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What Enables Canonical Literature to Function as “True”? The Case of the Hindu Purāṇas

McComas Taylor

Introduction

Why do the devout believe in the canonical literature of their tradition? What enables great normative texts to function as “true discourse”? The idea of “true discourse” is premised on the understanding that truth is ultimately contingent and is socially constructed. We are in the realm of localized “truths,” rather than that of some Absolute Truth which functions as a universally accepted, recognized, and applicable yardstick. Local “truth” is the currency of a given epistemic community, that is, a community with a shared set of understandings and beliefs as to what constitutes true knowledge. Each community also has defined procedures and processes by which true knowledge is produced, legitimated, and disseminated.¹

In any given epistemic community, “truth” is enabled by a complex set of social practices. Only certain individuals and institutions may be authorized to utter statements that count as true, certain practices are in place to validate these statements, and truth must be propagated in particular ways or through certain channels to count as true. The practices which govern the creation, validation, and dissemination of true discourse may conveniently be termed the “regime of truth” (Foucault 1980).

I use the term “discourse” in the Foucauldian sense in recognition of the fact that power (*pouvoir*) and knowledge (*savoir*) are in reality two sides of the one coin and that they are mutually constitutive. Knowledge—that is, information we regard as “true”—is seen as the product of specific power structures, and this knowledge subsequently may feed into and underwrite the very structures that produced it in the first place. For example, within a Hindu episteme, a Vaiṣṇava faith community might generate a Purāṇic text, which in turn serves to elevate and legitimize the very tradition that generated it.

A discursive statement that counts as “true” in one episteme does not necessarily count as true in another, as the bases for assessing the truth may differ from one epistemic community to another. An inhabitant of a Hindu episteme may argue that a given discursive statement is true because it is attested in the *Bhagavad Gītā*, but

such evidence will cut little ice with a member of a Christian episteme who seeks textual validation elsewhere in his or her own tradition. Similarly, in an academic episteme “true” discourse is enabled—“true” knowledge is produced, validated, legitimized, and propagated—through the scholarly processes of peer review and publication. The point here is that whether or not a discursive statement is “really” or “ultimately” true in any sense requires a longer yardstick than I possess. I am interested in what counts as “true” in a given episteme, in this case a Hindu Vaiṣṇava episteme, for the members of that community. Whether it is “ultimately” true or true for a member of a different episteme is irrelevant.

In many faith traditions, religious institutions, hierarchies, communities, and lineages provide the external sources of authority and validation for normative and canonical texts. Among the Hindu traditions the situation is quite different. There has never been a unified hierarchy, authority, or institution capable of imposing a single dominant version of orthodoxy over its rivals. No one tradition has been empowered to dictate globally what counts as true, which text is canonical, and which doxy is heretical. In the place of the one church, we find an open market of disparate, competing discourses, with many diverse groups and traditions each promoting their own orthodoxies, tenets, practices, and texts. The Abrahamic and Chinese traditions sought to resolve or to eradicate heresy and establish a sole authoritative canon. Among the Hindu traditions the canon is doctrinally open and polyphonic.

For Hindus, the Purāṇas are important, normative texts: “Although present-day Hindus may refer to the Vedas as the foundation of their tradition, it is the Purāṇas which give the myths and rituals by which their religious life is sustained” (Matchett 2005: 141). The Purāṇas are thought to have approached their current form between the fifth and fourteenth centuries of the current era, but, in the words of Velcheru Narayana Rao (2004: 97), they defy ready description, classification, authorship, or dating. Traditionally there are said to be eighteen great Purāṇas, the *mahāpurāṇas*, although the composition of the list and the sectarian allegiance of individual Purāṇas is contested. The word *purāṇa* means “old,” referring to the fact that they contain myths of creation, genealogies of gods and patriarchs, and legends of early royal lineages. In spite of several recent and valuable studies (Rocher 1986; Doniger 1993a; Bailey 1995; Holdrege 2000; Matchett 2001), the Purāṇas still have a reputation among Western scholars for being unloved and unlovely. Yet they provide the bulk of the myths, legends, practices, and discourses that inform contemporary Hinduism. Considering the enormous influence these texts have exerted over time and across space in the Sanskrit cosmopolis, it is surprising how little scholarly attention they have received.

Two of the main Hindu traditions, the Śaivite and Vaiṣṇava, both regard their own texts as pre-eminent, but neither tradition has ever acquired sufficient ascendancy or perhaps felt the urge to expunge or overrule the other. Historically, there has never been a united Śaivite or Vaiṣṇava authority, let alone a united Hindu hierarchy, sufficiently empowered to make global doctrinal pronouncements on matters of

faith. Traditions compete for orthodoxy, acceptance, and resources—religious capital—and this competition is manifest in their texts and has shaped them. The texts were created in contested discursive space: each tradition seeks to argue for the superiority and orthodoxy of its own normative texts, while in some cases attempting to belittle those of its religious competitors. Purāṇic texts were probably relatively fluid throughout their developmental history, and the process of copying and redaction has allowed the development of a system of internal legitimizing tropes. Unlike the Abrahamic and Chinese traditions referred to above, in which external authorities vet and valorize the canon, in the open market of Hindu traditions the creators of sacred text resorted to internal, textual means to empower their scriptures.

It has long been recognized that one way in which they sought to achieve superiority was to call on Vedic authority. While the major traditions within the Hindu fold subscribe to the primacy of the Vedas in theory and while Vedic ritual still resonates, in practice the Purāṇas are more important for the formation of religious identity. As no text, by definition, may be superior to the Vedas, the Purāṇas of a given tradition often referred to themselves as the equal of the Vedas, while texts of rival traditions are said to be of lesser stature.

In the absence of a hierarchy, every Hindu tradition continued as long as it maintained adherents and its texts were perpetuated. In northern India, texts were written on birch-bark, while palm leaves were used in the south. Unlike vellum, which has a shelf life of hundreds if not thousands of years, leaves and bark are perishable, particularly in the humid environment of the monsoonal subcontinent. Texts had to be copied every generation or so, if they were to be preserved. Writers of the Purāṇas must have been aware of once-influential deities, doctrines, and texts which had since fallen into obscurity, been lost or survived in name only. For this reason, perhaps, we see particular emphasis placed on the virtues to be derived from reciting, reading, and copying manuscripts. Like the contemporary chain letter, the Purāṇas frequently promise great rewards for those who propagate the texts among worthy devotees. Successful traditions propagated themselves and their doctrines; others fell by the wayside. In the end, history, not hierarchy, was the final arbiter of orthodoxy.

