

Perfumed by golden lotuses: Literary place and textual authority in the *Brahma-* and *Bhāgavatapurāṇas*

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The creators of the Hindu scriptures known as the Brahma- and Bhāgavatapurāṇas lavished a great amount of descriptive detail on mythical and 'mythologised' places where important discourses were enunciated: the Naimiṣa forest, Mt Meru, Kurukṣetra, and Ānanda on the banks of the Ganges. At first glance this might appear to be idle expression of literary virtuosity, but I suggest that this careful creation of literary place has an impact, intentional or not, on the reception of the text. Drawing on the idea of the construction of authoritative discourse and reader-response criticism, I suggest that the perfect, transcendent literary spaces created by the narratives' authors exert a specific effect on their reception by the purāṇic interpretive community. The discourse enunciated in such space appears to be perfect and transcendental. The power of literary place imbues and valorises the discourse and assists it to function as authoritative.

Introduction

Why have Sanskrit texts have been so influential for so long? What gives them their power and authority? This line of enquiry was originally stimulated by Pollock's pioneering work on normative Indic literature, and the positing of what he termed the 'śāstric paradigm'. This paradigm incorporates a set of common features, including claims of cosmogonic origins, divine authorship, and vast scope, which serve to empower and valorize śāstric texts (Pollock 1985). The idea of the textual power also underpins his concept of the 'Sanskrit cosmopolis' and also informs much of Pollock's most recent work on language, culture and power in pre-modern South Asia (Pollock 2006). On this basis I interrogated the famous 12th century collection of fables, the *Pañcatantra*, and suggested how the imbedded discourse of caste was empowered and enabled to function as authoritative (Taylor 2007). The task at hand is now to

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apply the same theoretical approach to the major Hindu scriptural compendia known as the *purāṇas*.

The word *purāṇa* means old, and the genre of that name contains either ‘tales of old’, or ‘old tales’, depending on the interpretation. *Purāṇas* exist in all shapes, sizes and languages of India, both classical and vernacular. A set of eighteen great Sanskrit *purāṇas* and eighteen lesser ones are traditionally recognised, although the membership of both sets is contested. These *mahāpurāṇas* are thought to have reached their current form between the 5th and 14th centuries CE, and as such are regarded as ‘recent’ literary products. They are the major source-books for mainstream Hindu cosmology, mythology, theology and practice. Many of the best-known stories relating to the most important Hindu deities, Śiva, Viṣṇu, Kṛṣṇa and Devī, for example, are found in authoritative form in the *purāṇas*. ‘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). As the Indological project has been sustained by philological and philosophical enquiry, *purāṇic* literature has not received the scholarly attention it warrants. The best recent scholarship is found in Rocher (1986), Doniger (1993), Bailey (1995), Narayan Rao (2004), and Matchett (2005).

My basic research problem is this: if the *purāṇas* have been the mainstay of Hindu religious life for over a millennium, what factors enable them to function as authoritative discourse? This question is premised on the idea that authority is both contingent and socially constructed. Within a given epistemic community, authoritative discourse is enabled by a specific set of social practices and structures. In certain Christian communities, for example, the fact that a discursive statement is found in the Bible or is uttered by a representative of the Holy Mother Church is sufficient alone for that statement to function as authoritative, that is, to be regarded as truth by members of that epistemic community. In an academic environment, a lofty university position, peer-review, and the authority of a reputable publisher allow what we say to function as authoritative. Consider, for example, how differently we respond to a statement on an anonymous blog, compared with the same statement when it bears the imprimatur of a major university press. What functions as authoritative on one basis for a Christian may not count as the same for an academic, and vice versa.

To further refine the question, the *purāṇas* might function as authoritative, but for whom? Here I draw on reader-response theory. I am interested to surmise what effect the text—and the strategies that enable it—exert on a reader (or more importantly a hearer). The receivers of the text are situated within a Sanskritic, devotional, epistemic community and bring to their reception of the discourse a specific ‘horizon of expectations’ (Jauss 1982). My goal is to suggest how the ‘implied reader’ (Iser

1978) or the ‘informed reader’ (Fish 1980) might respond to purāṇic discourse, bringing with them, as they do, the ‘interpretive conventions’ of the purāṇic thought world, and the internalized ‘literary competence’ shared by members of such a community (Culler 1980). Again, what functions as authoritative for a member of this interpretive community may not have the same effect on a non-member.

