

# Heavenly Carrots and Earthly Sticks: How *Phalaśruti* Paratexts Empower Purāṇic Discourse

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*Abstract:* Using Genette's theoretical framework of the 'paratext', this article analyses various phalaśruti texts found in the Skandapurāṇa. These enumerate the 'rewards of hearing', that is, supposed benefits accruing to the audience as the result of listening to particular discourses. Using a paradigmatic example of the phalaśruti associated with the pilgrimage site of Rāmasetu or 'Rāma's Bridge', four 'moves' or themes are identified in these texts: first, promises of transcendent and mundane rewards are aimed at inducing the faithful to adopt certain beliefs and practices. Second, these promises are backed up by threats of negative consequences for those who infringe normative prescriptions. Third, payment of dakṣiṇā or the sacrificial fee to the exponents of these texts is mandated. Fourth, the faithful are exhorted to copy and donate fresh manuscripts of the root texts. It is argued that these four 'moves' of phalaśruti paratexts function together in a self-sustaining 'purāṇic economy'. By perpetuating the beliefs and practices of the specific text, sponsors continue to accumulate religious merit, and the livelihood of the families of Brahmin exponents are guaranteed. This then provides the economic and material basis for the maintenance of the targeted practices.

## Introduction

In scholarly research, the *purāṇas* are often overshadowed by other branches of the *śruti* and *smṛti* traditions. For many localised and devotional communities, however, purāṇic narratives provide the foundational, normative sources of cosmogonic, theological, and mythological knowledge. At many pilgrimage sites, for example, local *purāṇas* (*sthalapurāṇas*), which are now included in the *Skandapurāṇa* (SkP), have provided the key narratives and are the 'world-creating' texts both for devotees and those who minister to them.

What makes these purāṇic texts influential? What gives them their authority? How have these textual traditions been able to maintain and perpetuate

themselves over the centuries? How do they function within the dominant, largely brahminical Sanskrit episteme? In answering these questions, my chief concerns are the processes of power, knowledge, ‘truth’, and discourse, and the ways in which these are mutually constitutive and mutually productive.

In this article, I build on my previous studies of textual empowerment strategies in the *Śiva-*, *Brahma-*, *Bhāgavata-*, and *Viṣṇupurāṇas*, to examine the internal workings of the SkP. Sometimes disparaged as a ‘grab-bag’ or ‘scrap-book’, the SkP contains many independent sub-narratives relating mainly to important places of pilgrimage. Many of these local *purāṇas* (in common with purāṇic texts more broadly, and many devotional Sanskrit texts in general) share a characteristic though little studied feature: a section called the *phalaśruti*, in which the ‘fruits of hearing’, that is, the benefits accruing to the audience as the result of listening to the particular discourse, are enumerated. Those who recite as little as a syllable of the narrative, those who listen attentively, those who endow the exponent with gifts, and those who sponsor and donate copies of the root texts are promised transcendental rewards up to and including *mokṣa*, the ultimate goal for most Hindu traditions. On the other hand, there are dire consequences in this world and the next for those who transgress these injunctions.

This article contains an examination and comparison of this system of heavenly carrots and earthly sticks contained in these *phalaśruti* chapters. Drawing partly on reader response theory (Iser 1974; Jaus 1982), I suggest how these chapters impact upon the creation of meaning within the discourse’s intended audience. I argue that the promise of heavenly rewards is a way of enabling the discourse to function as ‘true’, and is at least partly driven by a distinctly earthly agenda. These chapters serve to attract and maintain religious capital in a crowded, devotional marketplace, where the survival of a tradition relies on the financial and material resources provided by a devout audience to a body of expert purāṇic practitioners. Textual evidence is supported by observations from several living traditions of purāṇic performance.

A literary text is a ‘more or less long sequence of verbal statements that are more or less endowed with significance’, according to literary theorist, Gerard Genette (1997, p. 1). Texts in general are rarely presented in their unadorned state, but are almost invariably accompanied by what he terms the *paratext*. This consists of ‘verbal or other productions, such as an author’s name, a title, a preface, illustrations’. The paratext serves to ‘ensure the text’s presence in the world, its “reception” and its consumption . . .’ Citing Lejeune’s *La Pacte autobiographique* (1975), Genette further maintains that ‘the paratext is the fringe of the printed text which in reality controls one’s whole reading of the text’ (Genette 1997, p. 2). The aim of this article is to suggest ways in which the *phalaśruti* paratexts affect the reception of the *purāṇa*, and enable it to function as ‘true’ discourse in the Foucauldian sense (Foucault 1980). A ‘discourse’ is whatever constrains, and also enables writing, speaking, and thinking on a given social object or practice within a specific historical period (McHoul and Grace 1993: 31).

The discourse provides the external boundaries for its subject, but it also provides its internal structure: how statements are to be constituted, ordered, and validated. My concern is not whether the discourse proves to be true or false in any ultimate, absolute sense, but to explore the ways in which the discourse functions as ‘true’ for the epistemic community which shaped these *purāṇas*, and which was in turn shaped by them.

The first glimmering of interest in Sanskritic paratexts appeared in *Śāstrārambha: Inquiries into the Preamble in Sanskrit* (Slaje 2008), and specifically in two articles in that collection, Minkowski’s ‘Why should we read the Maṅgala Verses?’ (2008), and Boccalis’s ‘Incipits of Classical Sargabandhas’ (2008). These and other writings in this volume focus on paratextual elements as a literary genre, or ‘as a conceptual form for organizing a system of knowledge’ (Minkowski 2008, p. 1). None of them, however, seemed to be aware of Genette’s approach nor do they touch particularly on the discursive impacts of the paratext, which is the main focus of this article.

There has been no systematic attempt to theorise *phalaśrutis* in the context of discourse and paratexts, but several scholars have remarked on *phalaśruti* chapters of specific works. For example, Mackenzie Brown (1986) made references to various aspects of *phalaśruti* in the *Agni-*, *Devī Bhāgavata-*, *Kūrma-* and *Matsyapurāṇas*. Bailey (1995) has observed how *phalaśruti* chapters provide boundaries to narrative units in *Purāṇas* (pp. 9–10). In his latest book, *Religion, Narrative and Public Imagination in South Asia*, James Hegarty (2012) explores the *phalaśruti* texts of the final book of the *Mahābhārata* and compares them to certain developments in Buddhist ideology.