Let us now turn to our key question: “What enables the Purāṇas to function as true?” My response is based on a close reading of the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* and the *Brahma Purāṇa*, both Vaiṣṇava texts. I intend to broaden this investigation to encompass the other Purāṇas in future. This study draws on an investigation of Pūrṇabhadra’s *Pañcatantra*, entitled *The Fall of the Indigo Jackal* (Taylor 2007), in which it was shown how the discourse of caste (*varṇa*) was enabled in this famous collection of tales. The fivefold “regime of truth” consisted of the authoritative voice in which the text was enunciated (Bourdieu 1991), the universalization of the discourse, its adherence to the śāstric paradigm (Pollock 1985), its intertextuality (Kristeva 1986a, 1986b), and its naturalization (Smith 1994). The present paper represents a first step in the direction of a more ambitious project to describe a regime of truth for a broader set of didactic and normative master texts in the Sanskritic archive and to

further our understanding of the functioning of canons more generally.

Western scholars accept that the Purāṇas were created by anonymous, historical authors in mundane settings with earthly goals: namely, to propagate particular practices and forms of devotion and to win converts. As Freda Matchett (2005: 131) observed, the Purāṇas, like the weekend newspapers of the West, not only tell their audiences how to live, but how to see the world. Yet the authors of these texts frequently chose to place their words into the mouths of gods or sages in divine locations. They also created glittering lineages of beings who were said to have preserved and transmitted the texts.

As we know nothing about these actual authors, we will begin with an examination of the meta-creators and meta-narrators of the Purāṇas. The *Brahma Purāṇa* consists of three frame stories. In the innermost frame the deity Brahmā narrated various myths about the creation of the universe and the rest to sages assembled on Mount Meru, the cosmic mountain at the centre of the world. This story of Brahmā was then narrated by the sage Vyāsa to a group of sages at Kurukṣetra, a locality very well known in Sanskrit literature as the site of the Mahābhārata war. This account of Vyāsa at Kurukṣetra was related by another sage, Lomahaṣaṇa, to the inhabitants of the famous Naimiṣa Forest and constitutes the outermost frame story. Put another way, the *Brahma Purāṇa* is the story of Lomahaṣaṇa telling the story of Vyāsa who is telling the story of Brahmā, who in turn is telling the story of the universe.

The *Viṣṇu Purāṇa*, on the other hand, has a much simpler narrative structure: it is also ultimately attributed to Brahmā, but consists of a dialogue between two sages, Maitreya and Parāśara. The former poses questions on the nature of the universe, to which the second provides the answers.

I first discuss the identities and characters of the creators and narrators of these two Purāṇas. Second, I go on to explore their “performance” of the text in the divine settings of Mount Meru, Kurukṣetra, and Naimiṣa. Third, I examine their “power claims,” that is, the benefits, both spiritual and worldly, that the authors claim will arise from hearing, reciting, and propagating the texts. I conclude by exploring ways in which these three aspects exert a truth effect on the discourse and enable these two Purāṇas, at least, to function as “true.”

Creators and Narrators

The Purāṇas were written, refined, expanded, and reworked by generation after generation of human redactors, and yet, as mentioned above, their historical authors are invisible and the texts themselves are effectively anonymous. Anonymity removes the frail and fallible human hand from the creation of the discourse. The authors have carefully placed their own words in the mouths of gods and sages and have described long lineages of deities and men who preserved and propagated the narratives. Let us begin by examining some of the meta-creators and meta-narrators who have been “engaged” by our anonymous human authors to articulate their texts.

The historical authors of the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* could hardly have placed their discourse on more illustrious lips: they chose Brahmā, the four-faced father of the Universe, God Himself. The lineage from Brahmā is as follows: Ṛbhu, Priyavrata, Bhāguri, Taṃbhamitra, Dadhīca, Sārasvata, Bhṛgu, Purukutsa, Narmadā, to the *nāgas*² Dhṛtarāṣṭra and Āpūraṇa. The last two jointly recited the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* to the *nāga*-king Vāsuki, then to Vatsa, Aśvatara, Kāmbala, Elāputra, Pātāla, the sage Vedaśiras, Pramati, and Jātukarṇa who “related it to others of meritorious deeds.... As the result of the boon given by Pulastya I [the sage Parāśara] have committed it to memory. And accordingly I have related it to you, Maitreya” (*Viṣṇu Purāṇa* 6.8.43–50). What is the function of this ahistorical meta-lineage of gods, divine sages, *nāgas*, goddesses, and seers? Wendy Doniger made this interesting observation with reference to the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, which holds just as true for the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa*:

When we hear a story that claims to be true, our skepticism often leads us to ask, Where did you hear that story? Who told you that? This impulse is reflected in the tradition of Indian storytelling, too, which requires that its important stories be framed in a line of transmission, a *paraṃ-parā*, “from one to another,” tracing its descent from the original storyteller to the author of the present text. And the choice of that author tells us a great deal about the text’s image of itself; the nature of the author is appropriate to the nature of the text....Where Vedic scripture, or *śruti*, grounds itself in the claim of divine revelation, which is by nature secret, Epic and Purāṇic tradition (*smṛti*) defines itself by the chain of human memory, displaying each link as publicly as possible. The *Bhāgavata* in particular goes out of its way to ground itself in the archaic tradition (1993b: 31–32).

Thus the function of such a lineage is to “prove” publicly a direct link between the divine origins of the text and the text as it exists today. In effect, the lineage is also evidence of the text’s divinity and its status as divine revelation. The lineage also “proves” that the narratives are “old,” which, as will be remembered, is the meaning of *purāṇa*. In Sanskrit culture, old is good, and “new and improved” count for nothing. The authority of the Purāṇas “is bound up with their ‘originality,’ a word whose older sense, now archaic, of authenticity, would have been well understood by the Purāṇic composers, or Paurāṇikas” (Brown 1990: 4). The process of ascribing a discourse to a lineage of mythical narrators also has the effect of imbedding the discourse in an ancient past. The creator of the narrative may thereby present his contemporary concerns as being of primordial or timeless origin.

