



A Comparative Study of the Kāṁsavadha Episode in Select Nāṭakas, Campū-kāvyas, Gadya-kāvyas, and Khaṇḍa-kāvyas

R S Hariharan*
Shankar Rajaraman†

Abstract:

This paper analyzes the Kāṁsavadha narrative in the Bhāgavata Purāṇa (217 verses, tenth skandha, chapters 39–44), which chronicles Kṛṣṇa and Balarāma’s three-day journey from Gokula to Mathurā and Kāṁsa’s slaying, and its reinterpretations across six Sanskrit works. The Bhāgavata’s episodic framework—featuring Akrūra’s vision (55 verses) and Kāṁsa’s death (8 verses)—is reshaped by poets to reflect their unique aesthetic and devotional priorities. Abhinava Kālidāsa’s Bhāgavatacampū (15th century CE, 37 verses) frequently employs poetic wit, Agastya Pañḍita’s Kṛṣṇacarita (14th century CE) favors ornate prose with novel imagery, and Rāma Pāṇivāda’s Prākṛta Kāṁsavaho (early 18th century CE, 150 verses) emphasizes emotion. Parameśvara Bhaṭṭa’s Haricarita (13th century CE, 48 verses) opts for brevity, Bhāsa’s Bālacarita (4th century BCE, two acts) uses dramatic reporting, and Śeṣa Śrīkṛṣṇa’s Kāṁsavadha (16th century CE, 137 verses, Acts 4–6) introduces novel characters. A concluding chart maps verse distribution, highlighting how these works—spanning genres and centuries—recast the Kāṁsavadha as a versatile canvas for poetic ingenuity in Sanskrit literary tradition.

Keywords: Kāṁsavadha, Sanskrit Literature, Bhāgavata Purāṇa, Poetic Reinterpretation, Narratology

* Research Scholar, Karnataka Samskrit University, Pampa Mahakavi Rd, Chamrajapet, Bengaluru - 560004. E-mail: rshariharan@hotmail.com

† Associate Professor, Center for Ancient History and Culture (CAHC), JAIN (Deemed-to-be University), Bengaluru – 560078. E-mail: tryaksha@gmail.com

Introduction

The Kāṁsavadha narrative, as rendered in the Bhāgavata Purāṇa, forms a pivotal narrative of Sanskrit literary and devotional tradition, providing a vivid foundation for poetic reinterpretation across diverse genres. Spanning 217 verses in chapters 39 to 44 of the tenth skandha, the Bhāgavata chronicles Kṛṣṇa and Balarāma's journey from Gokula to Mathurā and the climactic slaying of Kāṁsa over three narrative days, organized into eleven episodes rich with action and devotional resonance. This paper explores the Bhāgavata's account alongside its adaptations in six notable Sanskrit works: the Bhāgavatacampū (BC) by Abhinava Kālidāsa (15th century CE), the Kṛṣṇacarita (KC) by Agastya Paṇḍita (14th century CE), the Kāṁsavaho (KVO) by Rāma Pāṇivāda (early 18th century CE), the Haricarita (HC) by Parameśvara Bhaṭṭa (13th century CE), the Bālacakarita (BLC) by Bhāsa (4th century BCE), and the Kāṁsavadha (KV) by Śeṣa Śrīkṛṣṇa (16th century CE). Representing nāṭkas, campū-kāvyas, and khaṇḍa-kāvyas across centuries, these texts reflect the Kāṁsavadha's malleability, with each poet reshaping the narrative to align with their unique aesthetic, dramatic, or devotional vision.

The Bhāgavata's detailed structure—from the gopīs' succinct lament (4 verses) to Akrūra's expansive vision (55 verses) and Kāṁsa's demise (8 verses)—offers a shared starting point that each author reworks according to their creative priorities. Abhinava Kālidāsa's Bhāgavatacampū employs poetic devices like virodhābhāsa to enhance Akrūra's vision, while Agastya Paṇḍita's Kṛṣṇacarita opts for ornate prose to evoke Viṣṇu's cosmic grandeur. Rāma Pāṇivāda's Prākṛta Kāṁsavaho emphasizes emotional depth, Parameśvara Bhaṭṭa's Haricarita favors brevity, Bhāsa's Bālacakarita harnesses dramatic reporting, and Śeṣa Śrīkṛṣṇa's Kāṁsavadha introduces new characters for narrative richness. This study highlights how these works, spanning Sanskrit and Prākṛta traditions, adapt the Bhāgavata's framework to suit their chosen genre and audience. A concluding chart detailing verse distribution and distinctive elements underscores the diversity of these poetic interpretations, illuminating the Kāṁsavadha's role as a versatile canvas within Sanskrit literary heritage.

The Narrative of Kāṁsavadha in the Bhāgavata: A Structured Overview

The Bhāgavata's meticulous pacing and episodic classification¹ make it a foundational source for exploring variations and adaptations in other Sanskrit literary works, including nāṭakas, campū-kāvyas, and khaṇḍa-kāvyas. The Kāṁsavadha episode as presented in Bhāgavata serves as the foundation on which other works are analyzed, wherefore it is briefly discussed below.

The **Kāṁsavadha episode**, spanning 217 verses across chapters 39 to 44 of the tenth skandha in the *Bhāgavata*, unfolds over three days, detailing Kṛṣṇa and Balarāma's journey from Gokula to Mathurā and culminating in the dramatic slaying of Kāṁsa. This narrative is categorized into key episodes, each reflecting significant developments and emotional arcs, and is structured as follows:

Day 1

1. Departure from Gokula (1 verse):

Kṛṣṇa and Balarāma begin their journey with Akrūra as their charioteer.

2. The Gopī-s' Lament (4 verses):

Overcome by grief, the Gopī-s chase the chariot, lamenting their separation from Kṛṣṇa and blaming Akrūra for their misfortune.

3. Akrūra's Vision at Yamunā (55 verses):

Stopping for his midday rituals at the Yamunā, Akrūra is granted a divine vision of Kṛṣṇa as Viṣṇu and Balarāma as Ādiśeṣa, surrounded by celestial beings. This realization fills him with devotion and awe.

4. Arrival at the Outskirts of Mathurā (12 verses):

The group halts near Mathurā. Akrūra proceeds to inform Kāṁsa, while Kṛṣṇa and Balarāma rest in a garden with the cowherds.

Day 2

5. Entry into Mathurā (13 verses):

Kṛṣṇa and Balarāma enter Mathurā, captivating the townsfolk with their divine presence.

