

PRAISE FOR

Bhakti Yoga

"Much appreciated for his erudite and comprehensive edition of *The Yoga Sūtras* of Patañjali, Edwin F. Bryant has once again done a great service to a wide community of readers, this time by putting into a single volume so much of the history and theology of *bhakti*, judiciously ordered and clearly explained. His discerning selection of texts from the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* is a welcome addition to the scholarship, making that great text ever more accessible today. Particularly welcome, too, is the inclusion of the *Nārada Bhakti Sūtras* and especially Śrī Caitanya's *Śikṣāṣṭakam*, a rare treasure that has long merited closer attention. Teachers and students, scholars and practitioners of religion alike, will be sure to keep this volume on hand in their research and for the sake of practice."

—Francis X. Clooney, S.J., director of the Center for the Study of World Religions, Harvard University



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EDWIN F. BRYANT

Bhakti Yoga

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Bhakti Yoga





Bhakti Yoga

Tales and Teachings from
the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*



EDWIN F. BRYANT

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Śrī Śrī Kṛṣṇa-Balarāmābhyāṃ namaḥ

In honor and dear remembrance of my father, George Bryant, MBE, for exemplifying *dharma* long before I encountered the concept in Sanskrit texts. I spent much time in his company as I worked on this text. May he partake of any merit accruing from this work.

To my daughter, Mohinī, in case one day she ever wonders what this piece of her upbringing was really all about.

To my sister, Pia, for all her love and support, that she may gain a clearer understanding of *bhakti yoga*. To Hannah Jackson, in case she ever becomes interested. And to all seekers interested in knowing more about the spirituality associated with the mischievous, lotus-eyed blue boy.

To my teachers and to all the *bhāgavatas* who have recorded, preserved, transmitted, and taught the wonderful *līlās* of *Bhagavān* across the ages. May they accept this little attempt to follow in their footsteps and smile with kindness and good humor at all its imperfections.

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Introduction to the Volume

Statement of Purpose: Sources and Scope of the Volume

There are as many variegated expressions of *bhakti yoga* in India as there are sects, languages, communities, lineages, castes, regions, villages, and, indeed, human hearts wherein it ultimately resides. This book is focused on one expression of *bhakti*: *Vaiṣṇava bhakti* centered on Śrī Kṛṣṇa as emerges in a sixteenth-century tradition. In this section, we discuss our vision and method for the volume and provide some rationale and contextual background for the texts on *bhakti* that we have chosen to feature. Our discussion in this introductory section may be mildly academic, but we have made every effort in the remainder of the volume to avoid scholarly language and specialized jargon in preference for straightforward prose and concepts accessible for the educated but nonspecialized reader. In this work, we attempt to navigate that unattainable line between producing something that is academically respectable, accessible to the interested nonspecialist, and useful to the intellectually responsible *yoga* practitioner. Since this is an impossible feat, I can only beg the indulgence both of scholars, who may find some of the discussion overly simplistic, and of lay readers, whether personally involved with *yoga* practices or not, who may find it too academic in places. In any event, anyone not interested in this section's technicalities might prefer to proceed to the next section, "Definition of *Bhakti*," where we begin our actual discussion on *bhakti* proper.

Specifically, the tales and teachings in part 2 of this volume are translations from the *Śrīmad Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, the *Beautiful Legend of Bhagavān* [God] (henceforth *Bhāgavata*), as are the stories of Kṛṣṇa in part 3. After much deliberation, we have chosen the translation “legend” here for the Sanskrit term *purāṇa*,¹ with the intention of denoting traditional lore, which presents itself as factual history, is purported to be true by its followers, and has been handed down and believed as such by its adherents across the centuries.² The *Bhāgavata* is, as we will suggest later, arguably one of the most important texts on *bhakti yoga*, along with the *Rāmāyaṇa*, in that cluster of traditions that has come to be known as “Hinduism.”³ In addition to the text itself, the systematic analysis of *bhakti yoga*, which will occupy the bulk of part 1, will to a great extent be from the perspective of the commentaries and elaborations on the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* written by the sixteenth-century theologians Jīva Gosvāmī and his uncle Rūpa Gosvāmī, two of the founding fathers of the Gauḍīya school of Vaiṣṇavism (also known as Caitanya Vaiṣṇavism).⁴ We will introduce these sources below. While we will engage a wide variety of other intellectual and theological expressions in India both prior and contemporary to the sixteenth century, our motive will be to compare and contrast these with our chosen case study.

Our aim in this volume is to provide the reader with a modest window into how *bhakti* is understood through the frame of reference of one community of practitioners in the premodern period. Our interest in this book is in the theology of Kṛṣṇa *bhakti*—the beliefs, metaphysics, devotional attitudes, and, most especially, *yogic* practices of this tradition—considered through the tradition’s own categories and terminologies as presented by its adherents.⁵ We will be directing considerable attention to the soteriological goals of the *Bhāgavata* tradition (“soteriology” is a term used to refer to the nature of religious beliefs pertaining to some sort of perfected afterlife—in the Indic⁶ context, *mokṣa*, the liberated state). This is a book intended for anyone with intellectual inclinations interested in exploring an expression of *bhakti* as a lived reality—as a map of how to navigate one’s existence in this world, frame its ultimate meaning, and conceive of that which lies beyond.

