *upādhi*, and the rope-snake metaphor. Take, for example, his commentary on *Bhāgavata* 1.7.6, a verse that describes how *bhakti-yoga*, as taught in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, can remove living beings’ ignorance. The verse is crucial to Jīva’s argument for the *Bhāgavata*’s supremacy as scripture, but the verse is also susceptible to Advaita theories of ignorance. In his commentary, Śrīdhara explains *māyā* as follows: “The Lord, who possesses all *śaktis*, who knows everything, who has an eternally manifest, supremely blissful form (*svarūpa*), controls *māyā* by his knowledge-*śakti*. The living being . . . is bewildered by the Lord’s *māyā*.” Śrīdhara follows this with a quotation from Viṣṇusvāmī describing the Lord’s powers of knowledge and bliss. Finally, Śrīdhara offers two verses—presumably of his own composition—in praise of the man-lion *avatāra*, Nṛsiṃha: “The one who controls *māyā* is the Lord, and the one pained by her is the living being . . . We praise Nṛhari, who continually delights with his own *māyā*.”²⁹ This, indeed, comes close to the Caitanya Vaiṣṇava understanding of *māyā* as the Lord’s *śakti*.

When, however, the opportunities become impossible to ignore, Śrīdhara offers attenuated or ambiguous forays into Advaita notions of ignorance. Here is a good example: The sage Nārada, speaking in verse 1.5.27, states, “I perceive that this *sat* and *asat* have been fabricated by my *māyā*

²⁶ *tad-vyākhyā tu samprati madhya-deśāu vyāptān advaita-vādinō nūnam bhagavan-mahimānam avagāhayitum tad-vādena karvurita-lipinām parama-vaiṣṇavānām śrīdhara-svāmī-caraṇānām śuddha-vaiṣṇava-siddhāntānugatā cet tarhi yathāvad eva vilikhyate.* (*Tattva-sandarbha*, *anuccheda* 27).

²⁷ *saḍ-aiśvarya-pūrṇānanda-vigraha yānīhāra/hena-bhagavāne tumi kaha nirākāra . . . māyāvādi-bhāṣya śunile haya sarva-nāśa.*

²⁸ See *Tattva-sandarbha*, *anucchedas* 34–44 and *Paramātma-sandarbha*, *anuccheda* 105.

²⁹ *anarthopāśamaṁ sāksād bhakti-yogam adhokṣajelokasyājānato vidvānś cakre sātva-saṁhitām (Bhāgavata 1.7.6) Bhāvārtha-dīpikā: etad uktam bhavati—vidyā-uaktya māyā-niyantā nityāvīrbhūta-paramānanda-svarūpaḥ sarva-jñāḥ sarva-śaktir īśvaras tan-māyayā saṁmohitas tirobhūta-svarūpas tad-viparīta-dharmā jīvas tasya ceśvara bhaktyā labdha-jñānena mokṣa iti. tad uktam viṣṇu-svāmīn—hlāḍīnyā saṁvid-aśliṣṭaḥ sac-cid-ānanda īśvarah. svāvidyā-saṁvṛto jīvaḥ saṁkleśa-nikarākarah. tatha—sa īśo yad-vaśe māyā sa jīvo yas tayārditaḥ. svāvīrbhūta-parānandaḥ svāvīrbhūta-suduḥkha-bhūḥ. svādyg-utthaviparyāsa-bhava-bhedaja-bhī-śucaḥ. man-māyayā juṣaṇn āste tam imaṁ nṛ-hariṁ numah. ity ādi.*

upon me, the transcendent Brahman.” For an Advaitin, this verse offers an irresistible opportunity to expound a theory of superimposition. As Anand Venkatkrishnan points out (Venkatkrishnan 2015a, pp. 49–50), none other than the thirteenth-century Hemādri, author of the *Kaivalya-dīpikā* commentary on the *Bhāgavata-muktāphala*, seizes this verse to discuss the rope-snake metaphor. But Śrīdhara nearly avoids the matter altogether, glossing “this *sat* and *asat*” as “these gross and subtle bodies,” “my *māyā*” as “my ignorance (*avidyā*),” and explaining that “fabricated” means that the body is not substantial or essential.³⁰ In other words, the body is a product of the living being’s own ignorance, although the living being is in fact Brahman. This highly limited application of superimposition of the body upon the self is something any Caitanya Vaiṣṇava can live with.