The term *phalaśruti* itself is slightly problematic: it is usually understood to mean the ‘*phala* of *śruti*’, that is, the ‘fruit or result of hearing’. It is however awkward to construe the compound in this way. A more logical interpretation might be to analyse it as genitive *tatpuruṣa* meaning ‘the *śruti* of *phala*’, perhaps ‘a discourse on fruits or results’. In the sense of ‘discourse’, however, the word *śruti* is usually restricted to those texts ‘heard’ by divine sages in mythological time, especially the Vedas and their *Aṅgas* or supplements. In this context, the word *śruti* would simply mean ‘that which is heard’ or ‘discourse’. In any case, the key concept is that the *phalaśruti* verses enumerate the advantages, both sacred and mundane, which are said to accrue to any devotee who hears or recites the discourse in question. The *phalaśruti* may also list punishments and dangers that await those who fail to follow certain exhortations relating to the text and its exponent. Other common terms for *phalaśruti* are *śravaṇaphala* and *śrutiphala*, which share the same meaning.

General internet searches of these terms result in many thousands of hits: this is indicative of their widespread use in textual traditions and their significance in current popular religious practice. In contrast, similar searches of academic databases yield only a tiny number of references, confirming my belief that *phalaśruti* verses constitute an important aspect of textual and popular practice that is yet to receive the scholarly attention they warrant.

I will focus on the *phalaśruti* as a paratextual element of the SkP, but before we begin, I will briefly introduce the SkP itself. Thought to date originally from about 600 CE, the SkP is the most important of the early Śaiva *purāṇas* (Yokochi 2011). It is also one of the largest of the *mahāpurāṇas* and runs to about 80,000 verses in 1700 chapters. Among Western scholars it has been assumed that after a long period of development and expansion, the SkP reached its current form in about the seventeenth century (Bakker 2004; Rocher 1986; Bisschop 2006). It is a compendium, rather than a single work, consisting of twenty-four independent narratives called *māhātmyas*, in which the ‘greatness’ of certain pilgrimage sites and practices is extolled. The majority of these *māhātmyas* contain myths relating to sacred locations all over India, from the sources of the Gaṅgā in the north, to ‘Rāma’s Bridge’ in the south, and from Puri (Orissa) in the east to Kambath (Gujarat) in the west. Most of these sites are related to the deity Śiva and to his son Skanda, who is said to have first uttered the entire *purāṇa* which bears his name, but some also exhibit a clear Vaiṣṇava orientation. Long scorned as a compendium of unrelated elements, Doniger has revealed that individual sections have their own internal logic (Doniger 1993). More recently, Rohlman, in an article that deserves to be more widely read, has drawn attention to persistent Orientalist biases in purāṇic scholarship and has opened our eyes to ‘an intentionally articulated religious vision’ exhibited in purāṇic texts as a whole (Rohlman 2002, p. 70). Three volumes of the critical edition have recently been published or are forthcoming (Adriaensen et al. 1998; Bakker & Isaacson 2005; Yokochi 2011).

This study is self-consciously synchronic and ahistorical. It treats the *māhātmyas* of the SkP as ‘complete narrative units’ in the sense of Bailey (1995, pp. 8–18). I am not concerned with the diachronic development of the collection or the relative chronology of the individual sections. These questions focus on the production of the text; my concern here is primarily with the text’s reception. The rationale is this: for an individual or a family sponsoring a reading of a particular *māhātmya*, and on whom the *phalaśruti* will exert its putative discursive influence, the textual history is irrelevant.

It is unlikely that the SkP was ever intended to be read from beginning to end as a single text. More probably, individual *māhātmyas* were read publicly at sacred places by professional readers (usually Brahmins) in ritual events subsidised by pilgrims. Similar events centred on other *purāṇas*, especially the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*, and are an important source of income for some Brahmin families today (Taylor 2010, 2012). At the same time, sponsoring a reading enables a devotee to accumulate religious and social capital (Bourdieu 1986). The continued prosperity of Brahmin exponents and the perceived advantages accruing to lay sponsors are two ingredients that ensure that the discourses and practices associated with each text and site are perpetuated. Ultimately it is the donations from sponsors, in cash and in kind, which lubricate the wheels of this purāṇic economy.

There are several editions of the SkP in common circulation. The one adopted for this study (Nag Publishers’ 1986 reprint of the Veṅkateśvara Steam Press

edition, Bombay, 1867–1910) consists of seven major sections (*khaṇḍas*): the *Māheśvara-*, *Vaiṣṇava-*, *Brāhma-*, *Kāśī-*, *Āvantiya-*, *Nāgara-*, and *Prabhāsa khaṇḍas*. While the *Vaiṣṇava-* and *Brāhmakhaṇḍa* focus at least nominally on Viṣṇu and Brahmā, the others divisions treat sites and practices specific to Śiva generally, and specifically city of Vārāṇasī, the land of Avanti (modern Malwa, Madhyapradesh), Nagara (consisting of both a *sthalapurāṇa* of Hāṭakeśvarakṣetra and a caste *purāṇa* of Brahmins and baniyas who derive their origins from Vaḍnagara, Gujarat), and Prabhāsa (Somnath, Gujarat).

These seven major *khaṇḍas* are further divided into 24 sections, most of which are known as *māhātmya*, and which recount the ‘greatness’ of a particular pilgrimage area. For example, the *Māheśvarakhaṇḍa* consists of three *māhātmyas*, focussed, respectively, on Kedarnath, Uttarakhand (35 chapters), the sacred ford (*tirtha*) of Mahīsāgarasaṃgama (Kambath, Gujarat, 66 chapters), and Aruṇācala near Tiruvannamalai, Tamil Nadu (37 chapters) (Rocher 1986).

