Performances of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* in Andhra Pradesh

By

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Abstract

This thesis examines performances of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* carried out in Andhra Pradesh, India from January 2006 to February 2007, documenting five *Bhāgavata saptāhas*—seven-day events during which a professional orator exposits the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* to a live audience—as well as a less structured oral exposition of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* called a *Bhāgavata kathā*. Specifically focusing on two case studies, this thesis explores the ways participants use the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* to shape their contemporary visions of Hinduism. The first case study involves a small, rural *Bhāgavata saptāha*, where local participants actively establish themes of authenticity, continuity and tradition within the context of a broader, changing world. The second case study considers a large, urban *Bhāgavata kathā* to explore how participants of the *kathā* reconcile the values imparted in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* with the aspirations for globalization and consumption circulating within their community. By focusing particularly on instances of metacommunication–moments in which participants communicate about the discourse and the performance—this thesis reveals the negotiations that occur during the performances. These self-reflective moments of discourse in turn become the moments in which contemporary Hinduism is shaped and recreated. The multiple meanings participants produce during these performances are examined in turn, as these meanings also expand and reshape their visions of a Hinduism that includes, and further reinforces, their everyday lifestyles. In examining the performative contexts of *Bhāgavata* readings, this dissertation also adds to literature examining South Asian textuality and performance by recording how performers conduct more fluid readings, as they interpolate other texts, commentaries, local histories and personal anecdotes into their non-linear expositions of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*. Additionally, this thesis makes a substantive contribution to literature regarding performances of

the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* in Andhra Pradesh by documenting five *Bhāgavata saptāha*s and detailing the variations among them.

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Introduction

> There is so much difference in saying you are reading the *Bhāgavatam* in the West than reading it in the East. And when you are considering the source of the *Bhāgavatam* it's a Godsend, a Godsend. . . . [T]he *Bhāgavatam* is not a book about God. It is an experience of God. It's not an exposition; it's an ecstasy. It's not a book, but a book form of the Lord…The *Bhāgavatam* is the Lord himself and every time I read the *Bhāgavatam* I'm giving you a verbal translation.
>
> Prema Pandurang[1]

Primarily a devotional text centering upon narratives of the life of Kṛṣṇa and his famous devotees, the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* draws to its performances both literate and illiterate listeners from various classes, castes, linguistic, and educational backgrounds.[2] Composed in Sanskrit, the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* belongs to a prolific genre of scripture known as *purāṇa*s, which broadly speaking combine elements of history, cosmology, narrative and religious instruction. Aside from being the most translated of all *purāṇa*s, the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* is also the most widely performed *purāṇa* throughout India and internationally amongst the Hindu diaspora. These oral performances, which are primarily executed in vernacular languages, include recitations, oral exegesis, theatrical performances, movies and, in recent decades, television serials. Given the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*'s vast influence, wide and enduring appeal, and constant circulation through

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[1] Prema Pandurang, "Highlights of the *Bhagavatham*: A *Srimad Bhagavatham* Discourse" (Spiritual discourse, Sathya Sai Nigamagamam, Hyderabad, AP, January 20, 2006). The discourse title is reproduced here and throughout the thesis with Anglicized spellings, just as the performer, Prema Pandurang, originally presented it in related advertisements and pamphlets. Likewise for titles of other performances, whenever a performer has provided the title in English with Anglicized spellings, those titles were preserved. For more about the usage of diacritics in this document, please refer to p. 54, "Usage of Diacritics."

[2] The *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* is also sometimes alternatively titled as the *Bhāgavata Mahāpurāṇa*, *Śrīmad Bhāgavata Mahāpurāṇa* and the *Śrīmad Bhāgavatam*. More simply, the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* is just referred to as the *Bhāgavata* and, in Andhra Pradesh, sometimes also the *Bhāgavatam*.

performance, oral performances of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* are important objects of inquiry in the study of contemporary Hinduism. In that vein, this dissertation primarily considers the question: How do participants of *Bhāgavata* performances make meaning from the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*? In particular, how do participants inform and shape their own contemporary visions of Hinduism through these performances of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*?

In response to those questions, this dissertation presents two case studies of oral performances of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* observed in Andhra Pradesh, India. The first case study features a *Bhāgavata saptāha*—a seven-day ritualized retelling of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*—that was performed in the small rural village of Kolapalli by a *paurāṇika,* a traditionally-trained, Brahmin expositor, named Chandramurthy Shastry, in the regional vernacular, Telugu.[3] In contrast, the second case study is of a *Bhāgavata kathā*—an oral exegesis or discourse of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*—delivered in English by a woman, Professor Prema Pandurang, in a posh air-conditioned auditorium in the metropolitan city of Hyderabad. Each case study documents and analyzes the performances in order to understand how participants read and make meaning from the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*. More specifically, by using a performance-based approach to analyze these performances, these case studies reveal the way in which the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* serves as a medium through which participants envision, shape and ultimately generate the Hinduism they claim to uphold and participate in. Thus, the rural, seven-day performance of the *Bhāgavata* which was performed by the traditionally-trained Brahmin, Chandramurthy Shastry,

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[3] Brahmin refers to the highest *varṇa* or caste in the Hindu caste system. Typically, an individual born into the Brahmin caste is also referred to as a Brahmin. The Brahmin caste is traditionally considered to be the scholarly and priestly caste, and thus, all of the performers and priests in the performances documented below were Brahmins. Also, note, I have changed the names of the city and performer of the rural *saptāha* in order to maintain the anonymity of the performers and participants. In the case of Prema Pandurang, as she is an international public figure, I used her real name. Likewise, for subsequent *saptāha* performances I observed and documented herein, I changed the names of the performers, participants I interviewed and interacted with, and if needed locations in order to maintain the anonymity of the participants of those *saptāha*s. The one notable exception with regards to the *saptāha* performances was Rameshbhai Oza (Bhaishri), who like Prema Pandurang, is a famous, public figure.

amongst a mostly orthodox Brahmin audience featuring many concomitant rituals produced a traditional, hierarchical, Brahminical orthodox Hinduism amidst the backdrop of an ever-increasingly modern world. Likewise, the less ritually punctuated *Bhāgavata kathā* performed in English by Professor Prema Pandurang for her middle and upper class urban, professional audience yielded a Hinduism that reconciled the changing modern, global, cosmopolitan lifestyles of the audience with the traditional world of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*.

Inextricably linked to these case studies of *Bhāgavata* performances are issues related to South Asian textual scholarship. As a growing number of scholars of Hindu religious texts in recent decades have noted, the study and engagement of *purāṇa*s, as well as the epics—the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa*—are enhanced and enriched by studying these texts within their rich oral and performative contexts.[4] These scholars have begun to explore oral recitations, retellings and performances of religious texts among Hindu communities, pursuing the notion that these textual practices are integral to understanding those texts. This follows from the recognition that because these texts—the *purāṇa*s and epics—are so often closely intertwined with the performances of them, audiences often do not distinguish between text and performance. As such, the very idea of a text in South Asian religious communities is being

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[4] See for example: Joyce Burkhalter Flueckiger and Laurie J. Sears, eds., *Boundaries of the Text: Epic Performances in South and Southeast Asia. Michigan Papers on South and Southeast Asia, No. 35.* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: Center for South and Southeast Asian Studies, University of Michigan, 1991); Philip Lutgendorf, *The Life of a Text: Performing the Rāmcaritmānas of Tulsidas,* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991.); Velcheru Narayana Rao, *"Purāṇas,"* in *The Hindu World.* Edited by Sushil Mittal and Gene Thursby, (New York: Routledge, 2004, 97-118); Paula Richmond, ed., *Many Rāmāyaṇas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia.* (Berkeley: University of California Press. 1991); John S. Hawley, in association with Srivatsa Goswami, *At Play with Krishna: Pilgrimage Dramas from Brindavan,* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981); Richard Schechner and Linda Hess, "The Ramlila of Ramnagar." *The Drama Review* 21:51-82.

called into question, with scholars proposing that texts in these communities have fluid boundaries that do not confine them to their written pages.[5]

The fluidity or fixity of Hindu scripture is connected in no small part to its categorization as *śruti* or *smṛti*. The designation of *śruti*, "that which is heard," and *smṛti*, "that which is recollected," have largely to do with the source of the scripture, which in turn, determines its transmission and usage. *Śruti* refers to scripture that is considered direct revelation—scripture that whose origins are divine and/or revealed at the start of creation itself—and then seen and subsequently transmitted by *ṛṣis*, or seers. Considered to be *apauruṣeya*, or not having a human author, the Vedas are the primary example of *śruti* text. As such, the Vedas have the highest authority and may not be altered in any way. Transmitted faithfully, word-for-word from generation-to-generation, they are fixed, immutable texts.

Smṛti, in contrast, is a product of indirect revelation, "remembered" (and then transmitted) by an "infallible human source," who has received a divine revelation of the particular scripture.[6] *Smṛti* texts are secondary in authority to *śruti* texts and function, at least in part, to clarify the meaning found in *śruti* through more precise instructions and prescriptions, as well as narrative examples. To that end, *smṛti* texts like the *purāṇa*s, epics and *dharmaśāstra*s can also be considered as texts that help to elaborate and interpret *śruti*.[7] An important

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[5] Wendy Doniger, "Fluid and Fixed Texts in India." In *Boundaries of the Text: Epic Performances in South and Southeast Asia. Michigan Papers on South and Southeast Asia, No. 35*. Edited by Joyce Burkhalter Flueckiger and Laurie J. Sears. (Ann Arbor, Mich.: Center for South and Southeast Asian Studies, University of Michigan, 1991).