For my academic colleagues, I feel obliged to point out that this is not an analysis of the social, political, or ideological contexts of

Kṛṣṇa *bhakti*, nor of the material influences that fed into its historical development—concerns that have come to dominate and, in fact, more or less define the study of religion as an academic discipline.⁷ These are all essential aspects of the study of any religion, as no tradition, howsoever spiritual, exists in a cultural vacuum, immune from being affected by its sociopolitical environment and devoid of any ideology of its own. But such contexts and agendas will not concern us here. Thus, while our critics may accuse us of naive ahistoricism (that is, extracting a tradition from its historical setting in the real world), we wish to be clear from the outset; our focus is on the theology and practices of a tradition as conceptualized and articulated in the terms and categories of the tradition itself.⁸ (I have placed further comments pertaining to how I am framing this work in notes so as not to burden this introduction.)⁹

We thus prioritize premodern traditional sources in this volume (but we have included references to select academic studies in notes). Our hope is that this focus affords an opportunity to glimpse one facet of the traditional Hindu universe of *bhakti* in India as expressed in a very important classical text¹⁰ and a major commentarial tradition prior to its encounter with modernity in the colonial period. Our aim is for scholars and students of religion to gain some understanding of the worldview and principal beliefs of the Kṛṣṇa *bhakti* practitioner of this tradition, and for intellectually responsible *yoga* practitioners to get a better sense of the premodern rationale of a form of *bhakti* as a very specific type of *yoga* practice. As a result of our chosen focus, in addition to engaging an important *bhakti* text, by an exposure to a traditional mode of understanding, interpreting, and reworking sacred scripture (hermeneutics), via Jīva and Rūpa’s commentarial writings and interpretations of the *Bhāgavata*, we will explore how an elaborate and sophisticated *bhakti* tradition sets about gaining authenticity for its teachings. Foundational texts such as the *Bhāgavata* in ancient India are almost always studied through the lineage-based commentaries that are written to clarify them, as well as to establish a sect’s theological credentials.

Our contention is that there is much that is shared, in both form and experience, in the overlapping but distinct traditions of *bhakti*, and that revealing the worldview and ingredients of one tradition in some depth provides a basic template that can readily be refitted and applied to other expressions, despite important differences. If we

analogize “Hinduism” as a universe containing numerous distinct but also significantly overlapping and interacting galaxies, with specific devotional traditions analogous to constellations, then awareness of the constitution and orbits of one constellation provides invaluable information relevant to other constellations, despite important differences. There is thus merit in exploring one *bhakti* universe with some profundity, rather than superficially attempting to cover the entire panoramic multifarious breadth of the vast spectrum of Hindu devotional traditions. Exposure to the metaphysical infrastructure, theological vision, set of practices, mental cultivations, and devotional depths of one tradition provides a useful blueprint that can be readily compared with others.

A further comment here on method: As is obvious from the cover designs, this work was conceived as a follow-up to the author’s commentary on the *Yoga Sūtras* of Patañjali. The rationale for that work, given the massive transplantation to the West of practices that have been assigned the name *yoga*, was to attempt to provide some grounding of the actual metaphysics, goals, and practices of classical *yoga* in their most prominent, premodern textual sources. This present project is motivated by similar intentions with regard to grounding *bhakti*. The difference in this work is that owing to the variegation in the *bhakti* traditions, we have focused principally on one lineage-specific expression of *bhakti*. The premodern Patañjali-derived *Yoga* tradition does not present the same heterogeneity as *bhakti*: there are no distinct lineages that derive from Patañjali’s *Yoga Sūtras*,¹¹ but rather an essentially fairly homogeneous commentarial *Yoga* tradition, all predicated on the first commentary on the text by Vyāsa, usually dated to around the third century.¹² Because of the canonical nature of Vyāsa, the later primary commentators—such as Vācaspati Miśra, Śaṅkara, Bhoja Rāja, Vijñānabhikṣu, and others—build on and expand on their predecessors, they do not disagree on essential points. Any differences are relatively minor.¹³ So we can speak of a fairly consistent “*Yoga* tradition” without overly generalizing or essentializing (that is, sharing the same Sāṅkhya metaphysics, understanding of mind and of consciousness, set of practices, and the like).

This is not the case with *bhakti*. Just to give a preview of a couple of topics that lie ahead to make this point, *bhakti* is both cen-

tral to the Vedānta philosophical traditions and to the Purāṇa literary ones. Ontology is the term used in philosophy to refer to the ultimate basic categories of reality (for example, in a typical monotheistic ontology: God, the world of matter, and souls), and there are fundamental differences among Vedānta lineages on essential ontological categories. To name just one we will engage later, is *Īśvara*, God, who is the recipient of *bhakti yoga*, the Ultimate Absolute Truth or a secondary one derived from some higher and even more Ultimate Truth? And there are differences just as significant in the Purāṇas, such as, for our purposes, whether Kṛṣṇa, Viṣṇu, or Śiva is the ultimate source *Īśvara*, with the other divinities secondary or derivative manifestations from this source *Īśvara*. We will, of course, expound on all this in great detail within, but we touch on this now simply to note that it is because of such significant heterogeneity on basic issues pertaining to *bhakti* that we have chosen to enter deeply into one *bhakti* tradition, rather than go broad and superficially attempt to cover multiple traditions. However, we will exemplify our featured tradition through comparisons with others, and hence there will be frequent references to predecessor and contemporary traditions of *bhakti*, especially those of *advaita Vedānta*, Śiva, and other Viṣṇu expressions.

