

Survey

AN INDIAN POET CONTEMPLATES ON THE LIFE OF JESUS CHRIST

**A CRITICAL APPRECIATION OF THE KRISTU-
BHAGAVATA OF PROF. P.C. DEVASSIA**

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1. Introduction

Jesus Christ is an Asian. He was born in Asia; he lived his thirty-three years of embodied existence, preached his message of love and salvation, died on the Cross and resurrected to life again in the Asian soil. All the world religions, in fact, took origin and grew strong in Asia. Hinduism, Judaism, Zoroastrianism, Jainism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, Shintoism, Islam and Sikhism: all these are products of Asia. No other continent, I presume, can claim to be the birth place of a world religion, with written foundational sacred texts, organized and systematized liturgical worship, precisely prescribed belief system, a definite founder whose inner spiritual experience gives the inspiration and basis to a particular religious tradition, and defined doctrines concerning the ultimate eschatological good of human existence. One may argue that some of the above-mentioned systems are not proper religions, but are only ways of life with a well-defined moral code and time-tested principles for orderly societal life. They are meant to ameliorate the earthly sojourn of humans through prescribed ethical principles and precepts for correct moral behaviour. This may depend how one defines religion. One thing is certain: religious traditions, principles, doctrines and practices have exerted and exert today immense influence on the life and activities of Asians. Christianity, though born in Asia, due to historical and geographical vicissitudes and reasons, spread to the West. In the course of time Christianity was identified and categorized as a western religion, and had to be re-introduced in many of the Asian countries. Unfortunately this re-introduction was wrongly conceived, irrationally planned and ruthlessly executed. Christ was presented to the Asians as if he were a European,

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clothed in the European socio-cultural garb, and Christian message was preached to the Asians in European cultural and philosophical framework and terminology. I am trying here to delineate how an Indian poet tries to recapture Christ as an Asian, as an Indian.

My intention here is to study and evaluate the *mahākāvya* of Prof. P.C. Devassia entitled *Kristu-bhāgavata*. Prof. Devassia is a committed Catholic from Kerala, and the Indian Christians can rightly be proud that one among them has secured the noble title and high honour of a Sanskrit *mahākavi*. Before I enter into the discussion on this epic poem, let me, by way of introduction, say a few words about the Kerala Christians' contribution to Sanskrit literature. The history of the Christians in Kerala, as is well known, goes back to the first century CE. It is believed Christianity came to India immediately after the death of Jesus Christ, its founder, through the ministry of his apostle St. Thomas. The Christians in Kerala has totally integrated and easily merged into the main stream life of the Kerala society. This first Christian community of India, known today as the Thomas Christians, in the beginning accepted the caste structure of the Hindu society and lived as a particular caste community. In the societal life they accepted most of the Hindu caste customs and traditions. They were vegetarians; they dressed like high caste Hindus.

1.1. The First Christian Sanskrit School

During the nineteenth century, a sort of Christian renaissance was initiated in Kerala mainly through the efforts of a local Catholic priest called Kuriakose Elias Chavara (1805-1871). He was a religious and social reformer, a brilliant educationalist, a great litterateur, a promoter of inter-religious understanding, and above all, a very holy man. The Keralites have to be grateful to this priest, because, the high literacy rate Kerala enjoys today is largely due to the interest taken by him to establish schools all over Kerala¹. He also started a Sanskrit school in 1846 in Mannanam. This is the first ever-recorded attempt by a Christian to propagate Sanskrit education in Kerala. This school was open to all,

¹Fr Kuriakose Elias Chavara was the head (Vicar General) of the Christian community of Kerala for some years. Using his authority he ordained that every parish community should establish a school attached to the church. He saw to it that his orders are carried out by local priests.

irrespective of castes, classes and sexes. In 1996 CMI Congregation celebrated the 150th anniversary of the foundation of the first Christian Sanskrit School in Kerala. But this institute did not survive long. One reason for its early demise might have been the objection raised by the caste Hindus. Caste system was extremely strong and virulent in Kerala at that time. "Kerala is a mad-house of castes", said Vivekananda. The high caste Hindus believed that the Christians were not gifted to engage in literary and artistic creativity. A Sanskrit school run by Christians, which is open to all, even to outcastes, might have been a blasphemous challenge for the all-powerful Hindu leadership. They might have prevented its progress by all means. However, it is a matter of great satisfaction that the members of the religious community established by Kuriakose Elias Chavara, today a very powerful Christian organization of Kerala, are keen on learning and propagating Indian culture. Sanskrit language and in promoting inter-religious understanding through dialogue².

In this century another Sanskrit College was established by another Christian, namely, by Prof. P.T.Kuriakose, commonly known as *Kuriakose Master*. He started a school in 1909 at Pavaratty which was later (in 1932) developed into a Sanskrit College, recognized (in 1937) by the University of Madras. All the teachers of this college were well-known Hindu Sanskrit scholars. Prof. Kuriakose also wrote and published a widely used Sanskrit textbook in five volumes. In 1973 he handed over this Sanskrit College with all its assets to the *Kendriya Vidyā-pīṭha* of the Government of India³.

1.2. Christian Sanskrit Literature

There are a few Sanskrit works written by Kerala Christians, which are worthy of mention. Prof. I.C.Chacko, who lived in the beginning of this century, an engineer by profession, was an acknowledged Sanskrit

²Courses on Sanskrit, Indian Philosophy and Hindu Spirituality are compulsory items in the curriculum of priestly studies of the CMI order. In fact, there are eminent scholars in Sanskrit language and Indian Philosophy among the members of this order. A number of Centres and Institutes are manned and managed by the CMI Order all over India to promote Indian culture and inter-religious dialogue.

³Later the government of India shifted this Sanskrit College from Pavaratty to Puranattukara.

scholar. His *Pāṇinīya-Pradyota*, a well-written Malayalam commentary to the *sūtras (Aṣṭādhyāyī)* of Panini, won for him the *National Sāhitya Academy Award* of 1956 for displaying high scholarship in Sanskrit language⁴. He has also composed *Kristu-Sahasra-Nāma*, the *One Thousand Names of Christ*, in Sanskrit. Imitating the *Viṣṇu-Sahasra-Nāma* of Hinduism, he wrote this devotional work in verses⁵. Another *Sahasra-Nāma* hymn entitled *Miśihasahasra-Nāma-Stotra* is recently published by another young Christian scholar named K.U.Chacko⁶. Besides the thousand names of Christ, this small book also contains *Kristvaṣṭottaraśata-Nāma-Stotra* and *Mariāṣṭottaraśata-Nāma-Stotra*.

Prof. K.P.Urumese is also known for his Sanskrit scholarship. Based on Christ's *Sermon on the Mount* he composed a monograph in Sanskrit verse, entitled *Girigītā*⁷. Another short Sanskrit work also deserves mention here, namely, *Yeśucarita* written in prose by Fr Marcel, who was professor of Sanskrit at SH College, Thevara, Ernakulam⁸. It is a work on the life of Christ based on the four Gospels⁹.