The lineage which begins with Brahmā ends with Parāśara, the narrator of the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* as it exists today. As mentioned above, the outer frame of the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* consists of a discourse between this sage and another, Maitreya. We have no information about Maitreya, other than a sage by this name appears briefly in the *Mahābhārata* (3.11). Neither is connected with the Buddhist deity of the same name. On the other hand, we can certainly say something about the mythical sage Parāśara. He came to be the lineage holder of this Purāṇa after his father was killed

by *rākṣasas*³ who had been employed by the sage Viśvāmitra. To avenge his father's death, Parāśara made sacrifices to exterminate them. Parāśara's grandfather, the famous seer Vasiṣṭha, enjoined him to mercy, and he desisted from the rites. In gratitude for Parāśara's show of mercy, Pulastya, mind-born son of Brahmā and progenitor of all the *rākṣasas*, granted Parāśara a boon, by virtue of which he would become the "creator of a compilation of the Purāṇa" that is, the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* (1.1.12–30). In short, Parāśara "created" the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* by a divine boon, although in fact we know from the lineage cited above that he was not so much a creator as a narrator, the final inheritor of the tradition.

What else do we know about Parāśara? He was not only the narrator of a Purāṇa, he was the "holder" of one of the four sub-branches of the Vedas:

This single tree of the great Veda was divided into four, and from that arose a forest of Veda-trees. In the first place, O Brāhmaṇa, Paila divided the tree of the *Rg Veda* and gave the two compilations to Indrapramiti and Bāṣkala. Bāṣkala then divided his compilation into four, O Brāhmaṇa. And that great sage gave them to his disciples Bodha, and so on. Bodhya [*sic*], Agnimāthaka, Yājñavalkya, and Parāśara accurately grasped the sub-branches of that branch, O sage (*Viṣṇu Purāṇa* 3.4.15–18).

Parāśara says that in the twenty-eighth Dvāpara age,⁴ "my son Vyāsa" (*Viṣṇu Purāṇa* 3.4.2) arranged the Vedas in four, and that in the preceding periods, the other Vyāsas and Parāśara himself had performed the same task. "Just as the Vedas were divided by all dividers, so too were they divided by me" (*Viṣṇu Purāṇa* 3.4.3).

In summary, Parāśara had many sagely qualities as the grandson of Vasiṣṭha and was an "excellent sage" himself. It is interesting to note how much of Parāśara's reputation is bound up with the Vedas. First, Parāśara, like Vyāsa, was a divider of the Vedas in preceding ages and was the holder of a sub-branch of the *Rg Veda* in this age. Further, in addition to being an expert in history, Purāṇas, and normative spiritual treatises known as Dharmaśāstras, he was a "knower of the Vedas and the limbs of the Vedas (*vedāṅgas*)." We shall return to this point below.

Let us now turn from Parāśara to Vyāsa, who also features prominently as both a creator and a narrator of the Purāṇas. It is stated explicitly that the *Brahma Purāṇa* was "produced" by him. The opening words of the *Brahma Purāṇa* are as follows: "Homage to Gaṇeśa. Now begins the *Brahma Purāṇa* produced by the great sage Śrī Vedavyāsa" (1.1.1). As mentioned above, he was also the notional meta-narrator of the middle frame story of the *Brahma Purāṇa*, which amounts to about three-quarters of the total length. I say "notional" because he merely repeats the words of Brahmā.

Vyāsa has been the subject of considerable recent scholarly interest (for example, Sullivan 1994, 1999; Hildebeitel 2001). Because he plays such an important part in these Purāṇas, both as a creator and a narrator, let us look more closely at this character. Vyāsa is best known as the divider of the four Vedas. In fact, as is frequently

repeated, his name is said to be derived from *vi* + *√as*, which means “to put apart or divide,” thus “Vyāsa” means little more than “the divider.” He is also the reputed author of the *Mahābhārata* and all eighteen *Purāṇas*. In the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa*, Vyāsa’s role in arranging the Vedas is described as follows:

Because of the thousand-fold divisions of the branches of the Veda-tree, O Maitreya, it is impossible to describe them in detail. Therefore hear this in brief: in every Dvāpara age, Viṣṇu in the form of Vyāsa, O great sage, divides the one Veda into very many parts for the good of the world. And having observed the limited energy, power, and strength of men, for the good of all beings, he performs the division of the Vedas. That bodily form, in which the Lord [Viṣṇu], the enemy of Madhu, performs the division of the Veda, is known as Vedavyāsa. Learn from me about all of the Vyāsas in this Manvantara⁵ and the division of the branches made by Vyāsa, O sage. The Vedas have been arranged by the great seers twenty-eight times in this Vaivasvata age. Twenty-eight Vedavyāsas, O excellent one, by whom the Veda was divided in four again and again during the Dvāpara ages, have passed on. In the first Dvāpara age, the Vedas were divided by the Self-created [Brahmā] himself. In the second Dvāpara age, the arranger of the Veda was Prajāpati. In the third, Uśanas; and in the fourth, Bṛhaspati; in the fifth, Savitṛ was the arranger...(3.3.4–12).

This account goes on to enumerate the remainder of the twenty-eight arrangers. The last few are of interest to us: 25. Parāśara’s father Śakti; 26. Parāśara; 27. Jaratkarna; and 28. Kṛṣṇa Dvaipāyana, that is, Vyāsa (son of Parāśara) (*Viṣṇu Purāṇa* 3.3.18–19).

There has been an interesting discussion of the function and meaning of ascribing a text to Vyāsa. J. A. B. van Buitenen made light of Vyāsa or at least of the idea that he was a historical figure:

A Vyāsa is named as “author” of *The Mahābhārata*; but he is also named as author of the eighteen major *Purāṇas*, and as the compiler of the four Vedas. The name is of course merely symbolic. And this, while unsatisfactory to a Western mode of thinking that needs historical order, is significant. The truth is more important than the individual who gives it voice (1974: 52).