There are many factors that enable a text to function in such a way. For example, it may occupy a highly revered position within a spiritual tradition; it may be the focus of great pomp, ritual or ceremony; it may be the fact that it is read and prescribed by one’s guru. We can observe these aspects in the present and perhaps interpolate back through history to suggest ways in which they may have exerted a interpretive effect on the discourse in previous times, but evidence is hard to come by. My basic aim is to discover why these texts have been so influential historically. We have the texts before us, and they serve as rich sources of empirical data. For the purposes of this investigation, I will leave aside the performative aspects of the text as a cultural object, and I will concentrate on the text as discourse, confining myself to the textual strategies that the creators of these purāṇas adopted, and that, I argue, have the effect of empowering the discourse.

In other work in progress, I am looking at the theme of meta-authorship as an empowering strategy in purāṇic texts. Meta-authorship is the practice of placing discourse in the mouths of glittering lineages of gods, divine sages, and the most eminent mythical human seers: Brahmā, Nārada and Vyāsa, for example. A second theme identifies the narratives’ power claims. These are the claims made for its efficacy and greatness. A typical example is the claim that reading a single verse, half a verse, or even a quarter of a verse of a given purāṇa will lead to final liberation (Taylor forthcoming b; Taylor forthcoming a). The third theme is that of literary place. By this I mean the place in which the purāṇic discourse is ‘performed’ according to the narrative itself. Typically a deity or a great seer delivers a purāṇic exposition to a divine, semi-divine or mythical audience in a specific, mythical or ‘mythologised’ setting.

Bonazzoli has identified the place at which each of the great purāṇas was ‘originally’ narrated. Such a place is ‘something more than a mere geographical or topographical problem’. The places of recitation provide the ‘structure or inner logic’ of the purāṇas themselves (Bonazzoli 2002, 241). They correlate with, and are indicative of, ‘layers’ of purāṇic evolution. Bonazzoli argues, not entirely convincingly, that for example a purāṇa narrated at Puṣkara—a location sacred to Brahmā—must have undergone a stage in which that deity and the stories about him were pre-eminent (Bonazzoli 2002, 251). A study of the supposed places at which a given purāṇa was recited could lead to an understanding of the evolution of that text: a kind of textual stratigraphy.

My focus is rather different. I am interested in the significance of the location and the interpretive impact it has on the discourse. Let us start with the descriptions of literary places and of the audiences present at the meta-performances. We will then explore their possible impact on the reception of the discourse by its actual human audience. I will draw examples from two important texts, the *Brahmā-* and the *Bhāgavatapurāṇas*.

The *Brahmapurāṇa*

The *Brahmapurāṇa*, consisting of 245 chapters, occupies the first place in most lists of mahāpurāṇas, and hence has the alternate title of *Ādi-* or ‘first’ *purāṇa*. Like many other purāṇas, it is described as a ‘conglomeration of portions belonging to different periods and written by different hands’. The *Brahmapurāṇa* has numerous passages in common with other members of the genre, including the *Viṣṇu-*, *Mārkaṇḍeya-*, *Sāmba-* and *Vāyupurāṇas*, as well as with the *Harivaṃśa* and *Mahābhārata*. In all these cases, the *Brahmapurāṇa* is said to be the borrower. In addition to standard purāṇic cosmological, theological and mythological content, much of the *Brahmapurāṇa* deals with holy places in Orissa, especially those sacred to Viṣṇu. It probably dates from the 13th or 14th century CE (Rocher 1986, 154–5).

