

Recounting the Sacred: orality and textuality in a contemporary performance of the Sanskrit classic, the Bhāgavatapurāṇa

Abstract

The Bhāgavatapurāṇa is one of the master-texts of the Sanskrit archive and is the foundational source of narratives relating to the deity Kṛṣṇa. Since it reached its current form about a millennium ago, public ‘performances’ of the text have been sponsored as a means of accumulating religious and social capital. These week-long events are a significant aspect of contemporary religious practice in the Hindu cultural world, but have received little or no scholarly attention. What is the role of the Sanskrit text in the oral performance of the Bhāgavatapurāṇa? How does the Sanskrit text function vis-à-vis the oral vernacular commentary with accompanies it? In this paper it is argued that a spectrum of social and cultural practices—ritual, oral, textual and performative—all contribute towards the validation and empowerment of the discourse.

Introduction: What is the Bhāgavatapurāṇa?

The Sanskrit word *purāṇa* means ‘old’, and in the context of the collections of texts known as the Purāṇas it can be taken to mean either ‘old stories’ or ‘stories of the old days’. These texts are vast encyclopaedic repositories of cosmogony, theology and orthodoxy for the three major Hindu traditions: Vaiṣṇava, Śaiva and Devī. Purāṇic texts are unlikely to have been written by single authors, but grew organically as they were copied and recopied over the centuries. To borrow Wendy Doniger’s simile (2009), they are the equivalent of premodern Wikipedias, to which successive generations made their own additions.

Traditionally there are said to be eighteen great purāṇas (mahāpurāṇas), and the same number of secondary purāṇas (upapurāṇas), although the membership of each of these classes varies from one authority to another. In addition, there are countless lesser purāṇas in which the stories relating to individual temples, places of pilgrimage and communities are recounted. The mahāpurāṇas, the longest of which run to tens of thousands of verses, are thought to have reached their present form between the fourth and twelfth centuries of the current era.

Of the mahāpurāṇas, the best known is the Bhāgavatapurāṇa. This text centres on the deity Viṣṇu, and most significantly, on his avatar or earthly manifestation Lord Kṛṣṇa. The Bhāgavatapurāṇa is the major normative text for countless millions of devotees of Kṛṣṇa throughout the Indian cultural world. The tenth book of the Bhāgavatapurāṇa, which accounts for almost half its total length, recounts the youthful pastimes of Kṛṣṇa among cow-herding tribes of Vraj. Many famous narratives appear in their most authoritative form

in the Bhāgavatapurāṇa: Kṛṣṇa stealing the curds, overturning the cart, uprooting the two arjuna trees, destroying demons and taking the cow-herd girls' clothes. The yearning of the cow-herding women for the preternaturally handsome youth has become a powerful metaphor for the purest and highest form of devotion to the divine that an individual may experience.¹

According to the Bhāgavatapurāṇa's own meta-narrative, the entire discourse was first given over seven days by the sage Śuka to the king Parīkṣit as the latter lay waiting for his death as the result of a curse. Having heard this sublime account, at the very moment of death, the king achieved liberation from the endless cycle of existence, the ultimate goal of most orthodox Hindu traditions. Accordingly, week-long readings or performances of the Bhāgavatapurāṇa have a special significance. Known as *Bhāgavata-saptāha* ('Bhāgavata-week') in Sanskrit or simply as *saptāh* in Hindi, it is traditionally said to confer liberation on both the chief sponsor and the audience. In its contemporary form, the reasons given for holding a saptāh include the salvation of deceased relatives and forebears, or as one informant expressed it, a saptāh is for the 'salvation and homage' of his ancestors.

Bhāgavata-saptāha: the week-long purāṇic performance

How is a saptāh carried out? A comprehensive set of instructions for a week-long oral performance of the Bhāgavatapurāṇa is given in the Śrīmad-bhāgavata-māhātmya ('The greatness of the glorious Bhāgavata[purāṇa]') (Goswami 2005: BhP 0.6.1-103). The Māhātmya, a short text of six chapters, was originally incorporated into the Uttarakhaṇḍa section of the Padmapurāṇa, but is also included in some modern editions of the Bhāgavatapurāṇa.