Most Western scholarship regards the many important sacred texts attributed to Vyāsa as the products of many human hands over many centuries. Rather than regarding the use of the name Vyāsa as “merely symbolic,” Bruce M. Sullivan argues that, on the contrary, ascribing a text to Vyāsa is *highly* symbolic:

In saying that Vyāsa is the editor or author of these many and various texts, Hindus have said something profoundly meaningful, namely, that their status and authority as religious texts are to some extent dependent on the status and auth-

ority of Vyāsa. For the Hindu tradition, religious authority is often personal, embodied in the figure of the *guru*, and Vyāsa stands at the head of the chain of teachers (*guru-paramparā*) as the originator and authenticator of these teachings (1994: 377).

In the contemporary Western episteme we rely to a large extent on the identity, authority, reputation, and reliability of the individual author when we construct our assessment of the credibility of a text. Sullivan's point is that ascribing the text to a mythological author does not detract from its "truth." I would agree that the opposite is indeed the case: the effect of ascribing a text to Vyāsa is to instill it with "truth." It is interesting to note that in contemporary usage, the term *vyās* is still used for the person who publicly recites or elaborates on a sacred text (Lutgendorf 1991: 126).

Turning now from the truth effect of ascribing a text to Vyāsa, let us consider the "narrator" of the *Brahma Purāṇa*, Lomahaṣaṇa. The *Brahma Purāṇa* has as its outermost frame an anonymous narrator who pays homage to the appropriate deities Gaṇeśa, Sarasvatī, and the rest. He then proceeds to describe the Naimiṣa Forest and how, one day, "Lomahaṣaṇa, the intelligent *sūta*" arrived there (1.1.14). In response to questions from the sages who lived in the forest, Lomahaṣaṇa related the narrative that became known as the *Brahma Purāṇa*. Just as Parāśara was the narrator of the outer frame of the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa*, the sage Lomahaṣaṇa is the primary narrator of this text.

Who is Lomahaṣaṇa? This surprising name, and its variants Romahaṣaṇa and Romahaṣa, means "causing the hair to bristle." Who or what is a *sūta*? In the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* we read that Vyāsa appointed the *sūta* Lomahaṣaṇa as his disciple in charge of the epics and Purāṇas:

Urged on by Brahmā, Vyāsa came to arrange the Vedas. He then adopted four disciples who had reached the further shore of the Vedas. That great sage took Paila as his disciple for the *Ṛg Veda*, and he took Vaiśampāyana by name for the *Yajur Veda*, Jaimini for the *Sāma Veda*, and the knower of the *Artharva Veda*, Sumantu, became the disciple of the wise Vedavyāsa. The great sage took the *sūta* of great intellect, Romahaṣaṇa by name, as his disciple for the histories and Purāṇas (3.4.7–10).

The primary meaning of the word *sūta* is probably "charioteer." As many of these narratives are placed in the mouths of these *sūtas*, it is also translated as "bard" (Brockington 1998; Sharma 2000). It also seems that there are many *sūtas*, such as Lomahaṣaṇa, who have no apparent connection with chariots or chariot-driving. The *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* gives this account of the birth of the *sūta*. It contains three plays on the theme of *√sū* "press": "At the auspicious sacrifice at the birth [of Pṛthu], the intelligent *sūta* was produced in the pressing (*sūti*) on the day of the *soma* pressing (*sautya*) (1.13.50–51). Many scholars have attempted to tie together the two words *sūta*, meaning a charioteer, and *sūta*, the narrator of a Purāṇa. They have posited a

role for the charioteer as courtly storyteller, like Sañjaya in the *Mahābhārata*. I fail to see a definite relationship between the two. Ludo Rocher (1986: 56) sensibly suggests that the word has had different meanings in different contexts and we need not force them together.

Lomahaṛṣaṇa in turn had six disciples, each of whom was responsible for a compilation. In the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* we find the following passage:

The famed *sūta* Romahaṛṣaṇa became Vyāsa’s disciple. The great sage Vyāsa gave him the compilation of the Purāṇas. Sumati, Agnivarcaś, Mitrāyus, Śaṁśa-pāyana, Akṛtavraṇa, and Sāvarṇi became his six disciples. Kāśyapa, Sāvarṇi, and Śaṁśapāyana are the compilers of the three basic compilations. This Romahaṛṣikā [*Viṣṇu Purāṇa*] is another and is the root compilation of the three (3.6.16–18).

Further, the sages of the Naimiṣa Forest give us this description of the qualities of the *sūta* Lomahaṛṣaṇa:

The sages said, “You know the Purāṇas, treatises, and scriptures, along with the histories, O excellent one, and the deeds, birth, and actions of the gods and demons. Nothing in the Veda, *śāstra*, or [*Mahā*]bhārata is unknown to you. You know all in the Purāṇas and treatises on liberation, O wise one” (*Brahma Purāṇa* 1.1.17–18).

As mentioned above, the first twenty-three chapters of the *Brahma Purāṇa* consists of Lomahaṛṣaṇa telling the sages in the Naimiṣa Forest about the origins of the world, the birth of the gods, the continents, oceans, sacred fords, and so on. At the start of the twenty-fourth chapter, the Naimiṣa sages questioned Lomahaṛṣaṇa further on the subject of famous sites. Lomahaṛṣaṇa replied that in former times his own preceptor Vyāsa had been asked the same question by the sages at Kurukṣetra and lists the names of more than fifty sages who were present. In Lomahaṛṣaṇa’s account, the sages ask Vyāsa what is conducive to welfare in the world, and they ask to hear about the realm of religious action (*karmabhūmi*) which bestows liberation. Instead of answering their question directly, Vyāsa recounts to them a conversation on the same subject between the sages and Brahmā on Mount Meru. Here is the seers’ opening question on Mount Meru: “The seers said, ‘O Bhagavan, we desire to hear of the realm of religious action on the surface of the earth. And it befits you to speak, O lord of gods, of the field of liberation which is difficult to achieve’ ” (*Brahma Purāṇa* 1.24.36).