This work is divided into five parts. Part 1 sets out to provide an analytic map of what constitutes the various principal ingredients of *bhakti*. Here, we primarily follow Jīva Gosvāmī’s systematic exposition on the *bhakti* of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* as expressed in his *Bhakti Sandarbha* (*Analysis of Bhakti*). We also significantly engage Rūpa Gosvāmī’s works on *bhakti yoga*, specifically the first part of his *Bhaktirasāmṛtasindhu* (*Ocean of the Nectar of the Experience of Bhakti*) and *Upadeśāmṛta* (*Nectar of Instruction*). We additionally draw from other *bhakti*-relevant texts, especially the *Bhagavad Gītā* (here, too, following in Jīva’s footsteps). Our major departure from the textual corpus Jīva invokes is our own profuse referencing to Patañjali’s *Yoga Sūtras*. This attention partly reflects this author’s own work on the *Yoga Sūtras* (Bryant 2009), but it also allows us to compare and contrast aspects of generic meditative *yoga* (*dhyāna*)—the practice systematized for the first time by Patañjali—with the path of *bhakti*. This is a contrast that surfaces repeatedly as a very important theme in the *Bhāgavata* as will be

discovered, and hence we feel justified in frequently referring to the *Yoga Sūtras* of Patañjali (which would be useful but not essential preparatory reading for the present work). This is especially so since, with modern *yogīs* in mind, the selections I have made from the *Bhāgavata* focus on Patañjali-like *yoga*, and I frequently draw attention to common concepts and phraseologies between the two sources.

Part 1 is divided into six sections. After these comments on the methodology of the volume, this section, "Introduction to the Volume," introduces the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* itself, as well as the commentators who will be our guides. The next section, "Definition of *Bhakti*," provides a definition of our subject matter. This is followed, in "The Practices of *Bhakti*," with an extensive discussion on *bhakti yoga* itself in its various forms of practices and devotional attitudes between devotee and God. "The Practitioner of *Bhakti*, the *Bhakta*" features the devotee, agent, performer, and experiencer of *bhakti* (we note that *bhakti* is the practice and the *bhakta* is the practitioner, in distinction to *yoga*, which is the practice, and *yogī*, the practitioner). "The Object of *Bhakti*: *Īśvara*, *Bhagavān*, *Brahman*, and Divine Hierarchies" discusses the various modes of understanding *Īśvara*, also referred to as *Bhagavān*, God, who is the object or recipient of *bhakti*. Finally, "Concluding Reflections" offers a few of this author's thoughts pertaining to the *Bhāgavata*'s uneasy placement in the modern, post-Enlightenment, intellectual world of our times. Here, we also summarize the Kṛṣṇa tradition's overall soteriology (the nature of the ultimate liberated state) and locate this within the larger framework of some of the Hindu *mokṣa* (liberation) traditions.

The remaining four parts of the volume consist of translations. Part 2 focuses on translations from the first nine books of the *Bhāgavata*, featuring the great exemplars and *yogī* virtuosi of the text—the *bhaktas*, the practitioners of *bhakti*, who have gained pan-Indian status and whose lives and devotional practices serve as inspirational role models for the tradition.¹⁴ The teachings of great *bhakta* sages or of various incarnations of *Īśvara* too are presented here; thus, some of the sections in part 2 are entitled "The Tale of . . ." and others "The Teachings of . . ." The *Bhāgavata*, as we will note below, contains a wide variety of subjects, but we will focus on the

yoga-related components. Each section is introduced by a brief "yoga blueprint," identifying the main *yogic* or theological message and other such distinguishing features being imparted by the narrative. In fact, the first nine books of the text are designed to prepare the reader with the requisite metaphysical, psychological, and other such devotional requirements to encounter with the appropriate attitude and understanding the summum bonum of the work in the tenth book, *Śrī Kṛṣṇa*.

It is in part 3 that we feature the most popular narratives from the tenth book of the *Bhāgavata*, pertaining to the object or recipient of *bhakti yoga* and ultimate goal of all its ingredients: Kṛṣṇa Himself.¹⁵ We will see here that the foundation of this form of *bhakti yoga* is based on the *Bhāgavata*'s narratives of Kṛṣṇa's divine descent into this world as *avatāra*, breaking into human space and time and performing superwondrous deeds (as is the case with other manifestations of *Īśvara* in other *bhakti* traditions). Most especially, we will encounter here the notion of *līlā*, the blissful pastimes Kṛṣṇa inaugurates with His beloved *bhaktas* for their pleasure, which lies at the very heart of Kṛṣṇa *bhakti*: love of God. Here, too, from the many *līlās* featured in book 10, we have extracted those that best highlight Kṛṣṇa's various types of relationships with His *bhaktas* and the corresponding *bhāvas* and *rasas*, emotional states of intense *bhakti*, as it is these that represent the ultimate goals of Kṛṣṇa *bhakti* in the *Bhāgavata*.