[6] Velcheru Narayana Rao clarifies that no ordinary human can receive and transmit divine revelation. Rather as is the usual case, it is a *ṛṣi*, or a seer, who either recalls divine scripture through mediation and/or is given a vision by a divine source. The *ṛṣi* then composes the scripture and then transmits it to other humans, usually his disciples. Narayana Rao, Velcheru. "Purāṇa As Brahminic Ideology," in *Purāṇa Perennis: Reciprocity and Transformation in Hindu and Jaina Texts*, ed. Wendy Doniger (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1993), 93.

[7] Thomas B. Coburn, "'Scripture' in India: Towards a Typology of the Word in Hindu Life," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 52.3 (1984): 440. *Śāstra* refers to knowledge and/or rules regarding a particular topic or branch of learning. *Śāstra* can also refer to the collective body of Sanskrit texts regarding that topic. Thus,

qualification of *smṛti* is that it must be validated by a consensus of local, learned Brahmins. Should there be any contradiction between a *śruti* and *smṛti* text moreover, the *śruti* text is considered to be more authoritative. As such, there is a wide range of scripture that is considered *smṛti*, as well as, multiple variations of a particular scripture that might be considered valid and authoritative. Thus, *purāṇa*s and epics, as *smṛti* texts, are often open-ended, with more flexible, fluid boundaries, as their nature as interpretive scripture allows for multiple variations to coexist.

To reiterate then, fixed texts (such as the Vedas) are texts, both oral and written, that are not to be altered through addition, omission, or any re-sequencing of words and/or portions of the text. Readers and performers of fixed texts, therefore, read, memorize and/or recite the texts exactly as they initially encounter these texts. In contrast, fluid texts have more flexible, permeable and malleable boundaries. Readers and performers of fluid texts, such as the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, are not required to read or perform the text from front to back, giving equal valence to every word, sentence and page.[8] Instead, readers and performers of fluid texts often move throughout the text, emphasizing and expanding upon some portions of the text, condensing and/or just briefly mentioning other portions and sometimes even omitting yet another portion. These fluid readings often interlace narratives, excerpts and quotes from earlier or later sections of the same text, other sacred texts (e.g. epics, *purāṇa*s, *śāstra*s), and/or otherwise significant texts (e.g. commentaries, devotional songs, poetry, popular novels). Skilled performers of these fluid texts may also blend personal anecdotes, experiences and commentary about current events, as well as, the local narratives and experiences of the audience into their expositions.

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dharmaśāstra refers to both the field of the study of *dharma* (religious and legal duty) and the genre of Sanskrit treatises regarding *dharma*.

[8] See, for example, Lutgendorf, *Life of a Text;* Narayana Rao, "Purāṇas," 114; Ludo Rocher, *The Purāṇas*, Vol. 2, fasc. 3 of *A History of Indian Literature*, ed. Jan Gonda (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1986), 58-9.

The *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* is often circulated through these kinds of fluid readings, as is exemplified by the *saptāha* and *kathā* performances of the *Bhāgavata* cited in this thesis. Performers of these *Bhāgavata* performances draw upon portions of the *Bhāgavata*, in an order of their choosing and interweave a variety of other texts, narratives and personal commentary. Most orators often included narratives and quotes from the *Mahābhārata*, *Rāmāyaṇa*, *Padma Purāṇa*, *Bhāgavata Māhātmya*, *Viṣṇu Purāṇa*, *Bhagavad Gītā*, *Nārāyaṇīyam* and *Manusmṛti*, as well as various other *śāstra*s, personal anecdotes, exegesis and materials from commentaries written about the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*.

These performances, moreover, do not need to occur in the language of the text's composition. In fact, in the case of Sanskrit texts like the *Bhāgavata*, often the orator's exegesis must be in a vernacular language for the benefit of contemporary audiences as most of the audience members—even those who might be familiar with Sanskrit—are unlikely to be fluent in Sanskrit. As will be seen in the case studies herein, during the *Bhāgavata* performances orators quote verses, lines and occasionally entire passages from the Sanskrit *Bhāgavata* in order to reference, cite, frame and/or support their own expositions of the *Bhāgavata*.[9] To clarify, for

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[9] McComas Taylor has also written articles discussing the way the *Bhāgavata* is used in performances as well. One article addresses the power relations in a North Indian village community involved in *Bhāgavata* performances. Drawing on Derrida's treatment of the notion of hospitality, Taylor points out how those who host *Bhāgavata* *saptāha* performances provide a platform for exploring ethical issues, though they do so within the context of establishing their own power as host. See McComas Taylor "Village Deity and Sacred Text: Power Relations and Cultural Synthesis at an Oral Performance of the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* in a Garhwal Community" Asian Ethnology, Vol. 70, no.2, (2011) 197-221. Taylor has also written about temporal continuities and change in *Bhāgavata* performances, especially as these pertain to processes of modernization. Of these processes, Taylor notes that "some of these processes are forcing or enabling change; others are enabling of enhancing continuity with traditional practice...the *saptāh* seem likely to continue to be recognized, time honored sacred shell into which sectarian and/or local content can be incorporated to give that content legitimacy, credibility and power." McComas Taylor "Rādhe, Rādhe! Continuity and Change in the Contemporary Oral Performance of the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*" Religions of South Asia 6.1 (2012), 100-101. In concert with Taylor, in this research, I found many moments in which the processes of modernity being experienced in communities could be contextualized through the narrative of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*. Vice-versa, I am also concerned with ways in which the narrative of the *Bhāgavata* gains legitimacy when articulated with these processes of modernity. I am also especially concerned with understanding how audiences and expositors manage these negotiations through the narrative, and which aspects of the text allow them to explore the choices and possibilities open to them in the contemporary moment.

most devotees and performers, the most authoritative version of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* is considered to be the Sanskrit text in print circulation today.[10] Performers generally refer to and quote from this Sanskrit version.

However, this work does not mean to imply that the printed form of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* is in the canonical form. In fact, as has been skillfully demonstrated by Daniel H. H. Ingalls, Sr. in his article, "The *Harivaṃśa* as Mahākāvya," many of the primary narratives about Kṛṣṇa found in the *Bhāgavata*, were found in earlier iterations within the *Harivaṃśa* and the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa*.[11] Refashioned, those narratives make up central aspects of the *Bhāgavata*. Moreover, those narratives continue to circulate in various forms, as Thomas Coburn notes:

> The story of the cowherd Kṛṣṇa, has, of course, been retold in vital and compelling fashion on the innumerable occasions, and a direct line runs from its first appearance in the *Harivaṃśa*, through the *Viṣṇu* and *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*s, or in Jayadeva's *Gīta Govinda*, the story has crystallized into a form that might be deemed "canonical" –which in the Hindu case would thus mean 'worthy of being recited verbatim.[12]

The *Bhāgavata*, thus has a history of interpolation and change itself. At some point in its history, however, the Sanskrit *Bhāgavata* crystallized into the current form popularly recited verbatim, cited in performances and distributed in print. Despite this crystallization, however, the *Bhāgavata* still finds dynamic presentation in performance.

Therefore, aside from the primary question of how participants engender their contemporary visions of Hinduism through these *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* performances, this

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[10] One popular print versions of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* includes the *Śrīmad Bhāgavata Mahāpurāṇa: With Sanskrit Text and English,* 2 vols. edited by C. L. Goswami (Gorakhpur, India: Gita Press, 2005). This Gita Press edition is what I have used to reference verses of both the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* and the *Bhāgavata Māhātmya*. I have also consulted the following editions as well: *Bhāgavata Purāṇa of Kṛṣṇa Dvaipāyana Vyāsa, with the Sanskrit Commentary Bhāvārthabodhinī of Śrīdharasvāmin*, edited by J. L. Shastri, (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1983); *Śrīmad Bhāgavata*, trans. Swami Tapasyananda (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1991).

[11] Daniel H. H. Ingalls, "The *Harivaṃśa* as a Mahākāvya," in Mélanges d'indianisme à la mémoire de Louis Renou. (Paris: Editions E. de Boccard. 1968): 381-394.

[12] Coburn, "'Scripture' in India," 450.

dissertation secondarily seeks to add to the body of work on South Asian textuality and performance. Through this examination of fluid readings of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, this thesis addresses questions regarding how fluid readings of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* influence the interpretation of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa.* In addition, this dissertation examines how these readings re-shape the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, which in turn, ultimately re-shapes participants' visions of Hinduism. By looking at the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* as it is retold and ritually performed in the seven-day rural *Bhāgavata saptāha* and the urban *Bhāgavata kathā* mentioned above, I explore the ways in which the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* is used, both as the verdant source of content and as the malleable frame of the performance.

By employing a performance-centered approach to analyze these case studies, I am able to examine in detail how participants, both performers and audiences, collectively draw from, while simultaneously refashioning the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* into a more relevant, vital text for themselves and their community. This methodology further reveals the agency of participants by highlighting the various negotiations these practitioners make while reading the text. Revealing the agency of the participants, in turn, demonstrates how the participants are actively engaged in recreating their traditions and shaping their Hinduisms.

