

## Chapter 38. Serpent Kaliya Humbled

### Krishna takes human form in sheer sport

“Listen, O King, to this momentous event,” said Suka. “The Divine Boy, Gopala, God, had taken human form in sheer sport. No one could know the significance of His movements, for He was never in the habit of telling others about His divine sports (*leelas*), either before or after. One could only observe and obey. No one could guess their nature or plumb their meaning, whoever he might be, whatever his attainments.

Krishna grew up like human children and attained the age of five. One day, He collected the cattle secretly, so that His parents didn’t know anything about it. Even His elder brother, who generally would accompany Him, was unaware of these goings-on. Krishna got His comrades together, and they went with the cattle to the bank of the Yamuna river. He took them to a deep pool in the river, which people generally avoided.

### The poisonous pool

“That pool had a sinister history. Such pools are naturally stagnant and slushy, but this one was blue in colour and boiling hot. The water bubbled ceaselessly, emitting steam into the upper air, and thus a cloud hung over it. Whoever breathed that atmosphere, fouled by the fumes, breathed his last, to the consternation and amazement of all. Birds that innocently flew over that pool were so fatally poisoned that they flapped their wings violently in despair and rolled down dead into its depths.

“Everyone in Gokula knew all about this mortal trap, this deadly wonder. They avoided it. They warned their children against it and vigilantly prevented their cattle from grazing anywhere near it. Of course, Krishna’s comrades protested vehemently and pleaded with Him not to go near the pool. They prayed, loud and long, but it was all in vain. He asserted that He had to go to that very pool; that was His predetermined destination that day. The boys drew Him back and did their best to prevent the inevitable ‘disaster’. He shook them off and, removing His clothes, announced that He would delight in swimming in that poison pool!

“The boys couldn’t muster enough courage to warn Him aloud against the terrors of that pool. He brushed aside their mild protestations. With a certain perverse will of His own, He climbed a tree on the bank and plunged into the horrid pool, by the side of the bank. He didn’t surface for a long time. Krishna was the very breath of the cowherd boys’ lives, and they were overwhelmed with fear. They gathered round the pool and started calling Him in unbearable agony, sobbing and shedding tears of extreme grief.

### Krishna battles the poison-spitting serpent

“Meanwhile, Gopala appeared above the waters, shaking the pool (as if an earthquake was rocking it) with the strokes of His swimming. Suddenly, they saw a huge serpent following Him, spitting poison and belching fire through its glowing eyes, like a volcano. The boys could not look on at this dreadful scene without bawling out, in uncontrollable anguish, ‘Krishna! Come on to the bank. Come this way. Come to this bank.’

“Krishna swam about as if He didn’t hear their prayers. He was happy in the pool, thrilled with excitement and joy. At last, the serpent succeeded in pursuing Krishna round the pool through the high tossing waves. It

wound itself round His body, gradually tightening the grip. Seeing this, some boys ran as fast as they could to Gokula and broke the news to Nanda and Yasoda, Krishna's father and mother. They wept aloud while telling them what had happened.

“Nanda and Yasoda, with all the cowherd boys and girls and the entire population of Gokula, ran toward the poison pool, urged on by the fear that some dire calamity was about to overtake Krishna. Balarama, the elder brother, was among them. He knew Krishna's strength and skill, so he calmed the parents. He assured them that no calamity could befall Krishna. He consoled and conferred confidence in many ways.

“Within a short time, the bank of the river was packed thick with people. On all sides, the cry of despair, ‘Krishna, Krishna!’ resounded from every throat, steeped in grief. Many fainted and lost consciousness when they saw Krishna and the serpent. Oh, it was indeed a heartrending sight!

“Many maids couldn't bear to see Krishna caught in the coils of that mighty monster, dragged down into the blood-red waters one moment, pulling Himself up the next, struggling valiantly with the serpent, who was emitting fiery sparks of poison. Yasoda and many cowherd maids swooned and fell on the sands. They were nursed back to consciousness by others. When they came to, they wept plaintively and called out the name of their beloved Krishna.