Of the 24 *māhātmyas*, 17 have *phalaśruti* texts, varying in length from as few as two verses to over one hundred. In spite of this disparity, they share a ‘family resemblance’ in the form of certain basic ‘moves’, most of which may be found in most of the texts. The greatest differences among the various *phalaśruti* texts are in the amount of amplification or elaboration that attends each move. The four basic features are as follows: (i) ‘carrots’, which are the benefits accruing to an individual who hears the discourse; (ii) ‘sticks’ in the form of negative consequences for those who do not conform to various normative behaviours relating to the discourse; (iii) descriptions of gifts suitable for the exponent; and (iv) exhortations relating to the transcription and gifting of the various root texts. I argue that together these four moves, which I will explore in turn below, function to exert a ‘truth effect’ on faithful members of the purāṇic audience, who are situated, almost by definition, within the Brahminical episteme. That is to say, they lend the text credence, authority, and power among an audience that is situated within the Brahminical epistemic community where these sorts of claims would have currency.

I am not arguing that there is anything particularly unique about this selection from the SkP. They are, however, typical of the genre, and they may serve to simulate a broader investigation of *phalaśruti* verses elsewhere, and the ways in which Sanskrit authors sought to make their texts authoritative. They do, however, form a convenient set for the purposes of comparison. Further, they help us to imagine a ‘purāṇic economy’, in which, in the crudest terms, the faithful acquire religious capital at the expense of the *dakṣiṇā* or sacrificial fee paid to the exponent.

The various *phalaśruti* paratexts of the SkP are wonderful, florid, and fecund in the great tradition of Sanskrit narrative literature. I have selected a single paradigmatic *phalaśruti* from the *māhātmya* which glorifies the greatness of Rāmaṣetu or ‘Rāma’s Bridge’. Known as Adam’s Bridge in English, this famous pilgrimage destination is located in the Ramanathapuram district in the South Indian state of

Tamil Nadu. It centres on a spit of low-lying land that extends from the Indian mainland towards Sri Lanka. The present analysis is not concerned with what the *māhātmya* says about Rāmasetu—this can be found in the first section of the *Brahmakhaṇḍa* of the SkP—but what the authors of the *phalaśruti* say about the *māhātmya*:

[The *Setu-māhātmya*] assuages great suffering, it dispels great illnesses, it drives off great sorrows, it prevents nightmares, it is auspicious, it averts accidental deaths and it provides great tranquility for those who read or listen to it. It leads to heaven and to liberation, it is propitious and it bestows the rewards of all the *tīrthas*. One should propagate this auspicious text, and one should listen to it attentively. Such a person receives the abundant reward of sacrifices having the *agniṣṭoma* as their first. The result of reading the four Vedas with their supplements one hundred times—such is the reward of recounting this *māhātmya*.

By reciting or listening to one chapter of it, O lords among sages, one achieves the entire reward of a Horse-sacrifice. From reciting or listening to two chapters, one achieves the unexcelled reward of the sacrifice known as the Cow-sacrifice. One who recites or listens to ten chapters with devotion reaches heaven and rejoices with Indra. By reciting or listening to twenty chapters, O lords among sages, one reaches Brahmā's realm and rejoices with Brahmā. By reciting or listening to thirty chapters, O lords among sages, one reaches Viṣṇu's realm and rejoices with Viṣṇu. By reciting or listening to forty chapters, O lords among sages, one reaches Rudra's realm and rejoices with Rudra. One who recites or listens to fifty chapters reaches Hara, accompanied by Ambā, that is, Śiva who has the crescent moon as his diadem. One who recites or listens to this excellent *māhātmya* in entirety achieves the same realm as Śiva accompanied by Ambā—there is no doubt about this. One who recites or listens to this text twice, O most excellent sages, proceeds into the presence of Śiva, mounted on an excellent celestial chariot. One who recites or listens to it three times with devotion, achieves identity with Śiva (*śivasārūpyam*), while bringing pleasure to Śiva. One who recites or listens to this excellent text four times achieves union with Śiva, the husband of the daughter of the mountain.

If one recites a verse every day, or even half a verse, a quarter of a verse, a word, a syllable or a letter, any misdeed committed on that day is assuaged at that very instant. As many letters as there are in these verses when the entire *Setu-māhātmya* is recited or heard, that same number of instances of brahminicide, drinking alcohol, stealing gold, having sexual intercourse with one's guru's wife, or the fault of association with such people—all these are assuaged at that very instant. As many letters as there are in this highly auspicious work, that same number of rewards born of bathing in the twenty-four *tīrthas* and also in the other *tīrthas* situated in the middle of the Setu, such is the reward of reciting or hearing this text.

A person who transcribes with devotion a copy of this excellent *Setu-māhātmya* will be freed from all ignorance and will achieve unity with Śiva. Those who have a written copy of this auspicious *māhātmya* in their houses have no fear of ghosts, spirits and so on. No resident in that house will be afflicted by disease; there is no fear of thieves; nor is there affliction from the planets, including Saturn or Mars. A house in which this auspicious and excellent *māhātmya* is found is regarded as Rāmasetu itself, O bulls of sages. The twenty-four *tīrthas* abide in that very place; there too is the auspicious mountain, Gandhamādana. Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śiva also dwell there respectfully. Having transcribed a copy of the *Setu-māhātmya*, one should donate it to a brahmin: such a person gives the whole world bounded by the four oceans. All other gifts are not worth one sixteenth part of the gift of the *Setu-māhātmya*: therefore grant me peace. Why say more? The three worlds abide in it. One who causes a single chapter to be heard at the time of a *śrāddha* removes any imperfections in the *śrāddha*, and his ancestors will be highly delighted. One who causes brahmins to hear a single chapter or a verse at the time of the full or new moon, his cows and buffaloes will be content, they will produce calves and will give much milk.<sup>1</sup>

### The fruits of hearing: ‘carrots’ and ‘sticks’

Having provided this example of a *phalaśruti* text, typical of those found in the SkP, our task is now to make sense of this mass of claims, to identify the main ‘moves’, and to supplement and amplify them with examples from cognate *phalaśruti* texts. The aim here is to cast some light on the process, purpose, and impact of their composition. The first two moves are ‘carrots’ and ‘sticks’.

A useful framework for classifying and understanding these two moves is provided by a foundational concept of Hindu thought, that of the *puruṣārtha*, the fundamental goals of human life. There are usually said to be four such goals: *dharma*, which refers to religious and spiritual endeavour; *artha* which encompasses worldly or material activity; *kāma* which takes in the realm of sensual and physical pleasure; and *mokṣa* which pertains to soteriological concerns, including final liberation from *saṃsāra*, the cycle of existence, and/or complete union with the divine. Admittedly, the process of allocating claims made in *phalaśruti* texts to the headings provided by this schema is somewhat arbitrary—Is achieving the ‘supreme goal’ (*paramagati*) strictly *dharma*, *mokṣa*, or both?—but as I hope to demonstrate, the headings are only designed to provide a practical, if not perfect, heuristic framework.