Occasionally, however, Śrīdhara becomes more explicit in his application of Advaita theories of illusion, and as far as I can tell, these are the only moments when Jīva directly rejects Śrīdhara’s interpretation (instead of simply layering an alternative interpretation, which Jīva does often). A good example of Śrīdhara in a sharper register is the *Bhāgavata*’s opening verse, which provides ample opportunities for nondualist interpretation. In the third line, Śrīdhara interprets *vinimaya* as *vyatyaya*, the false appearance of one element in another, like a mirage seen on a hot surface, water seen in glass, and glass appearing like water—examples that are typically Advaitic.³¹ Even here, Śrīdhara does not bother to spell out a theory of illusion. Rather, he seems to assume the core concepts of classical Advaita Vedānta as a general background to his work, without feeling the need to delineate or defend them. For him, the essential point is that the world (which he alternately calls true, *satya*, and false, *mithyā*) finds its basis in the true reality of Brahman, who has the power to dispel all confusion. Nevertheless, the implication of Śrīdhara’s metaphors is that the world is mere appearance, and Jīva finds this unacceptable. He comes down strongly against this view, calling it a fictitious interpretation (*kalpanā-mūla*), but never mentions Śrīdhara directly, as he is usually wont to do.

Since the interpretation given here is based on the *śruti*, other fictitious interpretations are automatically defeated. In those interpretations, fire and the other elements, which were indicated in a general way [in the verse], are explained in a particular way. This does not please the grammarians. If this was what the *Bhāgavata* meant, it would have said “like water in a mirage” and similarly for the other elements. Moreover, in that [incorrect] view, the threefold creation [*trisarga*] is not born from Brahman in the primary sense of the word “born”. Rather, the word *janma* is taken in the sense of superimposition (*āropa*).³²

At this point, Jīva presents several arguments in quick succession as to why superimposition cannot constitute the relationship between the world and Brahman. The disagreeable commentary he is referring to is clearly the *Bhāvārtha-dīpikā* (1.1.1), which states: “*Vinimaya* is transposition—the appearance of one thing in another. That [appearance] passes as reality because of the reality of its substrate [i.e., Brahman]. In this regard, the perception of water in fire, that is, in a mirage, is well known.”³³

³⁰ The full verse from the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* is as follows: *tasmiṁś tadā labdha-rucer mahā-matepriyaśravasy askhalitā matir mamayayāham etat sad-asat sva-māyayāpaśye mayi brahmaṇi kalpitam pare* (1.5.27) The entirety of Śrīdhara Svāmī’s comments on this verse is as follows: *priyam śravo yasya tasmin bhagavati labdha-rucer mamāskhālitaṭpratihataṭ matir abhavad ity anuṣaṅgaḥ. yayā matyā pare prapañcātīte brahma-rūpe mayi sad-asat sthūlaṁ sūkṣmaṁ caitac charitraṁ sva-māyayā svāvidyayā kalpitam na tu vastuto ’sīti tat-kṣaṇam eva paśyāmi*.

³¹ The relevant portion of Śrīdhara’s comments on *Bhāgavata* 1.1.1 is as follows: *satyatve hetuḥ. yatra yasmin brahmaṇi trayāṇāṁ māyā-guṇānāṁ tamo-rajah-sattvānāṁ sargo bhūteṇ dṛiṇya-devatā-rūpo ’mrṣā satyah. yat-satyatayā mīthyā-sargo ’pi satyavat pratīyate tam param satyam ity arthaḥ. atra dṛṣṭāntaḥ — tejo-vāri-mṛdām yathā vinimaya iti. vinimayo vyatyayo ’nyasminn anyāvabhāsaḥ. sa yathā ’dhiṣṭhāna-sattayā sadvat pratīyate ity arthaḥ. tatra tejasi vāri-buddhir marīci-toye prasiddhā. mṛdi kaccādu vāri-buddhir vāriṇi ca kaccādi-buddhir ityādi yathāyatham ūhyam*.

³² *tad evam arthasyāśya śruti-mulatoāt kalpanā-mūlas tv anyārthaḥ svata eva parāstaḥ. tatra ca sāmānyatayā nirdiṣṭānāṁ teja-ādīnāṁ viśeṣatve saṅkramaṇaṁ na śābdikānāṁ hṛdayamadhyārohati. yadi ca tad evāmaṁsyata tadā vāryādīni marīcīkādiṣu yathety evāvakṣyata. kiṁ ca tanmate brahmatas trisargasya mukhyaṁ janma nāsti kintv āropa eva janmety ucyate. (Paramātma-sandarbhā, anuccheda 105).*

³³ See note 31 for the Sanskrit.