According to these instructions, great care is to be taken in the selection of a suitable exponent. He should be a brahmin and a devotee of Viṣṇu who is free from worldly attachment. He should be capable of expounding on the Vedas and other authoritative texts (*śāstra*). He should be skilled in giving explanations; he must be reliable and completely free from desires. Certain types of people are to be avoided: those who are attracted by other traditions, those who are excessively interested in women and those who are heretics, even if they are well educated. The exponent should be provided with a seconder to help him 'dispel doubts and enlighten the public' (0.6.20-22).

The exponent should begin his recital at sunrise and should speak in a 'suitably moderated tone' for three-and-a-half watches (*prahara*), the equivalent of 10–11 hours. There should be a one-hour break at midday, during which devotees should sing praises of Viṣṇu. A single small meal should be eaten each day so that the exposition need not be interrupted by toilet breaks. The instructions suggest that people should fast for the full week, or take a diet of

¹ On the purāṇas in general, see Narayana Rao (2004) and Matchett (2005). The best summaries of the Bhāgavatapurāṇa are Rocher (1986) and Bryant (2007). Goswami (2005) contains a very accurate version of the complete Sanskrit text of the Bhāgavatapurāṇa with an accurate if quaint English translation. On the pastimes of Kṛṣṇa, see Schweig (2007b) and especially a new translation by Bryant (2004).

milk and ghee, or fruit and vegetables with just a single type of grain. Sensibly, however, they say that fasting should not stand in the way of listening to the exposition. If fasting will detract from one's ability to listen attentively for a week, then it is not to be pursued (0.6.38-43).

Letters should to addressed to everyone, inviting them to this 'exceedingly rare congregation of the pious' (0.6.8). All are welcome to 'drink the nectar of the glorious Bhāgavata [purāṇa]' (0.6.9). The instructions specifically mention promoting the event among 'people who stand remote from the stories of Śrī Hari [Viṣṇu] and the chanting of Viṣṇu's praises', including 'women, those of low caste [śūdras], etc' (0.6.6). This distinguishes the Bhāgavatapurāṇa from other master-texts of the Sanskritic archive, which are explicitly the preserve of high-caste males.

What was the language of the pre-modern saptāh? In the absence of concrete data, some assumptions may be made. There are two possibilities: Sanskrit only, or a blend of Sanskrit and the vernacular. Sanskrit has long been the language of elite scholarly and spiritual discourse (Pollock, 2006). The archetypal saptāh may have been conducted in exclusively Sanskrit, as such an event was described as an 'exceedingly rare congregation of the pious', in the Bhāgavatapurāṇa's own words. It is possible that the expositor read, recited or chanted verses in Sanskrit only. It is also possible that he explained verses in spoken Sanskrit, with the occasional assistance of his seconder, in the style of the prose commentaries that accompany many important Sanskrit texts.

It is usually assumed that most women and members of 'low castes' did not understand Sanskrit, but we have already seen that they were explicitly welcomed. If the narration were performed in Sanskrit only, these people may have acquired religious merit simply by hearing the discourse. The belief in the power and efficacy of sacred sound, with meaning as a poor cousin, is widespread in Hindu traditions. Further, the idea that one must understand the sacred word in order to benefit from it is perhaps an Orientalist habit of mind rooted in the Protestant traditions of Europe. On the other hand, if the aim of the performance is to impart religious knowledge rather than just religious merit, this could only be achieved through the vernacular. It seems likely therefore that the event was delivered in a mixture of Sanskrit and the vernacular or largely in the vernacular with a smattering of Sanskrit verses as is the case today. For, as one contemporary informant put it, 'What is the point of telling stories in Sanskrit if no one can understand them?'

The study of the purāṇas in the West has historically been a philological exercise, with an exclusive focus on the textual. The concept that oral traditions are 'the single most dominant communication technology of our species' (Foley, 1999, p. 1) and notion that these may shed light on our understanding of the purāṇic tradition are just beginning to dawn on Western students of the purāṇas. Yet, in many parts of India, the saptāh is an important and prominent feature of religious life. No fewer than twenty such events were advertised in the Vaiṣṇava pilgrimage town of Vrindavān in 2009 alone (Taylor, 2010). A Google search on the Hindi words 'Bhagavat saptah' and related terms yields almost 10000 hits, and over one thousand saptāh-related videos are available on Youtube. To my knowledge no attempt has

been made in scholarly literature to describe or explore the contemporary oral performance of the Bhāgavatapurāṇa and ambient cultural practices surrounding it. This study forms part of an ongoing exploration of the sources of power and authority that enable Sanskrit master-texts to function as ‘true’ discourse (Taylor, 2007, 2008a, 2008b, 2008c, forthcoming c).