6. Encounter with the Washerman (8 verses):

A washerman loyal to Kāṁsa insults Kṛṣṇa and refuses to provide fine clothes. Provoked, Kṛṣṇa slays him and distributes the garments among his companions.

7. Interaction with the Florist Sudāman (10 verses):

The brothers meet Sudāman, a devoted florist, who offers them garlands. In return, Kṛṣṇa blesses him with unwavering devotion (*bhakti*).

8. Meeting with Trivakrā (Kubjā) (13 verses):

Kṛṣṇa encounters the hunchbacked Trivakrā, who offers him fragrant ointments. He heals her deformity, transforming her into a beautiful maiden, symbolizing spiritual grace.

9. Breaking of the Bow (Dhanur-bhaṅga) (8 verses):

At the dhanur-yāga, Kṛṣṇa effortlessly snaps the ceremonial bow, alarming Kāṁsa.

Day 3

10. Confrontation with Kuvalayāpīda (15 verses):

The brothers defeat Kāṁsa's war elephant Kuvalayāpīda, and use its tusks later as weapons.

11. Battle with Wrestlers (Cāṇūra and Mūṣṭika) (40 verses):

Kṛṣṇa and Balarāma fight Kāṁsa's wrestlers in a fierce duel. Kṛṣṇa kills Cāṇūra, while Balarāma slays Mūṣṭika.

12. Kāṁsa's Command (3 verses):

Enraged, Kāṁsa orders the imprisonment of Nandagopa and Vasudeva and the execution of Ugrasena.

13. Killing of Kāṁsa (8 verses):

Kṛṣṇa leaps onto Kāṁsa's dais, drags him down, and slays him.

14. Defeat of Kāṁsa's Brothers (1 verse):

Balarāma swiftly dispatches Kāṁsa's eight brothers, ensuring Mathurā's liberation.

This structured overview highlights the emotional and dramatic progression of the Kāṁsavadha episode. From Akrūra's divine vision at the Yamunā to

Kṛṣṇa's climactic encounter with Kāṁsa, each episode is rich in devotional undertones and dramatic tension.

A figure (Fig. 1) summarizing the distribution of verses across episodes and texts has been included at the end of this paper. This visual representation aids in understanding the comparative contributions of each text to the Kāṁsavadha narrative. For each literary work discussed below, we highlight the unique narrative elements that are not found elsewhere. Additionally, the number of verses devoted to specific episodes has been enumerated to emphasize the importance placed by each poet on these episodes.

Analysis of Adaptations

1. Bhāgavatacampū (BC)

The BC, a campū-kavya adhering closely to the narrative of the Bhāgavata, was composed by a poet who goes by the name of Abhinava Kalidāsa² belonging to the 15th century CE³ and hailing from Andhra Pradesh. The current narrative, comprising 37 verses, is found in the 3rd and 4th vilāsa of this text written in a combination of prose and poetry.

The story spans two days. On Day 1, Kṛṣṇa and Balarāma embark on their journey to Mathurā from Gokula with Akrūra as their charioteer. The departure prompts the gopīs to lament. Their lamentation is depicted across 3 verses where they are described as chasing the chariot but failing to reach Kṛṣṇa. They stop at the Yamunā, wherein Akrūra's vision unfolds across 7 verses and 2 prose passages. The first, a longer passage, uses apparent poetic contradiction (virodhābhāṣa) in describing the divine form of Viṣṇu as visualised by Akrūra. In one of the verses that follow immediately, Kṛṣṇa is humorously likened to a physician:

pumāṇsam svikartum kamapi bhavarogam prakrtijam
balātkṛtvā kṛtvā viṣamamatha vittānyapaharan
dhruvaste mṛtyunom yadi bhajasi māmeva śaraṇam
prakalpyaivam trāṣam vrajasī paramārtādbhumatim
(3.133)⁴

The second, shorter passage, recounts Akrūra's return to his chariot.

As they reach Mathurā's outskirts, Akrūra disembarks and enters the city to inform Kāṁsa. Kṛṣṇa and Balarāma's entry into Mathurā is briefly noted in

a single verse and passage, with the people fancying Kṛṣṇa as a form of Viṣṇu. The episode with the haughty washerman spans 2 verses and 2 passages, detailing the flight of the washerman's workers after his death. The episode involving the florist-devotee Sudāman is mentioned in passing.

Trivakrā (Kubjā), the scent maker, is briefly described in 2 verses. Kṛṣṇa asks Kubjā to meet him later, with the poet humorously justifying the association of Kṛṣṇa with Kubjā as appropriate due to the former having taken the form of Vāmana, the dwarf (in one of his previous incarnations) and the latter being a hunchback:

*dhṛtavāmanabhāvōsau kubjeyamanayoryutih
anukūlaguṇā kena neyam samabhinandyatām*
(3.143)

At the Dhanuryāga hall, Kṛṣṇa and Balarāma break the bow, fend off attackers with its pieces, and return to their lodgings.

On Day 2, preparations for the wrestling match commence. The episode featuring Kuvalayāpīḍa, the tusker, spans two paragraphs. The mahout is commanded by Kṛṣṇa to withdraw the elephant from his path, since, elephants are to be set free only on the battleground and not anywhere else. Not doing so would incur fatal consequences:

*are re sarvadaivāraṇe vāraṇanirvāṇārpanamatiniśiddhamudghośi-
tam vicakṣaṇairityapāsārayainamanargalam madāvalamā-
muto mārgānnijanirgalamadāvaledpam cāpahāya rakṣasva
jīvitamanujīvipadajīvanamitti !*

In the passage that follows, Abhinava Kālidāsa describes Kṛṣṇa killing the elephant with its tusks.

Then follows a description of the wrestlers, Cāṇūra and Muṣṭika and the wrestling arena in 3 verses and 1 prose passage. The dialogue between Cāṇūra and Kṛṣṇa spans 5 verses, followed by a detailed account of the fight between the brothers and the two wrestlers in 4 verses and 1 prose passage. Balarāma kills the other wrestlers named Kūṭa, Śala and Tośala.

The injunctions of the infuriated Kamsa including the execution of Ugrasena and his two wives are crisply presented in a single verse. The killing of Kamsa is described in 1 verse and 1 prose passage. The poet compares

Kṛṣṇa's pulling down of Karīṣṇa to a lion subduing an elephant. The ending verse in this episode describes Kṛṣṇa killing Karīṣṇa's 8 brothers.