Despite such instances of Advaitic concepts emerging in the *Bhāvārtha-dīpikā*, there is broad consensus among scholars that Śrīdhara Svāmī is not a radical nondualist.³⁴ In his excellent study of Śrīdhara's commentary on the *catur-śloka* (the four essential verses of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, as determined by commentators), Okita finds that Śrīdhara's theology was "closer to Rāmānuja's nondualism" (Okita 2014, p. 75), as Śrīdhara sometimes affirms the reality of the world and at other times moves closer toward Advaitic understandings of *māyā* (Okita 2014, p. 123). Sharma finds similar variance (Sharma 1981, pp. 458–59). Indeed, as we have seen above, it is impossible to place Śrīdhara within any predefined Vedantic system, as he moves fluidly and unapologetically from Advaita-leaning positions to more dualistic views.³⁵ This fluidity makes the *Bhāvārtha-dīpikā* enticing to a broad spectrum of commentators, from a variety of sectarian backgrounds, across the subcontinent.

We have argued here that we must take seriously the fact that Jīva too, with his *acintya-bhedābheda* theology, is halfway to nondualism, and this makes Śrīdhara an easy choice—except, of course, when the choice is not easy, requiring a delicate interpretive dance on Jīva's part. We have argued that the acceptability of Śrīdhara's theology is dependent largely on his stance toward Advaitic theories of illusion. On the one hand, Śrīdhara's reticence to build an Advaitic theory of *māyā*, even when there are opportunities to do so, makes it possible for Jīva to use him as a foundation for Caitanya Vaiṣṇava theology. On the other, when Śrīdhara does venture in the direction of *māyā*, risking the reality of the world and the individuality of the self, we encounter the boundary that Jīva draws in *Tattva-sandarbhā*: "Our interpretation . . . will be written in accordance with the views of the great Vaiṣṇava, the revered Śrīdhara Svāmī, only when they conform to the strict Vaiṣṇava standpoint." (Elkman 1986, p. 119).

4. Why Śrīdhara? The Question Revisited

But we have spent much too long on the question of Śrīdhara Svāmī's Advaitic tendencies and the effect that those tendencies have on his status as the canonical Caitanya Vaiṣṇava commentator. Surely, there must be other reasons for Śrīdhara's appeal, other ways in which we can answer the question, "Why Śrīdhara?" Indeed there are, and we will now go through them more briefly.

First, we must note Śrīdhara's special regard for the *Bhāgavata* itself. The second verse of the *Purāṇa* proclaims the text's distinctiveness and preeminence: The *Bhāgavata* is free of fraudulent *dharmas*, truthful in content, salutary for listeners, and productive of God's presence in their hearts. The third line raises a rhetorical question: "This beautiful *Bhāgavata* was written by the great seer. What then (is the use) of others (*kiṃ vā paraiḥ*)?"³⁶ Śrīdhara interprets "others" as "other scriptures (*śāstraiḥ*)," and provides a detailed argument for the *Bhāgavata*'s superiority to the entire gamut of scriptural texts, including those of the *karma-kāṇḍa* (Vedic ritual), *jñāna-kāṇḍa* (philosophical), and *devatā-kāṇḍa* (devotional) genres. The *Bhāgavata*, he says, "is superior to all scriptures, including the three *kāṇḍas*, because it perfectly conveys their meaning. Therefore, this book should be heard continuously."³⁷ Indeed, Śrīdhara's conviction in the *Bhāgavata*'s preeminence is evident in chapter 87 of Book 10, where the Vedas praise Viṣṇu and thus implicitly accept their subordinate status to the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*. Śrīdhara, who is normally brief and pointed in his comments, waxes eloquent in this chapter, ending his commentary on each verse with his own verse composition in praise of Nṛsiṃha. There is little doubt that Śrīdhara accords to the *Bhāgavata* a privileged position above other sacred

³⁴ For example, see De (1961, pp. 17–18), Okita (2014, chp. 3), B.N.K. Sharma (1981, p. 128), Sheridan (1994, pp. 58, 65), and Hardy (1974, p. 32).

³⁵ Ananta Sukla (2010, pp. 74–76) argues that Śrīdhara's theology draws from a variety of traditions, including Vaiṣṇava, Śaiva, Śākta, Vedānta and Sāṅkhya, and he rarely criticizes thinkers from any of these traditions. Sukla (2010, p. 19) also points to the *Bhāvārtha-dīpikā*'s third opening verse, which honors the "two Lords, Mādhava and Ūmādhava [Śiva]."

