

# THE THEOLOGY OF DEPENDENCE IN THE GOPĪ VASTRĀHARAṆA AS PORTRAYED BY NĀRĀYAṆA TĪRTHA

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## ABSTRACT

*Śrī Śiva Nārāyaṇa Tīrtha occupies a distinguished place among the composers of Karṇāṭaka saṅgīta for his profound contribution to devotional literature and music. His celebrated work, Śrī Kṛṣṇa Līlā Taraṅgiṇī, stands as a unique blend of literature, music, dance, and dramatic expression within the Yakṣagāna tradition. Drawing from the divine episodes of the tenth canto of the Bhāgavata Purāṇa, he weaves together prose, poetry, and kīrtana-s with remarkable artistic depth and spiritual intensity. The work, structured into twelve taraṅgā-s, narrates key events from Kṛṣṇa's incarnation through various significant episodes of his life. This paper seeks to examine the Bhakti elements embedded throughout Śrī Kṛṣṇa Līlā Taraṅgiṇī, exploring how devotion is expressed through its literary, musical, and dramatic features. By analyzing selected passages from the fifth taraṅga, the study highlights the ways in which Nārāyaṇa Tīrtha conveys spiritual emotion, divine love, surrender, and the devotional essence central to Vaiṣṇava tradition. The paper aims to provide a broader understanding of the devotional framework that underpins some of the examples, offering insight into its continued significance within devotional and performing arts traditions.*

**Keywords:** Śrī Kṛṣṇa Līlā Taraṅgiṇī, Śiva Nārāyaṇa Tīrtha, Taraṅgā-s, Bhakti Elements.

## INTRODUCTION

*Bhakti*, or devotion, remains one of the most profound spiritual currents in Indian religious and literary traditions. It is characterized by elements such as intense love and surrender to the divine, emotional longing, humility, and a search for spiritual union with the beloved deity. The essence of *Bhakti* is expressed through poetry, music, ritual, and dance and transcends philosophical boundaries, accepting everyone as potential seekers. The devotional path frequently combines self-offering, personal intimacy with the lord, and emotional fervor (*Bhāva*), giving rise to an extensive collection of devotional compositions throughout Indian history.

Śrī Nārāyaṇa Tīrtha, celebrated as a saint-composer, stands as a radiant figure in the South Indian Bhakti tradition. Born in the Telugu-speaking region of Kāja near Maṅgaḷagiri in Guntur district to a Smārta Brahmin family, he lived approximately between 1650 and 1745 CE as ascertained by palm-leaf manuscripts from the Sarasvati mahal Library in Taṅjāvūru. With the surname Tallāvarjula, and possibly the birth name Gōvinda śāstri, he demonstrated profound mastery over Sanskrit, Telugu, classical music, and various śāstra-s like *Vēdānta* and *Tarka*. His spiritual journey was marked by deep devotion, renunciation, Vēdāntic scholarship, and artistic inventiveness that thrived in South India's dynamic cultural environment.

Nārāyaṇa Tīrtha's magnum opus, the *Śrī Kṛṣṇa Līlā Taraṅgiṇī*, is a monumental *Yakṣagāna*-style musical drama composed in Sanskrit. Known for its Taraṅgaṁs, it spans the tenth canto from the birth of Lord *Kṛṣṇa* to Rukmiṇi Kalyāṇam. These Taraṅga-s embody the very spirit of *Bhakti*, blending lyrical beauty, melodic richness, and philosophical depth. Structured with Pallavi, Anupallavi, and Caraṇam and sometimes enriched with rhythmic passages (*jatis*), each Taraṅgaṁ serves both as a poetic dialogue in its dramatic context and as an independent devotional hymn. The work's artistic design includes many literary forms, *Ślōkā-s*, prose passages, *cūrṇika-s*, *daruvu-s*, *dvipada-s*, and *catuspada-s*.

By upholding the tradition of repeated adoration of the Lord through music and dance, Nārāyaṇa Tīrtha's Taraṅga-s have become deeply embedded in the devotional and cultural practices of Andhra, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, and Karnataka. These Taraṅga-s are performed both in dance and in vocal music. The following study will demonstrate, an analytical exploration of the Taraṅga-s reveals their layered bhakti elements and their enduring contribution to the literary and spiritual heritage of India.