2. *Kṛṣṇacarita* (KC)

The KC, composed by Agastya Pañḍita⁵ in the 14th century CE from Andhra Pradesh, is renowned for its eloquent prose and vividness of ideas. Agastya Pañḍita's craftsmanship is celebrated by queen Gaṅgādevi in her “Madhurāvijaya.”

The Karīṣṇavadha narrative unfolds over two days. On the first day, Akrūra, Kṛṣṇa, Balarāma, and the cowherds set off from Gokula towards Mathurā. The gopīs, overcome with grief and desperation, cling to their memories and dreams of Kṛṣṇa. They follow the chariot as far as they can before losing their way and drift into various places, reminiscing about their time with Kṛṣṇa.

As they reach the Yamunā around noon, the scene is described with rich, poetic detail. Kṛṣṇa and Balarāma taste the river's water and rest under the shade of a Tamāla tree. Akrūra ties the horses to a tree branch. Akrūra's vision is then described. In it, Kṛṣṇa is seated on the lap of Balarāma, whose ‘complexion is white as mist’ (nīhāragauramūrti). The vision gives Agastya Pañḍita a chance to dwell on Viṣṇu's incarnations. He fancies Mt. Mandara as a tree, whose bulbous root is the Lord's form as the divine tortoise (mandaratarukandāyitamūrtyañtara). The heavenly Gaṅgā is described as akin to the moonlight emanating from the moon-like toenails of Viṣṇu in his form as Trivikrama (nakhacandracandrikāyitamandākinīpravāha).

The poet portrays Akrūra's reaction after emerging from the waters of Yamunā strikingly, with the imagery of his eyes embracing, kissing, and drinking in the sight of Kṛṣṇa and Balarāma:

*tīramāśādya tau vasudevasutāvanyāviva savismayam sapraṇayayam
savinayayam saharsa ca nispandapakṣmaṇā cakṣuṣā suciramālinganniva
cumbanniva pibannivāvatasthe!*

After this, the group prepares to move on. Upon reaching the outskirts of Mathurā, they rest in a garden. Akrūra informs Karīṣṇa of their arrival and their intention to meet him the following morning. Nanda and the cowherds had already arrived in the city.

Kṛṣṇa and Balarāma enter Mathurā in the evening. The citizens, eager to see the young visitors, discuss Kṛṣṇa's pastimes such as his killing of the demoness Pūtanā, breaking of the Asura disguised as a cart, uprooting of the twin Arjuna trees and so on. In describing these exploits, the poet cleverly brings out aspects of Kṛṣṇa's physical beauty such as his tenderness that stand in contrast with the prowess that is needed for exterminating the powerful Asuras.

The character who is elsewhere recognised just as a hunchback (kubjā) is given a name by Agastya Paṇḍita. The women of the town know her as Makarikā, the foremost among the King's unguent-makers (sairandhrīpradhānabhūtayā makarikābhidhānayā kubjayā).

At the Dhanuryāga hall, Agastya Paṇḍita describes the bow in great detail. It is placed on a cot draped with a blue silken cloth (nīlanicolakaśayyā) under a wide parasol proclaiming it's sovereignty (vistṛtajayātapatra); men wearing armours and carrying swords and shields protect it (kavīcītaiḥ kṛpāṇibhiḥ phalakapāṇibhirārakṣakaiḥ saṃrakṣyamāṇam); it is smeared with red sandal-paste (ālabdhaharicandanasthāsakam) and adorned with fragrant floral garlands that are kissed by bees (atīsurabhikusumamālikāvalīnilīnaśilīmukhaprakaram). Kṛṣṇa breaks the bow effortlessly as if he were an elephant breaking a mere sugarcane stick. The poet compares the sound of the breaking bow, in different ways as perceived by different people. As it reverberates through the three worlds, the day comes to an end. The sun descends from the firmament as if pulled down by his steeds that were startled at the noise of the breaking bow; the clouds in the sky turn red as if tinged by the blood of the guards killed by Kṛṣṇa; the eastern direction turns gloomy like the face of Kāṁśa upon hearing his enemy's feat; the lotuses shrink in fear as it were, while the hearts of the Yādavas bloom with joy like night lilies:

tāvaca tadākarnanacakitanijarathaturagākṛṣyamāṇa iva ga-
ganatalādavatataśā tarasā tapanah । madbumathanakarakali-
taśāsanāśakalavikṣiptarakṣābhata dehanirbharoccalitarudhi-
radhārāśateneva sāyantanena śoṇinnā nabhasi bhrśamarajyanta
jaladasaṇṭatayah । parijanamukhaviditadhanurbhaṅgasya danu-
japateriva mukham pradhānabharito jagāma vaivarnyam । dhanurd-
hvaniśravaṇabhiyā nayanānīva nyamīlayannambujāni kamalinyah ।
yādavabṛdayānīva pramodamabhajanta kumudāni ।

On the second day, Kāṁsa summons Akrūra to bring Kṛṣṇa and Balarāma to witness the wrestling match:

*bhadra satvaramānaya mallayuddhadarśanāya
nandagopanandanāviti |*

Kṛṣṇa and Balarāma re-enter the city in the morning, dressed as wrestlers, adorned with a tilaka mark fashioned from the ichor of Kuvalayāpīḍa that smelt like cardamom, smeared with the red sandal paste of the elephant's blood, decorated with the pearls fallen from the temples of the tusker, and carrying its broken tusks:

*mataṅgajasya karaṭakaraṇḍagalitena dalitailāphalaparimala-
mucā madadravene viracitati lakaū raktacandanakrtasthāsakau
muktāphalārcitavipulabhuja śikharaū gr̥hītadantakośau mal-
lavesadharināu babbhūvatuh ।*

The wrestling match begins with Kaṁsa signaling for the fight. Cāṇūra, Muṣṭika and other wrestlers are vanquished by Kṛṣṇa and Balarāma. Kaṁsa's subsequent injunctions includes evacuating all cowherds apart from killing Vasudeva and Ugrasena. In a decisive moment, Kṛṣṇa strikes Kaṁsa forcefully, resulting in his death. The narrative does not mention the fate of Kaṁsa's brothers.