³⁶ *dharmaḥ projjhita-kaitavo 'tra paramo nirmatsarānāṁ satāṁhvedyaṁ vāstavam atra vastu śivadam tāpa-trayonmūlanamśrīmad-bhāgavate mahā-muni-kṛte kiṃ vā paraiḥ īśvaraśadyo hṛdy avarudhyate 'tra kṛtibhiḥ śūśrūṣubhis tat-kṣaṇāt* (*Bhāgavata* 1.1.2)

³⁷ Śrīdhara Svāmī begins and ends his commentary on BhP 1.1.2 as follows: *idānīm śrotr-pravartanāya śrī-bhāgavatasya kāṇḍa-traya-viśayebhyaḥ sarva-śāstrebyaḥ śraiṣṭhyam darśayati . . . tasmād atra kāṇḍa-trayārthasyāpi yathāvat pratipādanād idam eva sarva-śāstrebyaḥ śraiṣṭhyam, ato nityam etad eva śrotavyam iti bhāvaḥ*

texts, a stance that likely contributed to the *Bhāgavata*'s meteoric rise as the preeminent scripture for subsequent schools of Vaiṣṇavism.³⁸ This regard for the *Bhāgavata* is not to be assumed in other early commentators; Vijayadhvaja Tīrtha, whose commentary would have been available during Jīva's time, interprets the third line of the *Bhāgavata*'s second verse differently. He says, in essence: "This beautiful *Bhāgavata* was written by the great seer [Vyāsa]. What then is the point of dharmic texts written by others (*aparaiḥ*)? The other Purāṇas shine only as long as the beautiful and highest *Bhāgavatam* is not visible."³⁹ He leaves it at that, not comparing the *Bhāgavata* to any texts beyond the Purāṇas. Another early *Bhāgavata* commentator, Lakṣmīdhara, does provide an elaborate argument for the *Bhāgavata*'s preeminence in his *Amṛta-taraṅginī* commentary,⁴⁰ but his praise for the *Bhāgavata* is accompanied by an ardent engagement with the classical Advaita theories of illusion,⁴¹ which would have rendered the commentary unacceptable to most Vaiṣṇava writers.⁴²

A second feature of Śrīdhara's commentary that would have made it particularly appealing to Caitanya Vaiṣṇavas is the central place he accords to Kṛṣṇa in his theology. Let us examine that verse in Book 1, chapter 3, which is of consummate importance to Caitanya Vaiṣṇavas and which Jīva considers to be the *mahā-vākya*, controlling thesis, of the entire *Bhāgavata*,⁴³ because it establishes Kṛṣṇa as the original Lord, the source of all other divinities: "These [aforementioned *avatāras*] are parts and portions of the Supreme Person, but Kṛṣṇa is Bhagavān, the Blessed Lord, himself."⁴⁴ Śrīdhara does two interesting things in this commentary: first, he provides a hierarchical typology of *avatāras* that would have been of great interest to early Caitanya Vaiṣṇava theologians, who develop this into an extensive *avatāra* classification system. Śrīdhara tells us that some *avatāras* are *aṁśas* (parts) of the Supreme Lord, whereas others are *kalā* (smaller portions) and *vibhūti*s (powers). He then gives examples of each type, explaining that Matsya and other (major) *avatāras* are omniscient and omnipotent, but they manifest their *śaktis* only inasmuch as is useful for their roles. Others, such as the four Kumāras, are possessed by powers of the Lord, such as knowledge, as are appropriate to their respective positions. The second task Śrīdhara takes up in this verse is to explicate the particular position of Kṛṣṇa, and from a Caitanya Vaiṣṇava standpoint, he could not have done it better. "Kṛṣṇa is indeed Bhagavān, none other than Nārāyaṇa. Because he manifests all *śaktis*, he is the culmination of all [*avatāras*]."⁴⁵ Although Caitanya Vaiṣṇavas would regard Nārāyaṇa as a portion of Kṛṣṇa, Śrīdhara is halfway there: he places Kṛṣṇa at the head of all *avatāras* and identifies him with their origin, Nārāyaṇa. By way of contrast, we can again point to Vijayadhvaja's comments on this verse, where he takes the word *kṛṣṇa* as merely a reference to Viṣṇu's blackish complexion (*megha-śyāma*), and takes particular care to

³⁸ As Christopher Minkowski (2005) shows, by the time of Nīlakaṇṭha Caturdhara, the seventeenth-century author of the *Bhārata-bhāva-dīpa* commentary on the *Mahābhārata*, the authority and status of *śruti* and *smṛti* were being reversed, with *smṛti* texts, particularly the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, bolstering the status of the Vedas rather than the other way around. See Gupta (2006) for a discussion of Jīva Gosvāmī's role in this *śruti-smṛti* reversal process.