The performance-centered approach that I employ emphasizes contextualization over context. Whereas a context-centered approach emphasizes the socio-cultural aspects surrounding the performance, contextualization considers those also, but only in terms of the metacommunicative processes occurring in the performance. Metacommunicative processes are all the self-reflexive communications occurring between participants in the performance surrounding the primary narrative events in the performance as it is happening. Thus, contextualization entails focusing on meta-level processes, or the active negotiations participants

engage in reflexively, as the discourse is happening. In particular, the performers, audiences, discourse, and surrounding context are all evaluated both in terms of structure and content by the participants, *in situ*. The concept of contextualization is especially pertinent in considering these performances, as it is indicative of how participants' evaluations are reincorporated back into the emergent discourse. Since contextualization emphasizes the metacommunicative processes, through those meta-level processes, the agency of the participants in the performance is revealed, along with the emergent quality of the performance.

While it is not difficult to conceive of the agency the performer of these *Bhāgavata* performances has as he or she guides the exposition, by considering the emergent quality of the text, the agency of the audience is also revealed. The emergent quality of each performance is composed of interactions between participants, the specific conditions comprising their skills and familiarity with the performance, and the contextual resources available during each performance. These conditions lay the foundation for potential transformation of the discourse, performance event, and/or social field in which the performance is carried out. The emergent quality of a performance is a significant aspect of performances as it indicates changes in the structure of the performance, whether that structure is ordered in text, event or community. This in turn reveals the process-based nature of these performances wherein participants—that is performers *and* listeners—actively make meaning from the text.

Contextualization therefore recognizes and restores more agency to the participants in the performance, representing their ability to transform and ultimately create an emergent text—that is, a new text which reflects the metacommunicative aspects of the performance in conjunction with the text of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*. As such, this emergent *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* is not only more congruent with their own values, ethics and overall vision of Hinduism, but also

(re)generates these values, ethics and visions. Thus, rather than the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* being the source of tradition, it is actually the site where tradition is (re)created and its performance is the process wherein tradition is negotiated.

Moreover, by paying attention to the metacommunicative processes that marked negotiations between participants during the performance, I saw that these reading practices empower participants. The negotiations indicated that not only were participants able to reinterpret the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, but ultimately, to use it to recast Hinduism in such a way that it could reflect their values. Thus, in the multiple performances of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* in Andhra Pradesh that I witnessed, participants were actively shaping and recreating the type of Hinduism they simultaneously claim to uphold. In the case of Kolapalli's ninetieth annual *Bhāgavata saptāha*, participants envision and recreate a local, traditional Hinduism that brandishes the air of being *the* authentic Hinduism. For Prema Pandurang and her urban, modern, cosmopolitan audience, the Hinduism they shaped together during Prema Pandurang's *Bhāgavata kathā* was a modern, global, cosmopolitan Hinduism that reconciled the values of the *Bhāgavata* with their fast-paced, modern, global lifestyles.

Finally, these case studies provide a substantive contribution to the study of a key and popular genre of *Bhāgavata* performance, the *Bhāgavata saptāha*, as well as to the study of *Bhāgavata* performances in Andhra Pradesh. *Bhāgavata saptāha*s, though quite widespread throughout India, have until recently never been studied in their own right.[13] This dissertation adds to this recent, growing body of literature concerned with *saptāha* performances by providing examples of multiple *saptāha*s observed in Andhra Pradesh from January 2006 to March 2007. Alongside a detailed case study of the rural Kolapalli *saptāha*, this dissertation

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[13] For some examples of this recent scholarship see Taylor, "Rādhe, Rādhe," 83-101, and Taylor, "Village Deity and Sacred Text,"197-221.

includes an additional case study of Prema Pandurang's *Bhāgavata kathā*. I have chosen to develop detailed descriptions of these two performances especially, insofar as they are exemplary of *Bhāgavata*-inspired performances in Andhra Pradesh, and thus contribute to this body of academic literature.

As popular and pervasive as the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* is throughout India and beyond, I chose to focus my studies on the Southern state of Andhra Pradesh. While many devotional activities and performances regarding Kṛṣṇa and the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* occur in the northern Braj regions, particularly Mathura and Vrindavan, not as much research on Southern *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* traditions has been conducted. Curious about vernacular performances of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, and having studied Telugu, Andhra Pradesh seemed like an obvious choice for fieldwork. Located on the east coast of India just below Orissa, Chhattisgarh and the eastern third of the state of Maharashtra, bordered to the west by Karnataka and to the south by Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh has a wide range of communities which might be described, in turn, as densely urban or sparsely rural. In many of these communities, the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* is popularly regarded, publicly read and performed. Moreover, Andhra Pradesh has a rich literary connection with the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, punctuated by the fifteenth-century Telugu poet Bammera Potana's free Telugu translation of the *Bhāgavata*, the *Śrīmad Bhāgavatamu*. As a region for research, Andhra Pradesh has proved to be especially fruitful, offering both diverse performances of the *Bhāgavata* and opportunities for engagement with participants of those performances.

Contextualization, further, recognizes that the ethnographer is also a participant in the performance and therefore, to some greater or lesser degree, has an impact on the performance. Thus, acknowledging the position of the ethnographer in the performances is required. To that

end, I have attempted to integrate accounts of those metacommunicative processes and negotiations in which I participated throughout this dissertation. My description of *Bhāgavata* performances herein has thus, at times taken on a somewhat personal dimension. That is, I have sometimes elected to use a participatory, personal tone, and an ethnographic voice, though a voice which first and foremost describes the movements and actions of those around me. I situate my own presence among the men and women who worked and performed with the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, as at times, my presence in their communities, as outsider (an American), partial insider (a second-generation Gujarati-American Hindu), and/or 'intellectual' researcher, provided a focal point upon which people asserted and made their own version of Hinduism.

Therefore, this dissertation seeks to add to current knowledge of contemporary Hinduism through these case studies of communities and how they envision and generate their own Hinduisms through these oral performances of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*. The documentation and analysis of these two oral performances of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* further contribute to scholarship about South Asian textual reading practices. By carefully examining the contexts in which audiences and orators remake and choose from the relatively vast narrative of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, this dissertation also provides an example of how people encounter and sustain the *Bhāgavata*'s fluid nature as a generative medium; generative of social commentary, ceremony, status and community. This thesis also adds to scholarship about the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* as these case studies give substantive evidence of the contexts in which the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* is put to use within Andhra Pradesh. Lastly, this dissertation will be especially pertinent to scholars who wish to understand the performance of *saptāha*s in Southern India, and more specifically in Andhra Pradesh—a region in which *saptāha*s have not yet been critically examined.

The Text and its Genre

The *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* belongs to a fertile genre of religious Hindu texts known as *purāṇa*s. In general, *purāṇa*s are a mix of history, cosmology, narrative, philosophy and *śāstra,* are predominantly Hindu and composed in Sanskrit.[14] The term '*purāṇa*' means old or ancient, and to some extent alludes to the fact that the stories have existed for a long time. These 'old' texts continue to remain a vital part of contemporary Hinduism, as Velcheru Narayana Rao writes:

> The worldview of the Hindus is almost completely derived from the teachings of the *Purāṇa*s. Their views of the creation, protection, and dissolution of the universe, the gods who are responsible for these activities, their views of time and space, cosmological perceptions, ideas of good and evil, karma and rebirth, the sacred and profane - are all derived from the *Purāṇa*s...Essentially, all Hindu religious, political, social, cultural and even literary education is derived from the *Purāṇa*s.[15]

The sheer volume and variety of texts that are considered *purāṇa*s easily make *purāṇa*s the largest, most unruly class of writings in Sanskrit literature.[16] Moreover, the staggering range and

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[14] Exceptions exist. There are non-Hindu *purāṇa*s, namely Buddhist and Jaina, as well as, *purāṇa*s composed in vernacular languages as opposed to Sanskrit. For more on Jaina *purāṇa*s see John E. Cort, "An Overview of the *Jaina Purāṇa*" in *Purāṇa Perennis: Reciprocity and Transformation in Hindu and Jaina Texts,* Edited by Wendy Doniger (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1993) 185-206; Padmanabh S. Jaini, "Jaina Purāṇas: A Purāṇic Counter Tradition" in *Purāṇa Perennis: Reciprocity and Transformation in Hindu and Jaina Texts, ed. Wendy Doniger* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1993) 207–249; An example of a Buddhist *Purāṇa* is the *Svayambhū Purāṇa*.

Vernacular *purāṇa*s, consist of *sthala purāṇa*s, or place *purāṇa*s, that give the history of a temple, town, city, important pilgrimage place, or even country; caste *purāṇa*s, which give the history of a particular caste and often function as a means of giving the lineage for a caste or family; and versions of the canonical *purāṇa*s in a vernacular language; Often these vernacular versions can be just as masterful a rendition of the *purāṇa* as the original Sanskrit *purāṇa*, and should not be considered a lesser version. Rocher, *The Purāṇas*, 67-74. One prime example of this is the *Śrīmad Bhāgavatamu*, the fifteenth-century Telugu poet Potana's masterful Telugu retelling of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*. Kaṇḍāḍai Appan Kṛṣṇamācāryulu. Bammerapōtana *Bhāgavatamu*. Visakhapatnam: Andhra University Press, 1979.

[15] Narayana Rao, "Purāṇas," 104.

[16] Nevertheless, some basic categories for *purāṇa*s do exist, albeit imperfect ones. *Purāṇa*s *can* generally be differentiated into one of the following categories: *mahāpurāṇa*s ("great" *purāṇa*s*)*, *upapurāṇa*s ("sub" or "secondary" *purāṇa*s), *sthala purāṇa*s, caste *purāṇa*s and vernacular *purāṇa*s. The *mahāpurāṇa*s and *upapurāṇa*s make up what is considered the canonical *purāṇa*s, which are more widely known pan-Indic *purāṇic* texts and are

quantity of topics that these texts encompass further obscure attempts at thematic definition and classification of *purāṇa*s. Adding complexity to the problem of defining this genre, as detailed below, are the differences between conceptions of *purāṇa*s within the tradition and outside of it, particularly in terms of authorship, dating and how to read the texts.