3. Kam̄savaho (KVO)

KVO is a *khaṇḍa-kāvya* written in Prākṛta by Rāma Pāṇivāda⁶ from Kerala in the early 18th century. It comprises four sarga-s, of which the first three cover the current narrative in 150 verses. It is one of the finest works in Prākṛta, showcasing vivid and imaginative descriptions along with deeply expressive emotions, conveyed through exquisite verses depicting the slaying of Kairīsa, which unfolds over a two-day span. The narrative follows the Bhāgavata with slight variations.

On Day 1, the gopī-s' lament is described in 20 verses. Akrūra consoles the gopī-s in an elaborate manner, across five verses. Akrūra's vision is encapsulated in no more than a single verse. Kṛṣṇa and Balarāma enter the city of Mathurā on the same day. Unlike in other works, they do not stay outside the city. There is a brief mention of the florist in a hemistich followed by 8

verses describing the brothers' encounter with the washerman ending with the latter's death at the hands of Kṛṣṇa. The episode of Kubjā unfolds in 19 verses. Kubjā reasons about Kṛṣṇa: "Your limbs are tender and the saffron paste I carry too is fragrant. It therefore behooves you to accept it, for it is only appropriate that like must unite with like."

*suumāramiṇam ca de sarīram surabī kumkumapamkao a eso ।
parīgāṇhau tā bhavam cieam sarisāṇam hi samāamo subassa ॥*
2.16⁷

Kṛṣṇa and Balarāma enter the city and then the hall where Kāṁsa's bow was kept. Kṛṣṇa's breaking of the ceremonial bow is described in six verses. Thereafter, the brothers stroll around Mathurā freely. Kṛṣṇa describes the city of Mathurā to Balarāma in 20 verses. They return to their residence and rest for the night.

As day 2 dawns, Kṛṣṇa is awakened by bards who sing his eulogies in 18 verses. Kāṁsa orders the mahout to kill Kṛṣṇa by deploying the elephant Kuvalayāpīḍa. The episode of Kuvalayāpīḍa's killing is described in ten verses. Afterwards, they enter the wrestling arena, as in the Bhāgavata, where Cāṇūra challenges Kṛṣṇa. The confrontation of Kṛṣṇa and Balarāma with Cāṇūra and Muṣṭika respectively is described in 12 verses. Enraged, Kāṁsa issues an injunction for the imprisonment of the brothers and the violent killing of the cowherds. The death of Kāṁsa at Kṛṣṇa's hands is described in four verses. Unlike in other works, where Balarāma kills Kāṁsa's eight brothers, in this text, Kṛṣṇa kills them himself.

4. Haricarita (HC)

The Haricarita (HC), a khaṇḍa-kāvya composed by Parameśvara Bhaṭṭā⁸ of Kerala in the 13th century CE, spans 253 verses and covers events extending over two days in 48 verses. Most of the verses in this section are composed in Anuśtubh and Āryā metres.

On the first day, Akrūra, Kṛṣṇa, Balarāma, and the cowherds depart from Gokula towards Mathurā. There is no mention of the gopīs' lamentation in this narrative. Akrūra's vision of the Yamunā is described in 16 verses. This vision includes a Daśāvatāra-stuti in 11 verses incorporating two verses on Narasimha.

Upon reaching the outskirts of Mathurā, the group halts in a garden just outside the city before entering it. The citizens, eager to see Kṛṣṇa, dress up in anticipation.

The narrative proceeds with Kṛṣṇa's encounters in Mathurā. The haughty washerman is briefly mentioned in two verses, and Kṛṣṇa's interaction with the florist is described in one verse. Trivakrā, also known as Kubjā, is described in three verses. When Kubjā invites Kṛṣṇa to her house, he explains that he transformed her into a beautiful maiden for his purpose rather than for her benefit, using the analogy of touching a cow for one's purification and not to purify the latter:

*gośuddhikāmāḥ kīmu gāḥ sprśanti
martyā yuvatyāṁ ca tathaiva yūnām ।
svārthāni karmāni tadāgamiṣyāmyuktveti
tāmāpa sa cāpaśālām ॥*

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The events related to the Dhanuryāga hall and the breaking of the bow are captured in two verses. The encounter with Kuvalayāpīḍa, the rutting tusker, is described in three verses. The poet depicts Kṛṣṇa as purposefully provoking the beast so that the citizens of Mathurā can enjoy watching their fight:

*nāgaro yuddhametena janāḥ paśyatviti prabhūḥ ।
svayamāhatya bhaṅktvāsyā prahārān vyaharacciram ॥*

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The wrestling match, including the killing of the wrestlers Cāṇūra and Muṣṭika, is summarized in two verses.

This narrative concludes with a single verse where Kṛṣṇa is described as killing Kāṁsa by toppling him from the top of his palace. Kāṁsa's brothers do not find any mention in this account.

5. Bālācarita (BLC)

The Bālācarita (BLC) is a drama in 5 acts composed by Bhāsa⁹ in the 4th century BCE. The Kāṁsavādha episode extends across the 4th and 5th acts of this drama.

This segment of the story follows Kṛṣṇa and Balarāma's journey to Mathurā. Although the timeline is not explicitly tracked, key events unfold as follows:

The narrative begins with Dhruvasena, a servant, arriving to inform Kṛṣṇa that Kāṁsa has invited him, his brother Balarāma, and all the gopas to a grand Dhanuryāga in Mathurā. Kṛṣṇa urges Balarāma to leave immediately, vowing to drag Kāṁsa out with his hair dishevelled, crown knocked off, necklace broken, bracelets fallen, and sacred thread dangling loose, and to kill him ruthlessly, like an insulted lion attacking an elephant:

*prabhraṣṭaratnamakuṭam parikirṇakeśam
vicchinnahārapatitāṅgadalambasūtram ।
ākṛṣya kāṁsamabamadya drdbhaṁ nihānmi
nāgaṇī mṛgendra iva pūrvakṛtāvalepam ॥*

4.13

The narrative does not cover the gopīs' lamentation over Kṛṣṇa's departure, their stop at the Yamunā, Akrūra's vision, their arrival at the outskirts of Mathurā, or their entry into the city.