The *Brahmapurāṇa* consists of three frame-stories nested one inside the other. In the innermost frame, the deity Brahmā narrated various myths about the creation of the universe to sages assembled on Mt Meru, the cosmic mountain at the centre of the world. These events concerning Brahmā were subsequently related by the sage Vyāsa to a group of sages at Kurukṣetra. This is a locality very well known in Sanskrit literature as a famous tīrtha (‘sacred ford’, and by extension, pilgrimage site) and as the site of the Mahābhārata war. The account of Vyāsa at Kurukṣetra was related by another sage, Lomahaṣaṇa, to the inhabitants of the famous Naimiṣa forest. This constitutes the outermost frame-story. To put it another way, the *Brahmapurāṇa* is the story of Lomahaṣaṇa telling the story of Vyāsa who is telling the story of Brahmā, who is in turn recounting the history of the universe.

Let us commence with this outermost framing narrative which 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*, *khādira*, *āmra*, *jambū*, *kapittha*, *nyagrodha*, *devadāru*, *aśvattha*, *pārijāta*, *candana*, *aguru*, *pāṭala*, *bakula*, *saptaparṇa*, *pumṇāga*, *nāgakesara*, *śāla*, *tāla*, *tamāla*, *nārikela*, *arjuna*, and many other trees, such as *campaka*;¹ filled with various flocks of birds, and various herds of wild animals; ornamented with various auspicious water-bodies, ponds and so on; with

¹ As few of these trees are identifiable with certainty, I have left them all in Sanskrit.

brahmins, 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 worshippers of the Naimiṣa was offered in the blazing fire, the sages and other twice-born ones came together there (BP 1.1.4–12).²

The Naimiṣa forest has attracted a considerable amount of scholarly attention over the years. Useful surveys, specifically with reference to the *Mahābhārata*, are given by Hegarty (in press) and Hiltebeitel (Hiltebeitel 1998; 2001). An early comprehensive survey was undertaken by Pandeya, who discusses many references to the forest in Sanskrit literature, some very old, dating back to the Brāhmaṇas and Upaniṣads. 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’. It is also mentioned as the site of Vedic sacrifice (Pandeya 1964, 405–6). Pandeya equates it with an actual pilgrimage place (Nimsar, 45 miles NW of Lucknow, UP)—a sacred pool. Citing A. Cunningham, *Archaeological Survey Lists (Audh)*, which I have been unable to trace, he says:

This reservoir is called Cakraṭīrtha, 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 *dharmśālas*. (Pandeya 1964, 408).

As an indication of the importance of the Naimiṣa forest as a place of pilgrimage, the *Brahmapurāṇa* 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 Dharmāraṇya, O excellent twice-born ones’ (BP 1.23.8–9).

Hiltebeitel finds that the Naimiṣa forest appears to ‘move about in the epics’ (Hiltebeitel 2001, 130), but the conventions of sacrifice and sanctity that pertain to it remain constant. Hiltebeitel cites Thapar as saying the uncertainly located Naimiṣa forest ‘may be just a convention’ (Thapar 1991, 10 and n. 36), cited in (Hiltebeitel 2001, 93). The use of the Naimiṣa forest as a setting may indeed be ‘just a convention’

² supuṇye naimiṣāraṇye pavitre ‘tha manohare || nānāmuniṇānākīrṇe nānāpuṣpapaśobhite || śālais ca karṇikāraiś ca paṇasair dhavakhādiraiḥ || āmrajambūkapitthaiś ca nyagrodhair devadārubhiḥ || aśvatthaiḥ pārijātaiś ca candanāgurupaṭalaiḥ || bakulaiḥ saptaparnaiś ca puṣpānāgar nāgakesaraiḥ || śālais tālais tamālaiś ca nārikelaiś tathā ‘rjunaiḥ || anyaiś ca bahubhir vṛkṣaiś campakādyaiś ca śobhite || nānāpakṣigaṇākīrṇe nānāmrgagaṇair yute || nānājalāśayaiḥ puṇyair dīrghikādyair alamkṛte || brāhmaṇaiḥ kṣatriyair vaiśyaiḥ śūdraiś cānyaiś ca jātibhiḥ || vānaprasthair grhasthaiś ca yatibhir brahmacāribhiḥ || saṃpannair gokulaiś caiva sarvatra samalamkṛte || yavagodhūmacaṇakair māśamudgatilekṣubhiḥ || śālibhiḥ ca tathā medhyaiḥ sasyaiś cānyaiś ca śobhite || tatra dīpte hutavahe hūyamāne mahāmakhe || yajatāṃ naimiṣeyāṇāṃ satre dvādaśavārṣike || ājagmus tatra munayas tathā ‘nye ‘pi dvijātayaḥ ||