⁴I.C.Chacko, *Pāṇinīya-pradyotam*, Ernakulam: Mar Thimotheus Memorial Printing and Publishing House, 1955.

⁵I.C.Chacko, *Kristusahasra-Nāma. Thousand Names of Christ*, Bangalore: Dharmaram College, 1985.

⁶K.U.Chacko, *Miśihasahasra-Nāma-Stotra*, Muvattupuzha: Jeeva Jyothi Publications, 1987.

⁷K.P.Urumese, *Girigītā*, Trivandrum: St Joseph's Press, 1978².

⁸Fr Marcel, *Yeśucarita*, Cochin-Thevara: L.F.Printing Press, 1957².

⁹Mention may be made here also of the short Sanskrit work by Prof. K.P. Narayanpisharoti, a Hindu scholar, entitled *Mahātyāgi*. This however, is a translation of the Malayalam work by the same name composed by a Kerala Christian Vidvān M.O. Avara. This poetic work treats the last words of Jesus Christ on the cross. Cf. K.P. Naryanapisharoti, *Mahātyāgi*, in Vidvan M.O. Avara, *Mahātyāgi. Christ on the Cross. Malayalam Poem with six Translations*, Cochin: Amarakerala Industries, 1978.

There are also numerous short hymns and bhajans in Sanskrit which are used widely in Christian churches.

2. Kristu-bhāgavata of Prof. P.C. Devassia

2.1. Introduction

The greatest contribution of Christians to Sanskrit literature is *Kristu-bhāgavata*, a *mahākāvya* in thirty-three chapters (*sarga*) based on the life of Jesus Christ, composed by Prof. P.C.Devassia¹⁰. The thirty-three chapters correspond to the thirty-three years of life of Jesus Christ¹¹.

¹⁰P.C.Devassia, *Kristu-bhāgavata*, Trivandrum: Jayabharatam, 1977.

Prof P.C.Devassia, born in 1906 at Kudamalore, Kerala, had his Sanskrit education in the traditional way under several well-known Sanskrit scholars. He took his Master's Degree in Malayalam and Sanskrit from the University of Madras in 1937, and since then had been lecturer and professor of Malayalam at several colleges of Kerala. He has published several works in Malayalam and Sanskrit. But his most important work is undoubtedly the *Kristu-bhāgavata*. He now leads a retired life in Trivandrum.

¹¹The thirty-three chapters of the poem are: I. *Kanyā-darśanam* (The Sage Meets the Virgin), II. *Pratiśruti* (The Betrothal), III. *Sakharyasya divya-darśanam* (The Vision of Zachariah), IV. *Maṅgala-vijñāpanam* (The Annunciation), V. *Bandhu-grahābhigamanam* (The Visitation), VI. *Janmadeśa-gamanam* (A Journey to Bethlehem), VII. *Bhagavato yeśor avatārah* (The Birth of Jesus), VIII. *Devalaya-samarpaṇam* (The Presentation in the Temple), IX. *Vidvad āgamanam herodakṛtam śiśusmāraṇam ca* (The Arrival of Magi and the Slaughter of the Innocents), X. *Yeśoh śaiśavam* (The Childhood of Jesus), XI. *Snāpakayohanasyāgamah* (The Coming of John the Baptist), XII. *Piśācasya pralobhanam yeśoh śiṣyavaraṇam ca* (The Temptation and the Call of the Disciples), XIII. *Vivāhotsave bhagavatah prathamādbhutam* (The Marriage Feast at Cana and the First Miracle), XIV. *Samariayāṅgana-vṛttāntah* (Jesus and the Samaritan Woman), XV. *Adbhuta-paramparā* (Jesus Works Many Miracles), XVI. *Anyādbhutāni dvādaśa-śiṣyavaraṇam ca* (More Miracles. The Selection of the Apostles), XVII. *Giri-prabhāṣaṇam I* (The Sermon on the Mount I), XVIII. *Giri-prabhāṣaṇam II* (The Sermon on the Mount II), XIX. *Snāpakayohanasya vadhah* (The Execution of John the Baptist), XX. *Magdalenāyās tailābhīṣekah* (The Story of Mary Magdalene), XXI. *Sādhoh samariyasya dṛṣṭāntah* (The Parable of Good Samaritan), XXII. *Durvyayinah sutasya kathā* (The Prodigal Son), XXIII. *Gaṇikā-vṛttāntah* (The Woman Taken in Adultery), XXIV. *Lasarasya punarj jīvanam* (The Raising of Lazar), XXV. *Yeśor jaitrayātrā* (The Triumphant Entry into Jerusalem), XXVI. *Yugāntasya lakṣaṇāni* (The End of the World), XXVII. *Antima-bhojanam* (The Last Supper), XXVIII. *Gadasimany ārāme yeśor yātanā* (The Agony in the Garden), XXIX. *Yudāsasya prāṇatyāgah* (The End of Judas), XXX. *Pilātasya vicāro nirṇayaś ca* (Pilate Tries and Condemns Jesus), XXXI. *Yeśoh krūśārohaṇam* (The Crucifixion), XXXII. *Yeśor utthānam* (The Resurrection of Jesus), XXXIII. *Svargārohaṇam* (The Ascension).

The basic story of this *mahākāvya* is taken from the four Gospels. But the author, without distorting the Gospel teachings and New Testament narratives on the life and message of Christ, using his imagination and poetical creativity, gives much more flesh and blood to the biblical story of Christ. The work begins with a brilliant *maṅgala-śloka*:

*Jagatpatim gokulajātam arcitum vipaścitah samcarato nināya yā /
punaśca kāvyadhvani me virājatām samujjvalā saiva śubhāya
tārakā//*

May the same brilliant star, which guided the wise men, who set out to worship the Lord of the universe born in a stable, shine again in the path of my poetic endeavours, so that they have happy ending (I.1)¹².

The second verse also calls our attention. The first poet (*ādikavi*) Valmiki wrote the great epic poem *Rāmāyaṇa* provoked and inspired by the immense pain he experienced at the brutal killing of a bird by a hunter. His *śoka* came out as *śloka*: the famous *mā niṣāda* ... Here the poet is inspired and encouraged to launch the sacred work of writing the life of Christ by the self-immolation of Christ on the cross: *jātmajasyātmabaler anusmṛtiḥ sucetasām kam na kavim kariṣyati/* (I.2).