Brahmā’s response to this question, which was in essence the same question asked of both Lomahaṛṣaṇa and Vyāsa, forms the rest of the Purāṇa. From this point, as far as I can see, neither Lomahaṛṣaṇa nor Vyāsa are mentioned again. They disappear from their own narratives, and Brahmā is left as the sole narrator of the last eighty chapters of the *Brahma Purāṇa*. Thus the discourse is enunciated by three highly authoritative voices, each narrative embedded within another like Russian dolls.

One further point of interest is the way in which the three performances closely mirror one another: Lomahaṣṣa in the Naimiṣa Forest, Vyāsa at Kurukṣetra, and Brahmā on Mount Meru, each with an entourage of sages and each in idealized divine physical settings characterized by abundance and lushness, filled with retinues, trees, flowers, wild animals, and so on. Let us look more carefully at the three physical settings in which these narratives were “performed.”

Place and Performance

The outermost framing narrative of the *Brahma Purāṇa*, in common with the *Mahābhārata* and most of the Purāṇas, is set in the Naimiṣa Forest:

In the very auspicious, sacred, and pleasing Naimiṣa Forest, filled with various populations of sages, beautified with various flowers, and beautified with *śāla*, *karṇikāra*, *panasa*, *dhava*, *khādīra*, *āmra*, *jambū*, *kapīṭha*, *nyagrodha*, *devadāru*, *aśvattha*, *pārijāta*, *candana*, *aguru*, *pāṭāla*, *bakula*, *saptaparṇa*, *pumṇāga*, *nāgakesara*, *śāla*, *tāla*, *tamāla*, *nārikela*, *arjuna*, and many other trees, such as *campaka*;⁶ filled with various flocks of birds and various herds of wild animals; ornamented with various auspicious water bodies, ponds, and so on; with Brāhmaṇas, warriors, merchants, servants, and other castes, forest dwellers, householders, ascetics, and students; ornamented everywhere with excellent herds of cattle; adorned with barley, wheat, chickpeas, lentils, kidney beans, sesame, sugarcane, rice, barley, and other cereals—there, in that forest, while the great twelve-year sacrifice of the worshipers of the Naimiṣa was offered in the blazing fire, the sages and other twice-born ones came together (1.1.4–12).

The Naimiṣa Forest has attracted a considerable amount of scholarly attention over the years. A useful survey, specifically with reference to the *Mahābhārata*, is given by Alf Hiltebeitel (2001). An early comprehensive survey was undertaken by Rajendra Pandeya (1964), who discusses many references to the forest in Sanskrit literature, some very old, dating back to the Brāhmaṇas and Upaniṣads, “being clearly of special sanctity” (405). The Brāhmaṇas derive the name Naimiṣāraṇya from *nimiṣa*, “a twinkling of the eye,” because this is “where in the twinkling of an eye the sage Gauramukha destroyed an army of the Asuras” (405, citing Führer 1891–1901: 290). It is mentioned as a seat of Vedic sacrifice (406). Pandeya equates it with an actual pilgrimage place (Nimsar, 45 miles north-west of Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh) with a sacred pool:

This reservoir is called Cakratīrtha, and is said to be the place where the *cakra* or discus of Viṣṇu, fell during his contest with the Asuras. The shape of the pool is nearly hexagonal with a diameter of 120 feet. The water springs up from below and flows out through the south side into a swampy rill about 20 feet wide, called Godāvarī Nālā. The pool is surrounded with a number of shabby brick temples and

dharmśālās (408).

As an indication of the importance of the Naimiṣa Forest as a place of pilgrimage, the *Brahma Purāṇa* ranks it second in a long list of approximately 350 holy places: “First I shall mention the sacred ford of Puṣkara, and the Naimiṣa Forest itself, Prayāga and Dharmāranya, O excellent twice-born ones” (1.23.8–9).

Hiltebeitel finds that the Naimiṣa Forest appears to “move about in the epics” (2001: 130), but the conventions of sacrifice and sanctity that pertain to it remain constant. Hiltebeitel (2001: 93) cites Romila Thapar (1991: 10) as saying the uncertainly located Naimiṣa Forest “may be just a convention.” The use of the Naimiṣa Forest as a setting may indeed be “just a convention” in relation to any identifiable physical location, but it is a very powerful convention when it comes to situating a textual “performance” within discursive space. Irrespective of whether the forest is real or not or whether it exists here or there, it clearly exists as sacred, literary space and, as such, plays an important, real, and measurable role. The Naimiṣa Forest functions as a power place, irrespective of its independent objective reality.

Sitting in the Naimiṣa Forest, Lomahaṣaṇa narrated the first twenty-four chapters of the *Brahma Purāṇa* to the assembled sages. At this point, as mentioned, the sages asked him for a description of the world:

Lomahaṣaṇa said, “Formerly the sages asked my *guru* this question. I will answer your question, O best of the twice-born. Sages of celebrated vows came to see Vyāsa, the best of the wise and the creator of the *Mahābhārata*, expert in all the treatises, intent on the ultimate soul, omniscient, delighting in the benefit of all beings, narrator of the Purāṇas and scriptures, who had reached the further shore of the Vedas and limbs of the Vedas, son of Parāśara, tranquil, with long eyes like lotus petals, seated in his own highly auspicious retreat in Kurukṣetra, beautified with various kinds of flowers, scattered with various kinds of trees and vines, filled with various flocks of wild animals, with *punnāga*, *karṇikāra*, *sarala*, *deva-dāru*, *śāla*, *tāla*, *tamāla*, *panasa*, *dhava*, *khādīra*, *pāṭala*, *aśoka*, *bakula*, *karavīra*, *campaka*, and other trees of various kinds which were resplendent with various flowers” (1.24.2–8).

Kurukṣetra, “the field of the Kurus,” is one of the most significant power places in the Sanskrit “thought world.” It is the supposed site of Hastināpura, the capital of the Kuru clan, and Indraprastha, built by their cousin-rivals, the Pāṇḍavas. Kurukṣetra was also the location of the Mahābhārata war between the two families, and as it was here that their twinned destinies were played out, it is also known as the *dharmakṣetra*, “field of *dharma*.”