In part 4, we present a translation of the *śikṣāṣṭaka*, "The Eight Verses of Instruction," composed by Caitanya, teacher of Rūpa and Jīva Gosvāmīs, and the fountainhead of the Gauḍīya tradition, which considers him to be an incarnation of Kṛṣṇa. While Caitanya's teachings were preserved and systematized by the *Gosvāmīs* and his life documented by later hagiographers in a number of works (from which we have extracted here a few illustrations from the *Caitanya Caritāmṛta* and *Caitanya Bhāgavata*), Caitanya himself penned only these eight verses. Finally, part 5 offers a translation of the eighty-four *sūtras* of the *Nārada Bhakti Sūtras*. This is a late text modeled on the *Yoga Sūtras* with the intention of providing a succinct exposition of *bhakti* utilizing the *sūtra* genre of expression. It seems aware of the theology that found its most elaborate expressions in the sixteenth-century writings of our *Gosvāmīs* (and their contemporary,

Vallabha) and so fits harmoniously with the focus of our volume. It is a useful manual for beginners.

With these preliminary comments pertaining to content and method in place, then; we will devote only a few cursory words to introducing the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, since we are limited in space here,¹⁶ and a few more introducing Rūpa and Jīva and their tradition.

The *Bhāgavata* as Text¹⁷

The *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* forms part of a corpus of texts emerging from the late Vedic period known as the Purāṇas. The early Vedic backdrop that spawned not just the *bhakti* of the *Bhāgavata*, but all Hindu forms of *yoga* and philosophies of *mokṣa* (liberation) cannot detain us here in detail (but see appendix 1 to get some sense of the Vedic literary and cultural context from which, and against which, the *Bhāgavata* is establishing its authority).¹⁸ The word *purāṇa*, in Sanskrit, signifies “that which took place in the past”—namely, ancient lore or legend. The Purāṇas are listed as eighteen in number,¹⁹ and it is in this genre of texts that, among many other topics, the stories of the various incarnations and activities of *Īśvara*, God, and of His feminine counterpart, *Īśvarī*, the Goddess, when manifest on earth, are recorded. The Purāṇas also feature the incredible acts of devotion, *bhakti*, toward these manifestations of *Īśvara* by superexemplary *bhaktas*. Thus, since *bhakti* is nothing other than devotion to a form of *Īśvara* or *Īśvarī*, the Purāṇa texts are the mainstay of *bhakti yoga*. The most immediately encountered aspects of Hinduism—the forms, personalities, qualities, deeds, and so on 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—are almost entirely extracted from the Purāṇas (and two epics) and their derivative literatures, as we will see from our case study of the *Bhāgavata*. The Purāṇas as a genre, then, lie as the principal source of almost all forms of *bhakti yoga*.²⁰

In addition to these descriptions of the various *Īśvara* forms and their devotees, as well as the sectarian theologies and practices associated with them, these Purāṇas as we have them today are a vast repository of stories about kings and royal dynasties; creation accounts; traditional cosmologies; reworkings 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 eighteen *mahā* (great) Purāṇas²¹ are said to contain four hundred thousand verses,²² and are the largest body of writing in Sanskrit.

There are two main transcendent deities in the Purāṇas, Śiva, and Viṣṇu—three, if we include Brahmā, the secondary creator,²³ but as we will see, as a mortal-created being,²⁴ he is more of a placeholder and never a serious contender. While we will need to nuance this later, Śiva in the overall Purāṇic narrative is usually associated with the destruction of the universe at the end of each of its periodic cycles, and Viṣṇu, with its maintenance. A number of stories speak of a playful rivalry between these two. A later Purāṇa, the *Devī Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, marks the ascendancy into the Purāṇic genre of Devī, the Goddess, as the supreme matrix. As will be discussed in some detail within, the term “monotheism,” when extracted from its historical Abrahamic associations, can, if we wish to adopt it (given our earlier comments about prioritizing Sanskritic terminologies), be applied to certain expressions of the Purāṇic traditions, especially the various orthodox Vaiṣṇava traditions, but also certain Śaiva sects.²⁵ But this monotheism needs to be understood in the context of a Supreme Being, whether understood as Viṣṇu or Śiva, who can manifest as unlimited other transcendent *Īśvara* and *Īśvarī* Beings, who are thereby derivative from and thus secondary to the original Godhead. This is not polytheism: perhaps we can think of this as a “multiplicity in oneness” parallel of the Christian trinity.