The *purāṇa*s as they exist in their present forms today include both ancient and recent historical narratives, each indicating their own date of origin, therefore making efforts to date *purāṇa*s difficult. This also holds true for the present version of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* that has been transmitted over generations. While there is no real consensus regarding the date of the *Bhāgavata*, based on the work of various modern scholars, it is possible to narrow down the composition of the *Bhāgavata* to sometime between the sixth and eleventh centuries. According to some scholars, because mention is made of the *Bhāgavata* in al-Biruni's list of *purāṇa*s, the *Bhāgavata* must have existed before he created his list in 1030 CE.[17] Based on the more detailed biography of Kṛṣṇa found in the *Bhāgavata*, as compared to the Kṛṣṇa biographies found in the *Harivaṃśa* and *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* which are dated to the third or fourth century CE, Hopkins asserts that the *Bhāgavata* could not have been composed any earlier than 500 CE.[18] Hopkins further summarizes other scholars' positions that seem to lean towards assigning the ninth and tenth centuries as time periods for the *Bhāgavata*'s composition, based on certain content within the

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composed in Sanskrit without exception. The *mahāpurāṇa*s are 18 in number, and considered the larger canonical *purāṇa*s, as the *upapurāṇa*s, also 18 in number, are just as well known and read, despite their designation as lesser *purāṇa*s. The *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* is generally said to be included among the *mahāpurāṇa*s. Rocher, *The Purāṇas,* 30.

[17] Thomas J. Hopkins, "The Social Teaching of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*" in *Krishna: Myths, Rites, and Attitudes*, ed. Milton B. Singer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966, 3-21), 4. Also, J. A. B. van Buitenen, "On the Archaism of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*." *Krishna: Myths, Rites, and Attitudes, ed*. Milton B. Singer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966, 23-40), 25-6.

[18] Hopkins, "Social Teaching of *Bhāgavata*,"4-5; Also, van Buitenen, "On Archaism," 26-7.

Bhāgavata.[19] Of particular note for the scholars Hopkins surveys, as well as others, is the central thread of *Vaiṣṇava bhakti* running through the *Bhāgavata*, which is attributed originally to the South Indian Tamil Āḷvār,[20] a group of *Vaiṣṇava* ascetic poets existing during the seventh through the ninth centuries.[21] And while there is also no consensus regarding who composed the *Bhāgavata*, because of the strong *Vaiṣṇava bhakti* content found throughout the narratives of the *Bhāgavata*, along with other references to South India, many scholars do agree that the *Bhāgavata* was most likely composed in South India.

Within the tradition, the Brahmin sage Vyāsa, who divided the Vedas and composed the epic *Mahābhārata* among other texts, is also credited with compiling the *purāṇa*s. In the *Bhāgavata*'s origin story, Vyāsa, after completing the epic *Mahābhārata*, finds himself feeling unsatisfied.[22] The divine sage Nārada tells Vyāsa that his discontent arose from the fact that Vyāsa had yet to describe the highest form of knowledge, *bhakti*. Vyāsa then went into a deep meditative state, had visions and realizations which led him to understand the importance of devotion, from which he subsequently composes the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* as a panacea for all mankind. The *Bhāgavata*, having been divinely inspired but composed by an infallible human (Vyāsa), thus falls under the category of Hindu scripture known as *smṛti*, "that which is

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[19] Hopkins, "Social Teaching of *Bhāgavata*," 4; Other scholars, such as Edward Bryant, argue that it is possible that the *Bhāgavata* might have been composed earlier in the fourth-sixth century CE during the Gupta period when most *mahāpurāṇa*s were compiled. Edwin Bryant, "The Date and Provenance of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* and the Vaikuntha Perumal Temple." *Journal of Vaiṣṇava Studies* 11, no. 1 (2002). And yet other scholars, ascribe the *Bhāgavata*'s composition to grammarian Vopadeva in the late thirteenth century. Rocher, *The Purāṇas*, 145.

[20] *Vaiṣṇava bhakti* refers to devotion (*bhakti*) to Viṣṇu as the supreme God. Viṣṇu or Nārāyāṇa's supremacy is based largely upon his many incarnations, including the one as Kṛṣṇa.

[21] Hopkins, "Social Teaching of *Bhāgavata*,"5; For extensive information about the Āḷvārs and their connection to the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* see Friedhelm Hardy, *Viraha-Bhakti: The Early History of Kṛṣṇa Devotion in South India*. (Delhi: Oxford, 1983).

[22] *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, I.5.1-I.7.8.

remembered."[23] As such we find that the *Bhāgavata*, like most *Purāṇa*s, is routinely modified and adapted to fit a contemporary context and audience. However, this does not mean that the *purāṇa*s are considered any less sacred or authoritative, nor read any less by Brahmins. It is quite the opposite, in fact, as it is generally Brahmins who today still read, train and perform the *purāṇa*s to the wider audiences.[24]

As the most popular and famous member of the *purāṇa* genre, the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* remains a crucial component in our understanding of contemporary Hindu communities.[25] The multiple translations and adaptations of the *Bhāgavata* in both whole and partial form into vernacular and even western languages, are themselves evidence of the *Bhāgavata*'s relatively wide circulation.[26] The significant reach of the *Bhāgavata* in Hindu thought is also evident in the staggering amount of commentaries written about the *Bhāgavata* by authors of various schools of thought, as compared to other *purāṇa*s which only have at most a few, if any at all.[27] The *Bhāgavata* also serves as fundamental text for *Vaiṣṇava* sects, particularly those devoted to Kṛṣṇa, such as the rapidly growing Swaminarayan sect and the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) founded by A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada.[28] And finally, as my own research would attest to, the continuing proliferation of *Bhāgavata* performances

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[23] Narayana Rao points out that the authors of texts in the Indian tradition serve a semiotic function expressing the importance of a text. "The texts of the highest authority are above human authorship. The Veda comes under this classification. Texts of the next level of authority are composed by a superhuman, and therefore infallible, person, Vyāsa." The Vedas are *śruti* texts (direct revelation) and texts composed by Vyāsa (indirect revelation) are *smṛti*. Narayana Rao, "Purāṇa As Brahminic Ideology," 93.

[24] Edwin F. Bryant, "Kṛṣṇa in the Tenth Book of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*." In *Kṛṣṇa: A Sourcebook*, ed. by Edwin F. Bryant. (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 112.

[25] Rocher, *The Purāṇas*, 148.

[26] Bryant, "Kṛṣṇa in Tenth Book," 112. Bryant notes that the tenth book of the *Bhāgavata* (either separately or as part of a whole *Bhāgavata* translation) has been translated into most all the languages of India, as well as European languages such as French and English as early as the mid-nineteenth century.

[27] Ibid. Bryant counts 81 existing commentaries for the *Bhāgavata*; Rocher, *The Purāṇas*, 149.

[28] See "The International Society For Krishna Consciousness", accessed August 11, 2013, http://iskcon.org/.

throughout India in a multiplicity of formats—including *saptāha*, *kathā*, pilgrimage plays (*raslīlā*s), television serials, movies and recitations—indicate the *Bhāgavata*'s on-going importance to contemporary Hindu communities.

The narrative sections of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* comprise the more widely known and read portions of the text. The most popular and translated section of *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* is its tenth canto which recounts the life of Kṛṣṇa, featuring the most popular stories of his birth, childhood in Vrindavan, his play with the *gopī*s (cowherd girls), and marriage to Rukmiṇī. The tenth canto is also the largest of the *Bhāgavata*'s twelve cantos, or *skandha*s, as it comprised of 90 chapters, or *adhyāya*s, of the total 335 *adhyāya*s found in the *Bhāgavata*.[29]

While the *Bhāgavata* is generally considered a Vaiṣṇavite text—holding Viṣṇu as the supreme Absolute Truth from which all things evolve—it is also a Kṛṣṇa-centered text, that has been used by many Kṛṣṇaite sects to assert that Kṛṣṇa is the supreme Absolute Truth from whom even Viṣṇu evolves.[30] The first nine cantos feature well-known narratives that detail the previous incarnations of Viṣṇu prior to Kṛṣṇa. The narratives also relate the most exemplary Viṣṇu devotees—Prahlāda, Parikṣit, Gajendra, Dhruva, etc.—demonstrating various aspects and requirements for following *bhakti-yoga*, the spiritual path of devotion to God, specifically here, Viṣṇu. Throughout these nine cantos, though Viṣṇu is not in any way subordinated to Kṛṣṇa, the tenth book of the *Bhāgavata*, which details Kṛṣṇa's incarnation, presents Kṛṣṇa as the Supreme Being and the ultimate goal of *bhakti-yoga*, the spiritual path of devotion.[31]

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[29] Actually 27% as figured by Ludo Rocher. Rocher, *The Purāṇas*, 141.

[30] Some examples of these sects include ISKCON, Caitanya sects, Vallabha sects and the Swaminarayan sects. Bryant, "Kṛṣṇa in Tenth Book,"112.