³⁹ The relevant section of Vijayadhvaja Tīrtha's commentary on *Bhāgavata* 1.1.2 states: *kiṁ viśiṣṭe. mahā-muni-kṛte aparaiḥ kiṁ vā ... tathā cokaṭaṁ rājante tāvad anyāni purāṇāni satāṁ gaṇe yāvan na dr̥ṣyate sāksāt śrīmad-bhāgavatam param iti. ... mahā-munir vyāsaḥ sāksānnārāyaṇaḥ tena kṛte prañīte ... dharmādi-kathanaiḥ kiṁ vā prayojanam.*

⁴⁰ See Lakṣmīdhara's commentary on the *Bhāgavata*'s second verse. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for pointing out this reference. Lakṣmīdhara also provides an argument for the *Bhāgavata*'s (and the Purāṇas') preeminent status in his *Bhagavan-nāma-kaumudī*, a text that was quoted appreciatively by Caitanya Vaiṣṇavas (Venkatkrishnan 2015a, chp. 3).

⁴¹ In his commentary on the first verse of the *Bhāgavata*, Lakṣmīdhara employs and defends a panoply of Advaita concepts, including *bimba-pratibimba*, *vivarta*, *anirvacanīya*, *mithyā-jagat*, and *cid-eka-rasa*. See Venkatkrishnan (2018) for a full discussion of Lakṣmīdhara's engagement with Advaita Vedānta as well as other salient features of his commentary.

⁴² The relationship between Lakṣmīdhara and Śrīdhara is not entirely clear. Venkatkrishnan notes that, among other confluences, "the first chapter of the BNK [*Bhagavan-nāma-kaumudī*] can be considered an elaboration of Śrīdhara's brief and scattered comments on the power of the divine name into a full-fledged theology" (Venkatkrishnan 2015a, p. 72). On the hand, Lakṣmīdhara's *Amṛta-taraṅginī* commentary, Venkatkrishnan says elsewhere (Venkatkrishnan 2018, p. 55), "seems to show no awareness of Śrīdhara's writing whatsoever."

⁴³ For a detailed discussion of the role of *mahāvākya*s in Jīva Gosvāmī's theology, see Aleksandar Uskokov (Uskokov 2018).

⁴⁴ *Bhāgavata* 1.3.28: *ete cāṁśa-kalāḥ punisatḥ kṛṣṇas tu bhagavān svayamindrāri-vyākulaṁ lokam mṛdayanti yuge yuge*

⁴⁵ *kṛṣṇas tu bhagavān nārāyaṇa eva āviṣkṛta-sarvaśaktitvāt sarveṣāṁ prayojanam*

identify the referent as Śeṣaśāyī, the Lord who lies upon the serpent Śeṣa, calling him the *mūla-rūpī*, the original form.⁴⁶ There is no interpretive space here for a Caitanya Vaiṣṇava commentator.

We could point to other elements in Śrīdhara's theology that make him appealing to Caitanya Vaiṣṇavas, such as his discussion of the power of Kṛṣṇa's name in the Ajāmila episode,⁴⁷ or the beginnings of a theory of *bhakti-rasa* in his commentary on *Bhāgavata* 10.43.17.⁴⁸ But in the interest of space, we shall limit ourselves to one final observation about Śrīdhara's commentarial method that may explain his appeal not just among Caitanya Vaiṣṇavas but among readers of the *Bhāgavata* more generally.