#### *Dharma*

In the Hindu world, an individual’s spiritual ledger may be visualised as having two columns, debit and credit. All of one’s misdeeds or ‘sins’ (*pāpa*) are duly registered in the debit column. These may be offset by meritorious acts (*puṇya*) which are



entered on the credit side of the ledger. All this is in preparation for the day of reckoning when one's account is finally settled, and the closing balance will determine one's future trajectory. The practice of *dharma*, in the sense of appropriate religious activity, may have an impact on either side of the ledger. That is, a dharmic act, such as reciting or listening to a devotional narrative, can reduce one's balance of misdeeds, and it may also contribute positively towards one's store of merit.

One of the key 'carrots' described in *phalaśruti* texts is the capacity of recitation of a devotional narrative to dispel misdeeds. Some texts specifically enumerate the sorts of sins for which redemption is possible. As we saw in the extract above, it is claimed that as many letters as there are in the *Setu-māhātmya* (SM), that same number of instances of brahminicide, drinking alcohol, stealing gold, and sleeping with one's guru's wife are all expunged instantly. These crimes, particularly killing a Brahmin and violating his marital bed, even once, let alone many thousands of times, are among the most serious in the brahminical legal code. Another example of sins which may be expunged is found in the *Kārttikamāsa-māhātmya* (KM): 'Having heard this, even one who takes pleasure in improper sexual activities, or one who sells his own daughter or sister will be liberated immediately'. Other texts offer blanket exemptions from all misdeeds, as in these examples: 'It expunges all sins', 'One who reads this is freed from sin', 'It destroys all misdeeds', 'One who reads or hears this with devotion is freed from all sins', and 'A devout person who listens to this or enables others to hear it is freed from all misdeeds.'<sup>2</sup>

On the other side of the ledger, as we saw in the extract from the SM above, *phalaśruti* texts often promise to increase one's store of merit. The benchmarks for comparison are the great pillars of meritorious orthopraxis in the brahminical thought-world: sacrifice, pilgrimage, donation, and recitation. Reading the SM brings merit equivalent to 'all sacrifices, beginning with the *agniṣṭoma*', plus the great legendary Vedic Horse-sacrifice, plus something even more meritorious, but unknown to me, the so-called 'Cow-sacrifice' (*gomedha*, SM 3.1.52.195). The benefits of hearing the *Puruṣottamakṣetra-māhātmya* (PM) with faith is equal to one thousand Horse-sacrifices, and the KM, like the SM, also offers the reward equal to that of all sacrifices and all donations.<sup>3</sup>

Further, in relation to donation, which in this context usually refers to gifts or the fee (*dakṣiṇā*) payable to Brahmins for conducting sacrifices or other rituals, listening every morning to the PM, for example, is the equal to a gift of one hundred brown cows, while the reward of listening to the DhK is equal to one thousand cows.<sup>4</sup>

As an aside, it is unlikely that the various *māhātmyas* in the SkP were in competition with one another. It seems improbable that a devotee would be drawn to the DhK rather than the PM simply because its rewards are ten times greater. Rather, the individual *phalaśruti* texts are better understood as autonomous units in which similar sets of tropes are deployed with greater or lesser amplification,



according to the inclination of the author. The rewards are best understood qualitatively rather than quantitatively.

The third great source of dharmic merit which emerged somewhat later in the history of Hinduism is pilgrimage. *Phalaśruti* texts often appropriate the merit associated with pilgrimage and promise it to their own readers. Merely owning a copy of the SM causes one's house to become a *tīrtha* and an abode of the gods. Reading or reciting the KM renders the same reward as visiting Badarī (modern Badrināth in the Himalayas). Listening to the PM every morning is equal in merit to being sprinkled with the waters of the two most holy *tīrthas*, Gaṅgā and Puṣkara. Like the SM, the DhK and the KāK also guarantee rewards equal to visiting all the *tīrthas*.<sup>5</sup>

The fourth and final form of meritorious orthopraxis co-opted by the authors of *phalaśruti* texts is Vedic recitation. This practice is a cornerstone of brahminical tradition and is attended with great benefits. The merit of hearing the *Revā-khaṇḍa* (RKh) is said to be eight times that of hearing a recitation of all the Vedas and their supplements, both with and without *sandhi*, while reading, reciting, or listening to the SM just once confers merit equal to reciting the entire Vedic corpus one hundred times.<sup>6</sup>

### Artha

All of the rewards above are related to the first of the four goals of human existence, *dharma*. We turn now to the second of our four broad categories, *artha*, which in the context of the *puruṣārtha* indicates worldly or material success. The SM *phalaśruti* text offers two forms of earthly carrots, those that enhance the positive aspects of mundane existence and those that counteract the negatives. Addressing the positive carrots first, the SM, like the *Kaumārika-khaṇḍa* (KauKh), claims to confer general merit (*puṇya*) and tranquility. One who listens or recites the *Veṅkaṭācala-māhātmya* (VM) will become contented (*kṛtakṛtya*). One who recites the KauKh, VM, or KM attains all riches. Listening to the PM bestows wealth, fame, longevity, is meritorious, and increases one's progeny.<sup>7</sup>

In addition to these sweeping claims of worldly benefits, many of the claims are more specific. Several texts, for example, claim to bestow wealth, sons, wives, vehicles, glory, houses, and a kingdom free from enemies. One who recites the SM, as we saw, will find that his cows and buffaloes will be content. In battle, or when setting out on a journey, the whole *Badarikāśrama-māhātmya* (BM), or a chapter, or half a chapter is to be read with diligence by the wise, as well as at a wedding, a court case, or an auspicious ritual. All these undertakings will then be successful. Of this there should be no doubt, we are told.<sup>8</sup>

In addition to these positive worldly advantages, *phalaśruti* texts promise to dispel a variety of earthly banes. For example, the SM assuages suffering, dispels illness, drives off sorrows, prevents accidental deaths, keeps ghosts and thieves at bay, and counteracts the malign astrological influences. The *phalaśruti* of the BM

reads like the fine print of a household insurance policy: among the eventualities covered are misfortune, disease, poverty, strife, accidental death, snakes, ill-luck, nightmares, evil spirits, and foreign invasions.<sup>9</sup>