Soon after they arrive in Mathurā, Kṛṣṇa and Balarāma encounter some washermen. Dhruvasena reports to Kāṁsa that Kṛṣṇa and his companions have robbed the washermen of the clothes they were carrying. He further informs the King about Kṛṣṇa's killing of the mountain-like elephant Kuvalayāpīḍa (who is here referred to as 'Utpalāpīḍa') by violently ripping out its tusks:

*taṁāpatantam sahāsā samīkṣya
sa(me)tagopālakavṛṇdamadhye ।
bālo balenādrinibhaṁ gajendram
dantam samākṛṣya jaghāna śighram ॥*

5.2

Kṛṣṇa's meeting with the hunchback scent-maker is thereafter described. Bhāsa calls her Madanikā, a name that appears to be the predecessor of the name Makarikā employed by Agastya Paṇḍita. Dhruvasena also reveals that Kṛṣṇa, after having redeemed Kubjā of her physical deformity, visited the city's floral market and adorned himself with garlands procured therein before proceeding to the Dhanuryāga hall.

Inquired further by the King, Dhruvasena returns with fresh news. He reports that Kṛṣṇa had broken the bow that was kept in the hall after striking the temples of one Simhala, who was guarding it, and killing him instantly.

It is interesting to note how Bhāsa informs the drama's audience of several key incidents in the narrative through the mouth of Dhruvasena instead of depicting them directly.

The brothers are then invited to a duel with Cāṇūra and Muṣṭika. Kāṁsa plans to watch the match from the balcony. Cāṇūra addresses Kṛṣṇa as Dāmodara and declares his readiness to smash him. Muṣṭika claims his iron fist will bring down Balarāma as a thunderbolt falls a mountain.

*lobamayamuṣṭi hasto nāmnā ca muṣṭiko ruṣṭaḥ ।
pātayāmyadya rāmaṁ girivarakūṭam yathā vajraḥ ॥*

5.5

Kāṁsa instructs Cāṇūra and Muṣṭika to do their utmost in repaying their debt to him. The wrestlers, on their part, assure the King that they will attain success by exhibiting all their skilful moves.

During the match, Kṛṣṇa kills Cāṇūra by breaking his ribs, and Balarāma slays Muṣṭika. The killing of Kāṁsa is vividly described: Kṛṣṇa mounts the balcony, seizes Kāṁsa by the head, and throws him down. Kāṁsa dies with his eyes projecting out, neck broken, shoulders shattered, limbs fractured, and necklace broken:

*vistīrṇalohitamukhaḥ parivṛttanetro
bhagnāṁsakanṭhakatijānukarorujaṅghaḥ
vicchinnahārapatitāṅgadalambasūtro
vajraprabhagnaśikharah patito yathādriḥ ॥*

5.11

The manner of Kāṁsa's death matches the vow of Kṛṣṇa in the verse 4.13. Not only are verses 4.13 and 5.11 in the same Vasantatilaka metre but they also are similar in their phrasing.

Bhāsa makes no mention of Kāṁsa's brothers.

6. Kāṁsavadha (KV)

The KV is a notable nāṭaka written by the 16th-century scholar-poet Śeśa Śrīkṛṣṇa¹⁰ who hailed from Maharashtra and lived in Kāśi. This seven-act drama is characterised by its novel adaptation of the Kāṁsavadha episode. The events proximal to the killing of Kāṁsa and the killing proper are delineated between the 4th and 6th Acts. The nāṭaka as a whole abounds in verses with

Acts 4 to 6 accounting for a total of 137.

The Karīsavadha episode unfolds over two days. On the first day, Akrūra - Kamsa's minister, Balarāma, and Kṛṣṇa commence their journey along with one Sudāman. It is to be noted that this Sudāman is a new character introduced by the poet in this narrative juncture and must not be confused with the florist of the same name who is mentioned in other works starting with Bhāgavatam. Furthermore, unlike other works where the gopīs lament the departure of Kṛṣṇa, in this case, it is the aged Nanda and Yaśodā, who mourn the departure of their sons.

Upon reaching the banks of the Yamunā, Sudāman suggests they rest on a cool rock covered with fresh moss to pass the midday. Kṛṣṇa agrees to Sudāman's suggestion and despatches a message to Akrūra through him. In the message, Kṛṣṇa reminds Akrūra about the performance of the overdue midday rituals, adding that Balarāma would assist the latter by gathering flowers, kuśa grass, and other items of worship. Kṛṣṇa plans to spend time conversing with Sudāman to alleviate the heartache caused by his separation from near and dear ones.

During their conversation, a messenger named Vilāsavatī arrives to inform Kṛṣṇa that Rādhā is suffering from the pangs of separation from him. Kṛṣṇa regrets not addressing Rādhā more adequately before leaving Gokula and expresses an inner conflict between being with Rādhā and following his uncle Karīsa's instructions to arrive at Mathurā:

*madviyogakṛtābādhā rādhā nopekṣitum kṣamā ।
anatikramanīyam ca mātulasyopasarpānam ॥*

4.45

Sudāman suggests inviting Rādhā to a nearby garden where she and Kṛṣṇa could perform the delightful rāsa dance; Kṛṣṇa could then set off for Mathurā the next morning.

Sudāman instructs Vilāsavatī to secretly inform Rādhā to arrive at the garden from Gokula. Kṛṣṇa adds that all other residents of Gokula should be invited as well since they too are his friends and followers. Kṛṣṇa asks Sudāman to deliver a message to Akrūra that he should reach Mathurā beforehand and inform Karīsa about their arrival while they rest in the Vṛndāvana grove for the day.

On the second day, a cowherd named Sunanda relates to Sudāman that Nandagopa was troubled by the idea of his sons leaving Gokula to face the evil

Kaṁsa all alone. Therefore, to appease Kaṁsa with gifts, he along with other denizens of Gokula had left for Mathurā. Sunanda enquires where the brothers could be found, and Sudāman replies that they had departed from Vṛndāvana that very morning. Sunanda is shocked to hear this since he had been instructed by Nandagopa to halt the brothers from reaching Mathurā before him. His plans now changed, Sunanda suggests that he and Sudāman should proceed towards Mathurā following the path taken by the brothers.