2.2. A Wider Perspective

The poet discovers, develops and presents with great poetical dexterity the untold and unrecorded details of the life and activities of Jesus. What are hinted at or alluded to in the Gospels are taken up and artistically elaborated into small stories within the overarching story and poetical plot. *Kaviḥ krāntadarśiḥ*, goes the saying, meaning a poet is one who sees beyond and behind the objects of experiences, which are conditioned by space, time and material dimensions. We, normal mortals, see objects, persons and events as they are presented to us through our senses and mind in their actual materiality, measurability and dimensionality. But poetical mind transcends and enters behind the presented objects and captures extra details, intense sentiments and new meanings of these things and experiences. Here the poet is on par with the

¹²Prof. P.C. Devassia himself has translated his poem into English. In this text I am using this translation.

sages of old, the *ṛṣis*; *ṛṣis* are also *krānta-darśis*. While the sages become transcendental supra-natural seers through the sublimation of the spirit and power of Yoga, the poets become supra normal visionaries through the power of imagination and poetical intuition (*pratibhā*) and connatural talents.

Thus our poet devotes two chapters (I and II) for the description of the betrothal of Mary with Joseph, which is mentioned in the Gospel in few sentences. Mary's visit to her cousin Elizabeth is emotionally charged and eminently tender in the vision of the poet in chapter five. Chapter ten gives a vivid description of the childhood stories of Jesus, which the Gospel, in an extremely matter of fact manner, hints at saying 'he grew up in wisdom before God and men' (Lk.2.52). Likewise portrayals of the birth of Jesus (VII), visit of the three wise men of the East (IX), marriage of Cana (XIII), Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman (XIV), murder of John the Baptist (XIX), suicide of Judas (XXIX), etc. show the creative imagination of the poet and his superb mastery over the language. Thus without contradicting the real story and without compromising the orthodox beliefs on the person and teaching of Jesus Christ, the poet makes the life of Christ poetically more palatable and pleasing, and religiously very edifying and inspiring to the readers.

2.3. Poetical Excellence

The language and style of the work are simple, clear and straightforward. Prof. V. Raghavan judges the *guṇas* (the distinguishing poetical character) of the poetry as *prasāda* (lucidity and serenity) and *saukumārya* (tenderness and beauty). Dr. K. Kunjunni Raja opines that the poetical style of the work can be characterized as Vaidarbhi. The poetical metres used are mainly *anuṣṭubh*, *upajāti* in combination with *indravajra* and *upendravajra*. Main sentiment is definitely *śānta*; and the subordinate sentiments are *vīra* and *adbhuta*. Of course, *alamkāras* make a poetical work delectable and delightful. The common *alamkāras* used in *Kristu-bhāgavata* are *upamā*, *utprekṣa* and *arthāntaranyāsa*. I will come back to some of these technical terms and concepts related to poetics and poetical works later.

Sanskrit *mahākāvyas* have to work within the parameters and rules laid down by theorists and literary tradition of the country. It should have

a particular number of chapters, at least eighteen; it should narrate childbirth, coronation of a king, marriage, description of a war, description of nature, a description of the sex life of the hero, etc. The story of the *kāvya*, being the holy life of Jesus, the poet is by force restricted in some aspects of such poetical conventions and *mahākāvya* tradition. In spite of these limitations, I believe, our poet brilliantly executes his poetical dharma.

Let me point out some examples. He describes Joseph as a very handsome, noble and at the same time a hardworking gentleman. He is a great artist, *viśvakarma dharaṅgatah kim*, as if Visvakarma, the artist and architect of gods, himself has taken birth on the earth (I.6). Joseph is actively involved in the life of the community, is aware of his social responsibility and is concerned with the sad plight of his country under the oppressive Roman rule. But at the same time he is a contemplative, given to *śravaṇa*, *manana* and *nididhyāsana*. The poet says:

*Dhruvam jalotpannam api svayam jalāt /
pṛthak sthitam padmam adhas cakāra sah //*

'He excelled the lotus, which though born in water, stands apart from water' (I.10). The dry and abstract piety of the middle ages, and the spiritual works of life-negating and world-denying authors of the past have portrayed Mary as an ethereal, numinous and other-worldly being, who is to be gazed at from distance in an awesome deference, and who is totally inaccessible to ordinary mortals. But look how our poet makes her an earthly and human person with charm and elegance:

*Kim indulekhā patīā nabhastalāt, kim ādimātā ca
yahudīyāmbardharā /
kim īśadūtas taruṅāvapur dharo, vitarkam evam bahudhā
prakurvatīm // (I.32)*

Is it the moon that has fallen from the sky? Is it our first mother (Eve) come in Jewish garb? Is this an angel in the feminine form? Mary's shapely form gave rise to such questions.

Look at the majesty of the following verse, in which the poet describes the sunset:

Samsārārtiharam sanātanarasām yeśor mukhān nihsṛtām

*premodgītisudhām piban praśamitottapo bhavan bhānumān /
samhṛty āśu karān viveśa vinayenāstādri-pārśvasthitam
sandhyārāga-kaṣāyitāambaradharo dhyānocitam gahvaram // (XVIII.42)*

The sun, having drunk the eternally sweet nectar of the sermon of love that flowed from the lips of Jesus, which removes the tribulations of the earthly existence, calmed down, and instantly withdrawing his rays and putting on the saffron robe dyed by the evening sky, entered, in all humility, a cave by the side of the setting mountain, a fitting resort for meditation.

2.4. An Inculturated Gospel

One of the greatest merit of this epic poem is that it takes inspiration from the Upanisadic, Epic and Puranic literature of India and uses stories and characters of these classical works to explain the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. Thus the author very ably tries to contextualize and indianize the message, events and incidents in the life of Christ and his teachings, and thus make them more understandable and enjoyable to the Indian readers, and suited to the genius and spirit of India.

The poet is bold enough to use the poetical freedom and state that Jesus as a boy took pains to acquire sufficient knowledge of the teachings of the Vedas, Upanisads, Puranas and of Buddhism (X.11-15):

The supremely intelligent boy had often heard from the merchants coming from the East, about the Vedas and the Upanisads, and about the religion of the Buddha.

The boy drank in like nectar the Puranas, which are rich in maxims like, 'non-violence is the supreme dharma' (*ahimsā paramo dharmah*).

He held in great esteem Siddhartha, who abandoned his kingdom and set out in search of a way for getting rid of the miseries of this *samsāra*.

To him, who was to offer his own flesh as food to his devotees, the story of Jimutavahana was indeed thrilling.