The Saptāh at Naluna

A seven-day performance of the Bhāgavatapurāṇa was held at Naluna, Uttarakhand, in November 2009. Naluna is a private estate on the Gaṅgā about one hour’s drive north of Uttarkashi, in the district of Garhwal, set among steep Himalayan foothills and scattered mountain villages.² The site of the performance was a brightly decorated marquee which had been set up in the garden of the estate. Half a dozen simple chandeliers were suspended from the roof, and lengths of green synthetic carpet were rolled out on the ground. A colourful backdrop depicting a fantastic Chinoiserie landscape was suspended around the perimeter as a make-shift wall. The exponent’s throne was on a low stage at the front of the marquee, and to the left was a space for the musicians and honoured guests.

The exponent, Śrī Badrī Prasād Nautiyāl Jī Śāstrī, was a brahmin from a village near Naluna. Aged about forty, he had studied for five years in a ‘university’ which specialised in the Bhāgavatapurāṇa in Vrindāvan. This was the sixth saptāh at which he had officiated since he graduated. Every afternoon at about 1.30, he took his seat on the stage. The audience sat on the ground in the marquee, men and women separately. Numbers of attendees rose during the week to a peak of about 150 during the final days. Each session commenced with a round of invocations and sacred songs. The exponent then proceeded to related episodes from the Bhāgavatapurāṇa to the audience in Garhwali-accented Hindi, occasionally singing a key verse from the text in Sanskrit, which he would then translate and explain. From time to time the audience would join enthusiastically in the singing of sacred songs, while clapping their hands in time. Each session concluded at about 4.30pm with another round of communal singing. A tray of sacred burning lamps was offered to the throne and was passed around as a blessing (*ārtī*), and blessed food (*prasād*) was distributed.

Many features of the saptāh at Naluna were unique, especially those relating to the fire-ritual and the role of the local deity (Taylor, 2010, forthcoming a, forthcoming b). The actual narrative technique of the exponent was strongly reminiscent of other performances seen in that district (Taylor, forthcoming b). The patterning of his narration, the flute and harmonium improvising softly in the background, the general pitch, the rise and fall of his intonation, and even his mannerisms (one hand raised for emphasis, occasionally two), were all similar to narrative techniques employed on the plains.³

For the community around Naluna, the week-long performance was a major event in the religious calendar, there being on average about one saptāh per year in the district. It was

² On the religion and culture of Garhwal, see Alter, 2008; Berreman, 1962, 1964, and 1972 [1963]; and Sax, 1990, 1991, 2002, and 2009.

³ Video recordings of Bādri Prasād Śāstrī giving a kathā session at Naluna are available at <http://alturl.com/5gyf>

also important as a social event. This conservative community, while not impoverished, has only limited material resources, and the saptāh is a socially-sanctioned form of entertainment in a district with few other opportunities. One informant suggested that it was an excellent opportunity for women to escape the drudgery of subsistence farming and the domination of their mothers-in-law. The mood during the week was festive and joyous. No doubt the sweet semolina pudding and community feast provided on the final day were additional attractions.

A saptāh is an important site for the enactment and replication of the social roles of caste, class and gender. It provides an opportunity for the sponsor to accumulate social capital and enhance his status and reputation as a benefactor. It also enabled individuals to acquire religious merit, and was a major site of religious education. This is where normative discourses are exerted and experienced at the 'capillary' level, to quote Foucault.

The explicit message of the week-long event was that hearing stories about 'God' (*Bhagavān Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa*) would expunge sins, dispel misery, bestow happiness, and make life 'fortunate' (*dhanya*). Its implicit function was to inculcate the beliefs of the Kṛṣṇa-focussed Vaiṣṇava traditions of the Vallabha and Gauḍīya lineages, and to perpetuate the spiritual practices associated with these lineages.

What was the role of the text of the Bhāgavatapurāṇa in the week-long event? In addition to being the *raison-d'être* for the occasion, I suggest it fulfilled four functions. First the text was a key focus of ritual action. Second it was the ultimate source of the structure and content of the event. Third it was central to the act of *pārāyana*, during which the entire text was read through in silence by the exponent over the course of the week. The final role of the Bhāgavatapurāṇa was as the source of Sanskrit quotes used by the exponent in his narration. I will conclude by suggesting ways in which these four aspects all function together to exert a particular effect on the discourse.