Despite the theological choices and innovations we have documented above—that demonstrate Śrīdhara's creative voice as a commentator—his exegetical method is more restrained than most commentators who succeed him. Śrīdhara's word definitions and grammatical parses tend to be what one would suspect on a first reading of the verse, with little recourse to obscure etymologies or creative resolutions of *sandhi*. The alternative interpretations, beginning with *yad vā*, that so delight later *Bhāgavata* commentators are less frequent in the *Bhāvārtha-dīpikā*, even when there is ambiguity in grammar or *sandhi*. Take, for example, the second verse of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* that we examined above. Vīrarāghava and Vijayadhvaṇya give several alternate explanations of words throughout the verse,⁴⁹ placing it carefully within the theological frameworks of their own traditions, and thus both commentators have much to say on this important verse. Śrīdhara, on the other hand, offers an alternative gloss to but a single word and does not acknowledge any ambiguity in *sandhi*. This makes his comments relatively short (although still rather long by his own standard). Śrīdhara's creative exegesis and theological digressions become even less frequent and more limited in scope as we move further into the *Purāṇa*. There are, of course, exceptions to Śrīdhara's typical brevity and exegetical restraint, most obviously in his commentary on the *Bhāgavata*'s first verse,⁵⁰ where he offers alternative interpretations of several words, along with two ways to resolve the *sandhi* of *trisargomṛṣā*.⁵¹ But even here, Śrīdhara is remarkably restrained compared to most other commentators, who sometimes offer multiple, unrelated interpretations of the entire verse, spanning several pages. Indeed, the first verse receives some of the longest and most complex commentaries of any verse in the *Bhāgavata*.

We can offer one more example of Śrīdhara's commentarial restraint, from Book 3, chapters 15–16 of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*—the story of Jaya and Vijaya's fall from grace. Jaya and Vijaya serve as Viṣṇu's attendants, guarding the innermost gates of Vaikuṇṭha. When the four child-sages, the Kumāras,

⁴⁶ Another interesting feature of Vijayadhvaṇya's commentary on this verse is that he explicitly rejects the possibility of gradations of *avatāras* (as Śrīdhara outlines) as well as simultaneous difference and nondifference between the Lord and the *avatāras* (as the Caitanya theologians claim for certain kinds of *avatāras*). Rather, Vijayadhvaṇya insists that all *avatāras* are nondifferent from each other and from the *avatārī*, the original Lord Viṣṇu. The relevant portion of his commentary on 1.3.28 runs as follows: *ete śeṣa-śāyinaḥ parama-puruṣasya svāmīśa-kalāḥ svarūpāmśāvatāraḥ na tatrāmśāśāyīnām bhedaḥ pratibimbāmśavat. kim uktam bhavati. kṛṣṇo megha-śyāmaḥ śeṣa-śāyī mūla-rūpī padma-nābho bhagavān svayaṁ tu svayaṁ eva na śākṣīśākhāvat bhedaḥbhedopitī bhāvāt.*

⁴⁷ See *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, Book Six, chapters 1–3, for the story of Ajāmila's life and near-death experience. Gupta and Valpey (2016, chp. 13) provide an overview of multiple commentaries on this episode, focusing on the commentators' discussion of the power of the divine names.

⁴⁸ *Bhāgavata* 10.43.17 describes the different ways in which Kṛṣṇa was perceived when he entered Kamsa's wrestling arena in Mathurā. In his commentary on this verse, Śrīdhara immediately introduces the concept of *rasa*: "Bhagavān, who is the embodiment of the multitude of all *rasas* beginning with amorous love, appeared in accordance with the wishes of each person there, and not in his fullness to everyone. . . . The *rasas* which were manifest in the wrestlers and members of the audience are delineated in order by this verse, '[The *rasas* are] wrath, wonder, amorous love, mirth, heroism, compassion, terror, disgust, tranquility, and devotion (*bhakti*) with love (*prema*).'"

⁴⁹ For example, Vīrarāghava writes: *yad vā matsara-śabdāḥ kāmādinām pradarśanārthaḥ sama-damādy-upetānām mumukṣūnām dharmāḥ.* (*Bhāgavata* 1.1.2). See note 39 above for other relevant portions of Vijayadhvaṇya's commentary on *Bhāgavata* 1.1.2.

⁵⁰ As mentioned above, Śrīdhara's commentary on the Śruti-stuti (*Bhāgavata* Book Ten, chapter 87) is also unusually long and complex.