[31] As *Bhāgavata* scholar Edwin Bryant writes more eloquently: "The books prior to the tenth teach various aspects of *bhakti-yoga*, the path of devotion, and are actually mostly associated with Viṣṇu as the goal of devotion.…The tenth book reveals the goal: Lord Kṛṣṇa himself. Thus the prior books prepare the reader for the *Bhāgavata*'s full revelation of God's personal nature that is disclosed in the tenth book, a fact suggested by the *Purāṇa* itself (2.10.1-

The *Bhāgavata* is set initially in Naimiṣa forest with Śaunaka and the other sages present

asking and longing for the Sūta, or bard, to tell them about Kṛṣṇa. The Sūta proceeds to praise

Kṛṣṇa and extol the virtue of Kṛṣṇa *bhakti*.[32] He then proceeds to tell them how the *Bhāgavata*

came to be composed by Vyāsa, who told it to his son Śuka, who in turn narrated the *Bhāgavata*

for the first time on earth to the dying King Parikṣit. As the Sūta recounts Parikṣit's life, it is the

king's final seven days that ultimately produce the second narrative frame. King Parikṣit having

been cursed to die in seven days by snakebite, cedes his kingdom to his son and goes to the

banks of the Ganga to die. There, longing to hear about Kṛṣṇa, he encounters the sage Śuka. And

so begins the second frame of the *Bhāgavata*, as Śuka proceeds to narrate Vyasa's *Bhāgavata*

Purāṇa to the dying King Parikṣit. Thus, the *Bhāgavata* has two major narrative frames, the

innermost in which Śuka shares the bulk of the content of the *Bhāgavata* with King Parikṣit, and

the outer frame where the Sūta tells the Sages in Naimiṣa about Śuka's narrative to King Parikṣit.

Like King Parikṣit, most people attending the performances, already know the stories of

Kṛṣṇa and the beloved devotees featured in the first nine cantos and therefore, do not come to

hear the stories for the first time. As Velcheru Narayana Rao writes:

> Parikṣit's request is to be informed of the story of Kṛṣṇa's birth; but a closer
> look will reveal that he actually asks to listen to a story he already knows,
> for the joy of listening to Kṛṣṇa's story another time, for the mere joy of
> hearing…The *bhakti Purāṇa*s now essentially create an atmosphere of
> participation in religious ecstasy. The emphasis is not on information but
> rather on a renewed opportunity to experience the divine. It is not
> communication but communion.[33]

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2). In this the *Bhāgavata* along with the [*Bhagavad*] *Gītā*, which also promotes Kṛṣṇa as the Supreme Being, is one of the two primary sources of scriptural authority that the Kṛṣṇa sects rely on in their prioritization of Kṛṣṇa as the highest Absolute Truth and personal godhead." Bryant, "Kṛṣṇa in Tenth Book," 113-4.

[32] The Sūta is the sage Ugraśravas, son of Romaharṣaṇa. (*Bhāgavata Purāṇa* I.2.1)

[33] Narayana Rao, "Purāṇa as Brahminic Ideology," 99.

Parallel to King Pariksit, Narayana Rao argues that audiences of *bhakti purāṇa*s participate in these performances as a means of communing with the object of their devotion and not to hear a new story. As a particularly Kṛṣṇa-*bhakti*-oriented *purāṇa*, discourses on the *Bhāgavata* are usually regarded as devotional performances and attendees consider themselves to be participating in an act of devotion. Participants look to hear the same narratives again and again, enjoying them even if they are told in a variety of ways.

The *Bhāgavata*'s narrative frames—Sūta and the sages in Naimiṣa forest; Śuka and King Pariksit —place the *Bhāgavata* in a dialogical structure. The *Bhāgavata*'s entire contents unfold through the questions and answers of these interlocuters and respondents. Likewise, all *purāṇa*s are framed within such a dialogic structure, where someone or some group of persons asks a vast question such as "How did the world come to be?" or requests to hear a particular story to a knowledgeable sage, the Sūta. The sage's reply, meant to enlighten the question for all mankind, launches the *purāṇa*'s content. Narayana Rao dubs this dialogical frame the *purāṇa* ethos and explains that it "creates an elevated tone and authenticity, the topics discussed acquire an aura of infallibility."[34] Aside from generating this authenticity, the dialogical frame also enables the *purāṇa*s to cover a variety of topics within it.

Another feature of *purāṇa*s that functions in a similar way, are the *pañcalakṣaṇa,* or five (*pañca*) distinguishing marks (*lakṣaṇa*). The five distinguishing marks are:

> *sarga*, the story of the creation of the universe; *pratisarga*, the secondary creation or recreation of the universe after its dissolution; *vaṃśa*, genealogies of the gods, the sun, the moon, and other beings; *manvantara*, the period of time when a particular Manu from among the fourteen Manus in every *kalpa* (see below) is in charge; and *vaṃśānucarita*, the history of the kings in the ruling dynasty during the particular *manvantara* in question.[35]

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[34] Narayana Rao, "Purāṇas," 102.

[35] Ibid., 97.

Again with *purāṇa*s, no rules are absolute and in the case of the *pañcalakṣaṇa* that rings true as well. Generally these five marks do not comprise much of the *purāṇa*s, nor does every *purāṇa* consistently employ all five marks. Modern scholars were often confused by the relatively scant attention *purāṇa*s spent on these *pañcalakṣaṇa*, mistakenly assuming that these five marks were topics that had to be addressed by the *purāṇa*. More recent theories view the five marks as a didactic frame within which non-*pañcalakṣaṇa* materials are given a spatio-temporal reference point.[36] More specifically, Velcheru Narayana Rao suggests that the *pañcalakṣaṇa* work as an ideological frame, because they serve to "ideologically transform whatever content is incorporated into the *purāṇa*s into a Brahmanic scheme of time and place."[37] Because the *pañcalakṣaṇa* order to the narrative events of the individual *purāṇa* both in terms of time and space, Narayana Rao argues that the *pañcalakṣaṇa* generate a world and a worldview.[38]

The *Bhāgavata Purāṇa,* however, is peculiar in regards to the *pañcalakṣaṇa* as it claims to have not just five, but ten distinguishing marks. Narayana Rao explains this doubling of the *lakṣaṇa* as "an effort on the part of Brahmanic ideology to signify two things: one, the incorporation of *bhakti* into its fold, and, two, Purāṇic approval of *bhakti*."[39] Emerging from the Tamil Āḷvār *bhakti* movement proliferating in the south, the *Bhāgavata* is a *bhakti purāṇa*. In

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[36] Greg Bailey, *Gaṇeśapurāṇa*, (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1995.), 8. Bailey writes: "The *pañcalakṣaṇa* scheme is a deliberate attempt to provide a temporal and spatial anchorage point into which non-*pañcalakṣaṇa* matrial can be located. Its presence as a defining referent or implicit context extends to all *Purāṇa*s, even those where the individual *lakṣaṇa*s are scarcely represented. Whilst its development requires an extended narrative in which to unfold, its content stipulations do not exhaust *Purāṇic* contents. Nor is it the only semantic system to exert an important influence on the configuration of *Purāṇic* contents and the choice of what is included and excluded in a given *Purāṇa*s."

[37] Narayana Rao, "Purāṇas," 102.; See also for a more detailed analysis of this theory, Narayana Rao, "Purāṇa as Brahmanic Ideology," 85-100.

[38] Narayana Rao, "Purāṇa as Brahmanic Ideology," 89.

[39] Ibid., 99.

particular, the type of *bhakti* espoused by the Āḷvārs, *viraha bhakti*, was a somewhat new devotional movement characterized by passionate, emotional feelings for God, as opposed to Northern *bhakti* traditions which were more intellectual and disciplined.[40] Within this emotional *bhakti*, deep affection and erotic love are acceptable forms of expressing devotion to God. As such, anyone—no matter what one's station, class, education, gender, or caste—practicing this form of emotional *bhakti* could directly access God. This, of course, undermines a Brahmanical society based on caste, social and patriarchal hierarchies and Brahmanic ritual authority. Therefore, in order to integrate this emotional *bhakti* into the Brahmanic fold and 'Brahmanize' the *Bhāgavata*, the *lakṣaṇa*s were increased.

Aside from the ten *lakṣaṇa*s, another noted peculiarity of the *Bhāgavata* is the archaic Sanskrit found within the text. What makes the archaisms peculiar is that the Vedic language used in the *Bhāgavata* had long been out of use in Sanskrit texts generated during the *Bhāgavata*'s general composition. J. A. B. van Buitenen argues that these archaisms are attempts to Sanskritize the *Bhāgavata* and render the text as an older text than it actually is. By Sanskritization, van Buitenen is referring to much more than a linguistic conversion—rendering something into Sanskrit—but more so to a "process in the Indian civilization in which a person or a group consciously relates himself or itself to an accepted notion of true and ancient ideology and conduct."[41]   In other words, the archaisms served to legitimize the text within the reigning cultural norms, in this case a Vedic or Brahmanic authority, which is sometimes subverted by the *Bhāgavata*'s *bhakti*. As this dissertation will demonstrate, this enables both an orthodox Brahmanical reading of the *Bhāgavata* as well as a contemporary, cosmopolitan reading.

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[40] Friedhelm Hardy, *Viraha-Bhakti: The Early History of Kṛṣṇa Devotion in South India* (Delhi: Oxford, 1983).

[41] van Buitenen, "On Archaisms," 35.