The *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, consisting of twelve *skandhas* (cantos, subdivisions, or books), occupies itself primarily with Viṣṇu and His incarnations, featuring, most particularly, Kṛṣṇa. This focus is structurally reflected in the fact that Kṛṣṇa is the exclusive subject matter of the tenth book, which disproportionately constitutes about one-quarter of the entire text. It is this tenth book that has caused this Purāṇa to be recognized as the most famous work of Purāṇa literature by far. This tenth book, in my view, along with the *Rāmāyaṇa*, is one of the two most influential texts in Hinduism. This claim can be supported by the enormous amount of artistic and cultural traditions

that its narratives have inspired over the last millennium in the form of derivative literature, poetry, drama, iconography, art, and temple sculpture, in addition to a vast array of intellectual and theological treatises from which the work of our *Gosvāmīs* is only one expression.²⁶ The text's influence can also be gauged by the overwhelming preponderance of traditional commentaries it inspired compared with all the other Purāṇas put together: the *Bhāgavata* has generated eighty-one commentaries currently available in Sanskrit alone, as well as others no longer extant (as a point of contrast, most of the Purāṇas have produced no traditional commentaries at all and others only one or, at most, with the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa*, two). It has been translated into almost all the languages of India, with forty or so translations on record in Bengal alone.²⁷ Tellingly, it has been neglected by Western scholarship until very recently. This is partly because the Victorian sensibilities of certain nineteenth-century Western Orientalists—and, just as important, early Hindu spokespersons and apologists influenced by Western moral discourses—were outraged by the amorous liaisons of Kṛṣṇa in the *Bhāgavata*, ignorant of their theological significances.²⁸ Consequently, the Kṛṣṇa of the *Bhāgavata* was jettisoned in favor of the more righteous Kṛṣṇa of the *Bhagavad Gītā* (henceforth *Gītā*)—a text that continues to produce hundreds of non-Indian translations—and still remains relatively unknown in the West.

As an unambiguously Vaiṣṇavite text—that is, adhering to Viṣṇu as the Supreme and Ultimate expression of Godhead (although the *Bhāgavata* will renegotiate Kṛṣṇa's status here), the first nine books of the *Bhāgavata* discuss in greater or lesser detail some of the major incarnations prior to Kṛṣṇa. These pave the way for the tenth book, which comprises about four thousand out of a claimed eighteen thousand total verses of the entire Purāṇa²⁹ and is dedicated exclusively to Kṛṣṇa. Indeed, it is Kṛṣṇa, under His title of *Bhagavān* (defined later), who gives His name to the whole *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* (literally, *Legend of Bhagavān*), as He does to the *Bhagavad Gītā* (literally, “that which was recited by *Bhagavān*”). Within Vaiṣṇavism, then, the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* is the Kṛṣṇa-centered text par excellence, to the point that the Kṛṣṇaite theologies that emerged in the sixteenth century³⁰ use the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* as scriptural authority to claim that it is not Kṛṣṇa who is an incar-

nation of Viṣṇu, as He is depicted in the *Mahābhārata* epic and in the other Purāṇas, but rather Viṣṇu who is a partial incarnation of Kṛṣṇa. In the theology of Jīva, Rūpa, and their associates, it is Kṛṣṇa who is the supreme Absolute Truth from whom all other deities, including Viṣṇu, evolve. Thus, Kṛṣṇaism positions itself within the larger matrix of Vaiṣṇavism as a familiar but also distinct expression.

It is an inconclusive task to try to assign specific dates to the Purāṇas, as shown by the considerable variation in the dates proposed by scholars for the *Bhāgavata* itself. Composed for public oral recitation, the Purāṇas are a malleable body of literature that continued to be transformed across the centuries by the fluid processes of transmission and adaptation to time and place as well as sectarian partialities. Any datable piece of information that may be gleaned from the texts may only reflect the historical period of that portion of the text and not necessarily other sections. Moreover, it is impossible to determine how long narratives had been in existence in oral form prior to being committed to writing. Hence Purāṇa scholars such as Rocher (1986) decline to attempt to date them. Accordingly, I will simply note here that the majority of scholars hold that the bulk of the material in most of the eighteen Purāṇas as we find them today reached its full completion and final form by the Gupta period, from about the fourth to the sixth century C.E.,³¹ even as many of these narratives had been evolving and handed down for many centuries prior to this.

There is no consensus regarding the date of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* itself in its finished form. While most specialists of the Purāṇas from India have opted for a completion around the fourth century C.E. during the Gupta period, some Western scholars have argued that it is the latest of the eighteen Purāṇas, written (depending on the scholar) sometime between the ninth and the thirteenth century C.E. in the south of the subcontinent. There are a number of significant reasons to question such a place of origin as well as time frame, which cause me to wonder whether the *Bhāgavata* too might not have reached its final form by the Gupta period along with the other major Purāṇas.³² No matter: for our present purposes here, we will only reiterate that whatever date one assigns to the *Bhāgavata* applies only to the final date of the entirety of the text as we now

have it, not to the material contained within it or even to portions of the text itself. As with the Purāṇic genre in general, the upper-limit date of the text is one issue, the date of the subject matter recorded in it is another.³³ Be this as it may, there is no question that the story of Kṛṣṇa is far older than the flowering of Purāṇic literature in the Gupta period. The earliest references to the Kṛṣṇa story, including sources outside the texts themselves, such as archaeological ones, take us back to at least the fourth to the fifth century B.C.E.³⁴

Needless to say, all such historical considerations of date and provenance are concerns for post-Enlightenment-derived, academic (text-critical) scholarship. Tradition holds the Purāṇa texts to be divine revelations, the *Smṛti*, “that which is remembered,” sacred Truths originating from an incarnation of *Īśvara* or empowered sage.³⁵ Thus the *Bhāgavata* records various different branches of its own earlier stages of transmission³⁶ prior to its final delivery by sage Śuka to King Parīkṣit that we will find in part 2, including its primordial origins as imparted by Kṛṣṇa to Brahmā at the beginning of creation (II.9.43). Brahmā is deemed to have then imparted it to sage Nārada, from whom it was transmitted to Vyāsa and then on to Śuka.