⁵¹ The *sandhi* of *trisargomṛṣā* can be resolved as *trisargaḥ mṛṣā* "the threefold creation is false," and *trisargaḥ amṛṣā* "the threefold creation is not false." This, of course, has significant theological ramifications, and Śrīdhara incorporates both interpretations into his comments.

arrive at these gates seeking to see the Lord, the gatekeepers turn them away, not recognizing the boys' greatness. The sages become angry and curse the gatekeepers to fall to earth and take three successive births as demonic enemies of Viṣṇu. Jaya and Vijaya instantly recognize their folly and repent, as Viṣṇu hastens to the scene to resolve the situation and give the sages what they had longed for—an audience with the Lord. At this point, the sages also feel deeply remorseful for their angry behavior, but Viṣṇu is unperturbed; he reassures both sides that all this was part of his divine plan. He asks Jaya and Vijaya to accept the curse and requests the sages to ensure that the gatekeepers' return to Vaikuṇṭha is swift.⁵²

The story of Jaya and Vijaya's fall from Vaikuṇṭha has intrigued commentators because it demonstrates what is said to be impossible—a liberated devotee of God falling from his divine abode to earth. This is the question that occupies commentators: Did Jaya and Vijaya truly deserve to be cursed and to fall from their posts in heaven? Who is to blame for their cursing—the four child-sages, the gatekeepers, Viṣṇu himself, or some combination of the three parties? The *Bhāgavata* itself incriminates different individuals at various points in the story, and the commentators duly acknowledge the text's attributions of guilt. But each commentator also has his own sense of what went wrong and who is truly at fault. Vallabhācārya, for example, makes note of the fact that although Vaikuṇṭha has seven gates, the sages were able to pass through six without difficulty.⁵³ The first six gates represent Viṣṇu's six excellences—majesty, strength, fame, beauty, wisdom, and renunciation—which the sages were qualified to perceive. But the Kumāras did not possess the quality necessary to enter the seventh gate, namely *bhakti*. Thus, even before the sages have uttered any curse, Vallabha makes it clear that the sages did not deserve to be there, and so the gatekeepers cannot truly be blamed for obstructing their path.⁵⁴ Nevertheless, the gatekeepers were not entirely innocent, says Vallabha, for they harbored pride in their status as the Lord's attendants, and pride is the characteristic quality of demons.

The other Vaiṣṇava commentators tend to be less critical of the sages at the outset, but they too shift their sympathies to Jaya and Vijaya later in the story. Jīva takes the word *avadhārya* ("ascertained") to indicate that the gatekeepers had not recognized the four naked boys and thus their offense was unintentional. Vijayadhvaṇya says that the gatekeepers' immediate repentance shows that they were not at fault.⁵⁵ When Viṣṇu beseeches the sages to make his attendants' exile short, the Vaiṣṇava commentators note the Lord's heartfelt concern for his devotees. When Viṣṇu finally takes blame upon himself, by claiming that he ordained the curse, Viśvanātha declares that both sides were faultless, since the entire event was set into motion by the Lord for the purpose of intensifying his loving relationships with his devotees.

All throughout the episode, Śrīdhara seems not to have a stake in the argument. He sticks closely to the *Bhāgavata's* explicit attribution of guilt, emphasizing the sages' qualification and the

⁵² The story of Jaya and Vijaya is one of the few narratives to be told twice within the *Bhāgavata*, in Books Three and Seven. In its second iteration, the story serves as part of an answer to the question of whether God behaves partially when he kills some and saves others. Kṛṣṇa's slaying of the hateful king Śiśupāla, we are assured, was in fact a blessing in disguise, because Śiśupāla was one of the two gatekeepers, and this was his last birth on earth as a demon. But this explanation of Śiśupāla's death simply pushes the question further back in time—did Jaya and Vijaya truly deserve to be cursed and to fall from their posts in heaven? This is the question that interests commentators in their commentaries on the Jaya-Vijaya episode.

⁵³ See Vallabha's remarkable commentary on *Bhāgavata* 3.15.27: "Here the sages passed through six gates without lingering, but at the seventh they saw two celestial beings holding clubs. Both were of equal age and they were beautifully dressed with the most excellent crowns, earrings, and armlets."

⁵⁴ But what do we make of the *Bhāgavata's* statement, in 3.15.31, that the sages were most deserving (*svarhattamāḥ*) of visiting Vaikuṇṭha? Vallabha explains that because the sages were *jñānīs* (men of wisdom), they were certainly more deserving than mere ascetics or others with good behavior. Even for them, however, entering the Lord's private chambers would have been a major transgression (presumably because they were not yet devotees, as discussed above), and allowing this to happen would have been a mistake on the part of the gatekeepers. To protect both sides from this offense, the sages were forbidden entry into the Lord's private chamber.