### *Kāma*

The third goal of human existence is the fulfilment of sensual and physical desires, or *kāma*. In addition to *dharma*, *artha* and, as we shall see, *mokṣa*, *phalaśruti* texts promise that all our desires will be satisfied. For a start, the *Bhāgavata-māhātmya* (BhM) states that, ‘having enjoyed in this world the choicest pleasures that can be desired by the mind, through recourse to the BhP one may proceed to the supreme state of Glorious Viṣṇu’.<sup>10</sup> Some texts such as the *Ayodhyā-māhātmya* (AM), *Kāśī-khaṇḍa* (KāKh), and the VM offer the blanket satisfaction of all desires,<sup>11</sup> while others such as the BhM and BM are specific and will fulfil desires according to caste, life-stage, and gender:

The BhP provides the light of knowledge for Brahmins, victory over adversaries for kings, riches for *vaiśyas* and good health for *sūdras*. Women and others will obtain all their wishes. Therefore, which fortunate person would not perpetually devote themselves to the BhP?

A king obtains victory, a person who desires a son obtains a son, one who desires a wife obtains a wife; a girl will find a good husband; one who desires wealth will become rich. [The BM] is the sole means of fulfilling all desires. A devout person who listens with faith for a month achieves his desire, no matter how difficult—of this there is no doubt.<sup>12</sup>

### *Mokṣa*

The concept of *mokṣa* or ‘liberation’ has evolved over time. In its earliest manifestation, it suggested unspecified liberation from *saṃsāra*, the endless cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. Later, it came to suggest ascent to a generalised Heaven (*svarga*) or to one of the specific divine realms of the Vedic or purāṇic deities, Indra, Brahmā, Viṣṇu, or Śiva. Later still, under the influence of *bhakti* (devotional) traditions, it came to mean final union with the Absolute or divine. *Mokṣa* in its varying forms has remained the highest goal of most if not all Indic spiritual traditions.

BhM found in the SkP, not to be confused with a similar text with the same name in the *Padmapurāṇa*, eulogises the great Vaiṣṇava master-text, the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*. The BhM provides us with an elegant segue from desires to liberation: ‘Yes, of course reciting or listening to the BhP will yield all worldly desires, but as it also leads one who desires it to the state of Kṛṣṇa, which is a much

more worthy goal, it is ridiculous [*viḍambanam*] to merely seek those mundane rewards'.<sup>13</sup> *Phalaśruti* texts promise *mokṣa* in all three flavours: a non-specific liberation, ascent to Heaven or one of the heavens, and union with the Divine. The KM, for example, simply bestows salvation. Merely possessing a manuscript of the *Vaiśākhamaśa-māhātmya* (*VaiśM*) in one's house leads to liberation. In the Kaliyuga, our present age of degeneration, people without ability, wealth, or knowledge may rely on the BhP for liberation. Especially in this age, there is no better path to liberation than listening to the KM. Those who devote themselves to the glorious treatise of the BhP completely save the lineages of their fathers, mothers, and wives. All those born into the family of one who hears or recites the VM proceed to liberation. And those who read or listen with faith to the AM or to the *VaiśM* attain the highest goal.<sup>14</sup>

A text might simply lead to an unspecified Heaven, or alternatively, it might lead to a specific heaven, such as the abode of Hari or Viṣṇuloka, or as the KauKh promises, a pure and restrained person who listens to the text, having transcended the sun, always proceeds to the state of Viṣṇu. Promises are also made in relation to Śiva's abode, Rudraloka, in the KauKh. Those who enable others to hear the KM reside in the realm of Brahmā for one hundred crore ages.<sup>15</sup>

At a more abstract level, texts guarantee *mokṣa* in the form of union with a deity. As we saw in the text above, various repetitions of the SM will be rewarded with union with all four deities in ascending order of prestige, namely Indra, Brahmā, Viṣṇu, and Śiva. The KauKh states that one who listens to or narrates the *māhātmya* is capable of becoming Brahman, the ineffable Absolute. A devout person who listens to the BM or enables others to do so attains the state of Viṣṇu.<sup>16</sup>

### *Some sticks*

As a counterpoint to all these heavenly carrots, there are some earthly sticks. These are less numerous, but some are very sharp indeed. They consist of threats of dire consequences which are said to result from various undesirable actions. For example, having obtained a human rebirth in India (*Bhārata*), those wicked persons who do not listen to the BhP are committing an act of self-destruction. If a man leaves in the middle of a recitation of the KM, he will lose his wife and wealth in the middle of enjoying them. A person seated on a high seat during a purāṇic recitation and who fails to bow down, will be reborn as a poisonous tree. A member of the audience who falls asleep will be reborn as a python in a forest. Those who interrupt a recitation, on being released from hell after ten million years, will be reborn as village pigs.<sup>17</sup>

The sharpest collection of sticks is found in the *phalaśruti* of the *Brahmottara-khaṇḍa* (BKh), most of which are intended to ensure that audiences remain duly attentive and respectful during the exposition. In addition to the sticks relating to pigs and pythons mentioned above, the BKh threatens misery for those who listen without devotion, and poverty for anyone who does not

honour the texts with betel leaves, etc. Those who listen while chewing betel will be forced to swallow their own faeces by the servants of Yama in hell. Those who listen while wearing a turban will be reborn as cranes, and those who sit on inappropriately high seats will return as crows. People who crouch or squat will be reborn as stunted trees. Those who chatter will be born first as donkeys and then as lizards. Anyone who criticises the exponent or the narrative will be reborn as a dog for the next one hundred lifetimes.<sup>18</sup>

### The sacrificial fee

In addition to the potential rewards for those who listen to a purāṇic recital and punishments for those who do not, *phalaśruti* texts often describe in detail how recitals of the *māhātmyas* are to be staged and how the exponent is to be recompensed. In addition, they enumerate additional rewards, which are in store for the devotee who compensates his exponent generously—these constitute in effect a further bunch of carrots. This short extract from the *phalaśruti* of the *Dvārakā-māhātmya* (DM) illustrates a number of key points in this regard:

Having heard this *purāṇa*, one who worships the exponent actually worships Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Rudra. . . . For this reason, the exponent who gives instruction in the *śāstras* is to be honoured with cattle, lands, gold, garments and other objects of enjoyment which satisfy all desires. Having heard this unexcelled *śāstra*, a person filled with devotion who worships the exponent in this way will achieve the state of Śiva.<sup>19</sup>

This neatly encapsulates three key terms on the exponent's side of the equation: (i) the exponent as the embodiment of the divine; (ii) the nature of the payment; and (iii) the rewards to the donor of paying suitable compensation. Let us examine each of these more closely.