Moving into this frame of reference expressed in the text itself, in keeping with our own interests, the *Bhāgavata* introduces itself with the claim of being primarily a historical record of the events that transpired when “*Bhagavān*, Kṛṣṇa, performed superhuman activities . . . concealed in the guise of a human” (I.1.20). In other words, it claims to be a record of events that transpired when God descended on earth.

Although the *Bhāgavata* ostensibly presents itself as containing ten topics or subject matters,³⁷ Jīva points out that actually the real purpose of the text is in fact to provide the reader with the opportunity to encounter Kṛṣṇa, *Bhagavān*, the tenth and ultimate topic. This tenth subject matter is Kṛṣṇa, the *āśraya* (support) of the entire text. As far as the *Bhāgavata* is concerned, “the great souls (*mahāt-mās*) describe the characteristics of the first nine topics, in order to clarify the tenth” (II.10.2). It is Kṛṣṇa who is the grand finale of all other subject matters.³⁸ The other nine topics—including the narratives of great kings—are simply to highlight some of *Īśvara*’s potencies and qualities and provide some prerequisite context and

preparatory devotional groundwork to enhance the appreciation of the ultimate topic revealed in the tenth book, God Himself:

These stories of great kings, who spread their fame throughout the worlds and then met their death, have been narrated with the intention of expressing detachment from and insight into [the temporal nature of material grandeur]. They are just a display of rhetoric, they are not the Ultimate Truth. But, on the other hand, the descriptions and qualities of Kṛṣṇa³⁹ which destroy all inauspiciousness, should always be recited. One desiring to attain pure *bhakti* for Kṛṣṇa should always hear them without interruption. (XII.3.14–15)

Therefore the sages in the forest of Naimiṣa we will encounter in part 2 were interested in hearing about even the saintly king Parīkṣit, Kṛṣṇa’s grandnephew, only “if doing so is a basis for stories about Kṛṣṇa” (I.16.5–6).

The other nine topics—including the stories of the great *bhakta* exemplars and their teachings, which will be featured in part 2, as well as accounts of the deeds of Viṣṇu’s previous incarnations, along with various related teachings—are covered in the *Bhāgavata*’s books 1–9 and 11–12.⁴⁰ The activities of Kṛṣṇa take up book 10, a quarter of the entire Purāṇa’s bulk, and are represented in part 3 of this volume. So these previous books are preparatory, providing the necessary theological and metaphysical infrastructure to understand the narrations of Kṛṣṇa, the apex of the entire text. Kṛṣṇa is the summum bonum, the other subject matters providing progressive layers of context for his activities on earth, the *līlās*, Kṛṣṇa’s playful pastimes with His beloved devotees.

These *līlā* narratives of this delightful appearance of God have captured the hearts, minds, and intellects of countless Hindus across the centuries and underpin not only much of the aesthetics of Hinduism, but also a good deal of its theologizing. Our concern here is the intellectual textual traditions inspired by the *Bhāgavata*, but the cultural influence of the text has been massive. Anyone who has seen a performance of classical Indian dance, for example, has very likely been treated to an enactment of some *līlā* episode from Kṛṣṇa’s childhood, and there is every chance that if one happens upon a Hindu

devotional poem or participates in an evening of *kīrtana* (devotional singing), narratives from the text will be featured. Likewise, anyone encountering a collection of traditional Indian paintings will be struck by how many depict scenes from the *Bhāgavata*, such as Kṛṣṇa with His beloved cowherd-women, the *gopīs*, and so forth with other art forms.⁴¹ And, of course, anyone chancing upon a Hindu temple anywhere in India will stand a good chance of encountering a deity of Kṛṣṇa, most typically (at least in the north) with His beloved consort, Rādhā.

The Commentaries

In any event, turning to the scholastic literary tradition, among the eighty-four or so Sanskrit commentaries written on the text's eighteen hundred verses, one was by Jīva Gosvāmī. Jīva was one of six *Gosvāmīs* (renounced ascetic) theologians entrusted with intellectually systematizing the popular revival of Kṛṣṇa *bhakti* emerging in the wake of the sixteenth-century charismatic Caitanya. This phenomenon—sometimes considered a renaissance of *bhakti*—took place primarily in East India as well as the Vṛndāvana area in north-west India. Bengal, in East India, was where Caitanya was born, and Vṛndāvana is where the *Bhāgavata* situates Kṛṣṇa's childhood millennium earlier.