⁵⁵ See Jīva's and Vijayadhvaṇya's commentaries on *Bhāgavata* 3.15.35. The verse is as follows: "When the sages uttered these terrible words, the gatekeepers realized [*avadhārya*] that this was a *brāhmaṇa's* curse, which cannot be counteracted by any number of weapons. The servants of Hari became very fearful and immediately fell to the ground, grasping the sages' feet in desperation."

gatekeepers' mistake.⁵⁶ When the text says that the gatekeepers' conduct was displeasing to the Lord, every commentator must explain why it was displeasing. Śrīdhara simply looks to the next chapter, where the fault is identified as disrespect of *brāhmaṇas*.⁵⁷ He moves with the narrative, apportioning blame as it is handed out by the text—first to the gatekeepers for insulting *brāhmaṇas* (3.15.30), then to the sages for cursing two sinless persons (3.16.25), and finally to Viṣṇu for making this part of his masterplan (3.16.26). Śrīdhara makes little attempt to harmonize these conflicting accounts of culpability and causality, focusing instead on the verse at hand and its immediate narrative context.⁵⁸

5. Conclusions

We have explored the question “Why Śrīdhara?” from two directions. First, we asked, “What was it about early Caitanya Vaiṣṇava theology that made it amenable to Śrīdhara Svāmī?” and second, “What was it about Śrīdhara that made his work so attractive to Caitanya Vaiṣṇava authors (and a wide variety of other commentators)?” As we attempted to answer these questions, we saw the historical and theological confluences that made Śrīdhara Svāmī and the Caitanya Vaiṣṇavas residents of a shared religious landscape, while carefully noting the boundaries between them. We also studied Śrīdhara Svāmī's distinctive commentarial voice, often presenting itself in paradoxical forms—his creativity as an exegete alongside his restraint, his focus on Kṛṣṇa together with his theological fluidity, and his insistence on following the flow of the text along with his resistance to harmonizing it.

There is a conversation in the *Caitanya-caritāmṛta* that is worth noting here, for it indirectly points to these facets of Śrīdhara's method. A Vaiṣṇava named Vallabha Bhaṭṭa visits Caitanya and expresses his dissatisfaction with the *Bhāvārtha-dīpikā*: “I cannot accept Śrīdhara's explanations. He explains things by accepting whatever he reads wherever he reads it. There is no consistency [in his explanations], and therefore I do not accept him as the master (*svāmī*).” (3.113–114). Although couched as a criticism here, these features of Śrīdhara's work—attention to a verse's context, little attempt at achieving theological consistency, the lack of an easily-identifiable theological system, reticence toward conspicuous exegetical creativity, and the resulting brevity—have helped make his commentary virtuously synonymous with the plain sense of the *Bhāgavata* in the eyes of later authors.

And yet there is commentarial play in Śrīdhara's conservative method—a willingness to dance between opposing poles of dualism and nondualism, to push the boundaries of *sampradāya*, to dabble in emerging theories of *bhakti-rasa*, to follow the *Bhāgavata*'s narratives wherever they might lead. That playfulness allows Śrīdhara to write a lucid commentary and himself remain an enigma, to be claimed by all and belong to none. Perhaps Jīva was right in comparing Śrīdhara's commentary to a casket of jewels, hiding a *cintāmaṇi* gem from the eyes of all who were indifferent to its value.⁵⁹ For whether one followed Śrīdhara's lead or resisted him, indifference, it seems, was not an option.

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⁵⁶ See *Bhāvārtha-dīpikā* 3.15.30 and 3.16.26.

⁵⁷ *Bhāvārtha-dīpikā* 3.15.30: *vāta-raśanān nagnān vṛddhān api pañca-varṣa-bālakavat pratīyamānān. ca-kārād ājñayā ca. askhalayatām nivāritavantaū. na tat skhalanam arhantīti tathā tān. aho atrāpi dhārṣṭyam ity evaṁ teṣān tejo vihasya. bhagavato brahmaṇya-devasya pratikūlaṁ śīlaṁ yayoh.*

⁵⁸ In our attempt to determine the reasons for Śrīdhara's influence, we might note another fruitful area of inquiry, namely, the social networks that conveyed the *Bhāvārtha-dīpikā* across much of the subcontinent less than a century after its composition, drawing the attention of those who were his near-contemporaries, such as Bahirā Jātaveda in Maharashtra and Vijayadhvaja Tīrtha in the south. At present, we know precious little about the *Bhāvārtha-dīpikā*'s socio-political context, its precise location of origin, or the intellectual networks that drew texts and their authors from Orissa (where the *Bhāvārtha-dīpikā* was presumably composed) to other parts of the subcontinent. We hope further research will shed light on these questions, although they lie outside the scope of this article.

⁵⁹ See Okita (2014, p. 103).

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