More than twenty-five references to stories, events or persons of the Hindu sacred books are made in the work to compare and contrast events in the life of Jesus. Thus Zechariah's offering in the temple of Jerusalem (Lk.1.8-10) is compared to Dasaratha's sacrifice with the help of sage Rsyasringa (III.27). Joseph wanted to abandon holy Mary (Mt. 1.19) as Sri Rama in *Rāmāyana* long ago abandoned the chaste Sita (V.34). A celestial voice announces the pregnancy of Mary to Joseph and she is accepted by him (Mt. 1.20-25), as sage Kanva heard the heavenly voice in the sacrificial room, which communicated to him the news of the pregnancy of Sakuntala (V.38). Sage Simeon desired death after seeing Jesus Christ, the promised Messiah (Lk. 2.25-32). This is compared to sage Sarabhanga who gave up his life after seeing Sri Rama, the incarnation of Visnu, in Dandaka forest (VIII.27). Just as Nanda, the husband of Yasoda, is the foster father of Krsna, so too Joseph, the husband of Mary, is the foster father of Jesus (IX.40). Kāma tried to distract Siva in his practice of penance, but was destroyed by Siva. In the same way the devil tried to tempt Jesus in his practice of penance and was defeated by Jesus (Lk. 4.1-13) (XII.19). Young Jesus, who was possessed with faith and love of his Father in the temple of Jerusalem (Lk.2.46-51), is compared to the young Brahmin boy Naciketas of the *Kāthopanisad* who too was possessed with great *śraddhā* (X.32). At the command of Jesus a blind man bathes in the pool of Siloe and is cured. In the same way sage Ashtavakra, at the command of his father Kahoda, takes a bath in the Samanga river and is cured (XXIII.34). Jesus who was moved by the sorrow of the two sisters raises their deceased brother Lazar to life. This is compared to the revival of Kacha, son of Brhaspati, by Sukra at the request of Devayani (XXIV.38). One of the disciples betrayed Jesus. There are parallels to this in *Mahābhārata*: Drona and Bhishma were betrayed and killed in the Kuruksetra war by the treachery of their disciple Arjuna (XXIX.8). Claudia, the wife of Pilate, advises her husband to let Jesus go, like Mandodari, the wife of Ravana, advises her husband to let Sita free (XXX.43).

I am citing three verses here from the lives of Mary and Joseph. See how Joseph, when he heard the divine voice, was ready to accept Mary as his wife, as sage Kanva did not hesitate to accept the pregnant Sakuntala:

*Nidrotthitah sumatir isvaradūtavākyaāt
paryagrahīd bhuvanabhūtidam āvahantīm /*

*vāṇīm sagarbhatanayām adhikṛtya daivīm
ākaraṇya tām iva munipravarah sa kaṇvah // (V.38).*

Again, Joseph was betrothed to Mary. But even before the marriage, through the divine intervention, Mary became pregnant. Thus Joseph was put in a very delicate predicament; on the one hand he knew the innocence and holiness of Mary, on the other he did not want to provoke the condemnation of the people by marrying a pregnant woman. Therefore, he decides to renounce her secretly. The poet compares this situation with the critical position of Sri Rama in *Rāmāyana*. Rama knew the fidelity and innocence of pregnant Sita. But he was afraid of the accusations of the people, and he decides to abandon her in the forest.

*Satīm pavitrātmaniviṣṭagarbhām nindāspadam kartuṃ anicchur
etām /
guptam parityaktum iyeṣa māni videhaputrīm iva rāmacandrah //
(V.34).*

The marriage of Mary with Joseph is compared to the marriage of sage Vasista with Arundhati:

*Śrīmad vasiṣṭamuniastam arundhatīva
patyuh karāgram avalambya satī tadānīm /
ratnam suvarṇakaṭake ghaṭitam yathā sā
reje svabāndhavajanair abhivandyamānā // (II.36).*

Jesus Christ and his message need to be incarnated and inculturated into the culture of India. Christ and his teaching should be presented to the Indian mind using Indian concepts, symbols and language as articulated in Indian philosophy and spirituality. One has to present the Bible and the person of Jesus Christ as the good news to an India of religious pluralism, of immense cultural diversity, rich spiritual heritage, but at the same time an India that faces existential problems of huge magnitudes. Inculturation, therefore, is a process that aims at assimilating and integrating the local culture and recognizing and accepting the realities of life in its complexity by the local Church to use it as an important medium of living and expressing the Christian faith. Inculturation is a living dialogue by which both the partners of dialogue, namely, local church and its cultural *milieu*, are mutually influenced, enriched and enlightened. I want to quote two passages, one from a document of Pope John Paul II and the other from the documents of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conference:

My thoughts turn immediately to the lands of the East, so rich in religious and philosophical traditions of great antiquity. Among these lands, India has a special place. A great spiritual impulse leads Indian thought to seek an experience, which would liberate the spirit from the shackles of time and space and would therefore acquire absolute value. The dynamic of this quest for liberation provides the context for great metaphysical systems. In India, particularly, it is the duty of Christians now to draw from this rich heritage the elements compatible with their faith, in order to enrich Christian thought¹³.

The local Church is a Church incarnate in a people, a Church indigenous and inculturated. And this means concretely a Church in continuous, humble and loving dialogue with the living traditions, the cultures, the religions, in brief, with all the life realities of the people in whose midst it has sunk its roots deeply and whose history and life it gladly makes its own¹⁴.

Prof. Devassia does not use high theology or complex philosophical deliberations for this process of inculturation; but he uses his poetical talents and aesthetical sensibilities to show striking parallels in the life and teachings of Jesus Christ with the stories and events of the sacred tradition and holy books of India. In this way our poet has done a very valuable service to the Indian Church; he has eminently enriched the Christian faith and practices.

There are also other allusions to events in the Indian political context. The poet compares the Roman rule in Palestine during the time of Jesus as the colonial rule of the British in India (I.11). The cruel betrayal of Jesus by Judas, one of his own disciples while he was praying, is compared to the brutal murder of Mahatma Gandhi by Nathuram Godse, a fellow Hindu (XXVIII.13), in an inter-religious prayer meeting.

¹³ Pope John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, art. 72.

¹⁴ FABC Statement, April 1974. Cf. Gaudencio B. Rosales and Catalino G. Arevalo (eds.), *For All the Peoples of Asia*, No. 12, Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1992, p.14.

2.5. A Religious *Sādhana*

In India the spirit of religion and the imprint of spirituality pervade and penetrate every sphere of life. Thus, for example, philosophizing, which is normally an intellectual exercise and exertion of reasoning in the search of ultimate causes, is a spiritual act for Indians. It is *darśana*, the vision of Reality from different viewpoints. Even the Nyaya philosophy, which deals with logic and epistemology, ultimately ask questions concerning the eschatological destiny of human life and embodied existence. The science of medicine is an Upaveda (Āyurveda); it has to be exercised as an act of devotion to the supreme Being. Bharata's *Nāṭya-śāstra* is sometimes referred to as *Nāṭya-veda*. Eating, a normal daily human need and activity, is a ritual act; it is a sacrifice offered into the abdominal fire. Even the union of husband and wife is a sacramental ritual, a *samskāra* (*garbhādhana*). *Artha*, wealth, and *kāma*, pleasure are *puruṣārthas*, goals or values of life, though subordinate and subservient to dharma and *mokṣa* (liberation) which is the ultimate goal. All the more, all works of fine arts are to be considered as acts of worship by the artist. Writing poetry, especially *mahākāvya*, is an eminent spiritual *sādhana*, which is to be executed with proper purity of mind, honesty of intention, concentration of one's energies and a consecration of the work to the divine power. It is Yoga; and as such it demands yogic psychosomatic disciplines from the yogin, the artist; control of body, of senses and of mind; one pointed concentration and renunciation of all other attachments. In ancient India all the literary works were religious. Religious and mythological literature of the Epics and Puranas is the mother and matrix of all, or almost all, literary works. It however, does not mean that fine arts are just accidental accessories or subservient subordinates of religion. No art theorist or art critic would insist that aesthetic and artistic approach to stories, events, persons, etc., and poetical cognizance of realities should be subjected to religious ideologies and doctrines. It is also to be noted here that moral instructions or dispensing of spiritual doctrines are not the primary objective of an ideal artistic poetical work. Delight is and should be its first and foremost objective. What I want to say is that religion and spirituality had a very firm hold on the life of people in India, and the spirit of religion permeates and pervades all vocations and occupations, all realms of life, and important moments of life. And artists were no exceptions.