The Text and Ritual Action



The exponent Śrī Badrī Prasād Nautiyāl Jī Śāstrī (centre) arrives at Naluna with an unidentified assistant carrying the text of the Bhāgavatapurāṇa on his head

In pre-modern times, Sanskrit manuscripts were written on oblong strips of palm-leaf or birch bark. Even with the advent of modern printing technology, the oblong format is still adopted for some religious texts. The text of the Bhāgavatapurāṇa used by the exponent at Naluna was a hefty volume in this traditional format, measuring 500mm in length, 200mm in width and 100mm in height.

The exponent (*śāstrī*, or 'learned one') and his party arrived at Naluna at 11:30am on the first day of the saptāh. An older gentleman accompanying him carried the text of the Bhāgavatapurāṇa wrapped in crimson velour on his head (see picture). The exponent and the text were greeted, honoured and garlanded at the gate, and were escorted into the marquee. The text was placed on a low table in the marquee and was honoured by various individuals with a small basket of offerings, garlands of marigolds and ten-rupee notes.



The text of the Bhāgavatapurāṇa, wrapped in red velour, is honoured with offerings, garlands and bank-notes, on a low table in the marquee

The two important preliminary rituals, the Kalaśasthāpana ('Establishing the pitchers') and the Saṃkalpa ('Statement of intent'), were conducted in the marquee at the foot of the table on which text was placed. These concluded with a procession around the pavilion where a fire-sacrifice was to take. During the procession, the text was borne on the head of the sponsor's elderly father.

Returning to the marquee, the text of the Bhāgavatapurāṇa was placed on a raised altar in front of the exponent. A young ritual specialist (*pūjārī*) made an offering of a tray of lights and incense to the text while the exponent read the text in silence. Using the middle finger of his right hand, the *pūjārī* marked the cover of the book with a spot of red sandal-paste.

Attendees arriving or leaving performed a wide range of ritual actions in front of the text: bowing down towards it, touching the altar or the text with their hands or foreheads, prostrating, throwing of grains or petals, the placing of flowers, fruits or money, honouring with palms joined (*añjali*), 'circumambulating' (actually turning around 360 degrees while standing on the spot with hands held in an *añjali*), and so on.

On several occasions during the week the exponent stated emphatically that the text was not just a book, a text, a collection of stories, but was the Lord (*Bhagavān*) Himself in physical form. This is also a claim made in the text (0.6.66-68). Any ritual act performed to the text is the equivalent of the same act made directly to God. As such the text represented the presence of the divine in physical form during the *saptāh*.

An anecdote will further illustrate the great significance attached to the text as a sacred object. During each session I sat at the back of the marquee and followed the progress of the narration by referring to a two-volume copy of the Bhāgavatapurāṇa. At one point I had placed one of the volumes on top of my folded jacket on the ground next to my seat.

Noticing this, the exponent interrupted his exposition, and to my mortification, called out to me in Hindi, 'Do not put that near your feet'. Chastened, I hastily retrieved the volume and kept it safely in my lap thereafter.

At the conclusion of the final day of the event, the sponsor, accompanied by the village deity, reverently carried the text on his head from the marquee to the vehicle which would take the exponent home again.

Text as source of structure and content



The exponent on his throne. A wandering ascetic and two musicians are seated on the left. The text of the Bhāgavatapurāṇa is immediately in front of the exponent under a heap of garlands

In addition to being the focus of ritual action, the text also provided the structure and content for the narratives of the seven days. The plan of the exponent's narration, which roughly followed the order of events in the Bhāgavatapurāṇa, is given in Appendix 1. The entire extent of the Bhāgavatapurāṇa was covered from beginning to end, but the rate at which the exponent progressed varied greatly from topic to topic. Sometimes he elaborated on a single episode at great length, while at other times, he traversed vast tracts of narrative terrain in a sentence or two.

The first day set the scene for the following narratives. The efficacy of the listening to narratives from the Bhāgavatapurāṇa is described by means of an allegorical parable. A young woman named Bhakti ('Devotion') and her two sons, Jñāna and Virāga ('Knowledge' and 'Dispassion'), are prematurely aged and emaciated. Simply by hearing a week-long narration of the Bhāgavatapurāṇa, all three are rejuvenated and reinvigorated.

