

## Review

*The Bhāgavata Purāṇa: Sacred Text and living Tradition*, eds. Ravi Gupta and Kenneth Valpey. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013. xiii +279. ISBN 978-0-321-14998-3 (hb), 0978-0-231-14999-0 (pbk).

**Reviewed by:** Edwin Bryant, Rutgers University, USA.  
edbryant@rci.rutgers.edu

**Keywords:** Indian literature; Puranas; religious studies.

Gupta and Valpey have put together a very welcome edited volume that brings together scholarship on a text that has not yet received the level of academic attention it merits, given its centrality in popular devotional Hinduism. It is a curious reflection on the agendas and motives of the scholarship on Hinduism, whether Orientalist, Indological, neo-Vedāntic, and so on, that, with very few exceptions, there has been and remains such a paucity of serious scholarship on the *Purāṇas* as a genre. The most immediately encountered aspects of Hinduism, featuring the forms, qualities, characteristics, and deeds, etc., of Kṛṣṇa, Viṣṇu, Śiva, the Goddess and other Divine *Īśvara* manifestations, depicted ubiquitously in the literature and the numerous classical art forms of ancient India—in short, the narratives underpinning *bhakti*—are almost entirely extracted from the *Purāṇas* (and two Epics). These texts are also a vast repository of stories about kings and royal dynasties; creation accounts; traditional cosmologies; reworking of ancient Epic and Vedic narratives; *yogic* practices; popular religious beliefs concerning pilgrimages, holy places and religious rites; information of social and cultural relevance such as caste duties; and even prophetic statements about the future. Almost everything that has come to be associated with 'Hinduism' has its roots in the *Purāṇas*, the largest body of writing in Sanskrit.

The genesis of such neglect is clear and well known. Deemed mythological compositions for the uneducated masses cognate to a long discarded Western past by an earlier generation of Indologists, they were regarded as the pre-rational expressions of Indian civilization, and thus not worthy of serious academic attention. Western scholars in the colonial period had their own agendas in terms of the texts to which they primarily devoted their attention—the Vedas, due to its indispensability in determining the linguistic and cultural origins of European civilization; the *dharma* law texts, such that the Indians could be ruled by their own precepts; the *Upaniṣads* and some of

the main philosophical schools, in terms of their similarity or not to Greek or Christian thought; and, to a lesser extent, the two Epics, cognate to and functional equivalents of their Greek parallels. For colonial scholarship, the *Purāṇas* had nothing to offer but silly superstition and absurd depictions of Divinity. From their side, the neo-Vedāntins had their own set of motives and agendas underpinning their construction of, typically, some neo-*advaita* expression of an imagined pristine Hinduism that could not only hold its own but trump western forms of religiosity. And, here too, the *Purāṇas* were dismissed as later accretions superimposed on the Vedāntic *philosophia perennis*, and hastily jettisoned.

The *Bhāgavata* was particularly censured by earlier scholarship because the Victorian sensibilities of certain nineteenth-century western Orientalists - and, just as importantly, early Hindu spokespersons and apologists influenced by western moral discourses—were offended by the amorous liaisons of Kṛṣṇa in the *Bhāgavata*, ignorant of their theological significances. Consequently, the Kṛṣṇa of the *Bhāgavata* was jettisoned in most intellectual circles in favor of the more righteous Kṛṣṇa of the *Bhagavad Gītā*—a text that has seen hundreds of non-Indian translations—and still remains relatively unknown in the West. What is surprising is that this neglect has surpassed its shelf life for so long and remains, unacceptably, a feature of Western scholarship on Hinduism to this day.

The Gupta and Valpey volume is thus a welcome contribution to redressing this lacuna in Indological scholarship. Culminating in its tenth book featuring the incarnation of Kṛṣṇa, the *Bhāgavata* is the most famous work of *Purāṇa* literature. Indeed, along with the *Rāmāyaṇa*, it is arguably one of the most influential texts in Hinduism, evidenced by the enormous amount of artistic and cultural traditions that its narratives have inspired over the last millennium. These include derivative literature, poetry, drama, dance, iconography, art, temple sculpture, and a vast array of theological treatises, over and above the eighty-one commentaries on the primary text currently available in Sanskrit alone as well as others no longer extant (where most of the *Purāṇas* have produced no traditional commentaries at all, and others only one or, at most, two).

As the first multi-faceted monograph dedicated to the text's many attributes and influences, the various papers in this volume make an excellent start at redressing some of this neglect and capturing some of the text's multiple dimensionalities. Here we are afforded a glimpse at the literary sophistication and intellectual richness of this text, and a sense of how the text has influenced the religious and aesthetic culture of the subcontinent over the last millennia. Overall, the volume is well organized, and divided into two parts: 'the World of the *Bhāgavata*' and 'the *Bhāgavata* in the World' namely, the text's own horizons of meaning, and the way it has effected meaning and signification in the greater world of Hinduism. Topics include the text's view of Time, cosmology, natural theology, sacred geography, ethics, theology,

commentary and heresy, as well as analyses on how it has influenced dance, song, and recitation performance, with a final chapter on its modern reception and placement. It is designed to compliment an accompanying future volume on select translations of the text, thus affording students an opportunity to engage the primary source text along with secondary analyses on some of its many aspects and legacies.

The authors are to be commended for not overloading the volume with material related to arguably the most influential Krishna teacher since the 16th century, Caitanya, given that both editors themselves specialize in and have published extensively on Caitanya's tradition. One senses that the editors strove sincerely to maintain an overall balance in representation (a fairly impossible task to accomplish in edited volumes such as this, given the restrictions of volume size and the unpredictability of the final products submitted by contributors). The material in the volume is mostly original, and even as a number of the authors have published elsewhere on the subject of their contributions, theirs are important ingredients to re-tailor for such a monograph. And for the most part, the volume offers much new material, some, excitingly, from brand new scholars flush with their recent research.

Perhaps the most egregious oversight that might be mentioned is the rather skimpy contextualization of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* in the context of Sanskrit literature and intellectual history—its relationship to the Vedas, *Upaniṣads*, and the other *Purāṇas*. But this is a minor detail, and it is to the editors' credit that they have put together a fine and long-overdue volume on this important text. Naturally there are and will always be a plethora of other topics that could have been covered on a scripture so central to Hinduism, but an edited volume can only attempt so much, and it would not be fair on the hard work of the editors' to point out this or that important area worthy of inclusion on a text that could and should consume dozens of edited volumes reflecting its myriad facets and legacies. There is much to be gleaned from these pages for both specialist and general reader and the authors have hopefully opened the door for many future editions that will follow this exemplary trail-breaking study.