### **Cowherd maidens pray for Krishna's victory**

“My dear child, where was this horrible serpent hiding all this while? Why did it emerge now?” lamented Yasoda, in despair.

“A few of His comrades sobbed, ‘Why can't the serpent strike its fangs on us instead of wounding Krishna? Can't it release Gopala?’ Some cowherd maidens got ready to plunge into the pool so that the serpent might give up Krishna and attack them instead. ‘We'll give up our lives to save Krishna,’ they declared. But Balarama stood in their way. He assured them that Krishna would come out unscathed, that no harm could approach Him. He called out to Krishna to come to them soon, after triumphing over the monster.

“Many cowherd maidens (*gopis*) prayed ardently for Krishna's victory. ‘Krishna's safety is the safety of all the worlds. Our Krishna is the sole sovereign of all worlds. Therefore, may Krishna be released quickly from the serpent's strangle hold.’ Their prayers were addressed to the very Krishna whom they wished to save by means of the prayer! They opened their eyes even while praying, to find out whether He had released Himself already. The huge gathering on the riverbank was waiting the release of Krishna with eyes that didn't even wink. They were overpowered by fear and anxiety, hope and faith.

“At that moment —O, how can I contemplate and describe the scene, to you, King?” Suka could not continue. He couldn't suppress the flow of spiritual bliss (*ananda*), grief, wonder, and adoration that rose from his heart. He was so overcome that he covered his face behind his clasped palms in a vain effort to suppress his tears.

Parikshith saw this and exclaimed, “Master! Master! What wonder is this? What happened later? What calamity intervened that made you grieve like this? Please tell me quick.”

Suka recovered his composure, wiping the flow of tears with the end of his ochre robe. “*Maharaja!* No calamity took place, but another wonder happened. Krishna grew so fast, so big, and so tall every moment that the serpent had to uncoil from around Him, ring by ring. When the cowherd boys and girls saw the little child

growing before their very eyes, they were struck with amazement and joy. At last, the serpent had to release its hold. It was too exhausted to do any harm. Still, its anger was unabated, and it vomited poison into the waters and the air. It lifted its hoods every few moments and fixed its glare on Krishna as if its desire to finish Him was still unquenched.

“Krishna caught it by its tail and whirled the serpent pretty fast. He beat the surface of the water with its body. This forced the serpent to hang down its heads, but with great effort it struggled to keep them erect over the waters. Then, Krishna jumped upon it and, holding the tail in one hand, decided to dance upon the line of hoods! The serpent couldn’t bear the weight of the Lord, stepping merrily from hood to hood. It bled profusely from nose and mouth and whined piteously through pain and shame. It could scarcely breathe. It was about to die.

### **The serpent’s consorts pray to Krishna for pardon**

“The people gathered on the bank shouted in joy and confidence, ‘Krishna! Come over to the bank now. You saved us all from this monster. The crisis is over. You have won the victory. Our prayers have been answered. We have won the fruit of our good deeds.’

While the cowherds were thus exulting over the amazing turn of events, the serpentesses, who were the consorts of the monster, rose from the depths of the pool, sobbing aloud and in great anguish. They fell at Krishna’s feet and prayed, ‘Lord! You have incarnated with the avowed object of punishing the wicked and the vicious, so your trampling on this monster and curbing his pride is right and proper. It is just. You have merely carried out Your task and mission. But, however cruel our husband was, we’re sure that planting Your Feet on his heads transformed his nature. Pardon him, O Lord, and give us back our husband, with your gracious blessing. Save him and bless him that he will no longer cause harm to any living thing.’

“The Lord condescended to grant their prayers. He pardoned the monster, Kaliya. He released him with the admonition: ‘Henceforth, don’t inflict injury on anyone without provocation. Be pure (*sathwic*) in nature. I bless you that no one will harm you and provoke you into vengeance. You carry My footprints on your heads, so even your natural enemy, the Garuda eagle, won’t harm you anymore. Go and live in peace.’”