#### *The exponent as divine*

Just as the DM declares that the exponent is the equivalent of Brahmā, Viṣṇu, and Śiva, a similar claim is made in the SM: 'When the exponent is worshipped, the trinity is worshipped; the three worlds are worshipped when the trinity is worshipped'. The *phalaśruti* of the KM also states that the exponent of that text is the equal of Viṣṇu. The PM adds that the exponent is also the equivalent of Vyāsa, the legendary sage who 'arranged' the Vedas, the *Mahābhārata*, and the *purāṇas*. It continues:

For hearing a recitation, one should invite with very fine ornaments, garments, sandalwood, garlands and so on, a brahmin born into a pure family, whose limbs are not deformed, who is calm and of the same Vedic branch as oneself,

who is one's own domestic priest, and who knows the true meaning of all the *śāstras*. With joined palms, one should request the twice-born one saying, 'You are Viṣṇu, and Viṣṇu is indeed you. There is no distinction at all. May I be freed from obstructions by your grace. Be merciful.' Then, having caused the invited brahmin to be seated on a costly and beautiful seat, one should place a garland around his neck. On his head there should be the calyx of a flower (*puṣpagarbha*) and he should be anointed with sandal paste. Because at this time the brahmin is thought to be the equivalent of Vyāsa, one should cause the Vyāsapūjā to be carried out by that very brahmin for the text which is Viṣṇu in material form, with sandal paste, aloe and flowers. Every day, the ritual of offering a seat and so on should be carried out devoutly with various offerings, delicious foods and so on.<sup>20</sup>

Having established the divinity of the exponent, or at least his equivalence to the divine-sage Vyāsa, it is necessary that he should be honoured and worshipped in a fitting manner, that is, with the payment of *dakṣiṇā* or the sacrificial fee.

#### *The nature of the dakṣiṇā*

We saw in the above extract that the exponent of the PM was to be invited with 'very fine ornaments, garments, sandalwood, garlands and so on.' These are typical of the gifts specified for the sponsor to bestow on the exponent either before or after a recitation. In the case of the KM, at the end of a month-long recitation, the sponsor is instructed to honour the exponent with fragrances, garlands, garments, ornaments, and money. The instructions of the SM state that payment in the form of gold or its equivalent should be given to the exponent in accordance with the sponsor's capacity. This exponent is also to be honoured with clothing, gold, grain, land, and cows. The BhM stipulates clothes, ornaments, and a cow; the AM calls for gold and so on according to capacity; and the KM mentions cows, land, gold, and garments.<sup>21</sup> This wonderful set of instruction for rewarding the exponent of the PM is worth quoting in full:

Then, at the conclusion of the [recital of the] book, intent on gratifying Viṣṇu, one should, with greatest faith, garb the brahmin who is the equivalent of Vyāsa in special garments, garlands and so on, and in sandal and ornaments, O brahmins. And one should give according to one's capacity the sacrificial fee in accordance with tradition. Hear from me now the gifts that the various classes of people should give: kings should give decorated elephants with auspicious marks. *Kṣatriyas* should do likewise for they are considered to be the equal of kings. Brahmins should give texts and wicker-work cases for [holding items used in the] worship of Viṣṇu, gold, silver, grain and garments [as an expression] of their own faith. *Vaiśyas* should give horses from the land of Sindh, richly caparisoned with jewels and ornaments, as well as dairy cows marked with auspicious signs, accompanied by their calves. Intent on

dharma, they may also give other things such as gold, etc. *Śūdras*, their minds filled with greatest joy, should give garments, gold, grain, jewels and cows covered with varied ornaments, having full udders or being in calf. Thus one should give the sacrificial fee in accordance with one's capacity such that the guru will be pleased, O brahmins. One should not be the cause of stinginess. *Śāntika*, *Pauṣṭika*, *Vrata*, marriage and other rituals, and rituals for the accomplishment of liberation, listening to a *purāṇa*, sacrificial rites, donations and taking of vows of various kinds—if any of these are carried out without the payment of a sacrificial fee, then they will be fruitless. Evil spirits steal the fruits of such ritual action. Like the beauty of a woman who lacks a husband's love, like archers who turn tail and flee from battle, like halt horses which are considered to have a fault, O brahmins, like the scholarship of those who have studied all the *śāstras* but are unable to speak, each of these rituals is similarly fruitless without a sacrificial fee. Because the multitude of misdeeds is assuaged by an act of giving, it is sung of as 'dakṣiṇā' by those who know the *śāstras*, O brahmins.<sup>22</sup> Then one should feed the brahmins with food prepared in accordance with one's own capacity: camphor, candy, ghee, rice puddings, six kinds of delicious nectarine foods, drinks and so on.

And just in case the message is not clear, there is one final reprise: 'One should cause gold, garments, etc., to be given to them.'<sup>23</sup>

#### *Rewards of paying recompense*

Having declared that the exponent is divine and having enumerated the appropriate compensation for him, many *phalaśruti* texts promise great rewards for sponsors who pay up. One who gives the exponent of the AM wealth according to his capacity, vessels, garments pleasing to the mind, silver, gold, and cows is liberated. Those who give the exponent of the KM a rug, a deer-skin, cloth, a platform, or a bench for sitting on, or undergarments, clothes, ornaments, and so on, will reside in the abode of Brahmā. If the exponent of the KM is gratified, then all the deities are gratified. The sponsor will then receive the full reward of his merit without doubt. There are numerous other examples of similar promises attendant upon the giving of *dakṣiṇā*.<sup>24</sup>