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 any independent, objective, geographical reality.

Sitting in the Naimiṣa forest, Lomahaṣaṇa narrated the first twenty-four chapters of the *Brahmapurāṇa* to the assembly of ‘sages and other twice-born ones’. 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*, who is 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 elongated 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*, *devadāru*, *śāla*, *tāla*, *tamāla*, *panasa*, *dhava*, *khādīra*, *pāṭala*, *aśoka*, *bakula*, *karavīra*, *campaka* and other trees of various kinds which were resplendent with various flowers”. (BP 1.24.2–8)³

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

Lomahaṣaṇa began to recount verbatim Vyāsa’s reply to the same question about the nature of the world that had been posed by the sages. Vyāsa’s retreat in Kurukṣetra became the setting for the second framing story for the *Brahmapurāṇa*. In fact, Vyāsa’s personal input is very limited at this point, as his reply to the sages is simply a recounting of Brahmā’s reply to the identical question asked by the sages on Mt Meru. Vyāsa’s audience at Kurukṣetra consists of fifty-five named sages, and is a Who’s Who of brahminical power. It is too long to repeat here in full, but among the

³ lomahaṣaṇa uvāca || imaṃ praśnaṃ mama guruṃ papracchur munayaḥ purā || tam aham sampravakṣyāmi yat pṛcchadhvaṃ dvijottamāḥ || svāśrame sumahāpuṇye nānāpuṣpopaśobhite || nānādrumalātākīrṇe nānāmṛgagaṇair yute || punnāgaiḥ kārṇikāraiś ca saralair devadārubhiḥ || śālais tālais tamālais ca panasair dhavakhādīraiḥ || pāṭalāśokakabakulaiḥ karavīraiḥ sacampakaiḥ || anyaiś ca vividhair vṛkṣair nānāpuṣpopaśobhitaiḥ || kurukṣetra samāśīnaṃ vyāsaṃ matimatāṃ varam || mahābhāratakartāraṃ sarvaśāstraviśāradam || adhyātmaniṣṭhaṃ sarvajñaṃ sarvabhūtahite ratam || purāṇāgamavaktāraṃ vedavedāṅgapārāgam || parāśarasutaṃ śāntaṃ padmapatrāyatekṣaṇam || draṣṭum abhyāyayuh prītyā munayaḥ śamsitavratāḥ ||

more recognizable names are Kaśyapa, Jamadagni, Bharadvāja, Gautama, Vasiṣṭha, Jaimini, Mārkaṇḍeya, Vālmiki [sic], Viśvāmitra, Bhārgava, Pippalāda, Maitreya, Agastya, Nārada, Vaiśampāyana and Pulastya (BP 1.24.9–14). Vyāsa says,

Listen, O sages. Since 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, attended by various beings, graced 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*⁴ 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 very matter. (BP 1.24.27–35)⁵

Brahmā's reply to the question about the nature of the world forms the remaining chapters of the *Brahmapurāṇa*. It is worth pausing to reflect on the similarities in the descriptions of the three physical settings. 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 flourish of mythical-botanical detail. The third setting, Mt Meru, is also richly described in terms of flora, fauna, minerals, retinues, etc. All three are rich descriptions which draw on some of the standard tropes of Sanskrit literary embellishment.

The *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*

Let us turn now to the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*, the second of our two purāṇic sources. The *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* is written in the bhakti or devotional tradition, and has as its ultimate aim the inculcation of personal devotion to the deity Viṣṇu, and in particular his avatar, Lord Kṛṣṇa. It is often said to be the most popular, most famous and most influential

⁴ All are species of divine or semi-divine being.