The second and third days provided the 'historical' background to the week-long narrative. These include the biographies of the main meta-narrator of the story, Śuka, and of the king

Parīkṣit to whom the Bhāgavatapurāṇa was originally told. The fourth and fifth days were dedicated to narratives in which devotion to the deity Viṣṇu and his various avatars is shown to be rewarded. The first five days served as a prelude to the climax, which was reached in the sixth and seventh days. This consisted of narratives concerning the avatar Kṛṣṇa, set among cow-herding peoples of Vraj. The best-known stories of Kṛṣṇa's childhood pranks, and his youthful love-making among the cow-herding women were included here.

The narration was not restricted to the Bhāgavatapurāṇa but drew on other master-texts of contemporary Hinduism, such as the Bhagavadgītā and Rāmcaritmānas. In addition to narration, he included a certain amount of contemporary sermonising: 'it is better to wear traditional clothes than Western clothes to religion event', and 'we should all adhere to our caste traditions (*varṇa-dharma*)'. There was also a distinctive local element to the narration. As the event was located right on the banks of the Gaṅgā, that deity was frequently invoked and honoured, as was the local village deity Kaṇḍār, under whose auspices the event was held.

Silent reading or *pārāyaṇa*

The first session began with the musicians singing sacred songs while the exponent, seated on the throne, read silently the six chapters of the Māhātmya section of the Bhāgavatapurāṇa. In the days that followed, from about 5.30am in the freezing pre-dawn gloom, until 11.00 every morning, the exponent, wrapped up against the cold, sat alone in the marquee and read, or at least glance through, the entire eighteen thousand verses of the Bhāgavatapurāṇa silently to himself, at the rate of one two books (*skandha*) per day. His stated purpose was that the stories should be fresh in his mind, but there was also a ritual function: 'Don't worry if you don't hear it. Just reading it will confer benefits. It helps to continue the tradition'. The exponent described reading the text quickly 'in his mind' (*mānasik*) as a 'sacred act'. It seems that the event could not be considered complete unless the text was read in entirety.

According to an informant who has experience with the Bhāgavata-saptāh tradition in Bangalore, a week-long event may consist solely of *pārāyaṇa*. A benefactor may sponsor a traditional scholar (*vidvān*) to undertake such a silent reading in a private residence, without the need for any further exposition (A. Rao pers. comm.) At another week-long event at Govardhan in November 2009, two traditional scholars were seated on the stage silently reading the Bhāgavatapurāṇa while the exponent delivered his narration. They appeared to be reading in great haste, and I was led to understand that they were required to complete the reading by the time the main oral narration finished.

The practice of *pārāyaṇa* is not mentioned in the original instructions for a saptāh, but is obviously an important and integral part of some forms of the contemporary practice, and was a feature of most of the saptāh events for which I have data. If there was an expectation in the original instructions that the text be aloud read in its entirety, then this is obviously no longer possible as Sanskrit is not widely understood. *Pārāyaṇa* seems to be a nod to the instructions' requirement or expectation of a complete reading. As the whole text is not or

cannot be read aloud, the requirement of a complete reading can at least be met in part through pāṛāyaṇa.

Text as source of Sanskrit quotations

While the contemporary saptāh is embedded in ritual action focussed on the text, and while the event derives its structure and contents from the text in a broad sense, it is far from being a public reading or recital of the Bhāgavatapurāṇa itself. Except when the text was being used for pāṛāyaṇa or some other ritual purpose, at all other times it sat on the altar tightly wrapped in red velour and garlanded with marigolds. In fact, the true textual source of the event seemed to be a white exercise book which the exponent kept in his lap, and at which he glanced occasionally during his discourses. Unfortunately, I did not have the opportunity to examine this source closely.

Rather than Sanskrit recitals, the contemporary events were in fact vernacular oral performances embellished with occasional Sanskritic elements. A typical three-hour session might include as few as four verses or as many as a dozen from the Bhāgavatapurāṇa. The verses were not necessarily drawn from the text in the order in which they appear. For example, on the first day, the exponent began with a verse from the second chapter of the Māhātmya on the accumulation of merit (0.2.76), before returning at a later time to the opening verses in praise of Kṛṣṇa (0.1.1). An example of the way in which the exponent incorporated Sanskrit verses into his oral performance is given below. The verse from the Bhāgavatapurāṇa is shown in bold, and his explanation and elaboration in Hindi are given in plain text:

O great king, as the great Bhāgavat-jī says—as our saintly men say: {Sings:} **‘When a person comes into association with the pious as the result of rising good fortune accumulated though many lifetimes....’**⁴ {Speaks:} **‘As the result of rising good fortune accumulated though many lifetimes’**. As the result of many, many lifetimes, we gain an accumulation of merit. Through many lifetimes an accumulation of merit exists for us. We make this accumulation. We make it well. Then, having sat down for the stories of the Lord, having come for the stories of the Lord, there is support for us. **‘As the result of rising good fortune accumulated though many lifetimes.’** Having made an accumulation of merit through many lifetimes, then we have the support [to hear] the stories of the Lord. Having come for the stories of the Lord, there will be support. And further, O great king, having come for the stories, then we, having dispersed all of the many miseries in our lives, this story which is like a

⁴ The complete verse reads as follows: ‘When a person comes into association with the pious as the result of rising good fortune accumulated though many lifetimes, then having destroyed the darkness of delusion and pride caused by the agency of ignorance, pure knowledge arises.’ *bhāgodayena bahujaṇmasamarjitenā satsaṅgamaṇi ca labhate puruṣo yadā vai | ajñānahetukṛtāmohamādāndhakāranāśaṇi vidhāya hi tadodayate vivekaḥ ||* (0.2.76)

mother, having brought us into her own presence, destroys all the miseries in our lives. For us, O Lord, for us, this mother-like story, having taken us into her lap, is result of the accumulation of merit though many lifetimes. There will be an association with the pious. And when we come into the association with the pious, when we come to hear the stories of the Lord, and having heard the stories, it will cause our lives to be filled with bliss. *** check this

In the first instance the Sanskrit sections were sung (as indicated in the transcript above), and when he repeated them subsequently, he adopted a dramatic, declarative register, as distinct from the natural speaking voice in which the bulk of the discourse was delivered. As such, he used performative vocal techniques to distinguish, emphasise and elevate the Sanskrit passages.

The above passage represents about two minutes of spoken performance, or about one-third of the total exposition of this one verse. The exponent returned a number of times to the original Sanskrit wording during this time, while expanding on the basic message that the great fortunate that enables one to hear the Bhāgavatapurāṇa and that hearing it will be of great benefit.

There are a number of points of interest here. Firstly, the term 'great king' refers to Parīkṣit to whom the original Bhāgavatapurāṇa was supposed to have been narrated by the sage Śuka. This term was used very frequently during the whole seven-day narration. By using the phrase 'great king', the exponent made it sound as if everything that he said had actually been spoken by the sage. This included not just the Sanskrit verses themselves, but the exponent's own disquisitions. This narrative technique had the effect of blurring the distinction between that which was the exponent's and that which was Śuka's.

A second point of interest is the way in which he referred to the text. The respectful form 'Bhāgavat-jī' was used in the feminine gender, and as we saw, the Bhāgavatapurāṇa was likened to a mother who took to audience into her lap. I am aware of no other such personification of a Sanskrit document. It is even more surprising in such a highly patriarchal episteme that the feminine and maternal metaphors are used. One suggestion is that as Garhwal is the first abode of Gaṅgā Mā ('Mother Ganges'), perhaps the pervasive influence of the river as a physical entity and as female deity has served to validate and empower the feminine in this case.

There is a high level of literacy in the community around Naluna, estimated at 95% by one informant, but this is confined exclusively to Hindi literacy. Some of the educated Brahmins and men of the Rajput community are able to read Sanskrit, but it is unlikely that anyone in the audience could have understood verses from the Bhāgavatapurāṇa without some explanation. If the Sanskrit verses are not readily understood in their own right, what function do they play? What effect do they have on the discourse and its reception by the audience?

As Pollock suggests, in premodern times, this was universal language of the Sanskritic Cosmopolis. It was the language of choice whenever an agent had something universal to

say. In the contemporary Hindu thought-world, Sanskrit is still the ultimate power-language. It is the language of the gods, the master-texts, and truth. The choice of Sanskrit elevates and empowers discursive statements (Taylor , 2007). The use of Sanskrit verses also contributed towards the structuring of the discourse, as the exponent frequently initiated a new theme by beginning with a verse from the original text. The inclusion of these verses also demonstrated to the audience that exposition was clearly and firmly bedded in the original text. They served to make explicit the relationship between oral performance and the textual source. I suggest that this, like the adoption of Śuka's 'voice' described above, is a means of appropriating the inherent authority of the text. This empowers and legitimises the oral performance and facilitates its reception as 'true discourse' on the part of the audience.

