PART II

LITERACY AND ORALITY
EMPOWERING THE SACRED:
THE FUNCTION OF THE SANSKRIT TEXT IN
A CONTEMPORARY EXPOSITION OF THE
BHĀGAVATAPURĀṆA

McComas Taylor

Abstract
The Bhāgavatapurāṇa is one of the master-texts of the Sanskrit archive and is
the foundational source of narratives relating to the deity Kṛṣṇa. Since it reached
its current form about a millennium ago, public oral ‘performances’ of the text
have been sponsored as a means of accumulating religious and social capital.
These week-long events are a significant form of contemporary religious practice
in the Hindu cultural world, but have received little or no scholarly attention. In
this paper I describe one such event that was held in Uttarakhand, North India,
in November 2009. What is the role of the Sanskrit text in the oral performance?
I identify four functions: first, the text provided a focus of ritual action; second,
it was the source of the overall structure and content of the event; third, it was
the object of the exponent’s daily silent reading or pārāyaṇa; finally, it was the
source of many of the Sanskrit verses around which the exponent constructed
his vernacular comment. In concluding, I argue that a spectrum of social and
cultural practices—ritual, oral, textual and performative—all contribute towards
the validation and empowerment of discourses relating to Kṛṣṇa.

Introduction: What is the Bhāgavatapurāṇa?
The Sanskrit word purāṇa means ‘old’, and in the context of the collect-
ions of texts known as the Purāṇas it may mean either ‘old stories’ or
‘stories of the old days’. These texts are vast encyclopaedic repositories

1 Some of the material in this paper first appeared in an earlier form in ‘Indian Idol:
Narrating the Story of Kṛṣṇa in Globalising Contexts’, the final report of a research project
funded by the POSCO TJ Park Foundation (http://www.postf.org/other/pds_a_list.jsp)
(Taylor [2010]), a paper entitled ‘Village Deity and Sacred Text: Power-sharing and
Cultural Synthesis in a Garhwal Community’, submitted to Asian Ethnology (Taylor
forthcoming a) and a paper entitled “‘Rādhā, Rādhē!’ Narrating Stories from the
Bhāgavatapurāṇa in a Globalising Context’ which has been submitted to Religions of
South Asia (Taylor forthcoming b)).