Prof. P.C. Devassia is eminently a religious person. He undertook this great work neither to give free vent to his poetical imagination nor to exhibit his artistic competency, nor to secure the fame of a *mahākavi*, though all these might have encouraged him to embark on this project. But primarily it is a religious act and spiritual *sādhana*. He confesses that the contemplation on the passion and death of Jesus on the cross has made him a poet (I.2); he is narrating the supreme self-sacrifice of Jesus so that it may rouse sublime and noble sentiments in his heart (I.3). He dedicates the work to Blessed Virgin Mary, the mother of Christ, and mother of humanity (*mayā kṛtam idam navam kristu-bhagavatam arpayāmi mariyāmbike tava padāntike*).

2.6. Artistic Evaluation

To criticise and evaluate serious poetical works, the critic needs to be almost a poet himself/herself. The critic should possess a high degree of aesthetic sensibility, poetic intuition (*pratibhā*), artistic temperament and creative capability. The poetry has to reincarnate in the inner being of the critic. Poet creates poetry, and critic should recreate the same in himself/herself, so that he/she may enjoy the supra-normal poetical delight and may rightly evaluate the inherent merits and demerits of a given work. The difference between poet and critic is that of grade or degree and not of kind and category. Viewed in this perspective, perhaps, I am not eligible for the post of a literary critic. Still as a lover of poetry and as a believer in Christ, I am, I believe, entitled to pass some remarks on this work, namely, the *Kristu-bhāgavata*.

Literary criticism in India probably begins with the *Nāṭyaśāstra* attributed to sage Bharata, which might have been written between first century BCE and first century CE. Bharata concentrated more on drama, dance and music; but he has also laid down seminal rules and directives for good poetry. Later there was a long line of eminent theorists and adept technical experts of poetics who analysed the existing good poetry like *Rāmāyaṇa*, *Mahābhārata*, etc. (probably also Kalidasa's works), discerned the essential ingredients needed for ideal and perfect poetry and synthesised technical rules and codes of conventions for writing flawless poetry. These rules later became the norms of judging artistic beauty and aesthetic value of poetry, that is, for poetical criticism. Concepts like *śabda* and *artha*, *rasu* and *bhāva*, *alamkāra*, *vakrokti*, *rīti*, *guṇa*, *vṛtti*,

dhvani, *abhidhā*, *lakṣaṇa* and *vyāṅgya*, etc. were developed into complex theories.

The first among the ancient (*prācīna*) theorists is Bhamaha (about 700 CE) who wrote the famous *Kāvya-lamkāra*. Dandin who lived about 700 CE, (there are differences of opinion as to whether he lived before or after Bhamaha), is the author of *Kāvya-darśa*; Udbhata (after 750 CE) wrote *Bhāmaha-vivaraṇa* and *Alamkāra-sāra-samgraha*; Vamana (about 800) *Kāvya-lamakāra-sūtra*; Rudrata (about 850) *Kāvya-lamkāra*; Anandavardhana (wrote between 860 – 890) *Dhvanyāloka*; Rajashekhara (between 900 – 950) *Kāvya-mīmāṃsā*; Kuntaka, *Vakrokti-jīvita*; Abhinavagupta (about 1000), *Dhvanyāloka-locana*; Dhanamjaya *Daśarūpa*; Ksemendra, *Aucitya-vicāra-carca*, and *Kavi-kaṅṭhābharaṇa*; Mammata (about 1050), *Kāvya-prakāśa*; Ruyyaka *Alamkāra-sarvasva*; Somesvara (1131 CE) *Mānasollasa*; Hemachandra, *Kāvya-ānuśāsana*; Bhoja *Śṅgāra-prakāśa*; Jayadeva, *Chandrāloka*; Visvanatha *Sāhitya-darpaṇa*; Jagannatha, *Rasagaṅgādhara*; and many others followed. Different schools and trends in the science of poetics were formed¹⁵.

Bhamaha in his *Kāvya-lamkāra* (I.9) enumerates the source materials or basic helps for poetical endeavour. They are grammar, poetical metre, dictionary, traditional myths and legends, worldly wisdom, logic and other fine arts. Mammata in his *Kāvya-prakāśa* (I.3) declares: “Poetic imagination, proficiency resulting from the study of the world, sciences, poetical compositions and the like, practice under the guidance of those who know poetry – these constitute the cause of its (of the poetry) origin”¹⁶. These things could be categorized in five heads: poetical imagination (*pratibhā*), proficiency in the use of correct and elegant language, knowledge of worldly wisdom, knowledge of other compositions and knowledge of the scriptures and mythology. Needless to say the Prof. Devassia possessed all these prerequisites to create his *magnum opus*. He learned Sanskrit under traditional pandits and in University College, and has been teaching Sanskrit for almost thirty-five

¹⁵For more details, Cf. P.V. Kane, *History of Sanskrit Poetics*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1998 (IVth edition reprint)

¹⁶*The Poetic Light: Kāvya-prakāśa of Mammata*, transl. by R.C. Dwivedi, Vol.I, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1977, p.7.

years. He started to work on *Kristu-bhāgavata* at the ripe age of sixty-six. By that time he had already been acclaimed as a Sanskrit scholar and poet. He had already published several literary works in Malayalam and Sanskrit, and also had completed the translation of *Kathā-sarit-sāgara* into Malayalam. As a devoted Christian he was well-versed in Christian scriptures. As is evident from the notes in his work, he has read and studied scholarly works of numerous eminent authors on the life of Christ, like Abbe Constant Foward, Ferdinand Prat, Guiseppe Ricciotti, Alban Goodier, Lagrange M.J., Giovanni Papini and Fulton J. Sheen.