#### **The giving of texts**

In addition to the standard gifts for the exponent, and one that is frequently mentioned in the *phalaśruti*, is the transcription and donation of copies of the root text in question. It is often said that the Indian climate is unkind to manuscripts. High humidity and a rich invertebrate fauna conspired against pre-modern texts, which were usually inscribed on palm leaves, and which had to be recopied every generation or so. For vast encyclopedic texts like the epics or *purāṇas*, this was a very significant undertaking. Not only would costly writing materials be

required, teams of scribes had to be housed, fed, and clothed for weeks or possibly months while the process of transcription was undertaken. This was of key importance, for without copies of the text on which they are based, many traditions of practice could not perpetuate themselves. For this reason, complex sets of carrots were put in place to induce sponsors to copy manuscripts and donate them to exponents. For example, the paradigmatic *phalaśruti* from the SM states that:

A person who transcribes with devotion a copy of this excellent *Setu-māhātmya* will be freed from all ignorance and will achieve unity with Śiva . . . . Having transcribed a copy of the *Setu-māhātmya*, one should present it to a brahmin: such a person gives the whole world bounded by the four oceans.

The KM lists ‘*dharmaśāstras*, *purāṇas*, or books of vedic knowledge, etc’ as suitable gifts for an exponent and encourages sponsors with the thought that ‘donors of [books of] purāṇic knowledge enjoy endless rewards.’<sup>25</sup> Further:

Having a copy made of this beautiful book [the KāKh] and making an offering of it is the same as a donation of all the *purāṇas*. The donor will be honoured in heaven for as many thousands of *yugas* as there are stories, verses, words, syllables, metrical measures, lines of text, filaments of thread, threads in the fabric, and as many pictures as there are in this handsome volume.<sup>26</sup>

## Discussion

In the texts we have seen, the *phalaśruti* paratexts promise great rewards for the faithful, punishments for those who stray, and while the Brahmins prescribe hearty pay-checks for themselves, they encourage the copying of the expensive texts needed to perpetuate the traditions.

These carrots and sticks endow the *māhātmyas* with authority and gravitas. They induce an audience to sit up, pay attention and take notice. They enable the narratives to function as ‘true’ discourse in the Foucauldian sense. That is to say, the *phalaśruti* valorises the discourse and effectively demands that a member of the targeted epistemic community will imbibe the discourses, maintain the practices, and endow the exponent in such a way that the tradition will be perpetuated. The acts of reciting, hearing, or sponsoring a recitation enable a devotee to increase his accumulation of religious capital in the community. Yet, the faithful are not the only ones to benefit from these purāṇic performances. As the extract from the SM makes clear, the exponents also stand to reap substantial financial rewards. This is the other side of the equation of the purāṇic economy. Devotees acquire religious capital in exchange for the worldly wealth and material benefits which they bestow on the exponent. The exponent may set the terms of trade, but both parties benefit.



How much credence can we place on this system of carrots and sticks? Did people really believe such claims? Did these textual strategies result in the various *māhātmyas* being accepted as ‘true’ discourse as I suggest? These are difficult questions. Field-work in India might throw some light on contemporary practice.<sup>27</sup> In lieu of any published data, there are three relevant pieces of supportive evidence. The first is the fact that these texts have survived into modern times. At least once every generation or so from the likely date of their composition many centuries ago, someone, somewhere, deemed them sufficiently valuable to invest considerable resources in causing them to be transcribed. Their very survival suggests that the *phalaśruti* may have been effective.

The second piece of evidence comes from a parallel tradition, that is, the contemporary oral performance centred not on the SkP, but on the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*. This practice, which is supported by a lively contemporary tradition, gives us an opportunity to study the effectiveness of *phalaśruti* in practice. Week-long oral performances of the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* have been the subject of several recent papers (Taylor 2010, 2011, 2012; forthcoming). For example, one such seven-day event or *saptāh* was held in November 2009 at the hamlet of Naluna, 14 km north-east of Uttarkashi, Uttarakhand, Northern India. The exponent spent the first three-hour session exclusively on the *phalaśruti* of the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*. The gist of his narrative was that listening to the forthcoming discourse would make participants’ lives fortunate (*dhanya*) (Taylor 2010, pp. 44–45). There was certainly every indication that the attendees were taking the discourse, the *phalaśruti*, the exponent and his promises seriously.

Also of interest in this context is the role of the *phalaśruti* and the payment of fees to the exponent. In accordance with the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*’s own instructions, the exponent at the event at Naluna was presented with a set of clothes, a white calf decorated with garlands and ribbons, a gold ring, and cash. The chief sponsor had also been instructed to present the exponent with a copy of the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*, but gave him an additional 500 rupees in lieu. The traditional concepts of *dakṣiṇā* as spelled out in the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*’s *phalaśruti* text are still very much alive in contemporary practice.

The third piece of evidence, again interpolating from contemporary experience to pre-modern times, suggests ways in which the *phalaśruti* may have been received. In a personal communication dated 2 June 2011, Pandit Dr Ananth Rao, an expert practitioner of *kathākālākṣepa* recitation, informed me: ‘One is traditionally admonished that going away for example, after the main chant or story without hearing the *phalaśruti* practically negates the exercise of listening to the main text’.

An intangible function of *phalaśruti* texts is the effect they exert on the sponsor, or in the course or a private reading, on the readers themselves. Some of these *māhātmyas* are read in specific social circumstances, or in response to particular needs. For example, the VM, having a successful marriage as one of its central themes, is read or caused to be read by families who are experiencing difficulty in

finding a suitable husband for a daughter. In these situations, the *phalaśruti* texts are an important part of the psychotherapeutic function of the ritual act of reading, as they reassure that sponsor/reader that what they have done is effective and worthwhile.

The ardent tone of the *phalaśruti* texts of the mainly lesser, regional traditions contained in the SkP makes an interesting comparison to the relatively sober and circumscribed carrots and the conspicuous lack of sticks in major texts such as the *Mahābhārata* and Vālmiki's *Rāmāyaṇa*. This supports my contention that the carrots and sticks are part of a purāṇic economy necessary to perpetuate these particular traditions and discourses. The major texts experience no such insecurity, and enjoy fast adherence all over India. Unlike the lesser *sthala-* and *jātipurāṇas* of the kind discussed here, their future is secure and they do not require such elaborate sets of inducements to ensure their survival. One could argue, for example, the smaller the tradition, the more vulnerable and uncertain its future, the more florid and extravagant are the claims made for it.