Aside from reading the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* as scripture, the physical book of the *Bhāgavata* is worshiped as a sacred object as well. In many of the *Bhāgavata* performances I witnessed, the physical text of the *Bhāgavata* was worshiped and kept on the altar at the performance. For *Bhāgavata saptāha*s in particular, as per the prescription laid out for the performance of *Bhāgavata saptāha*s in the *Bhāgavata Māhātmya*, worship of the physical text of the *Bhāgavata* is required at the start of the performance.[42] As the *Bhāgavata Māhātmya* further instructs on how the book should be worshiped, it also reiterates the fact that the *Bhāgavata* is to be considered as Kṛṣṇa himself.[43] Finally, the *Bhāgavata Māhātmya* also suggests that at the conclusion of the *saptāha* sponsors with adequate means should also honor the Brahmin *paurāṇika* with the gift of a well-scribed copy of the *Bhāgavata* on a golden lion-throne.[44]

In some instances, this worship of the *Bhāgavata* was a grand spectacle with the text being carried in upon the head (or heads if there were multiple texts) of the *purohit*, a sponsor or the expositor of the performance. One such case I witnessed, was at the mass *Bhāgavata saptāha* given by Bhaishri in Gacchibowli Stadium, where he and 21 Brahmins entered the pavillion where the discourse was to be held with copies of the *Bhāgavata* wrapped in silk upon their heads at the start of the *saptāha*. McComas Taylor also documents uses of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* as an object of worship as follows:

> [The *Bhāgavata*] was carried on the head of the exponent's assistant on arrival; it was welcomed at the gate by the *devta;* it was the ultimate source of the narratives and raison d'etre for the *saptah;* it was honored as "God in physical form" during the discourse; it was the focus of all ritual action at the throne; it was accompanied by the *devta* to the gate on departure; and it was carried on the head of the sponsor on departure.[45]

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[42] *Bhāgavata Māhātmya*, 6.28-31.

[43] Ibid,. 6.30

[44] Ibid., 6.68-71.

[45] Taylor, "Village Deity and Sacred Text," 215.

Likewise, at all *saptāha*s I observed, a physical copy of the *Bhāgavata*, usually carefully wrapped in cloth, would be placed on the altar, sometimes on a special bookstand, alongside of images of other deities. At minimum, worship in the form of a small *pūjā* concluded with *ārati* would be conducted to the text.[46] Participants also made offerings, usually of flowers, to the *Bhāgavata* throughout the performance, as well.

In any and all situations, the *Bhāgavata*, like all other sacred objects and texts, is to be handled with the utmost care by devotees. It should never be put directly on the floor, nor allowed to come into contact with dirty and impure surfaces or items—such as feet, alcohol, meat, etc. Such ways of handling the *Bhāgavata* (as well as other sacred texts) were often emphasized in all the performances I witnessed. Moreover, some expositors would emphasize the cleanliness and purity of those who would even read the text, stressing that one should not touch or read the *Bhāgavata* while smoking, drinking or eating, while under the influence of alcohol or any other intoxicant, while laying down, in bed, unshowered or otherwise unclean, inappropriately dressed, or otherwise ritually impure.[47]

It should be noted that the worship of a sacred text is not a practice limited to the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa,* limited to recent times, nor even to Hindu practices. Worship of the book, or the 'cult of the book' as book worship in South Asia is also referred to as linked to the rise of

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[46] *Pūjā* is a religious ritual in which a deity, religious object or revered person is honored with various offerings, including food which is then consecrated and distributed as blessed food, or *prasād*. *Pūjā*s vary in scale based on the venue and the occasion. Thus, a *pūjā* done at home will generally be smaller and simpler, whereas a *pūjā* conducted for a particular holy event at a temple might be quite elaborate, expensive and grand. *Pūjā*s often involve *ārati*, a light offering in which a small lit ghee (clarified butter) or oil lamp is waved in front of the image or the object of worship in a circular fashion.

[47] Most vocal about the conduct and condition of those who would touch and read the *Bhāgavata* was Chandramurthy Shastry during his *saptāha* discourse, detailed further below in Chapter Two. Other performers such as Prema Pandurang emphasized proper conduct when handling the *Bhāgavata*, and extended that conduct towards all scripture. All expositors at some point in their discourse strongly condemned those who would handle or read the *Bhāgavata* while imbibing any intoxicants, eating, drinking and not having showered first.

Mahāyāna Buddhism, as well as, the rise of *bhakti* (devotional) movements. As Gregory Schopen notes, worship of scripture is not new to the South Asian religious context, as the 'cult of the book,' a culture of worshiping Buddhist *sūtra*s, existed during the rise of Mahāyāna Buddhism as a devotional practice:

> Another very common class of devotional acts mentioned in our texts is connected with activity directed toward sacred books—the preservation, copying, hearing, reciting, and worshipping of individual *sūtra*s.[48]

By revering, transmitting and worshiping the *sūtra*s in their physical recorded form, devotees earned many rewards including religious merit. Schopen argues that the cult of the book arose in response to the prevalent Buddhist practice of worshiping relics. While it was initially meritorious for devotees to listen to recitations of the *sūtra*s by wandering reciters, once the *sūtra*s were recorded they were then interred in the places where these recitations often took place. This in turn enabled the development of stable, tangible centers of practice surrounding *sūtra*s that were now put into physical form, similar to the centers of worship established for relics.[49]

In his article "Purāṇa as Scripture: From Sound to Image of the Holy Word in the Hindu Tradition," C. Mackenzie Brown summarizes the rise of the cult of the book in Hinduism, ceding that it most likely did follow after the Mahāyāna Buddhist rise of the cult of the book. Citing early Buddhist narratives which demonstrate an acceptance of the written books and conscripted texts as opposed to early Brahminical texts which indicate a resistance to conscripting text and preference for oral transmission, Brown argues that it is likely that the rise of the cult of the book in Mahāyāna Buddhism preceded the rise of the cult of the book in Hinduism. Once the Buddhist

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[48] Gregory Schopen, "The Phrase 'sa pṛthivīpradeśaś caityabhūto bhavet' in the Vajracchedikā: Notes on the Cult of the Book in Mahāyāna," *Indo-Iranian Journal* 17 (1975), 159.

[49] Schopen, "The Phrase 'sa pṛthivīpradeśaś caityabhūto bhavet' in the Vajracchedikā," 179-180.

canon was recorded around 35-32 BC, soon after Brown notes that the epic *Mahābhārata* is rendered into book form. Subsequently in both Buddhism and Hinduism devotional practices surrounding the written book—such as worship, copying, preservation and gifting of the physical text—appear.[50] Likewise, the copies of epics and *purāṇa*s were kept in parallel Hindu institutions, such as temples and *maṭha*s, seminaries where students and householders were given religious instruction. The *maṭha*s, in turn, became areas of cultic activity surrounding texts, especially with regards to instruction, dissemination and transmission of texts, similar to Buddhist monasteries.[51]

The importance of the rise of the *bhakti* movement is also an important aspect of the rise of the cult of the book particularly in terms of Hinduism. As Brown writes:

> The *bhakti*c tendencies towards inclusiveness of all castes, manifested in the relative openness of the Purāṇas themselves, inevitably lead to new interpretations of the relationship between the Brahmans and the other classes. In the practice of book giving, for example there is a significant reversal of roles: when scripture was purely oral, it was given by the Brahmans to others; in its written form, it can now be given by others to Brahmans.[52]

Not only does the gifting of the book to Brahmins allow for a reversal of roles among *bhakti* cults, but worship of the physical text also allowed devotees an immediate access to their deity. Worship of the physical text enabled devotees to sidestep the Brahmin, who otherwise is the only specialist who may transmit the oral text, and directly commune with the deity through adorning the sacred text in fine clothes, placing it in a decorative box or upon a special throne and then performing *pūjā* to the physical text. As indicated above, these types of reverance for the

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[50] C. Mackenzie Brown, "Purāṇa as Scripture: From Sound to Image of the Holy Word in the Hindu Tradition," *History of Religions*, Vol.26.1 (1986), 78.

[51] Ibid., 80.

[52] Ibid., 78.

physical text are prominent with regards to the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, and even within the scope of the oral performances documented in this thesis, the physical book of the *Bhāgavata* is present and highly regarded.

Reading in South Asia

My work follows from a long line of scholarship examining epic and purāṇic texts and reading practices in South Asia. Particularly, my project stems from the understanding that the oral culture from which these texts emerged in the first place has an integral part in their continued use in contemporary culture as well as in defining what the text is itself. Even though these texts now exist in print form, they began as oral texts and largely continue to remain oral, particularly in terms of their reading and transmission. As a consequence, these texts are transmitted through oral performances—usually by trained tellers following in a long line of tellers—resulting in multiple varying iterations of each text. While early scholars of *purāṇa*s were critical of these multiple iterations, believing them to be corruptions of a singular critical edition of the text, scholars today recognize "the important fact that liberties in the transmission of the *purāṇa*s are normal and accepted at every level, and that translators in no way act differently than the editors of the printed editions."[53]

More recent scholars of South Asian epics have begun to study these various iterations along with the intricate connections between these texts and their oral performances from an indigenous perspective. For example, Flueckiger and Sears' edited volume, *Boundaries of the Text,* features a collection of essays based on performance traditions of the epic texts, the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa*. These essays complicate black and white distinctions between

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[53] Rocher, *The Purāṇas*, 53.

oral and written texts as they explore in just what ways are these texts bounded. By defining text more broadly as "marked words" both oral and written, the various essays defy the notion of a continuous movement from oral to written, while also illustrating multiple strata of interaction between oral performances and written texts.[54] In her essay, Wendy Doniger suggests thinking about these texts as fluid and fixed: where fluid texts indicate both written and oral texts that are more malleable and have pliant boundaries, whereas fixed texts, both written and oral, have set, stable boundaries that are not to be changed.[55]

Similarly, Paula Richmond's edited volume, *Many Rāmāyaṇas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia*, features a collection of articles about various iterations of the epic *Rāmāyaṇa*.[56] This collection of articles operates under the assumption that all versions of the *Rāmāyaṇa* are just as worthy and valid as Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa*, which has become the prevailing edition of the text. The essays in the volume also seek to showcase the diverse ways in which the *Rāmāyaṇa* is retold, ranging from other written versions, puppet theater, songs, etc. As a result, the many *Rāmāyaṇa*s presented in the volume illustrate the continuous, diverse and sometimes conflicting *Rāmāyaṇa*s that are allowed by the *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition.