Among the theorists of poetics one of the main questions discussed is: what is the essence or soul of poetry? What makes a poetical work enjoyable to the *sahṛdayas*? The answers to these questions were different for different authors, and hence different definitions of poetry were proposed and propagated, and different schools of poetics emerged. Some of the older definitions of poetry are: *śabdārthau sahitau kāvyam* (*Kāvya-lamkāra* of Bhamaha, I.16). More or less the same definition is repeated by Rudrata, Kuntaka, Mammata, Vagbhata, Hemachandra and Vamana. Visvanatha gives a famous definition of poetry in his *Sāhitya-darpaṇa*: *vākyam rasātmakam kāvyam*. *Ramaṇīyārtha-pratipādkah śabdah kāvyam* is another well-known definition by Jagannatha in his *Rasa-gaṅgādhara*. The same author has another beautiful definition: *sahṛdaya-hṛdayāhlādi-śabdārtha-mayatvam eva kāvya-lakṣaṇam*.

There are at least five schools of poetics based on the answer given to the basic question: what is the essence or soul of poetry. (i) The Rasa School is headed by Bharata's *Nāṭya-śāstra* itself. His statement *vibhāvānubhāva-vyabhicāri-samyogād rasa-niṣpatti* is the basic *mantra* of this school. Lollata, Sankuka, Bhattanayaka and Abhinavagupta belong to this school. Each poetical work has the predominance of one or two *rasas* of the nine *rasas* and their corresponding *bhāvas*¹⁷. (ii) The Alamkara School: *Alamkāra* means a thing of beauty, and the figures of speech that beautify the poetry. Bhamaha, Udbhata, Dandi, Rudrata and others are the advocates of this school. (iii) The Riti School: This is based on the *guṇas* of poetry. Bharata's *Nāṭya-śāstra* (XVII.96) speaks of ten such *guṇas*.

¹⁷The *rasas* are: *śṛṅgāra*, *hāsya*, *vīra*, *raudra*, *adbhuta*, *bhayānaka*, *bībhatsa*, *karuṇa* and *śānta*. Their *sthāyībhāvas* are *rati*, *hāsa*, *śoka*, *krodha*, *utsāha*, *bhaya*, *jugupsā*, *vismaya* and *śama*.

Vamana gives ten with some differences¹⁸. Based on the predominance of one or more *guṇas* in the work, which are fostered and used by poets of particular regions of India, scholars of poetics discern two main schools of *rīti* (style), namely, Gaudiya which is said to be *paurastya* (the eastern) and Vaidarbhi, which is said to be *dakṣinātya* (the southern). But Vamana adds one more to these two, namely, Pancali (belonging to the Pancala country). Gaudiya has the poetical features (*guṇas*) of *ojas*, and *kānti*. This school is fond of the use of too many complex compounds, exaggerations (*atyukti*), poetical embellishments and powerful expressions (*gaudeṣv akṣara-dambarah*, [Bana's *Harṣacarita*]). The Vaidarbhi style has all the ten *guṇas*, but especially has predominance of *guṇas* like *prasāda*, *samata* and *saukumārya*. The Pancali specializes the *guṇas* of *mādhurya*, *saukumārya*, etc. (iv) Vakrokti School: *Vakrokti* is opposed to plain, ordinary, matter-of-fact speech. It chooses words carefully, combinations are striking, diction is extraordinary, sees thing behind the reality – all these are normally beyond the ordinary usage of language of ordinary people. Some say it is the soul of poetry. Bhamaha thinks that *vakrokti* is *alamkāra*, and that it is present in all *alamkāras*. Kuntaka, the author of *Vakrokti-jīvita* is the greatest proponent of this school. (v) Dhvani School: Most of the theorists of poetics agree that *dhvani* character is the extension of the concept and experience of *rasa*. *Rasa* is mainly applicable to dramas (remember Bharata is the proponent of *rasa* theory), which is an audio-visual art (*śravya-dṛśya-kāvya*). When it is applied to poetry we have *dhvani*. Poetry becomes enjoyable when it expresses more than the literal meaning, 'when it contains the charming sense of *vyāṅgya* ... only those words, which have particular qualities and are arranged in a particular manner and contains a charming *vyāṅgya* constitute *kāvya*'¹⁹. Anandavardhana, author of *Dhvanyāloka* is the greatest advocate of *dhvani* school.

I am now far away from the *mahākāvya Kristu-bhāgavata* of Prof. Devassia. But I purposely did this digression to come to the poetical temper, aesthetic make-up and artistic elegance of this epic poem. It had

¹⁸The ten *guṇas*: *ojas*, *prasāda*, *śleṣa*, *samata*, *samādhi*, *mādhurya*, *saukumārya*, *udāratā*, *arthavyakti*, and *kānti*. Cf. P.V. Kane, *History of Sanskrit Poetics*, pp.378ff.

¹⁹Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 387.

already been mentioned earlier that this poetical work is endowed with the *guṇas* of *prasāda* and *saukumārya* and that it belongs to the Vaidarbhi category of poetry. In fact, this is not my personal opinion. V. Raghavan has said it in the *Foreword to Kristu-bhāgavata*²⁰. If V. Raghavan said it, we have to take it seriously, because he is one of the greatest and ablest Sanskrit literary critics and theorists of poetics of this century. R.C. Dwivedi, himself a scholar in Sanskrit poetics, dedicates his translation of *Kāvya-prakāśa* of Mammata to Padmabhusan Dr. Raghavan, and says in the preface to his work that Raghavan 'is our guru in the field of literary criticism'. *Prasāda* is translated as lucidity. It is the serenity and transparency of language. *Saukumārya* is tenderness, which involves gentleness and prettiness. The Vaidarbhi style is related to these *guṇas*. As opposed to Gaudiya style, Vaidarbhi is simple and does not use too many abstruse compounds, hard words and ostentatious phrases. This judgement is true. The language and style of *Kristu-bhāgavata* is graceful, sweet, simple and straightforward. Our poet avoids pompous and pretentious play of language and inflated and jingoistic phraseology and unwarranted expository articulations. Let me cite two verses as examples:

*Āgacchantam śrotum ādhyātma-sūktam
 dr̥ṣṭvā yeśus tam janaugham mahāntam /
 āruhyādrim tatra sārddham svaśiṣyair
 āsīnah san vācam etām babhāṣe //*
*Dhanyās te ye svātmani syur daridrās
 teṣam-nūnam vidyate svargarājyam /
 śokārtā ye te 'pi dhanyā bhaveyur
 yal lapyante sāntvanam śāntidāyi // (XVII.1-2)*

These verses narrate the initial sentences of the *Sermon on the Mount*.