## STUDY AREA

This study is centered on exploring the devotional elements embedded within *Śrī Kṛṣṇa Līlā Taraṅgiṇī*, the celebrated literary-musical work of Śrī Nārāyaṇa Tīrtha. The text, composed in the *Yakṣagāna* tradition, presents various episodes from the life of Lord *Kṛṣṇa* through prose, poetry, and musical compositions.

The study focuses particularly on those sections of the work in which devotional emotion, and narrative depth, appear most vividly. These segments provide rich material for understanding how Nārāyaṇa Tīrtha conveys *Bhakti* through literary imagery, and dramatic presentation.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study is based on a qualitative textual analysis of selected taraṅgas from *Śrī Kṛṣṇa Līlā Taraṅgiṇī*, the devotional and spiritual composition of Śrī Śiva Nārāyaṇa Tīrtha. A few representative sections from the work were chosen and examined carefully to understand their devotional meaning, emotional expression, and interpretative depth.

## GŌPI VASTRAPAHARAṆAM

Among the devotees of Lord Kṛṣṇa, the highest devotees are the Gōpikas. The honor of expressing such sweet devotion in his unique *Bhakti* style belongs to Śrī Nārāyaṇa Tīrtha. This episode relates to the 22<sup>nd</sup> chapter in the 10<sup>th</sup> canto of the *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam*. In the fifth Taraṅgam, the episode where the Gōpikas leave their clothes and enter the river is described, along with how Lord Kṛṣṇa playfully teases the Gōpikas in this context.

In Vedic custom, girls aged ten to fourteen worship Śiva or Durga for a worthy husband. The Vṛndāvana gōpīs, already devoted to Kṛṣṇa, still observed the Kātyāyani vow in Hēmanta season (just prior to the winter season), eating simple haviṣyāna and bathing in the Yamuna before worship. The unmarried gōpīs made a sand idol of Goddess Durga and worshiped her daily. They prayed only to marry Kṛṣṇa, and though Vaiṣṇavas don't worship demigods for material gain, the gōpīs worshiped Kātyāyani purely to deepen their love for Kṛṣṇa, praying for him as their husband throughout the month with sincere devotion.

Every morning, the gōpīs bathed together in the Yamuna, singing Kṛṣṇa's glories and leaving their clothes on the riverbank as per tradition. Understanding their pure love and desire to marry Him, Kṛṣṇa blessed and fulfilled their prayers. In the fifth Taraṅgam The First Kīrtana is "AyAhi vraja yuvati brunda tvaraya mAyAhi salilE"

In this, Lord Kṛṣṇa climbed up a tree and tied the clothes he held in his hand into a bundle on a branch. Smiling, he playfully teased the Gōpikas. (Because of their great affection for Hari, the event was a joyous one for them.) Kṛṣṇa playfully takes the garments of the Gōpikas while they are bathing in a pond. Seated smiling on a tree branch, Kṛṣṇa calls out to the Gōpikas, urging them to come out of the water to retrieve their clothes. He assures them of his intimate and loving relationship, reminding them that he is their closest companion. Symbolically, the robes represent the veil of Māyā that obscures the true nature of the mind. This playful act reflects both transcendental and spiritual dimensions, illustrating how Kṛṣṇa's divine play reveals spiritual truths beyond the material cover.

Great Vaiṣṇava saints like Śrī Caitanya Mahāprabhu, Śrī Jīva Gōsvāmī, Śrī Sanātana Gōsvāmī, and Śrī Viśvanātha Cakravartī Ṭhākura have described Māyā in various profound ways, each sharing their realizations born from deep, unwavering devotion. In this, Śrī Nārāyaṇa Tīrtha similarly illustrates the distinction between the material and the spiritual realms in his own unique style.

Ultimately, only a devotee endowed with boundless, unalloyed devotion can truly understand that the love the Gōpikas have for Kṛṣṇa is utterly pure and transcendental. This teaching is well known from the Bhagavadgīta, delivered by the Supreme Lord thousands of years ago for the benefit of humanity.

For, as Kṛṣṇa clearly declares in Bhagavadgītā 7.14: "*daiivī hy eṣā guṇa-mayī*" This divine energy of Mine, composed of the three modes of material nature, is extremely difficult to overcome. But those who take complete shelter of Me alone can easily cross beyond it. It is also established that for those with pure devotion. Kṛṣṇa is always present before them.

Thus, only through such exclusive surrender and devotion can one perceive the spiritual purity of the Gōpikas' love for Kṛṣṇa.