Meanwhile, Kṛṣṇa and Balarāma reach Mathurā describing the scenic beauty of their path that has been embellished by the advent of autumn. They hear the wailing of someone being beaten up mercilessly and calling out to them for help. On getting to know that the person crying out for help was their attendant named Kubjaka and that he was beaten up by Kaṁsa's washerman for requesting the latter to part with some of the robes he was carrying, Kṛṣṇa and Balarāma proceed to check on him. The washerman replies vehemently that the cowherd brothers are not worthy of royal clothes. Kubjaka recounts Kṛṣṇa's greatness, mentioning his vanquishing of valiant opponents such as Śakaṭasura, Pūtanā, Tṛṇavarta, Kāliya, Baka, and Dhenuka, and wonders why the washerman refuses to honour such a hero with the royal robes he is carrying:

yābhyāṁ sa śakaṭasuro vidalito yābhyāṁ hatā pūtanā
yābhyāmeva śilātale vinihatāstikṣṇastṛṇāvartakāḥ ।
yāmyāṁ dhenukakeśikāliya kāriṣṭā garīṣṭhā hatā
bantavyā apare daityanivahāstāveva prāptāvimau ॥

5.16 (Sanskrit chāyā of Prākṛt verse)

The arrogant washerman mocks and humiliates them, saying that they fled to Gokula leaving their parents behind in Mathurā after the king's servants killed seven of their brothers:

yayoḥ sapta bhrātarāḥ śilāpaṭṭevasmadīyaḥ kiṃkarairupthitāḥ ।
tatra bhayaśāṅkitābhyāmetāmyāṁ mātaram pitaram copeksya nan-
dapallyāṁ palāyya niliya sthitam ।

He continues that their parents managed somehow to hold on to dear life and that the king had presently ordered their execution. On hearing these words, Balarāma becomes furious and tells Kṛṣṇa that they must put a stop to the washerman's prattle.

Kṛṣṇa demands the washerman for the clothes, stating that they were the nephews of the king and had been invited by him to the city. He promises a reward for the washerman if he complies. The washerman further humiliates them, saying Kṛṣṇa and his forefathers wore clothes fit for forest dwellers and that the king himself would gift them noble clothes. The washerman refuses to part with the clothes and warns them against the king's wrath. Kṛṣṇa instructs Kubjaka to kill the ill-mannered washerman by smashing his head against a rock, which Kubjaka immediately complies with. Balarāma asks his fellow gopas to select the clothes of their choice and wear them with joy. Thereafter, a certain character who is merely referred to as 'Puruṣa' presents Kṛṣṇa and Balarāma with gem-studded silken robes. From the description above, it is evident that Śeṣa Kṛṣṇa has dealt with the washerman episode in greater detail by introducing novel characters such as Kubjaka and Puruṣa, without transgressing the bounds of narrative propriety.

Balarāma then suggests that it would be appropriate if they could lay hands on exquisite perfume to match their newly obtained robes. Kṛṣṇa assures him that all their wishes will be fulfilled even as they walk around the city. Śeṣa Kṛṣṇa has thus cleverly suggested the encounter with Kubjā that is to happen through this response of Kṛṣṇa.

As they continue their journey, the brothers spot the florist Sudāman approaching them. Sudāman is already aware of their divinity and feels blessed by their presence. Taking them to his home, he offers them garlands and other auspicious items. Amused by his hospitality, Balarāma and Kṛṣṇa explain to him that the items offered to them were worthy of a King and not forest dwellers such as themselves. Sudāman retorts that he is not the ignorant washerman to not realise their divinity.

Śeṣa Kṛṣṇa devotes substantial space to the Kubjā sub-plot. Kṛṣṇa notices a hunchback woman walking on the street and asks Sudāman about her. Sudāman suggests Kṛṣṇa to find out himself. Kṛṣṇa approaches the woman and asks who she was, where she hailed from, who her master was and to whom was she carrying unguents. The woman informs Kṛṣṇa that she, Trivakrā, was a servant in Kamsa's harem and that the King was especially fond of the unguents, robes, flowers and betel leaves which she carried for him. Kṛṣṇa mockingly remarks that it is only right the king favours such a person as her, referring indirectly to her hunchbacked form. Kubjā responds by asking him

to stop jesting. Kṛṣṇa assures her he was not mocking her and that inner qualities were more important than external appearances (न खलु रसिकानामाकृतिष्वादः, अपि तु गुणेषु ।). Kubjā adds that the crookedness of her physical form was a product of fate over which she had no control. Sudāman advises her to worship Kṛṣṇa for the attainment of earthly and other-worldly prosperity alike. Kubjā acknowledges Kṛṣṇa's divinity and expresses that the good fortune of meeting the blessed Lord left her with no desire for heaven or liberation:

*anekajanmārjitapuṇyapākaiḥ
param nidhānaṁ bhagavantamāpya ।
na jātu hātum valate mano me
svargāpavargādiṣu vītarāgam ॥*

5.35

She offers Kṛṣṇa perfumes, flowers, betel leaves and other items which she was carrying. Kṛṣṇa warns her that the king would be displeased at the favour she bestowed upon him and the other gopas. Kubjā responds that anyone who followed Kṛṣṇa, known for his inconceivable power, had nothing to fear even from the god of death, let alone human threats such as Kāṁsa. Sudāman suggests that Kubjā apply the fragrance to Kṛṣṇa and Balarāma herself, so she, instead of them, could take the burden of blame. Balarāma applauds his idea, which Kubjā dismisses as being as crooked as her own body:

yathā mama vakraṇ prṣṭhamevaṇ tava vakrā buddhibh ।

Speaking privately with her, Sudāman calls her naive and advises her to apply the fragrance herself so Kṛṣṇa can straighten her back. Kubjā appreciates this suggestion and does accordingly.

Kubjā's transformation, which is similar to what is described in Bhāgavata, is dealt with in two verses. The now transformed Kubjā pulls at Kṛṣṇa's upper garment and invites him to her house, offering herself completely to him. Kṛṣṇa promises to return after dealing with Kāṁsa, reinstating Ugrasena to the throne, releasing the imprisoned, and restoring order in Mathurā. Kubjā urges Kṛṣṇa not to forget his promise amidst his busy schedule; Kṛṣṇa assures her and takes leave.

It can be seen from the above that, in Śeśa Kṛṣṇa's dramatic reconstruction of the Kāṁsavadha episode, noble characters such as Sudāman and Kub-

jā are ever aware of the divine nature of Kṛṣṇa and Balarāma and the purpose of their re-incarnation, namely, the redemption of earth from the clutches of asuras. By extension, Kṛṣṇa's supernatural powers such as his ability to transform the hunchback woman are also self-evident to the characters even before they are manifested.