"The main sentiment delineated is, of course, Santa, to which other sentiments like Karuna, Vira and Adbhuta are suitably added as subordinates", says Kunjunni Raja, another eminent Sanskrit literary critic, in his Introduction to this *mahākāvya*²¹. Subject matter of the poem is the person of Jesus Christ, embodiment of love, mercy and compassion. The presence of his personality exuded the luster of peace and tranquillity. His

²⁰Foreword to *Kristu-bhagavata*, p.ii

²¹Introduction to *Kristu-bhagavata*, p.v.

spirit of forgiveness and forbearance disarmed even his enemies. His supreme sacrifice on the cross is the ultimate example of self-giving, universal love and the finest spirit of non-violence (*ahimsā*). It is only fitting that the predominant *rasa* is *śānta*. As a poetical sentiment *śānta* means quietism, which is characterized by tranquillity and indifference. Its *sthāyībhāva* is *śama*. In fact, *śānta-rasa*, the ninth and last of the *rasas*, was not recognized by Bharata. It was a later addition. In the course of time poetical works were produced the basic and underlying sentiment of which was that of quietism, which did not fit in the eight accepted sentiments. Therefore, scholars of poetics were forced to add *śānta* as another *rasa*. *Karuṇa* is mercy and compassion. *Vīra* signifies valour, heroism and determination. And *adbhuta* is wonder and elation.

Without *rasa* the art would remain only an artifice. Rhythm, harmony, etc. are qualities arising out of the material handled by the artist. Any inventions of his genius superadded to natural forms are like ornaments. While *gunas* and *alamkaras* relate to the external body of art, the life-informing soul is provided by *rasa-bhavas*. While the former are within the reach of everyone, a cultivated aesthetic sensibility alone can enjoy *rasa*²².

Bhava is the state of mind, in which particular emotional complex is produced instigated and inspired by the delight, the *rasa*.

The poet does not use *alamkāras* profusely. The main figures of speech (*alamkāras*) used are *upamā*, *utprekṣa* and *arthāntaranyāsa*. Kunjunni Raja says: "The Arthantaranyasa figures employed in this poem have a classical dignity and polish, and they often remind one of Kalidasa's maxims"²³. Then he quotes a number of examples, some of which are quoted below:

Mṛtir hi dāsyāt khalu māninām varam / (I.14) 'For honourable men death indeed is nobler than servitude'.

²²K. Krishnamoorthy, *Studies in Indian Aesthetics and Criticism*, Mysore: DVK Moorthy, 1979, p.15.

²³Introduction to *Kristu-bhagavata*, *ibid*.

Gṛhapradīpo hi vadhur hitaiṣiṇī / (I.26) 'A wife who seeks the welfare of the other (husband) is verily the lamp of home'.

Yūnām prāyah priyānandaphalo hi veśah / (II.1) 'Young men in general dress with the intention of pleasing their sweethearts'.

Ahetuakām utkalikām upaiti snehādracittam hi śubhe muhūrte / (II.15) 'For, on auspicious occasions, loving and tender hearts are overcome by inexplicable anxiety'.

Devasevaika-vratānām nihsvatā balam / (III.3) 'Poverty may be an asset to those who have dedicated themselves to the service of God'.

Vinaṣṭavitto hi vinaṣṭamītrah / (XXII.15) 'He who has lost his money has also lost his friend'.

What are the objectives or purpose of composing poetical works? There is no doubt that the primary purpose of poetical works is aesthetic delight, experience of noble inner sentiments. Besides this imparting knowledge of religion and morality, sharing the experiences of life in the world, etc. are other objectives of good poetry. Poets may compose works for fame and wealth. The oft-quoted verse of Mammata is relevant here:

*Kāvyaṃ yaśase'rthakṛte vyavahāra-vidē śivetakṣaye /
sadyah paranirvṛtaye kāntā-sammitayopadeśayuje* // (I.2)

Poetry leads to fame, procurement of wealth, knowledge of the ways of the world, cessation of the inauspicious, immediate bliss par excellence and it imparts advice in the manner of a beloved wife²⁴.

Bharata says that 'drama imparts solace to people who are afflicted by sorrows, bodily fatigue, miseries, and also to the ascetics'²⁵. One of the main objectives of our *mahākavi* is definitely imparting moral instructions and religious values, and above all the knowledge of the life and message of Jesus Christ through the medium of poetry. It is true that Sanskrit is the language of the elite, of a privileged few, and is a symbol of the caste culture and brahmanic superiority, as opposed to the Dalit culture. Still

²⁴Transl. by R. C. Dwivedi, *The Poetic Light, Kāvyaṃprakāśa of Mammata*, I.2.

²⁵*dukkhātānām śramātānām śokātānām tapasvinām /
viśrama-jananam loke nāpyam etad bhaviṣyati* // (I.111).

there is a sizeable number of people, Christians and followers of other religious traditions, who can enjoy the work as a creation of art, at the same time imbibe inspiration from the holy life of Jesus.

Before I conclude this section, I should also mention here that the famous saying *apāre kāvyasamsāre kavir eva prajāpati / yathāsmāi rocate viśvam tathedam parivartate // (Dhvanyāloka)* cannot be fully applied to the case of Prof. P.C. Devassia. There are two facts which put some kind of restrictions and constraints on him in his poetical pilgrimage into the life of Christ. (i) He is dealing with a historical person, Jesus of Nazareth. Therefore, he has to be faithful to the facts of history. He cannot manipulate and distort facts narrated in the Gospels to suite his poetical adventurism. On the other hand, as a *mahākāvya*, his work should conform to the rules laid down by tradition and by the theorists of poetics. Some of such elements would not conform to the sacred life and teachings of Christ. One needs certain amount of decent decorum and sense of the sacred before such holy and noble life. There is need of dexterous balancing act. The poet is aware of this limitation and mentions it in the preface of the work. (ii) For Christians Jesus is also an object of faith. There are doctrinal statements and dogmatic articles of faith concerning the person, nature, life, message, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. These are very sacred and inviolable moorings of Christian faith. The temper and rigour in the matter of faith are much more exacting and unconditional in Christian tradition than that of Hinduism. Therefore, when a committed believer engages in artistic works about Christ, he/she needs to keep the ambit of his/her creative imagination within the boundary. Prof. P.C. Devassia, a believer as he is, cannot perceive Jesus as a mere object of artistic creativity and poetical curios, as a secular/atheistic artist, like, perhaps, the author of the "The Last Temptation of Jesus", would treat him.

Is there any blemish, or, what the theorists of poetics would say any *kāvya-doṣa*, in *Kristu-bhāgavata*? There is general understanding among such theoreticians that not to be a poet is no mistake, but to be a bad poet is an unpardonable mistake and crime! *Kristu-bhāgavata*, no doubt, is excellent poetry. At the same time a critical reader and an objective observer will not pass it as the best. If you read *Raghuvamśa* by Kalidasa and then *Kristu-bhāgavata*, you will feel and realize the difference. The

effortless elegance, connatural spontaneity, the cultivated gracefulness and the sublime style of Kalidas captivate us. His works instantly take us to the heights of poetical delight. These elements you will not see in the same degree in *Kristu-bhāgavata*. Or, you read the *Nala-carita* or *Kādambarī* of Bana. His absolute mastery of language, awe-inspiring play of words, his inimitable ability for description, deftness in the use of words of double meaning, etc. will not be found in the same extent in *Kristu-bhāgavata*. Perhaps it is not right that we compare poet Devassia with these classical colossuses of Sanskrit poetry who lived in a different era, in the classical golden era of Sanskrit literature, steeped and saturated with high Sanskritic culture. What I am saying is that we cannot point to *Kristu-bhāgavata* and say here is the noblest and the most exquisite form of poetical beauty and aesthetic excellence.