Caitanya triggered a wave of Kṛṣṇa devotion across East India featuring meditations on Kṛṣṇa's early-life *līlā* pastimes in the *Bhāgavata*'s tenth book and its derived literature. His movement especially expressed itself through the ecstatic public chanting of Kṛṣṇa's names (we will provide a few glimpses of Caitanya's hagiography in part 1). Caitanya also contributed to the revival of the holy places associated with the *līlās* of the tenth book in Vṛndāvana (also referred to as Vraj herein),⁴² which, as a result, developed into the bustling sacred town of today. Here Jīva resided as one of the celebrated six *Gosvāmīs* who settled in this holy place. These *Gosvāmīs* were essentially the intellectual founding figures of the tradition bestowed by Caitanya, producing an entire (and very extensive) canon of literary, philosophical, and aesthetic works dedicated to Kṛṣṇa. They were also responsible for the construction of most of the main temples in the town built on sites sacred to Kṛṣṇa, making Vṛndāvana

one of the most thriving pilgrimage places in India today.⁴³ Thus a school was formed around Caitanya's life and teachings that came to be called the Caitanya Vaiṣṇava tradition, or the Gauḍīya (Eastern) Vaiṣṇava tradition.

Although Caitanya personally recorded only eight verses in writing (see part 4, "The Eight Versus of Instruction"), he inculcated an elaborate theology of Kṛṣṇa *bhakti* to some of His followers, especially Jīva's uncles Rūpa Gosvāmī and Sanātāna Gosvāmī.⁴⁴ The distinguishing feature of these teachings from the perspective of the greater landscape of the multifarious *bhakti* traditions of the time is their focus on the various types of ecstatic mental states and intimate relationships with Kṛṣṇa that can be cultivated and attained through devotional practices, *bhakti yoga*. These teachings are, to all intents and purposes, a new body of divine revelation purporting to disclose details of some of the most intimate and personal eternal activities of God. Nonetheless, great energy is invested by the *Gosvāmīs* in locating their roots within the larger body of Vedic and Vedic-derived sacred texts accepted by all Hindu schools, the *Śruti* and *Smṛti* (hence the tradition sees itself as a Vedānta tradition, all of which is discussed within and in appendix 1).

Among other things, Rūpa wrote the *Bhaktirasāmṛtasindhu* (*Ocean of the Nectar of the Experience of Bhakti*) on these mental states (*bhāvas*) and relationships (*rasas*). In keeping with this imagery of the ocean, Rūpa divides his *Bhaktirasāmṛtasindhu* into four "quadrants": the Eastern (EQ), Western (WQ), Southern (SQ), and Northern (NQ). These are further subdivided into a sequential numbering of "waves" (for which we have just substituted the numbers). We will be drawing mostly from the Eastern Quadrant here. Rūpa also wrote a small handbook on *bhakti* practice, the *Upadeśāmṛta* (*Nectar of Instruction*), to which we will be referring. But he primarily left it up to Jīva to systematize and articulate the epistemology, metaphysics, and other philosophical ingredients of the tradition and situate it in accordance with the expected criteria of the intellectual milieu of the day. In addition to a considerable body of other writings, including his commentary on the *Bhāgavata* itself, Jīva compiled six treatises, the *Ṣaṭ-Sandarbhās*, which subsequently took their place and remain at the core of the philosophy and *bhakti* systematics of this school.⁴⁵ These are essentially thematic analyses of

the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* from the perspective of the Gauḍīya tradition (that is, based on the “revelations” of Caitanya), which was developing in Jīva’s time. A Sandarbha is defined as a type of text “which illuminates an esoteric subject matter, expresses its essence as well as its excellence, gives its various meanings, and is worthy of learning.”⁴⁶ In part 1 of this work, we will be drawing from the fifth treatise, the *Bhakti Sandarbha*.⁴⁷

These six treatises encapsulate the entire philosophical basis—metaphysical, epistemological, ontological, ethical, and soteriological—of Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism, which considers itself a Vedānta tradition.⁴⁸ The Sandarbhas are designed sequentially, prior volumes providing the epistemological and metaphysical infrastructure precursory to the practice of *bhakti* outlined in the fifth Sandarbha, which itself is precursory to the sixth, the *Prīti Sandarbha*, which deals with the goal of *bhakti*, love of God. So, in the *Bhakti Sandarbha*, Jīva is assuming the reader’s familiarity with the previous four Sandarbhas and thus aware of the Gauḍīya position on certain essential issues central to the Vedānta as well as Purāṇa traditions. So by joining Jīva in his fifth Sandarbha, we are leap-frogging over Jīva’s own sequential logic. By this point in his Sandarbhas, Jīva has already established why the *Bhāgavata* is to be deemed the paramount scripture on *bhakti* (discussed in appendix 1), and he assumes knowledge of the tradition’s ontology (the nature of manifest reality, the individual self within it, and the Absolute Cause from which it emerges), outlined in the first four Sandarbhas. These are extensive domains in their own right, so we can touch only briefly upon such topics when we need to identify the main prerequisite metaphysical presuppositions fundamental to the present study on *bhakti* (especially in the chapter “The Object of *Bhakti*: *Īśvara*, *Bhagavān*, *Brahman*, and Divine Hierarchies”). But we must note that Jīva has argued and defended the tradition’s theological fundamentals extensively through scriptural exegesis (interpretation) as well as through reason and argument. He has not simply assumed them.