As they reach the streets of Mathurā, Balarāma, and Sudāman describe the opulence of the shops lining them. As Sudāman directs Kṛṣṇa to let his glance fall on the city's pretty maidens, Kṛṣṇa turns nostalgic in the remembrance of his parents and relatives and comments that they should curtail their excitement as regards the city (*alamidānīṁ nagarālokanakautukavyāsaṅgena*!). The memory of his village life in contrast to the artificial beauty of the city instantly manifests in the form of two prākṛta verses:

so vi kkhaṇo huvissadi jassim
tādassa pāakamalammi!
bhāmmantabhamaravibbhama paḍilambho
bhodi [maha] matthassa ||¹¹

5.45

*Will I once again get a chance to prostrate at the lotus feet of my father, my flowing tresses fabricating a swarm of bees therein?*¹²

ummiliapulaāī phārialacchīr~ pemmataralāī!
bhūo bandhumuhāī suhāī~ me denti suciraditthāī ||¹¹

5.46

*Will I once again get the joyful opportunity of seeing my relatives' faces for a long, (faces) which are covered in goosebumps, whose beauty lingers in mind and which radiates love?*¹²

This curious employment of Prakṛta by the hero (Kṛṣṇa) is a rare instance in Sanskrit dramas, where raw emotions and affection influence the choice of a more suitable dialect.

Balarāma reassures Kṛṣṇa that Kāṁsa's end is imminent since evil men bring about their downfall; he illustrates his point by providing Rāvaṇa's case as an example. To be noted is that the episode of Dhanurbhaṇga that features prominently in other works is conspicuous by its absence here.

The sixth act begins with a soliloquy by the royal guard who is well aware of the king's cruel nature. He is a compassionate man who is caught between his natural disposition for kindness and a sense of duty towards his wicked lord. Ordered by the king, he alerts the vassals along the borders that Kṛṣṇa had become a threat to Mathurā's throne. The guard directs them to make preparations for Kṛṣṇa's elimination by guarding the city gates, deploying the elephant Kuvalayāpīḍa in front, assembling skilled wrestlers who wield terrifying weapons, constructing lofty platforms for the sacrificial event, and striking down any hostile warriors. Although the guard knows the king's orders are unjust, he feels powerless to act against them, as he is merely a servant.

As he is pondering on the risky behaviours of Nanda's children, a sudden commotion catches the guard's attention. A watchman arrives and informs him that Kṛṣṇa had shattered the harder-than-diamond gate with a single fist strike, slain the guards, and dragged the great elephant Kuvalayāpīḍa by its trunk, ready to trample it. The guard decides to stay and witness the duel between Kṛṣṇa and Kuvalayāpīḍa. He marvels at the detailed battle and the ensuing victory of Kṛṣṇa.

The watchman remarks that only fate can save Kāṁsa now, as Kṛṣṇa gets closer to him every moment. The guard mentions that Kāṁsa had devised further plans to kill Kṛṣṇa. If Kuvalayāpīḍa were to be defeated, the brothers would be ambushed in the wrestling arena under the guise of a fair match. The arena had been fortified with deceitful soldiers and skilled wrestlers stationed at strategic points, with Kāṁsa himself supervising the operation. Thereafter, the guard and the watchman proceed towards the wrestling arena.

Cāṇūra, stationed at the entrance of the wrestling arena, blocks Kṛṣṇa's entry, declaring that only the powerful may enter. Muṣṭika reminds Cāṇūra about the king's purpose in inviting them to the wrestling match and asks the latter to allow them in. Ordered by Muṣṭika to prove his worth, Kṛṣṇa responds cleverly by requesting them to initiate him and his brother in the art of wrestling. Though they enjoy some fun in the beginning by pretending to be novices, Kṛṣṇa and Balarāma quickly resort to their naturally heroic stance and kill the wrestler duo. The description of their fierce fight is put in the mouths of the guard and the watchman. Having killed Cāṇūra, Muṣṭika, Śala, Tośala and innumerable other wrestlers, the brothers, carrying Kuvalayāpīḍa's tusks, storm the gates of the arena.

The guard and the watchman acknowledge that Kāṁsa's doom is inevitable now. As Kṛṣṇa and Balarāma admire the arena's grandeur, Balarāma points to Kāṁsa sitting at a distance atop a seven-storied mansion. Kāṁsa, sensing the danger, orders his chiefs to act quickly. The courtiers, however, decide to abandon Kāṁsa, recognizing that his unethical reign was nearing its ruin:

*tadetatsarājakaṁ rāṣṭram prahīṇaprāyamapi
parihātumasmākamucitam !*

Meanwhile, Kāṁsa injuncts that Nanda and others must be arrested immediately, Ugrasena and his allies executed, and Vasudeva and Devakī humiliated and severely punished.

Balarāma warns Kṛṣṇa that Kāṁsa, trembling in rage, was preparing for a battle. Kṛṣṇa hesitates momentarily, considering Kāṁsa their uncle. Balarāma reminds him about the purpose of his descent, namely, to fight evil and protect the world. Kṛṣṇa agrees and follows Balarāma's lead.

With the force of an elephant, Kṛṣṇa scatters the royal guards with his mace and sword. He seizes Kāṁsa, drags him by the hair, and throws him down from his seat. Like a falcon capturing its prey, Kṛṣṇa lifts Kāṁsa high and smashes him onto a rock repeatedly until he lies lifeless.

Conclusion

The Kāṁsavadha narrative, as crafted in the Bhāgavata Purāṇa and reimagined in the six Sanskrit works examined here, showcases a rich array of poetic preferences, each tailoring the tale to distinct stylistic and thematic ends. The Bhāgavata's 217-verse rendition, unfolding over three days, provides a comprehensive foundation—from the gopīs' lament (4 verses) to Akrūra's vision (55 verses) and Kāṁsa's slaying (8 verses)—that each poet adapts to reflect their vision. Across the Bhāgavatacampū (37 verses), Kṛṣṇacarita (prose-heavy), Kāṁsavaho (150 verses), Haricarita (48 verses), Bālacarita (two acts), and Kāṁsavadha (137 verses across Acts 4–6), these works preserve the narrative's essence—Kṛṣṇa's triumph over Kāṁsa as a divine act—while reshaping its contours to suit their chosen forms and intents.