Lomahaṣaṇa began to recount verbatim Vyāsa’s reply to the same question posed by the sages. Vyāsa’s retreat in Kurukṣetra became the setting for the second framing story for the *Brahma Purāṇa*. In fact Vyāsa’s personal input is very limited at

this point. His reply to the sages is simply a recounting of Brahmā's reply to the identical question asked by the sages on Mount Meru. Vyāsa says:

Listen, O sages. As you all ask, I will recount the conversation which took place in former times between the seers and Brahmā on the vast peak of Meru, resplendent with various gems, scattered with various trees and vines, beautified with various kinds of flowers, resounding with various birds, pleasant, filled with young animals, filled with various beings, attended by various wonders, filled with rocks of various colors, resplendent with various minerals, filled with various populations of sages and provided with various retreats. The four-faced lord of the world, source of the world, master of the world, who is praised by the world, the support of the world, the master, was seated there surrounded by gods, *dānavas*, *gandharvas*, *yakṣas*, *vidyādharas*, and *nāgas*, sages, *siddhas*, *apsarases*,⁷ and other denizens of the divine realm. Some praised that god, some came before him, some played musical instruments, and others danced. Thus at this joyous time when all beings had gathered together, filled with the fragrances of various flowers, fanned by a southerly breeze, the sages, the best of twice-born seers led by Bhṛgu, having bowed to the god, the grandsire, asked their progenitor about this matter (*Brahma Purāṇa* 1.24.27–35).

Brahmā's reply to this question forms the remaining chapters of the *Brahma Purāṇa*. There are two aspects worthy of attention here: first, the similarities in the descriptions of the three physical settings, and, second, the effect exerted by place on performance. The description of Naimiṣa features a long list of trees, birds, animals, castes, crops, and Vedic ritual. For Kurukṣetra the description is less fulsome, but is still replete with a rich dose of mythical-botanical detail. The third setting, Mount Meru is also richly described in terms of flora, fauna, minerals, retinues, and so on.

What is the point of lavishing all this literary detail on the settings in which the three narratives are performed? Descriptions of forests elsewhere in the Brāhmaṇical archive are often ornamented with lists like these. This may be just an opportunity for literary virtuosity and flourish, but I suggest it is more than this. The descriptions of both Naimiṣa and Kurukṣetra could be said to be "divine" and resemble with little modification earthly versions of the divine setting on Mount Meru where Brahmā "performed" his discourse. In all three cases, the idealized perfection in physical and social terms and the sanctity of the setting imbue the performance of the discourse delivered there with commensurate perfection and sanctity. The perfection of place elevates and enhances the perfection of the discourse.

What can we say about the fictional audiences in these three power places? Lomahaṇṣa's audience in the Naimiṣa Forest is simply described as "sages and other twice-born ones." Vyāsa's audience at Kurukṣetra consists of fifty-five named sages, and is a Who's Who of Brāhmaṇical power. It is too long to repeat here in full, but among the more recognizable names are Kaśyapa, Jamadagni, Bharadvāja,

Gautama, Vasiṣṭha, Jaimini, Mārkaṇḍeya, Vālmiki [sic], Viśvāmitra, Bhārgava, Pippalāda, Maitreya, Agastya, Nārada, Vaiśampāyana, Pulastya, and interestingly in the light of the previous discussion, a sage apparently named Sūta (*Brahma Purāṇa* 1.24.9–14). As described above, Brahmā’s audience on Mount Meru consists of hosts of divine and semi-divine beings and the best of humanity. These are the ultimate audiences in the two worlds and are worthy of the ultimate discourse.

In his study of the Buddhist *Samdhinirmocana Sūtra*, John Powers (1993: 24–26) describes how the *sūtra* was “performed” before an audience of exalted interlocutors and in the exalted space of a celestial palace. The status of both audience and location are strategies to establish the “definitiveness” of the discourse. Similarly, in the case of the Hindu Purāṇas, the divine and flawless nature of the recipient and reception signals the narratives’ human audience, sensitizing and preparing it for the reception of a divine and flawless discourse.

The sanctity of the sacred site saturates the narrative that is enunciated there (Hegarty 2006) and heightens its canonicity. Many other great canonical works were said to be enunciated at sacred places like Naimiṣa and Kurukṣetra, which are perhaps the earthly equivalents of divine sacred sites such as Mount Meru. The canonicity and authority of a text are therefore enhanced by adherence to this convention. The three sites of performance also exist outside mundane time and space, allowing sages from across the millennia to meet together contemporaneously. A discourse performed in timeless space become timeless and universalized itself.

Power Claims

At the beginning of each of these two Purāṇas, the site of performance, the lineage of the text, and the characters of the narrators are established. We also find claims of the narratives’ greatness, efficacy, the spiritual and worldly benefits to be derived from reading and propagating them, and the various magical properties associated with them. Claims such as these are common to many Purāṇas (Lutgendorf 1991: 57), but I would like to explore these in relation to their reception of the text. The narratives’ creators intentionally incorporate such claims as they wish their texts to exert a particular impact on their audience and for their text to be received in a particular way. These statements of efficacy, which are called *śravaṇaphala*, or the “rewards of hearing,” in Sanskrit, are the claims that the text makes of its own power. I term them “power claims” as I believe they also serve to empower the discourse, that is, enhance its authority and prestige in the eyes (and ears) of its intended audience and thereby contribute to its function as “truth” in the Purāṇic episteme. That is to say, a text that promises everything from instant and complete *mokṣa* to freedom from snakes, floods, and fire becomes in the hands of a believer powerful, talismanic, and “true.”

These power claims are repeated using identical or similar formulae in the closing chapters, framing the discourse both fore and aft. In the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa*, the

narrator Parāśara says, “This Purāṇa which I have related to you is the equal of the Vedas. By hearing it, the multitude of misdeeds arising from all faults is destroyed” (6.8.12). Similarly, in the opening chapter of the *Brahma Purāṇa*, Lomaharṣaṇa says,

Having bowed to the *guru*, I will narrate this Purāṇa, the equal of the Vedas.... Listen! I will narrate this story which liberates from misdeeds, which while being narrated by me is wonderful, full of significance, and rich in Vedic discourse. One who always bears it [in his heart] or even listens to it repeatedly, having perpetuated his family, will be exalted in heaven (1.1.30–33).