⁵ śṛṇudhvaṃ munayaḥ sarve vakṣyāmi yadi prcchatha || yaḥ saṃvādo 'bhavat pūrvam ṛṣiṇāṃ brāhmaṇā saha || meruprṣṭhe tu viṣṭiṇe nānāratnavibhūṣite || nānādrumatātākīrṇe nānāpuṣpopaśobhite || nānāpakṣirute ramye nānāprasavasamkule || nānāsatvasamākīrṇe nānāścaryasamanvite || nānāvārṇaśilākīrṇe nānādhātuvibhūṣite nānāmuniḥkīrṇe nānāśramasamanvite || tatrā'sīnam jagannātham jagadyoniṃ caturmukham || jagatpatiṃ jagadvandyaṃ jagadādhāram īśvaram || devadānavagandharvair yakṣavidyādharoragaiḥ || munisiddhāpsarobhīś ca vṛtam anyair divālayaiḥ || kecid stuvanti taṃ devaṃ kecid dhyāyanti cāgrataḥ || kecid vādyāni vādyante kecin nṛtyanti cāpare || evaṃ pramudite kāle sarvabhūtasamāgame || nānākusumagandhādhye dakṣiṇānilasevite || bhṛgvādyā munayo devaṃ praṇipatyā pitāmaham || imam artham ṛṣivarāḥ papracchuḥ pitaraṃ dvijāḥ ||

of all the purāṇas (Mackenzie Brown 1983, 556), and is one of the most important scriptural sources for 600 million Vaiṣṇavas worldwide. It probably has more claim to the title of ‘first’ among purāṇas than the *Brahmapurāṇa*. According to Schweig, dozens of traditional commentaries have been written on the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*, whereas other purāṇas have received just one or two, if any (Schweig 2007, 11). It is frequently mentioned in the same breath as the two great epics, the *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Mahābhārata* (Singer 1958, 355). The *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* is a collective, anonymous work that has been expanded over many centuries and probably reached its present form about 1000 CE. It is, therefore, like the *Brahmapurāṇa*, regarded as ‘late’ or ‘recent’. Parts are written in difficult, archaic Sanskrit, incorporating for example anachronistic Vedic verbal forms and vocables (Meier 1931; van Buitenen 1966).

All the most significant events of the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* are tied to specific locations. For example, the dialogues between the main purāṇic narrator, the sūta, and the elder of the sagely community, Śaunaka, which provide the outermost narrative frames of both the introduction (the Māhātmya, ‘Greatness’) and of the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* itself are set in the Naimiṣa forest (BhP 0.1.3).⁶ We do not find the same kind of ‘thick description’ of the forest that we found above, but we do have an interesting section on a place called Ānanda on the banks of the Ganges near Gaṅgādvāra (Haridvar). Here the divine ‘boy-sages’ or Sanatkumāras, the mind-born sons of the deity Brahmā, gave an important recitation of the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*. Here is a description of Ānanda and the recital that took place there:

“It is frequented by various hosts of sages, inhabited by gods and *siddhas*, covered with various trees, plants, and fresh soft sand. It is pleasant, remote and perfumed by golden lotuses. No enmity dwells in the minds of beings who live in that vicinity. You should perform the ‘knowledge-sacrifice’ [i.e. recitation of the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*] in that place with diligence. There the story will be characterised by unprecedented charm...” Having spoken thus, the kumāras then hastily proceeded with Nārada to the banks of the Ganges for the purpose of imbibing the story. When they reached the bank, a tumult arose on earth, in the realm of the gods, and in the realm of Brahmā. All those who crave the elixir came running to imbibe the nectar of *Śrībhāgavata*, with the Vaiṣṇavas at the fore. Bhṛgu, Vasiṣṭha, Cyavana, Gautama, Medhātithi, Devala, Devarāta [Yājñavalkya], [Paraśu]rāma, [Viśvāmitra] son of Gādhi, Śākala, [Mārkaṇḍeya] son of Mṛkaṇḍu, [Dattātreyā] son of Atri, Pippalāda, the two lords of yoga Vyāsa and Parāśara, the counter-part of Śuka (*chāyā-śuka*)—all these hosts of sages headed by Jākali and Jahnu, filled with great desire, came with their sons, disciples and womenfolk.⁷ The Vedāntas, Vedas, mantras and tantras, the seventeen [other] purāṇas, and the six śāstras also came in bodily form. The rivers headed by Gaṅgā, and the lakes headed by Puṣkara, the sacred fields and all the directions, and the forests headed by Daṇḍaka were there. The *devas*, *gandharvas*, the *dānavas*, the *nāgas* and the rest were there. Because of his position as guru, Bhṛgu reminded those who had failed to come, and brought them there. Then the boy-sages, who had been initiated, were