In particular, A.K. Ramanujan's article *Three Hundred Rāmāyaṇas: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation* within the volume explains this phenomenon of the continual production of new, diverse versions of South Asian epics as symbolic translation:

> The word translation itself here acquires a somewhat mathematical sense, of mapping a structure of relations onto another plane or another symbolic system. When this happens, the Rāma story has become almost a second language of the whole culture area, a shared core of names, characters, incidents, and motifs, with a narrative language in which Text 1 can say one

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[54] Flueckiger and Sears, "Boundaries of Text," 1.

[55] Doniger, "Fluid and Fixed Texts," 31-2.

[56] See fn. 4 for full citation.

thing and Text 2 something else, even the exact opposite. Valmiki's Hindu and Vimalasuri's Jaina texts in India—or the Thai Ramakirti in Southeast Asia--are such symbolic translations of each other.[57]

Thus, such things as plot elements, characters, motifs and names that are basic, well-known components to the *Rāmāyaṇa* become a language of their own. As such, these components serve as a structural frame for a new iteration of the story where all the content in between can be filled with local details and/or even narratives that are contradictory to the previous iterations or various iterations of the story. Ramanujan eventually refers to this "language" as a common code or common pool of signifiers:

> These various texts not only relate to prior texts directly, to borrow or refute, but they relate to each other through this common code or common pool. Every author, if one may hazard a metaphor, dips into it and brings out a unique crystallization, a new text with a unique texture and a fresh context. … In this sense, no text is original, yet no telling is a mere reading—and the story has no closure, although it may be enclosed in a text. In India and in Southeast Asia, no one ever reads the *Rāmāyaṇa* or the *Mahābhārata* for the first time. The stories are there, "always already."[58]

Through this common code of signifiers these texts, while still related to one another, can also be individual and personalized to fit the context, the author and his/her potential audience. Moreover, this allows for a never-ending stream of *Rāmāyaṇa*s, as no one *Rāmāyaṇa* can claim to be the original. Instead, all iterations have some claim to being a '*Rāmāyaṇa*'. This is all possible ultimately as Ramanujan points out, because the narratives of the *Rāmāyaṇa* (and *Mahābhārata*) are not new to the general populations surrounding the text in India and Southeast Asia. This shared corpus of narrative is what comprises this common pool of signifiers.

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[57] A. K. Ramanujan, "Three Hundred *Rāmāyaṇas*: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translations" in *Many Rāmāyanas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia*, ed. Paula Richmond (Berkley: University of California Press, 1991), 45.

[58]Ibid, 46.

As seen above, the narratives of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, particularly the Kṛṣṇa narratives, are also widely known by most Hindus. Likewise, the narratives of the *Bhāgavata* can serve as common pool of signifiers just as the epics outlined above. The *Bhāgavata*, moreover, with its *purāṇic* structures of the ten *lakṣaṇa*s which function as a didactic frame and the narrative frames which function as dialogic frames may encompass virtually any version of the narratives within those frames. This enables the *Bhāgavata* to serve as a shared idiom, a shared vocabulary of sorts, from which participants may generate a wide spectrum of *Bhāgavata*s and with them, envision a variety of worldviews. In this way, I argue that the *Bhāgavata* is a site of creation and recreation of various visions of Hinduism.

In terms of understanding the *Bhāgavata* as a process, it is important to look at the way in which these South Asian texts are read and performed. Through his studies of performances of the devotional text the *Rāmcaritmānas,* in *The Life of the Text*, Philip Lutgendorf called attention to the fact that no one in Hindu religious communities was reading the *Rāmcaritmānas* in a linear fashion from beginning to end. Velcheru Narayana Rao also noted this to be the case for *purāṇa*s as well, further distinguishing between two sorts of texts: recorded texts, and received texts. In his formulation, the recorded text is the authoritative version of the text that is written down, whereas the received text is the text that is determined by the performer.[59] Because the written text is on paper, its form suggests it will be read sequentially page-by-page, giving equal valence to the entire text. In contrast, the received text is produced by the performers of the text as they highlight particular sections, de-emphasize some and omit others. In effect, the performers compose a new text based on their selections, which becomes the received text. Often these readings will include interpolations and references to other texts as well.

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[59] Narayana Rao, "Purāṇas," 114.

The flexibility of the text allows communities to make coherent readings while simultaneously enabling them to maintain a sense of continuity to their traditions. Because the performers' selective narrative and textual references are contextualized within a literary background shared both with the audience and with the larger Hindu world, the texts are rendered intelligible to the audience, both through language and narrative. As detailed in the first case study, during the *saptāha* performance in Kollapalli, Chandramurthy Shastry paraphrases the Sanskrit *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* in Telugu while employing many orthodox religious terms, chants, local rituals, and literary allusions to other religious texts. In doing so, he communicates to his relatively traditional, Brahmin audience what applications he thinks the text has for their lives, ranging from daily living practices to specific methods for conducting worship. However, his discourse requires accurate assessment of the audience, so that not only will his interpolations, references, etc. be understood by his audience, but also approved as legitimate.

Similarly, in the second case study, the metropolitan *Bhāgavata kathā*, the unconventional female Brahmin preacher, Prema Pandurang, retells the *Bhāgavata* in English to her urban, modern, cosmopolitan audience. Faced with a more pan-Indic audience united more by education and class than by caste and locality, not only must she provide a new set of qualifications to demonstrate her own legitimacy as a performer, but her interpolations and literary allusions include more broadly known Hindu scriptures, as well as secular texts. In this way, she is able to generate a reading of the *Bhāgavata* that espouses the traditional values her audience is looking for while still incorporating the seemingly clashing values of their contemporary, urban lifestyles.

This thesis demonstrates a complex but ephemeral connectivity between performers and audiences that only exists between that performer and that specific audience. What emerges is a

text that is crafted both explicitly from the performer's choices based upon his textual background and implicitly from the needs of the audience based on their textual background and social or religious location. This allows for a multiplicity of *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*s that are particular to their communities.

In the larger context of reading religious texts, this dissertation speaks to questions related to how we read and understand scripture, and ultimately definitions of religious texts in general. By reintegrating the oral component to the *Bhāgavata* through utilizing a performance-centered approach (as detailed below in Methodology), this dissertation attempts to analyze the text in a way that recovers the agency of the participants reading and using the text. Thus, one notable issue in the study of scripture and texts in general, deals with finding a happy medium between contextual studies of the text and philological studies of texts. Often one method is favored exclusively over the other. This limits how texts can be understood, disabling ways of considering how a text can help imagine the world outside of it. Calling for a textual methodology that includes both approaches, Ronald Inden writes in the Introduction to *Querying the Medieval*:

> We want to think of texts as works enmeshed in the circumstances in which people have made and used them, and we want to see them both as articulating the world in which they are situated and as articulated by it, that is integral to the makeup of one another.[60]

In his statement above, Inden and his colleagues are seeking to find a way in which the generative capacity of a text can be recognized. An exclusively philological study ignores the context, or world, which surrounds the text, while an exclusively context-based study focuses on the world outside of the text without recognizing how the text itself shaped that world.

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[60] Ronald Inden, "Introduction," in *Querying the Medieval: Texts and the History of Practices in South Asia,* ed. Daud Ali, Ronald Inden and Jonathan Walters (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 3.

Balancing philological and context-based studies of texts is also a concern for scholars of scripture, who seek to restore the oral dimensions to texts that seem to be only studied in written contexts. In his book *Beyond the Written Word*, William A. Graham examines how the loss of the oral dimension in Biblical studies has diminished the dynamic nature of the Bible, turning it instead into an object to be deciphered.[61] By examining various scriptural traditions, including the Bible, *Qur'ān* and a survey of oral Indian scripture, Graham concludes that the Western bias towards written scripture over oral scripture ultimately reduces the role of the readers to a passive, quiet role, rather than recognizing the dynamic role performers and audiences have in reading the text. Yet again, a strictly philological study or strictly context-based study is problematic as the first in reifying the text ignores the agency of the readers/performers and the latter over-emphasizes the outside factors surrounding the text, also ignoring the reader/performer's agency. Disregarding the performer's agency reduces scripture to an object, overlooking the dynamic collaborate process that *is* oral scripture. This process allows scripture to be a verdant field capable of producing a myriad of fruitful texts that shape the world around it and its readers too. By thinking of scripture as both a site of production and as a collaborative process, we are able to engage the text and its readers in more vibrant and compelling ways, opening up new insights into how texts and readers generate the very religious traditions they come from.