The dharmic rewards to be won from the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* are equal to those from Vedic sacrifices and fasting:

The reward which a ritually purified man obtains from a horse sacrifice or a ritual ablution is the same as the reward he receives having heard this [Purāṇa], O best of sages. [The reward] received by a man who has fasted at Prayāga, Puṣkara, Kurukṣetra, or by the ocean is the [same as the reward] from hearing this. The great meritorious reward which a man receives from a year-long, well-attended fire sacrifice is [the same as] the reward from hearing this [Purāṇa] a single time. The reward which a person receives having bathed in the waters of the Yamunā River at Mathurā on the twelfth day of the bright fortnight in the month of Jyeṣṭha and having beheld Hari⁸—that reward a person whose mind is intent on Keśava⁹ receives in full from hearing one chapter of this Purāṇa, O seer among Brāhmaṇas (6.8.28–32).

The *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* further claims the following spiritual and worldly benefits:

The merit which a man wins by rescuing his own forefathers [with offerings], he receives having listened attentively to one chapter of this Purāṇa. This is the unexcelled shelter for those who fear cyclical existence. It is the best thing that may be heard among all that is to be heard. It is the unexcelled refuge. It dispels men’s nightmares and removes all defilements. It is auspicious among things that are auspicious and is the provider of sons and fortune (6.8.40–42).

The narrative continues to describe how the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* destroys all the sins accruing in the age of Kali and frees one from all misdeeds. Hearing it every day is the equivalent of bathing in all the sacred fords and worshipping all the immortals. Hearing ten chapters is the equivalent of donating a cow to a Brāhmaṇa. Listening to the whole Purāṇa is equivalent in merit to a horse sacrifice. One who hears, recites, or causes this Purāṇa to be recited wins a reward not found in the three worlds, that is, complete perfection (*Viṣṇu Purāṇa* 6.8.53–56).

The *Brahma Purāṇa* also includes this set of power claims:

The attainment of religious, material, sensual, and liberational goals in [the world] of moving and unmoving things—all this is found here in this extensive history. This Purāṇa, which contains that which is said in the Vedas, is filled with all the secrets of Vedic scripture, the name of which is ever conducive of excellence when viewed correctly and which was narrated for the benefit of the worlds, and is filled with many religious teachings. If one were to hear or recite with devotion one verse or even one quarter of a verse from it or to make the utterance “*Gaṅgā, Gaṅgā*,” one would obtain merit....The reward one receives from the performance of thousands of horse sacrifices and hundreds of *soma* sacrifices would be the same as hearing [this Purāṇa]. One who has a copy of this Purāṇa narrated by Brahmā in his house has no fear of the Kali age, O Nārada. This excellent Purāṇa should not be narrated to just anyone, but to a faithful, tranquil, noble-minded Vaiṣṇava. It is praiseworthy, productive of devotion and liberation, and it destroys misdeeds. Merely by hearing it, a person may become fulfilled. One who copies this text and offers it to a Brāhmaṇa is freed from all misdeeds and will not enter a womb again (2.105.77–90).

We may summarize all these power claims by placing them (with some overlap) in three baskets. In the first basket are what we might call dharmic power claims. These include the attainment of the normal spiritual goals promoted in the Brāhmaṇical archive, including the accomplishment of the four goals of human life (spiritual, material, sensual, and liberational), the purifying of misdeeds, and the acquisition of merit from religious observances such as ritual bathing, fasting, offerings, and so on.

The second basket contains claims that relate to magical properties and to the mundane benefits to be won from the Purāṇas. These include “protection against fears of the Kali age,” including worldly fears such as fire, flood, snakes, sickness, robbers, and demons. In this basket also are the Purāṇas’ claims to dispel nightmares and to guarantee sons and wealth. The narratives’ inherent power may also be the reason for restricting readership to “faithful Vaiṣṇavas.” Finally, and this might also belong in the dharmic basket above, copying the text is sufficient to release one from rebirth in cyclical existence.

The third basket contains power claims, some of which may be classified as dharmic, and some of which are also magical/mundane, but all of which draw on Vedic ritual and practice or are expressed in terms of Vedic authority. As Doniger observed, “The claim that an important Hindu text is the fruit of the Vedas...is a common one” (1993b: 32). This is certainly the case with the Purāṇas in this study. Both are the “equal of the Vedas,” and “contain what is said in the Vedas,” and are “rich in Vedic scripture.” The rewards to be won from recitation and listening are compared with those derived from the great Vedic horse-, *soma*-, and fire-sacrifices.

What is the role of Vedic authority in the establishment of the trueness of the Purāṇas? John E. Llewellyn has written,

In Hinduism the measure of orthodoxy has been acceptance of the authority of the Vedas, of the rituals in which they are used, and of the priests whose vocation it was to teach those texts and perform those rituals. The Vedas are the shibboleth that has been used to distinguish “true” Hindus from others (1994: 237).

The meta-creators and meta-narrators are inextricably linked with the Vedas. Vyāsa was the original “divider” of the Vedas. Parāśara is not only praised in terms of his mastery of the Vedas and Vedāṅgas, he was the “holder” of one of the four Vedic sub-branches. Lomahaṛṣaṇa is also mentioned in the same breath as four sages who “who had reached the further shore of the Vedas.” In terms of performance, the Naimiṣa Forest is well known in the archive as a site of Vedic ritual, and the *Brahma Purāṇa* is said to have been narrated in the middle of a great twelve-year fire sacrifice.

The authority of the “authors,” many of the power claims of the texts and the truth effects which they exert are all to a greater or lesser extent founded on Vedic bedrock. Within the Sanskritic, Brāhmaṇical, orthodox thought world, the Vedas are the ultimate authority and are the yardstick by which truth is measured. Just as the *śāstras* assert their trueness by claiming Vedic authority (Pollock 1985), the claim of these two Purāṇas to be “Vedic” is indeed the equivalent of claiming to be true.