Conclusion

We have seen that the text of the Bhāgavatapurāṇa plays four roles in the week-long performance known as Bhāgavata-saptāh. In addition to being the *raison-d'être* for the event, the text is an important focus of ritual action. As the equivalent of 'the Lord Himself in physical form', it is honoured with lights, flowers, scents, prostrations, etc. The text 'presided' over the preliminary ceremonies and in a sense presided over the entire event from its position on the altar in front of the expositor. Borne of the heads of eminent personages, its arrival and departure marked the beginning and end of the event respectively.

Although stories about Kṛṣṇa abound in the oral tradition and in vernacular texts, the Bhāgavatapurāṇa is the ultimate authoritative source for this tradition. The text was the source of the narratives recounted during the week, and the exponent adhered to the order in which the narrative units appeared in the text. In this sense, the Bhāgavatapurāṇa provided both the overall form and the content of the event.

In addition to the daily oral discourse delivered in the vernacular to the assembled audience, the exponent undertook a silent reading of the text known as *pārāyaṇa*. This served to legitimise the event by demonstrating that the oral performance was based on the written text. Pārāyaṇa also demonstrated adherence to a tradition that required that the entire text be read during the week. This conspicuous practice of *pārāyaṇa* imbued the event with a sense of 'wholeness' or 'fullness', to use Sanskritic metaphors.

Having confirmed the supreme authority of the text through ritual action and by elevating it to the status of a deity, and having manifested the 'properness' of the event through adherence to the tradition of *pārāyaṇa*, the discursive link between the spoken narratives and the Sanskrit text was demonstrated by means of Sanskrit verses. I suggest that all these, the performative aspects of rituals surrounding the text, the sanctifying process of *pārāyaṇa*, and the appropriation of textual authority operate in concert to exert a powerful influence on the reception of the discourse. The net effect is to validate, empower and perpetuate the beliefs and the practices this particular Vaiṣṇava lineage. To use another Foucauldian concept, they enable the discourse to function as 'true'.

Finally this suggests that discourse is not exerted by the text alone as I had previously assumed. It appears that discourses of power are exerted through means that are neither strictly oral nor textual. Purāṇic discourse is partly independent of language, and is activated as much by the performative aspects of the event, including the ritual and *pārāyaṇa* elements. It is as much the ambient rituals in which the oral performance is embedded which contribute to the production and reception of discourse. The full assemblage of social and cultural practices surrounding the saptāh are on the one hand produced by discourse, and on the other function in turn to produce it.

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Appendix 1

Plan of the saptāh at Naluna, indication the sections of the Bhāgavatapurāṇa covered each day

- Day 1. Māhātmya, ‘The Greatness’ of the Bhāgavatapurāṇa
- Day 2. Birth of Śukadeva, why he went naked (BhP 1.4); tested by Janaka; Nārada’s past life as the son of a serving girl (BhP 1.6); massacre of the Pāṇḍavas’ sons by Aśvatthāmā (BhP 1.7)
- Day 3. Aśvatthāmā, Abhimanyu and the birth of Parīkṣit; the curse of King Parīkṣit (Book 1)
- Day 4. Uddhava and Vidura; Hiraṇyākṣa and Hiraṇyakaśipu; the Boar avatar; Devahūti; Kapila; Manu’s daughters; Śiva and Dakṣa; Dhruva (Books 3-4)
- Day 5. Bharata and the deer; Hiraṇyakaśipu and Prahrāda; Gajendra and the crocodile; Churning of the Ocean; Mohinī; Aditi asks for a boon; Bali performs yajña; Viṣṇu

as Vāmana. (Books 5, 7 and 8)

- Day 6. Kṛṣṇa's childhood and youth; his struggles with Kāṁsa; Kṛṣṇa overturns the cart, eats mud, steals butter, etc.; Brahmā takes the cattle; Govardhan (Book 10)
- Day 7. Kṛṣṇa and the gopis, Kāṁsa's attempts to kill him, Sudāmā, Kṛṣṇa's flight to Dvārakā, marriage with Rukmiṇī (Book 10); the twenty-four gurus – very brief (Book 11) and Mārkaṇḍeya, before giving the synopsis of the whole Bhāgavatapurāṇa and the last verse (Book 12)

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