It has already been stated above that the style of *Kristu-bhāgavata* is Vaidarbhi. Vaidarbhi style is known for its gracefulness, simplicity, uncomplicated word-sentence relations, structural explicitness, etc. Its *guṇa* is *prasāda*, lucidity. But if this style is pushed too hard, if the work is too simple and extremely explicit, it may not engender the desired poetic delight in the reader. *Kristu-bhāgavata* contains, without doubt, poetry of highest caliber and aesthetic eminence. But, rarely, here and there, the reader may bump upon verses that are dull and simplistic.

The most important prerequisite and the most powerful equipment a poet must possess to create good poetry is *pratibhā*, which may otherwise be called *śakti*. *Pratibhā* is poetic intuition, poetic power of imagination, creative power, etc. It is an innate talent or gift. Abhinavagupta in his *Locana* says that *praitbhā* is the power of consciousness of the poet which enables him to create extraordinary things. It is the power to produce poetry, which is charming and is endowed with clarity and proper fusion of correct *rasas*. One important characteristic of *pratibhā* is *unmeṣa*, which is said to be the fresh and powerful flashes of imagination.

Besides poetic intuition, two other instruments needed for the poet are *vyutpatti* and *abhyāsa*. *Vyutpatti* here means poetic culture and discipline and maturity of thought, and *abhyāsa* means constant training and repetition. These two *sādhanas* are to be obtained by personal efforts and hard work. "The Dhvanyaloka (p.169) makes it clear that if a poet has *śakti* (i.e. *pratibhā*), it conceals the defects that may arise from lack of

vyutpatti, but if a poet is deficient in *pratibhā* and has only *vyutpatti*, the defects in his composition are noticed at once²⁶. Now the question is what is explicit and predominant in *Kristu-bhāgavata*? Without a great degree of *pratibhā* a poet cannot create such a graceful *mahākāvya*. But reading through the text, one may get also the feeling that the poet has, by his hard work, tenacious perseverance in the pursuit of poetical excellence and constant practice, that is, by *vyutpatti* and *abhyāsa*, risen to the level of a great poet. If he had an equal amount of poetical intuition, I feel, his work would have gained the poetical worth and artistic value of a Kalidasa poetry.

Kristu-bhāgavata has thirty-three chapters. The poet has a spiritual and emotional attachment to the number '33' because it corresponds to the age of Lord Jesus Christ. But to complete this magical number, the author has to drag and forcefully extend and elongate the plot of the story. It seems to me that this *mahākāvya* in twenty chapters would have presented compact, coherent and cogent work, which would have supplied the reader intensity of poetic experience, and would drive home the message of the work to the reader more efficiently.

2.7. Answer to the Hindutva Movement

Recent fundamentalist Hindu nationalist movement demands that Church and Christians have to become *svadeśis*. This demand contains a veiled accusation and an indirect indictment that Christians have no respect and regard for Indian culture and traditions; they have not accepted and assimilated the sacred spiritual heritage of India, and have not understood the soul of India; they do not love India, feel like Indians, and take pride in being Indians; they are alienated from the main stream national life, etc. There is an inherent inference in it, that to be a Christian and to be a true Indian is a contradiction in terms. I believe that it would be presumptuous and audacious from the part of a Hindu or any body to claim that Indian culture is a monopoly of Hindus. Every Indian born and brought up in this country, though his religious allegiance might be different, is an Indian culturally too. One of the exquisite flowers of this culture engendered by a non-Hindu is this *Kristu-bhāgavata*. This eminent work is a valuable and priceless contribution to Sanskrit literature and

²⁶P.V. Kane, *History of Sanskrit Poetics*, p.350.

Indian culture. Prof. P.C. Devassia is not an isolated example. There are notable scholars among Christians in Indian philosophy, Indology and Sanskrit literature.

2.8. Universal Recognition

The merit and poetical value of *Kristu-bhāgavata* has been recognized by numerous national, state and private organizations of India. It has received so far nine awards including the *National Sahitya Academy Award* (1980) and the Award for *Samagra Sambhavana from the Kerala Sahitya Academy* (1993). Some of the opinions of eminent scholars about this work are quoted below. "Written in the accepted form of a Mahakavya and aptly called the "Kristubhagavatam", as it embodies the sacred life of the founder of a religion, and comprising thirty-three cantos corresponding to the years of Christ's life, the present poem is a major achievement in the field of modern creative writings in Sanskrit"²⁷. Dr. Kunjunni Raja, a student of Prof. Devassia, writes: "The Kristubhagavatam by Prof..P.C.Devassia is one of the outstanding Sanskrit Mahakavyas produced in recent times. [...] is the first comprehensive work produced in Sanskrit on the life of Jesus; and Sanskrit can justly be proud of this achievement"²⁸. "This monumental work of CHRISTU-BHAGAVATAM from the erudite pen of my beloved Professor Mr. P.C.Devassia is a landmark not only in the history of Christian literature but also of Sanskrit literature"²⁹.

Krsitu-bhāgavata had also become an object of research works and critical studies. A doctoral dissertation entitled *A Critical Study of the Kristu-bhagavatam of Prof. P.C.Devassia* by Sr. Pastor has already been defended³⁰. Fr. John Kunnappilly, another Christian Sanskrit scholar from Kerala, has also prepared and published a *Prakriyā-bhāṣya* of *Kristu-bhāgavata*.

²⁷V.Raghavan, *Foreword to Kristu-bhāgavata*, p.ii.

²⁸Introduction to *Kristu-bhāgavata*, p.iv.

²⁹Cardinal Joseph Parecattil, *Appreciations, op.cit.*, p.ix.

³⁰Cf. Sr. Pastor, *A Critical Study of the Kristubhagavatam of Prof P.C.Devassia*, Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, Dept. of Sanskrit of Vimala College Trichur, University of Calicut, 1985.

3. Conclusion

Born and brought up in a Christian ambience and in a Christian family, but being an Indian and surrounded by genuine indianess, Prof. Devassia represents the harmonious blending and pleasant fusion of two powerful spiritual traditions and cultural currents: the Indian and the Christian. He is a committed Christian who has placed his trust and faith uncompromisingly in Jesus Christ. But he is also unequivocally devoted to Indian culture, thought and philosophy and to Sanskrit language. He avidly and ardently imbibed the spirit and knowledge from the great treasure house of Sanskrit literature. He was saturated with both the traditions that eventually it spontaneously flowed out in the form *Kristu-bhāgavata*. It is the climax and culmination of his strenuous *sādhana* in Gospel spirituality and genuine search into the soul of Indian spirituality, philosophy and culture.