How can we test my supposition that these themes enable the Purāṇas to function as “true” discourse? The episteme in which these texts function is not bounded by chronological constraints, nor did it suddenly come to an end with “modernity.” On the contrary, it extends into the present. That is to say, there still exists a community of “consumers” of Purāṇic discourse for whom it is undoubtedly true. We need look no further for evidence than a general upwelling of coolness and suspicion among more orthodox audiences, even in academic forums, when I have spoken on the contingent, socially constructed nature of Purāṇic truth, when, for them, it is as they have told me themselves, “the word of God: it must be true.”

A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupāda (1896–1977), the founder of the “Hare Krishnas,” prefaced his translation of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* with the words, “The *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* hits on the target of the Absolute Truth” (1970: 5). Indeed, this is also the view of the modern publishers (Motilal Banarsidass) of the Purāṇas in the series entitled “Ancient Indian Tradition and Mythology in English Translation.” This publisher’s note is found in the front of every volume of the series:

The purest gems lie hidden in the bottom of the ocean or in the depth of rocks. One has to dive into the ocean or delve into the rocks to find them out. Similarly, truth lies concealed in the language which with the passage of time has become obsolete [!] Man has to learn that language before he discovers the truth. But he has neither the means nor the leisure to embark on that course. We have, therefore, planned to help him acquire knowledge by an easier course. We have started the series of Ancient Indian Tradition and Mythology in English Translation.

These quotations suggest that Purāṇic discourse in written form functions as “true” to its reading audience, but the Purāṇic tradition is predominantly an oral one: it is to be heard rather than read. How are (or were) Purāṇic texts received by their listening audiences? I know of no research in this area. The most popular contemporary successor to the tradition of Purāṇic performance is the recitation of Tulsīdās’ *Rāmcarit-mānas* (Lutgendorf 1991). With the exception of Tracy Pintchman (2005), who describes the empowerment of women via participation in Kārtik *pūjā* at Benares, the ethnography of contemporary *pravacan* and *kathā* performance is closely focused on the production of the discourse, apparently to the exclusion of its reception.

The final question that remains to be asked is this: how do the textual strategies of empowerment in the *Viṣṇu* and *Brahma Purāṇas* compare with those found in other Purāṇas, in other genres within the Sanskritic archive, and in canonical works of other traditions? A preliminary survey suggests that certain elements of these approaches, including the interpolation of meta-narrators and the use of power claims, are found across the Purāṇic corpus, but the details vary from case to case. Meta-performative devices are not prominent in all Purāṇas, but their role in the genre as a whole deserves more careful study. The Purāṇic empowerment strategies described here seem quite distinct from those that are found in the *śāstras* (Pollock 1985) and narrative tales (Taylor 2007), but the findings of this paper mesh well with studies of Purāṇic canonicity in general (Brown 1983; Holdrege 2000). The diversity of strategies found in these various genres suggests that there may be no unified Sanskritic “regime of truth” in the Foucauldian sense, but the comparison of these varied truth strategies with those of other traditions awaits further investigation.

Conclusion

What gives the Hindu Purāṇas their discursive power in the absence of external structures, such as a unified hierarchy or ecclesiastical authority, which provide validation for canons in other traditions? What internal textual strategies lend them authority? How are they able to function as true discourse? In the preceding pages we have been able to glimpse the Purāṇic author at work, to observe some of the internal textual strategies that he adopted to instil a sense of authority and truthfulness into his text.

In the first place, the discourse is placed in the mouths of various “power figures” whose authority is unquestionable. The meta-creators and meta-narrators of the discourses, Brahmā—God Himself—and such luminaries as Vyāsa, Parāśara, and Lomahaṛṣaṇa, all have stellar, unimpeachable reputations. The texts frequently remind us of the sagely qualities of their illustrious narrators—they are “versed in the Vedas,” “knowers of all the scriptures,” and so on. Any discourse enunciated by such characters partakes of their sanctity and veracity and by definition must be regarded as true by any member of the Brāhmaṇical epistemic community. A discourse in the mouth of a deity becomes divine revelation, the Word of God.

The long and illustrious lineages of *gurus* and disciples are the chains by which these “remember texts” (*smṛti*) are preserved, perpetuated, and propagated. By foregrounding the lineage, the texts’ human authors present us with evidence of textual authenticity. The lineage functions as “proof” of divine provenance as it links directly the divine originator with its ultimate meta-narrator. The lineage is a guarantee of the text’s pedigree.

The three-fold divine place of “performance” of the *Brahma Purāṇa*—the Naimiṣa Forest, Kurukṣetra, and Mount Meru—are lavishly described power places. The first is a pre-eminent sacred site of Vedic ritual. The second is the “field of *dharma*” itself. The third is the divine abode of the supreme deity. The power and sanctity of place, I suggest, permeate the “performance” and exert a truth effect on the discourse enunciated there.

Finally, the *Purāṇas* which we have examined are spiked with “power claims.” These are the supposed benefits that accrue to the practitioner from hearing, reciting, or propagating the texts. The promised benefits range from the modest and mundane, such as freedom from nightmares and the acquisition of offspring and wealth, through to the sublime and existential, culminating in final release from cyclical existence, the ultimate goal of all Hindu spiritual practice. The overall effect of these lavish claims is to heighten the authority of the text.

These three—the enunciation of the text in the authoritative voice, the performance of the narrative in places of power, and the liberal infusion of power claims—combine to imbue these two *Purāṇas* with veracity and unassailability for an audience situated within the norms of the Brāhmaṇical episteme. It is these three factors that permit these texts to function as true discourse.

Notes

1. I would like to thank my friend, mentor, and colleague John Powers and one of this journal’s anonymous reviewers for the many constructive criticisms and insightful comments they made in regard to this paper.

2. A semi-divine, snake-like being associated with water.

3. Malignant, flesh-eating demons.

4. The *Dvāpara* age consists of the third and fourth aeons of a cosmic cycle.

5. The name of a cosmic period.

6. As few of these trees are identifiable with certainty, I have left them all in Sanskrit.

7. All are species of divine or semi-divine being.

8. Epithet of Viṣṇu.

9. Epithet of Viṣṇu.

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