⁶ The ‘0’ in the reference refers to the Māhātmya section of the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*.

⁷ I have been guided by Tagare’s translations in identifying some of these figures.

given excellent seats by Nārada, and were honoured by all were seated, intent upon Kṛṣṇa. Vaiṣṇavas, renunciants, *nyāsins*, and *brahmacārins* were seated at the front, with Nārada at their head. On one side was the host of sages, on the other, the denizens of heaven. The Vedas and the Upaniṣads sat on another side, and the sacred fords and the women were in another part. There was the cry of “Victory!”, the cry of “Homage!”, and the blare of conches. There was a very great shower of powdered sandalwood, parched rice and flowers. Having mounted their celestial chariots, several of the leaders of gods showered everyone there with flowers from the wish-granting tree. (BhP 0.3.5–22)⁸

In this ‘celebrity audience’ are all the major figures of the brahminical thought-world: the most significant sages, and in bodily form all the major genres of scriptures, all the major sacred sites and places of pilgrimage, and all the older generation of Vedic deities.

The most important framing narrative of the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* itself centres on the person of the king Parīkṣit. King Parīkṣit was the son of Abhimanyu and grandson of Arjuna, one of the central figures of the *Mahābhārata*. Parīkṣit had been out hunting, and being hungry and thirsty asked a meditating sage for water. Receiving no reply, Parīkṣit flew into a rage and with the end of his bow he draped a dead snake around the sage’s shoulders. Seeing this outrage, the sage’s son cursed the king to be bitten on the eighth day thence by Takṣaka, a snake-prince (BhP 1.18.24–37). Stricken with remorse, the king returned to his city and sat down on the banks of the Ganges to await death in the company of a host of sages:

Which person on the point of death, would not resort to the river rendered excellent by the dust from the feet of Kṛṣṇa mixed with glittering tulasī pollen, and which purifies the worlds both here and hereafter, along with the gods? (BhP 1.19.6).⁹

‘Again, the audience was packed with the most famous and outstanding sages of the brahminical imagination: Atri, Vasiṣṭha, Cyavana, Śaradvān, Āriṣṭanemi,

