

## Review

*The Bhāgavata Purāṇa: Selected Readings*, by Ravi M. Gupta and Kenneth R. Valpey. New York: Columbia University Press, 2016. xx + 303 pp., \$105/£81 (hb), \$35/£27 (pb), \$34.99/£27 (ebook). ISBN 978-0-23116-900-4 (hb), 978-0-23116-901-1 (pb), 978-0-23154-234-0 (ebook).

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The *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* is the most popular book of the *Purāṇa* genre of literature. With the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Bhagavad-Gītā*, it is certainly the most influential Hindu scripture, with a diverse reception history consisting of countless commentaries, translations, and summaries, oral retellings and performances, and a rich tradition of artistic representation. It is also very much a classic and a fine literature of exceptional aesthetic qualities. Since 1966 and through the Hare Krishna movement, it has become part of the cultural imaginary of the west as well. The *Bhāgavata* is a massive work, with over 14,000 verses, and the book under review, *The Bhāgavata Purāṇa: Selected Readings*, by Ravi M. Gupta and Kenneth R. Valpey, is an anthology of select *Bhāgavata* passages in translation that attempts to provide a rounded introduction to the classic.

The bulk of the book consists of 12 chapters that follow the 12 books of the *Bhāgavata*. In these 12 chapters, the authors combine translation of select passages, roughly ten percent of the whole text, with summaries of the portions in between. The purpose of such combining is to provide for the reader a relatively complete experience of the *Bhāgavata* in a volume that is limited in size. Two principles determine the selection of texts for direct translation. The first is, again, that of complete experience: ‘In selecting passages to translate, we have attempted to offer a representative sampling of the many kinds of narratives, philosophical ideas, and literary styles found in the *Purāṇa*’ (p. 24). The second is reception history; that is, in deciding what to select for direct translation, the authors were mindful of the attention that individual passages have received in the commentarial tradition on the *Bhāgavata*.

The translation is beautiful and smooth, and the notes attempt to integrate individual verses and passages with other textual loci in the *Bhāgavata*,

its wider context such as the *Mahābhārata*, the commentarial tradition, and existing scholarship. Each chapter, finally, concludes with a list of suggested readings for further study, the scope of which varies from three to eight entries, that address topics prominent in the respective chapter. Many of these readings are drawn from *The Bhāgavata Purāna: Sacred Text and Living Tradition*, a volume edited by Gupta and Valpey which, though published in 2013 and conceived earlier, is a companion to the present volume.

The Introduction of the book is quite informative, as an introduction must be, presenting the basic coordinates about the *Bhāgavata*, its rich commentarial tradition, and the wider reception history. Two of its sections, however, do more than a mere introduction, and are often illuminating even for the seasoned student. In ‘The *Bhāgavata*’s Complex Structure’, Gupta and Valpey (1) reflect on the dialogue edifice of the *Bhāgavata* that uses several nested layers—dialogues within dialogues within dialogues—and claim that the point of such strategy is to present the message as having no temporal origin, which comes to mean that the *Bhāgavata* intentionally presents itself as *apauruṣeya-śruti* or non-personal composition that is, in effect, equal *in kind* to the Veda; (2) identify a circular narrative pattern that draws a sort of *maṇḍala* out of the *Bhāgavata* and, thus, facilitates progressive focus on book ten, particularly on Kṛṣṇa’s dance with the *gopīs* that itself is a circle formation, a *maṇḍala*; and (3) discover a thematic structure that attempts to be simultaneously circular and linear, becoming, in effect, ‘spiral’, a formation in which ‘themes that are introduced briefly in the *Bhāgavata*’s early chapters are revisited later, with increased degrees of dilation’ (p. 8).

‘The *Bhāgavata*’s Major Themes’ section revolves around the role of *bhakti* or devotion to Kṛṣṇa in the text. By examining topics such as the retelling of famous myths from the Vedas and the epics—a retelling which always comes with a characteristic twist—and by focusing on striking cases of disturbance and subsequent restoring of the social order, such as the *rasa* dance and the story of the wives of the *brāhmaṇas* who bring food for Kṛṣṇa, the authors show that what the *Bhāgavata* is *doing* as its underlying speech act is, in fact, promoting *bhakti* as the highest good and the sole firm ground, a power that turns the world of *dharma* and the Veda upside down, before restoring it with itself as its fundament.

Led by concerns of reception history and complete experience which is not limited to the text of the *Bhāgavata* but includes all that the book embodies, stands for, and becomes, Gupta and Valpey offer a final, thirteenth chapter, which provides four ‘guided tours’ (p. 24) into the rich commentarial tradition. In the first, the Vedāntic nature of the *Bhāgavata* comes to the fore. It is well known that the *Bhāgavata* expressly relates itself to the tradition of Vedānta: it claims to be the essence of all Upaniṣads (*sarva-vedānta-sāraṁ hi śrī-bhāgavatam iśyate*, 2.13.15), and it opens just like the *Brahma-Sūtra*: *janmādy asya yataḥ*, ‘[The supreme truth is that] from whom proceed creation etc. of this world’. The first tour into the commentarial tradition, then, focuses on

Śrīdhara Svāmī's exegesis on this first verse, to provide a foretaste of the rich Vedāntic flavour of the *Bhāgavata*.

The second tour explores the themes of curse, fall from grace, and the relative value of knowledge and devotion in the famous story of the brawl between the four Kumāras and Jaya and Vijaya the gatekeepers of Vaiṣṇuṭha, now in a much wider commentarial setting. In the third tour, we read about the salvific power of the divine names relative to the question about the source and nature of *dharma*, in the story of Ajāmila that extends through the first three chapters of *Bhāgavata*'s book six. We learn here how immersed the *Bhāgavata* commentarial tradition was in Mīmāṃsā or scriptural theology and its non-sectarian canons of interpretation. The final tour deals with the aesthetics of separation (*viraha*) in the 'song to the bee' (*bhramara-gītā*) in chapter 47 of book ten.

The only 'problem' with the book, if one may, now, release the philologist out of the cage, is the occasionally inconsistent representation of book titles, compounds, and the like (cf. *Brhad-vaiṣṇava Toṣaṇī* versus *Vaiṣṇava-nandini* on p. 6; or *yathādhitaṁ yathā matiḥ* on p. 18, both of which are *avyayī-bhāvas*, such that the second must be *yathā-mati*). Set against its value, however, such inconsistencies are insignificant. Gupta and Valpey have produced a most captivating (and, it bears mentioning, edifying) book. They combine meticulous scholarship and insight with deep appreciation for and commitment to the *Bhāgavata*, as well as talent of good novelists, that makes the reading a wonderful and easy introduction to the classic, as well as an illuminating book for specialists.