In terms of the subject matter of these six Sandarbhas, briefly, the first, the *Tattva*, makes some preliminary comments on ontology and then focuses on epistemology (what constitutes a valid source of knowledge).⁴⁹ Since the exclusive focus on Kṛṣṇa as Godhead

and *bhakti* as the summum bonum of human existence is based on the authority of the *Bhāgavata* tradition, Jīva must begin this first Sandarbha with the epistemological issue of what makes the *Bhāgavata* itself so authoritative. We have represented his arguments from the *Tattva Sandarbha* in appendix 1 so as not to overburden this introduction. The second Sandarbha, the *Bhagavat Sandarbha*, focuses on three transcendent aspects of the one Absolute Reality, with special attention directed toward the ultimate aspect of the personal *Bhagavān*, the Godhead (including monistic and monotheistic expressions). We will elaborate on this in some detail in “The Object of *Bhakti*.” The third, the *Paramātmā Sandarbha*, features another of these three transcendent aspects: the various manifestations of God derived from Kṛṣṇa in the form of the unlimited Viṣṇu immanent in or associated with the multiplicity of universes in *prakṛti*, the material realm. The fourth, the *Kṛṣṇa Sandarbha*, focuses on the primacy of the form of Kṛṣṇa over other manifestations of *Bhagavān*, such as the multiple expressions of Viṣṇu, a topic also touched on in “The Object of *Bhakti*.” Thus, the first four Sandarbhas deal with the relationship between God and His energies, powers, and derivative manifestations. And the sixth, the *Prīti Sandarbha*, occupies itself with the goal, love of God, free from all personal motives. (See Dāsa 2007 for a brief introduction with sample translations from these Sandarbhas.) While we will be drawing on occasion from these other Sandarbhas as noted, in part 1 we are joining Jīva for the fifth, the *Bhakti Sandarbha*, which will outline the manifold ingredients and expressions of *bhakti yoga*. All the Sandarbhas are subdivided into *anucchedas*, thematic or topical sections (henceforth *anu*).

Our aim in this volume has been to open a modest window into the theological underpinnings and devotional practices of one important *bhakti* tradition. We wish to stress once more that the same treatment can be directed to other *bhakti* traditions, Vaiṣṇava, Śaiva, and Devī (Goddess) centered, to which we make frequent references. These all have their own powerful and coherent theological appeal and unique devotional depths. The rich variegation of these traditions reveals the multifarious theistic possibilities and richness of practice stemming from variants of *bhakti yoga* dedicated to the unlimited manifestations of *Īśvara/Bhagavān*. We will consider our

meager effort in this regard successful if it inspires the reader to study the primary texts of these traditions directly in order to develop a deeper understanding of their tenets.

Despite our stated focus on attempting to present the tradition in its own terms and frame of references, or perhaps because of it, we would like to hope that this work will be of use to both academics and scholars interested in Kṛṣṇa *bhakti*, as well as practitioners of some of the forms of *yoga*. From an academic perspective, in addition to gaining exposure to an entire devotional worldview and mode of living in the world, by following the logic of the organization and systematization of the textual material by our *Gosvāmīs*, we encounter a good example of sectarian hermeneutics (the methods of scriptural interpretation) committed to promoting a comprehensive view of ultimate reality through a specific *bhakti* lens. This hermeneutics includes the rationale through which certain texts are prioritized and others minimized or ignored, and how, within commonly shared texts, sections or even individual statements conducive to a lineage's sectarian ontologies and hierarchies are prioritized and those less amenable in this regard ignored or assigned secondary meanings.

From the *yoga* practitioners' perspective, we are afforded a window into how a community of *bhaktas* with scholarly gifts and inclinations undertake what they deem to be their service both to their beloved Kṛṣṇa and to humanity at large. For them, this entails promoting, through the established intellectual criteria of their day and age, the metaphysics, practices, goals, and experiences of not just *yoga*, but *bhakti yoga* (an important distinction that we will discuss in detail). Specifically, in this tradition, the summum bonum of human existence is to attain *bhakti rasa*, ecstatic love of a higher *ātman*, *Īśvara*, God. There is no other ultimate meaning or purpose to embodied life: "The rising and setting of the sun simply steals away the life of people other than those whose time is spent in devotion to Kṛṣṇa" (*Bhāgavata* II.3.17). Jīva and Rūpa, along with their contemporary *Gosvāmī* (ascetic) associates, dedicated their lives to revealing to others in a remarkably erudite and intellectually rigorous manner the expressions such devotion takes in its Kṛṣṇa modalities. We encourage those who wish to gain a closer sense of the appeal of *bhakti* as a profound and meaningful worldview and soteriological

goal to associate with those dedicated to their practices both in the past, through the literatures they have left behind, and in the present, through their teachings and observing their lifestyles and behaviors. Readers interested in pursuing this subject matter may care to study all the *Śandarbhās* and other *Gosvāmī* works systematically.⁵⁰ But first of all, of course, the reader is encouraged to read the entire *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* in its own right.⁵¹

Om tat sat