Abhinava Kālidāsa's Bhāgavatacampū condenses the timeline to two days, weaving poetic wit into Akrūra's vision (e.g., Kṛṣṇa as a physician, 3.133) and Trivakrā's encounter (3.143) to suit its campū style. Agastya Paṇḍita's

Kṛṣṇacarita employs lush prose to depict Akrūra's vision—Balarāma as “white as mist”—and the bow-breaking's cosmic impact while completely omitting any mention of Kāṁsa's brothers. Rāma Pāṇivāda's Kāṁsavaho in Prākṛta allocates 20 verses to the gopīs' lament and 19 to Kubjā, assigning Kāṁsa's brothers' deaths to Kṛṣṇa alone. Parameśvara Bhaṭṭa's Haricarita opts for conciseness, compressing the wrestling match (2 verses), highlighting Kṛṣṇa's agency (e.g., provoking Kuvalayāpīda, 190), and excluding the gopīs' lament. Bhāsa's Bālacarita crafts a dramatic narrative via Dhruvasena's reports of Kṛṣṇa's vow (4.13) that finds fulfilment in Kāṁsa's climactic death (5.11), thereby prioritizing theatrical effect. Śeṣa Śrikṛṣṇa's Kāṁsavadha enriches the tale with novel characters like Sudāman and Kubjaka, adding subplots (e.g., Rādhā's longing, 4.45) and putting Prākṛta verses (5.45–46) in the mouth of the hero for achieving emotional depth. This drama completely bypasses the bow-breaking episode.

The appended chart—contrasting the Bhāgavata's 55 verses on Akrūra's vision with Kāṁsavaho's single verse or Bālacarita's omission—illustrates how each poet apportions narrative weight to align with their priorities. The Bhāgavatacampū and Kṛṣṇacarita emphasize devotional aesthetics, Kāṁsavaho and Haricarita highlight emotion or heroism, and Bālacarita and Kāṁsavadha leverage drama for immediacy and character interplay. Spanning the 4th century BCE to the 18th century CE, these works—across Sanskrit and Prākṛta, poetry and prose—demonstrate the Kāṁsavadha's adaptability as a narrative frame, where Kṛṣṇa's victory resonates through each poet's distinct lens. This analysis celebrates the multiplicity of these renditions, inviting further exploration into how such creative choices reflect the interplay of Purāṇic lore, poetic genius and narrative ingenuity in Sanskrit literary tradition.

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Tables

Kavya Category	Name of the Kavya	Author	Region	Period
Gadya-Kāvya	Kṛṣṇacarita	Agastya Paṇḍita	Andhra Pradesh	14 th CE
Campū-Kāvya	Bhāgavatacampū	Abhinava Kālidāsa	Andhra Pradesh	15 th CE
Nāṭaka	Bālacakritam	Bhāsa	Unknown	4 th BCE
	Karṇasavadham	Śeṣa Śrīkṛṣṇa	Maharashtra (Kāśī)	16 th CE
Khaṇḍa-Kāvya	Karṇasavaho	Rāma Pāṇivāda	Kerala	Early 18 th CE
	Haricarita	Parameśvara Bhaṭṭa	Kerala	13 th CE

Table 1: Works analyzed by category, chronology and authorship

Figure

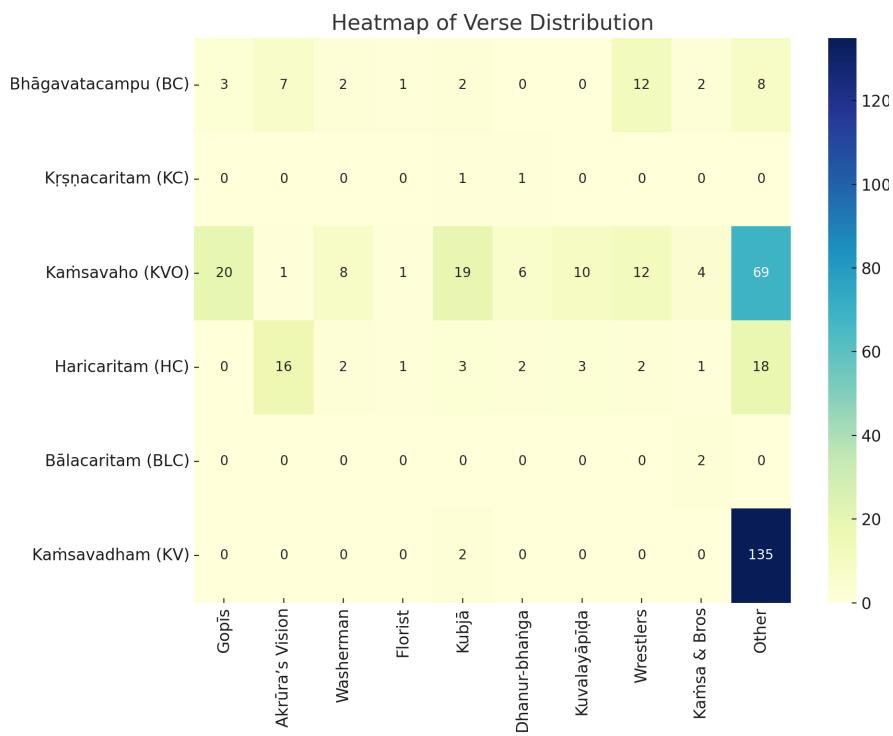


Fig 1. The chart illustrates the verse distribution across key episodes in various texts, highlighting genre-specific narrative emphasis.

Notes

1. Goswami, 2023, pp.298-323.
2. Haridutt Shastri and Srinivas Sharma, 2000, pp.105-122.
3. P. Sriramamurti, 1972.
4. Vellala Chidambara Shastri, 1961, p.225.
5. T. Venkatacharya, 1975, pp.60-77.
6. A. N. Upadhye, 2002, pp.9-156.
7. The Sanskrit chāyā of the verse on page 8, ascribed to an unknown writer, is as follows:
*sukumāramidam ca te śarīraṇ surabhiḥ kūnikumapaṇkajaścaiśah | parigrhṇātū tasmād-
 bhavānevedam sadṛśayorhi samāgamah sukhbāya || 2.16*
8. Krṣṇamacharya, 1948, pp.40-53.
9. T. Ganapati Sāstrī, 1912, pp.53-64.
10. Pandit Durgaprasada *et al.*, 1935, pp.37-84
11. The Samskrta-chaya of the verses on page 14 are: *so’pi kṣaṇo bhavīṣyati yasminstāta-
 sya pādakamale | bhramagamaravibramapratilambho bhavati [mama] mastakasya
 || 5.45;unmīlitapulakāni smārītalakṣmīni premataralā ni | bhūyo bandhumukhāni
 sukhanī me dāsyanti suciradr̥ṣṭāni || 5.46*
12. Translations of verses on page 14 in Kamsavadham are by Dr. Shankar Rajaraman

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