Here, the Supreme God Kṛṣṇa, while speaking with the Gōpikas, imparts profound philosophical detachment (*Vairāgyam*) and teaches the importance of surrendering to Him without attachment to the fruits of actions. He advises that becoming calm-minded and dedicating all actions to Kṛṣṇa is the most auspicious path. Also, Lord Nandagōpāla instructs the Gōpikas in a spiritual manner, without preaching philosophy, urging them to come quickly from the pond with a hint that their mothers are approaching and reveals the philosophical truth that He is the cause of all beings and worlds. It appears He tests the consciousness of the Gōpikas, whether they are attached to the body or devoted with self-surrender to guide them properly.

Śrī Nārāyaṇa Tīrtha beautifully incorporates the divine playful words of Kṛṣṇa with the devotees to bring them joy in this Taraṅgam. The Lord accepts the *karma* and circumstances of his devoted souls as His own and remains ever compassionate and joyful with them, as expressed in Nārāyaṇa tīrtha's sweet compositions. This is supported by Bhagavadgīta's teachings, notably in Chapter 9, Verse 22, "*ananyās cintayanto mām*" which assures that the Lord takes care of those devoted to Him with exclusive faith, and Chapter 18, Verse 66, "*sarva-dharmān parityajya*" which advocates abandoning all duties and seeking refuge in the Lord for liberation from all sins. Kṛṣṇa advises giving up all worldly duties and surrendering solely to Him as the highest spiritual dharma.

In the Second Kīrtana of Fifth Taraṅgam Śrī Nārāyaṇa Tīrtha Explains "*Sri Kṛṣṇa tAvaka mahimA kEna varNyatE*"

O Kṛṣṇa! Who can truly describe Your greatness?

The inner nature of Śrī Kṛṣṇa is not easy to understand. The deeper meaning behind His actions was not immediately clear to the Gōpikas at that moment, so they pleaded earnestly with Him.

We offer our respects to You. Please give us back the garments that cover our bodies, which the world should not see.

Here, Śrī Kṛṣṇa's act of taking the garments and His playful conversation carry a deeper significance. In His reply within the story, Kṛṣṇa reveals the inner meaning: worshiping Him with attachment to the body yields no true benefit. To those who surrender themselves to Him completely, mind, speech, and action, He Himself approaches them and serves them with love. Such is the nature of Yaśōda's beloved son. Kṛṣṇa had no doubts about Gōpikas devotion, but admiring their immense love, He appeared before them only to delight them and give them joy.

O Kṛṣṇa, seated upon this Punnāga tree! You are the best among men, born in a noble lineage. You are free from faults. Never before have You been blamed or accused by anyone.

Kṛṣṇa is dear to all beings. He is the supreme among devotees and the Supreme Person Himself. He exists in all worlds and is untouched by faults. Wherever He is present, happiness naturally arises. The whole world knows this. Considering Kṛṣṇa to be merely human is ignorance. Kṛṣṇa Himself declares this in Bhagavadgītā in the chapter 9 verse 11, He says "*avajānanti mām mūḍhā mānuṣīm tanum āśritam*" - "Only the ignorant think of Me as an ordinary human being. They fail to understand My divine, transcendental nature and that I am the Supreme Lord who controls everything."

Here, Gōpikas say - You are hiding on the tree. Remove our sorrow and grant us happiness. Show us that You are truly a person of noble character.

"O Kṛṣṇa! You are virtuous. We do not know whether we truly understand the inner purpose behind Your taking away our clothes. We love You deeply. Do not make us suffer. Protect us. Do not break our faith and devotion. Please show that You are compassionate."

This scene is beautifully described by Śrī Nārāyaṇa Tīrtha in his work.

O Kṛṣṇa, shining with a charming smile and a radiant, pure form! You are the Ādi Nārāyaṇa, the son of Nanda and Yaśōda. Do not trouble us.

The beauty of Kṛṣṇa's face is indescribable. Throughout the Bhāgavatam, one never finds sorrow reflected on His face. His sweet smile is not an act, it is His very nature. The Supreme Being, Acyuta, the foundation of all existence, appears in various incarnations to guide humanity, protect the righteous, and destroy evil. How could such a being cause pain to anyone? Thus, the Gōpikas humbly expressed their request with deep devotion.

With your yellow garments and moon-like radiant face, O Kṛṣṇa, You lack nothing. You are the One who sustains all the worlds.

Śrī Nārāyaṇa Tīrtha implicitly depicts Lord Kṛṣṇa as the Supreme Personality in this Kīrtana with terms such as Sarva Pālaka, Lokēṣa, Puruṣōttama, and Akhandīta. He also transforms himself into Gōpika and delivers lovely sentences to Kṛṣṇa, showing his supremacy.