⁸ nānārṣigaṇair juṣṭaṃ devasiddhāṇiṣevitam | nānātarulatākīrṇaṃ navakomalavālukam |
ramyam ekāntadeśasthaṃ hemapadmasusaurabham | yatsamīpasthājīvanāṃ vairam cetasi na
sthitam | jñānayajñas tvayā tatra kartavyo hi prayatnataḥ | apūrvarasarūpā ca kathā tatra bhaviṣyati
| ...evam uktvā kumārās te nāradena samaṃ tataḥ | gaṅgātaṭaṃ samājagmuḥ kathāpānāya satvarāḥ
| yadā yātās taṭaṃ te tu tadā kolāhalo ‘py abhūt | bhūloke devaloke ca brahmaloke tathaiva ca |
śrībhāgavatapīṭhāpānāya rasalampaṭāḥ | dhāvanto ‘py āyayuh sarve prathamam ye ca vaiṣṇavāḥ
| bhṛguḥ vasiṣṭhaś cyavanaś ca gautamo medhātithir devaladevarātau | rāmas tathā gādhisutaś ca
śākalo mṛkaṇḍuputrātrijapippalādāḥ | yogeśvarau vyāsaparāśarau ca chāyāsuko jājalijahnumukhyāḥ
| sarve ‘py amī munigaṇāḥ sahaputraśiṣyāḥ svastrībhir āyayur atipraṇayena yuktāḥ | vedāntāni
ca vedaś ca mantrās tantrāḥ samūrtayaḥ | daśasaptapurāṇāni ṣaṭśāstrāṇi tathā ‘yayuh | gaṅgādyāḥ
saritas tatra puṣkarādīsarāṃsi ca | kṣetrāṇi ca diśaḥ sarvā daṇḍakādi vanāni ca | nagādayo yayus tatra
devagandharvadānavāḥ | gurutvāt tatra nāyātān bhṛguḥ sambodhya cānayāt | dīkṣitā nāradenātha
dattam āsanam [u]ttamam | kumārā vanditāḥ sarvair niṣeduh kṛṣṇatatparāḥ | vaiṣṇavāś ca viraktāś
ca nyāsino brahmacārīnaḥ | mukhabhāge sthitās te ca tadagre nāradaḥ sthitāḥ | ekabhāge ṛṣigaṇas
tadanyatra divaukasaḥ | vedopaniṣado ‘nyatra tīrthāny atri striyo ‘nyataḥ | jayaśabdo namaḥśabdaḥ
śaṅkhaśabdas tathaiva ca | cūrṇalājāprasūnānām nikṣepaḥ sumahān abhūt | vimānāni samāruhya
kiyanto devanāyakaḥ | kalpavṛkṣaprasūnais tān sarvāṃs tatra samākiran |

⁹ yā vai lasatcīrṇitulasīvimīśrakṛṣṇāṃghrivenabhyadhikāmbunetrī | punāti lokānubhayatra
seśān kas tām na seveta mariṣyamāṇaḥ |

Bhrgu, Aṅgiras, Parāśara, [Viśvāmitra] the son of Gādhi, [Paraśu]rāma, Utathya, Indrapramada, Idhmabāha, Medhātithi, Devala, Ārṣṭiṣeṇa, Bhāradvāja, Gautama, Pippalāda, Maitreya, Aurva, Kavaṣa, Agastya, Vyāsa, Nārada ‘and other excellent divine sages and great sages, and excellent royal sages headed by Aruṇa’ (BhP 1.19.9–10).

Conclusions

The creators of these narratives sited each major event at one of the power-places of the Sanskrit thought-world: the Naimiṣa forest, Kurukṣetra, Mt Meru, or the banks of the Ganges River. What is the point of lavishing all this literary detail on the settings in which the narratives are performed? Rich descriptions of landscapes appear throughout the Sanskrit archive and are often ornamented with detail in this way. This may be just an opportunity for the display of literary virtuosity, but I suggest it is something more.

There are several tropes that unite these descriptions. The first is the trope of untrammelled natural beauty. They are beautiful from the ground up, starting with the rocks, gems and minerals. They abound in flowers, trees, lakes, birds and animals. The physical beauty is heightened and complemented by fragrant air and gentle breezes. This external environment even determines the inner world, for as we saw, the minds of those who dwell in such places are ‘free from enmity’.

A trope of richness and abundance is conveyed by the images of excellent cattle and by the long lists of crops. The richness of the idealised natural environment is reflected in the fertility and fecundity of the social world: here are found members of all four castes, and individuals at each of the four traditional stages of Brahminical life pursue their appropriate dharmas.

Another important trope is that of sanctity. This is expressed in a number of ways. For example, included in the description of the Naimiṣa forest is an allusion to a 12-year Vedic sacrifice which was then in progress. These places are also the sacred abodes of saints, seers and sages. They constitute glittering celebrity A-lists, the cream of Hindu orthodoxy. The sanctity is heightened, especially in the BhP’s description of Ānanda, by the presence in human form of all the major objects of worship in the Vaiṣṇava tradition, including scriptures, pilgrimage destinations, and sacred sites.