## Conclusion

The ultimate function of the *māhātmyas* in the SkP is to ensure the perpetuation of particular sets of practices and beliefs. The *phalaśruti* paratexts generally exhibit four 'moves' or themes, which relate to inducements ('carrots'), threats ('sticks'), the payment of fees, and the copying and presentation of texts. It is my contention that the cumulative effect of these textual strategies on the *māhātmya*'s intended audience—most often groups of pilgrims visiting the sacred sites in question—is to make the discourse appear weighty, authoritative, and ultimately 'true'. First, the carrots, which can be explored in terms of the four *puruṣārtha-dharma, artha, kāma, and mokṣa*—offer the faithful the chance to augment their religious capital. Second, the sticks function to reinforce certain normative behaviours *vis-à-vis* the text and the exposition. Third, the payment of fees provides the livelihood for the Brahmin families of professional exponents, as is still the case in India today. These are the same communities who compiled these texts in the first place, who stand to benefit materially, and who presumably shared an interest with the faithful in wishing to perpetuate the traditions and practices in question. Fourth, the gifts of expensive manuscripts, as exhorted in the *phalaśruti*, give Brahmin exponents the physical means by which to continue the relevant tradition. To encourage faithful sponsors to cooperate further, the payment of these fees and the donation of fresh copies of the text were said to confer great rewards in this life and in the next. Evidence derived from the contemporary practice of cognate traditions provides some support for these contentions.

These elements—carrots, sticks, fees, and gifts of texts—all function together in a self-perpetuating purāṇic economy. Listening to the recitation of quasi-canonical *māhātmya* texts confers religious capital on sponsors. Canonicity lends gravitas and authority to the carrots and sticks, which in turn prompt the payments of fees.

Fees provide the livelihood for exponents and their families who recite the texts. The gift of fresh manuscripts mean that the texts remain in circulation. The circular functioning of this economy apparently enabled the perpetuation of these texts and practices for many centuries, and in some cases up to the present day. This is facilitated by the *phalaśruti* paratexts, which as Gennette remarks, ‘ensure the text’s presence in the world, its “reception” and its consumption . . .’.

Yet, what if the devotee’s concrete experiences contradict the promises made in the *phalaśruti*? What if the carrots and sticks prove elusive and there are no sons, no cows producing calves and milk? What if one’s buffaloes are not content after all? Religious capital unlike its mundane counterpart remains intangible and ultimately unquantifiable. The *phalaśruti* lack performance criteria by which they may be measured. In the final analysis, we must accept that people ‘want’ to believe, and irrespective of the outcomes, the *phalaśruti* paratexts may provide them with a framework for doing so.<sup>28</sup>

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## Notes

- 1 RM 3.1.52.189–219.
- 2 KM 2.4.36.41, PM 2.2.48.28, VM 2.1.40.26, KM 2.4.36.40–44, BM 2.3.8.51–58, KauKh 1.2.63.126–128.
- 3 PM 2.2.48.25, KM 2.4.36.37.
- 4 PM 2.2.48.27, DhK 3.2.40.75.
- 5 KM 2.4.36.39, PM 2.2.48.27, DhK 3.2.40.71, KāKh 4.2.100.107.
- 6 RKh 5.3.232.25.
- 7 KauKh 1.2.63.135, VM 2.1.40.27, KauKh 1.2.63.128, KauKh 1.2.63.135, KM 2.4.36.50, PM 2.2.48.28.
- 8 BhM 2.6.4.35, KM 2.4.36.50, AM 2.7.10.85, BM 2.3.8.51–58
- 9 BM 2.3.8.51–58.
- 10 BhM 2.6.4.36.
- 11 AM 2.7.10.86, KāKh 4.2.100.130–131, VM 7.2.19.40.
- 12 BhM 2.6.3.16–17, BM 2.3.8.51–58.
- 13 BhM 2.6.4.47.
- 14 KM 2.4.36.50, BhM 2.6.4.33–34, KM 2.4.36.38, VaiśM 2.7.25.68–69, BhM 2.6.3.15, VM 2.1.40.28, AM 2.7.10.83, VaiśM 2.7.25.67–68.

- 15 KauKh 1.2.63.135, PM 2.2.48.28, AM 2.7.10.86, VM 2.1.40.2, KauKh 1.2.63.135, KM 2.4.36.44, KauKh 1.2.63.127-134, KM 2.4.36.33.
- 16 KauKh 1.2.63.129, BM 2.3.8.51-58.
- 17 KM 2.4.36.31, BhM 2.6.3.14, KM 2.4.36.30, KM 2.4.36.32.
- 18 BKh 3.3.30-40.
- 19 DM 7.4.44.16-20.
- 20 SM 3.1.52.230, KM 2.4.36.42, PM 2.2.49.9-16.
- 21 KM 2.4.36.28, SM 3.1.52.228-229, BhM 2.6.4.46, AM 2.7.10.85, KM 2.4.36.42.
- 22  $\sqrt{dakṣ}$ , MMW: 'to act to the satisfaction of'.
- 23 PM 2.2.49.26-41.
- 24 AM 2.7.10.87, KM 2.4.36.34-35, KM 2.4.36.36.
- 25 KM 2.4.36.43, see also SkP 7.1.2.29-77
- 26 KāKh 4.2.100.24-28
- 27 Possible leads for further investigation are suggested by the following: Jürgen Neuß (email 12 July 2011) kindly informs me that although he has not yet witnessed the *Revākhaṇḍa* being recited, he knows that a copy is held by a number of *sādhus* or priests running temples along the pilgrims' path and he supposes that recitations are done. The rite of the *Narmadāparikrama* is very popular in the Narmadā valley and is undertaken by many pilgrims every year. T. Ganesan (email 12 July 2011) informs me that he believes that the *Kāśikhaṇḍa* is recited (at least in the month of Kārttika in Varanasi. He had heard a long time previously that the *Venkaṭācala-māhātmya* was recited or expounded during *Navarātri* celebrations in some parts of Karnataka, especially by Vaiṣṇavas. The *Kārttika-māhātmya* is regularly recited during that month in Varanasi and he heard it being recited (interspersed with Hindi explanations) some years ago in a Śiva temple in Amritsar.
- 28 I am grateful to Barbara Nelson for these insights.