O Gōpāla! O Nārāyaṇa! What can we do now?

("Will you not return our garments?") These heartfelt words of the Gōpikas were expressed by Śrī Nārāyaṇa Tīrtha in the form of a melodious Kīrtana.

The kīrtana concludes in a deeply prayerful mood, with the Gōpikas humbly asking Lord Kṛṣṇa to guide them on what they should do next. Nārāyaṇa Tīrtha uses the name 'Gōpāla,' meaning the Lord who controls all senses, indicating that the Gōpikas had fully surrendered their minds and senses to Him. Relying entirely on His guidance, they turned to Kṛṣṇa alone for direction.

When the Gōpikas completed their sincere prayers, Lord Kṛṣṇa, ever compassionate toward them, gently and reverently replied. In the third kīrtana of the fifth Tarāṅgaṃ, Śrī Nārāyaṇa Tīrtha describes this moment.

"AvaraNam mama na hi tE dAtum bhAvaya gOpa vadhUjana brnda"

Kṛṣṇa: O Gōpikas! I do not have any covers (garments). Here, the term covering has two meanings:

Clothing and The covering of Māyā. Both interpretations are applicable throughout the discourse. "Now think carefully."

Śrī Kṛṣṇa teases the Gōpikas by saying, "I do not have any garments to give you; you think of what to do now," and taking away their clothes. Garments can be considered a kind of māyā.

Gōpīs: “O Infinite One! You have taken away our coverings—please return them to us.”

By calling Him Ananta (the Infinite One), the Gōpikas reveal their deep understanding of Kṛṣṇa as the limitless source of creation. As the Gītā states (10.8) *Aham sarvasya prabhavo mattaḥ sarvaṁ pravartate*, Kṛṣṇa is the origin of everything, and the wise worship Him knowing this truth.

Though the Gōpikā-līlā and the Gītā occur at different times, Nārāyaṇa Tīrtha highlights that Ananta signifies the beginningless, endless foundation of all existence.

With devotion, the Gōpikas beg Kṛṣṇa to return their garments, and He delights in hearing their sincere words. Since everything is under His control, Kṛṣṇa cannot be viewed as an ordinary human in this episode.

Kṛṣṇa said, “I have never taken anyone else’s coverings. Think carefully—because I am the Self, conscious and complete, I have no coverings at all.”

Nārāyaṇa Tīrtha interprets this with deep madhura-bhakti. The word āvāraṇam (covering) can mean both “garments” and “the body that covers the soul.”

The Gōpikas, though devoted, were seeing only Kṛṣṇa’s external form and not fully understanding His true, spiritual nature. By hinting that the soul has no connection with body or clothing, Kṛṣṇa explains that He too has no coverings.

When He says, “I never take others’ coverings,” it subtly means: The Gōpikas are not “others” to Him, He has accepted them as His own beloved devotees. Hence, their coverings cannot be considered “others’,” and He has taken nothing that belongs to someone else.

The Gōpikas said, “O protector of the distressed! Earlier You Yourself told us to take our coverings. So now, please return them to us.”

Kṛṣṇa had teasingly offered the garments at first, and the Gōpikas are now pleading for them with devotion. Words like Ārta-śaraṇya and Ārta-rakṣaka mean the same, “the One who protects those in distress.” Whether in the Gajendra pastime, in protecting the Pāṇḍavas, or safeguarding Kuntī, the Bhāgavata and Mahābhārata show how quickly Kṛṣṇa responds to His devotees’ sincere prayers.

Kṛṣṇa replied, “I only told you to close your eyes and come out of the water, nothing more. Even now, do just that. There is no better covering than this.”

Kṛṣṇa spoke to the Gōpikas with deep spiritual intent, teasing them by saying He had only asked them to come out just as they were and had spoken nothing else. A woman stands uncovered only before her husband, and the Gōpikas desired Kṛṣṇa alone as their husband. By this playful exchange, the Lord was actually fulfilling their heartfelt wish. He also hinted that for a soul awakened in self-knowledge, external coverings have no real significance — and that true knowledge itself is the highest covering.

The Gōpikas replied, “O Lord of the world! Not so. The eyes of people must be shielded. Please return our coverings.”  
“*lOkAlOkana vihitAvaraNam lOkEshvara mama dEhi samuditam*”

Here, the word lōka means both “witness” and “the world.” They pointed out that although He is the Lord of all beings, even the five elements stand as witnesses to His actions. They felt that mere external praise of Kṛṣṇa has no value unless accompanied by true inner understanding.