Closely allied to the trope of sanctity is that of divinity. The presence of the divine certainly contributes towards the sanctity of these literary places. We have seen how they are populated by deities and other divine and semi-divine beings. Even the earthly places mirror with little modification the explicitly divine setting of Mt Meru, where Brahmā ‘performed’ his discourse.

In all of this we perceive the fifth trope: fullness, completeness, perfection and unsurpassability. The creators of these places have given us complete sets and comprehensive lists: castes, stages, crops, trees, sages, deities. Nothing is left out. Nothing is flawed. Everything is noble, worthy, desirable and perfect. These places are the ultimate and are unsurpassable; nothing could be better than they.

What then, can we say of the discourse ‘performed’ in such literary space? It is difficult to imagine that the historical authors could have created more illustrious locations for their discourse. By unfolding their narratives in highly idealised environments before the cream of the Sanskritic imaginary universe, they imply that the ultimate place and the ultimate audience would naturally warrant the ultimate discourse. To express the equation in other terms, because the place, along with every attribute and inhabitant found there, is complete, perfect and unsurpassed, the discourse performed there must also be experienced as the ultimate, perfect and unsurpassable discourse. Just as the tropes of beauty, richness, sanctity and perfection empower and ennoble the place of performance, they are also activated to empower, valorise and ennoble the discourse. The purāṇic creators pre-empt a specific literary competence in the implied receiver (reader or hearer) of the discourse. They intended their literary creation to be taken seriously—to be received as authoritative, as powerful, as efficacious, as evincing a more complete understanding of the nature of the underlying structures and sympathies of the universe, as destructive of *papa*, as generating *punya*, as many things, all experienced as true. Their goal was to further their devotional tradition by attracting new practitioners, maintaining the numbers of the faithful, and propagating a specific set of beliefs and practices. The use of literary place, in tandem with other textual strategies such as meta-authorship and the use of power-claims, contribute towards the achievement of these goals.

In his study of the Buddhist *Samdhinirmocana-sūtra*, Powers 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 (Powers 1993, 24–6). Similarly, in the case of these Hindu purāṇas, the divine and flawless nature of the setting signals the narratives’ human audience, sensitizing and preparing it for the reception of a divine and flawless discourse.

The sanctity of ‘place’ saturates the narrative that is enunciated there and also contributes to its authority by heightening its canonicity. Many other great canonical works were said to be enunciated at sacred places like Naimiṣa, Kurukṣetra and banks of the Ganges. The canonicity and authority of a text are therefore enhanced by adherence to this convention. These sites of performance exist in narrative time and space and are attested in multiple intertextual sources, but they exist outside

mundane time and space, allowing sages from across the millennia to meet together contemporaneously. A discourse performed in timeless space becomes timeless and universalized itself. Is it possible to prove conclusively that literary tropes such as place enable purāṇic discourse to function as authoritative? No, but there is evidence that points in this direction. Firstly, we know that these textual traditions have been preserved and have flourished for many centuries and exist in numerous manuscripts from all parts of the subcontinent. These two facts suggest that purāṇic texts have long been deemed worthy of preservation and propagation. Considering the effort involved in copying very substantial manuscripts like these, we would have to ask why devotees would invest the necessary resources and expense of commissioning a copy if they did not regard it as a valid scriptural tradition. Secondly, purāṇas are often represented as being divine revelation. It is difficult to imagine that Vaiṣṇava devotees could regard the words of their supreme deity as anything other than authoritative. For practitioners to disbelieve the words of their god would make nonsense of religious practice. Thirdly, in the case of the BhP at least, we have evidence from contemporary Vaiṣṇava practitioners. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupāda's monumental translation and commentary opens with the words: 'The *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* hits on the target of the Absolute Truth' (Bhaktivedanta Swami 1970, 5). It is hard to imagine that the BhP, or any other purāṇic text, was regarded as any less authoritative by reader-devotees in earlier times.

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