Kṛṣṇa said, “No one can cover the vision of the Witness of the world (the all-seeing Lord). The world itself cannot be hidden.”

Śrī Kṛṣṇa is not personally involved in the creation, maintenance, or destruction of the material universe. His true purpose is to engage in eternal, love-filled pastimes in His divine abode, Gōlōka, with liberated souls. For the sake of material creation, He expands as Kāraṇōdakaśāyī Viṣṇu, also known as Mahāviṣṇu.

In Brahma Samhita Verse 1, Brahma Himself extols Lord Kṛṣṇa as

*īśvaraḥ paramaḥ kṛṣṇaḥ  
sac-cid-ānanda-vigrahaḥ  
anādir ādir govindaḥ  
sarva-kāraṇa-kāraṇam*

Kṛṣṇa, called Gōvinda, is the Supreme Lord. His form is eternal, full of knowledge and bliss. He is the original source of everything, without any source above Him, and He is the ultimate cause behind all causes.

The Gōpikas pleaded, “O Svāmi! Please give us a covering so that no one may see us.”

Kṛṣṇa replied, “Anything that is seen by the Witness cannot, in turn, see the Witness. If it could, it would contradict direct perception. Since you are of the nature of the Supreme Self, and the Supreme Witness cannot be seen by anything, none can truly see you. Therefore you have no need for garments.”

Unable to understand this philosophical meaning, the Gōpikas interpreted His words differently.

They said, “O Lord of the world! Not so. We are being seen by others. The senses experience seeing and hearing, so others can see us. Therefore please give us our coverings back.”

Kṛṣṇa answered, “If you are seen by the Supreme Brahman, then nothing is hidden from Him, and no external covering is necessary.”

The Gōpikas finally said, “You are speaking of coverings that do not exist in this world, but we are feeling ashamed. Please give us our clothes.”

O Gōpikas! Whether a covering exists for the soul or not is something even yōgis debate. Here, “covering” refers to Māyā.

Thus, when Kṛṣṇa speaks of a “covering,” He means Māyā, which hides His true nature from ordinary people.

The Gōpikas replied, “O Lord! Your words are too deep—we cannot understand anything. Please tell us clearly what we should do.”

*ābālya meta dyuṣhmāka-m abalāḥ kevalam matam,  
ubhābhyāmeva hastābhyām ḡrhantu vasanāni vaḥ*

“O Gōpikas! Since childhood you already know this—raise both your hands and receive your clothes.”

*ity uktvā vasanāny āsām datvā gopālakaisaha,  
avaruhya taroḥ kṛṣṇaḥ prayayau sva-ḡrham mudā*

“After saying this, Kṛṣṇa returned their garments, came down from the tree, and joyfully went home along with the cowherd boys.”

Śrī Nārāyaṇa Tīrtha, in his Śrī Kṛṣṇa Līlā Taranginī, beautifully presents this delightful episode, showing both the purity of the Gōpikas and the loving playfulness of Lord Kṛṣṇa. Through these lines, he brings out the profound spiritual truths woven into Kṛṣṇa’s divine pastimes.

## CONCLUSION

In this way, Śrī Nārāyaṇa Tīrtha, in his Śrī Kṛṣṇa Līlā Taranginī, composed the episode of Gōpika Vastrāpaharaṇam with profound devotion and philosophical depth, gifting us an extraordinary work of art. In the soft and refined language of Śrī Nārāyaṇa Tīrtha, whether in his dialogues or in his kīrtanas—one can clearly sense the deep devotion and surrender that flowed from his heart. This chapter specially makes that evident. Here we see how Lord Kṛṣṇa’s playful words to the Gōpikas are, on the surface, simple and teasing, but inwardly filled with spiritual teaching and pure devotion. Śrī Nārāyaṇa Tīrtha lovingly brings out this hidden essence through his narration.

From this we understand that our ancestors, the great composers, never wrote their works for fame or recognition. They created them as spiritual tools for bhakti-sādhana. When we carefully study and practice such compositions, we too receive the same devotional inspiration and musical upliftment. As Śrī Tyāgarāja Svāmī beautifully declares: “*saṅgīta jñānamu bhakti vinā sanmārgamu galadē manasā*” O mind, without devotion, even musical knowledge cannot lead one to the true path.

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