Performance-centered Approach

As seen above, in a consideration of readings of Hindu texts, there is a necessary shift to performance-based readings of these texts. Along with shifting to a performance based reading,

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[61] William A. Graham, *Beyond the Written Word: Oral Aspects of Scripture in the History of Religion* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

this project also seeks a performance-centered approach as outlined below. To give attention to performative contexts, I carried out ethnographic research, collecting data by taking mp3 recordings, video recordings and pictures of a massive, metropolitan *saptāha* in Hyderabad (Rameshbhai Oza's "*Srimad Bhagawat* Katha Gyan Yagna" held in Goshamahal Police Stadium, Hyderabad from February 18 through 24, 2006 in Hindi);[62] two different *saptāha*s held in two different temples in the city of Guntur (Hariprasad Sharma's "*Śrīmad Bhāgavata* Saptāha" conducted at the Satyanārāyāṇa Temple in Guntur from November 23 through 30, 2006 in Telugu); Nandakumaracharya Shastry's "*Śrīmad Bhāgavata* Saptāhamu" conducted at the Veṅkaṭeśvara Temple in Guntur from January 22 through 29, 2007 in Telugu); a small rural *saptāha* in the village of Kolapalli (Kolapalli's ninetieth annual "*Bhāgavata* Saptāha Jñānayajña Mahōtsavamulu," expounded by Chandramurthy in Kolapalli from Sept. 1 through 8, 2006 in Telugu); a remote *saptāha* held at an ashram (Mahendra Shastry's "*Śrī Bhāgavata* Saptāhamu" conducted in an ashram in Andhra Pradesh from October 8 through 14, 2006 in Telugu), as well as an extensive six-day *kathā* performance by Prema Pandurang in Hyderabad (Professor Prema Pandurang's "Highlights of the Bhagavatam" exposited at Sathya Sai Nigamagamam in Hyderabad from Jan 16 through 21, 2006 in English). Outside of the performances, after hours in towns, I also recorded interviews with participants, using—when these items were met with approval—both notebook recordings and a digital audio recorder. I also read portions of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* with retired literature professor Sampatkumarcharya, of Kakatiya University in Hyderabad, and Sanskrit professor J. Prabhakara Shastry from the city of Visakhapatnam.

In presenting these experiences in the field, I have chosen to focus on the *Bhāgavata saptāha* carried out in Kolapalli, as well as the more extensive urban *kathā* carried out by Prema

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[62] The Anglicized spelling of Bhaishri's performance (as seen on signage and pamphlets at the site of the discourse) has been retained here and throughout the document.

Pandurang, as I found the differences and similarities in these two performances exemplified the contradictions and possibilities of contemporary religious reading in Andhra Pradesh. Focusing on these two performances in depth allowed me to delve into what practices of reading are entailed in contemporary Hinduism in Andhra Pradesh.

These practices of reading the *Bhāgavata*, that is the *Bhāgavata saptāha* and *Bhāgavata kathā*, are linked to the broader category of exposition, known as *kathā*. *Kathā*, from the Sanskrit root –*kath*, "to tell, relate, narrate, report, inform, speak about, declare, explain, describe," can mean most simply story, but often also refers to the telling or exposition of a story.[63] In general, however, when using the term *kathā*, often it is referring to a religious story or the exposition of a religious story. Most of the narratives of *kathā* performances come from the epics, *purāṇa*s, or local religious stories. As Kirin Narayan demonstrates in her book *Storytellers, Saints and Scoundrel: Folk Narrative in Hindu Religious Teaching*, *kathā* performances serve an important didactic function and thus hold a very important place in Indian folklore and religious life.[64]

Though *kathā* is a commonly recognized term throughout India for the performance of religious or moral narrative, it exists in many different levels of complexity and sophisticated forms. For example, a particular form of *kathā* known as *harikathā* exists in Maharastra and Karnataka. In his article "Harikathā—A Study in Communication," Y. B. Damle examines the didactic function of *harikathā* in Maharastra, demonstrating *harikathā* to be an extremely organized type of communication that was often used to educate and influence social and political affairs.[65]

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[63] Monier Williams, *Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, 247.

[64] Kirin Narayan, *Storytellers, Saints and Scoundrels: Folk Narrative in Hindu Religious Teaching*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989).

[65] Y.B. Damle, "Harikathā—A Study in Communication," *Bulletin of the Deccan College Post-Graduate and Research Institute*, (1960), 63-107.

Listening to *kathā* is usually considered a devotional act. The expression of this devotion takes shape among the guidelines each performer provides, thus one useful way of categorizing them is by performer. Kirin Narayan designates four different types of performers of *kathā*: non-specialists who may carry out a personal recitation of the *kathā* from printed pamphlets; Brahmin priests whose readings coincide with ritual occasions they are presiding over; professional storytellers, such as the *paurāṇika*, who speak in front of gathered audiences; and fourth, renunciates and mendicants, who during their own discourse might read portions of sacred texts (e.g. the *Bhāgavata*, *Rāmāyaṇa*) and then comment upon them through exegesis and demonstrative parables.[66] These types of performers further indicate the variety of *kathā* performances prevalent throughout India.

Worth noting, in the first category, would fall *vrata kathā*, a specific type of practice in which devotees make undertake some type of austerity (*vrata*), usually a particular fast of some type on a particular day all delineated within the specific story (*kathā*) of the *vrata kathā*. The *vrata-kathā* may involve the performance of simple or elaborate ritual practices to the central deity of the *vrata-kathā* narrative (if there is one). *Vrata-kathā*s are in some sense the simplest *kathā* performance in that the *katha*s can be read aloud by a non-specialist, individual from pamphlets that are easily available in market place stalls and Indian grocery stores. In most cases, however, the *vrata kathā* narrative stipulates that the *vrata kathā* culminate in the telling or reciting of the *vrata kathā* to someone else.

While *vrata kathā*s seems reminiscent of *Bhāgavata saptāha* performances in terms of concomitant abstemious practices, the *Bhāgavata saptāha* is decidedly different in terms of how the narrative is performed, the scale of the performance and the performer. In most cases *vrata*

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[66] Kirin Narayan, *Storytellers, Saints, and Scoundrels*, 46.

*kathā*s are recited or retold with very little exposition, whereas the *Bhāgavata* is usually retold and expounded upon during a *saptāha* by a professional Brahmin expositor. Even in the few cases of *saptāha*s where the *Bhāgavata* is just recited, it still requires Brahmins to do the reciting and a larger audience. *Vrata kathā*s do not require a professional or even a Brahmin to do the recitation of the story, nor much of an audience. In fact, *vrata kathā*s are most widely practiced by women as part of daily personal practices.[67] Moreover, *Bhāgavata saptāha*s must be conducted over a period of seven days.

Likewise, in the case of *Bhāgavata kathā*s, once again a professional expositor narrates the *Bhāgavata* with commentary and skillful interpolation in front of a gathered audience. Though the *Bhāgavata kathā* is not as rigidly structured as a *Bhāgavata saptāha*, nor does it require the practice of any concomitant austerities for its audience, the *Bhāgavata kathā* is still considered a devotional act. Audience members come for the opportunity to listen to familiar stories of Kṛṣṇa as an act of devotion. The performer meanwhile weaves commentary, selections from other religious narratives and scripture, personal anecdotes, devotional songs, etc. into the performance in order to both deliver whatever didactic message they have for the audience as well as reinforce and further inspire devotion amongst the audience members.

The *Bhāgavata* performances cited in this thesis, therefore, fit soundly into the third category of performance as listed by Kirin Narayan, that requiring the professional storyteller—the *paurāṇika*. Similarly, Philip Lutgendorf in his book, "The Life of a Text: Performing the *Rāmcaritmānas* of Tulsidas," examines professional storytellers as they perform the popular and

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[67] Sometimes, the purpose of the *vrata kathā* dictates how big an audience one might gather to hear the *vrata kathā*. For personal, individual, daily *vrata kathā* practices, practitioners may just settle for reading the *vrata kathā* pamphlet aloud to themselves, if no one is available to listen to the *kathā*. I have witnessed this many times with all of the women in my family who practice various *vrata kathā*s. For christening a new home, on the other hand, a person might hold a *Satyanārāyaṇa Vrata Kathā* and invite a Brahmin priest to perform the *vrata kathā* along with many other guests to hear the vrata *kathā*.

highly sophisticated form of *kathā*, known as the *Mānas*. Prevalent in North India, the *Mānas* is a *kathā* performance of the *Rāmcaritmānas*, a Hindi rendition of the Sanskrit *Rāmāyaṇa* by poet Tulsidas. As Philip Lutgendorf emphasizes throughout his analysis of the *Mānas*, "in Hindu performance traditions the role of the hearer (*śrota*) is participatory rather than passive."[68] Citing Richard Baumann's concept of emergent quality, Lutgendorf goes on to emphasize the process-based quality of the *Rāmcaritmānas*. He writes:

> I would like to repeat that the *Mānas* has for its audience an emergent quality. It is a means rather than an end, a living seed rather than a finished artifact. Similarly, its contemporary realization in *kathā* is more than just the verbalization of written commentary. . . If the broad genre label *kathā* does not distinguish between, on the one hand, the simple retelling of the *Mānas* text, and on the other, its elaboration into such complex forms as described here, I would assert that this is not mere carelessness of terminology but an indigenous recognition of an identity of process. And it is process, not product, that is of the essence.[69]

Lutgendorf and Bauman's notion of an emergent quality thus places meaning-rich narratives as productive centers of process and change. Likewise, as my research of the *Bhāgavata* is concerned with how this emergent process takes shape through public performances, this also frequently involves uncovering the detailed procedures that guide performers and audience members—i.e the ritual aspects of *Bhāgavata* performances.

A useful point of reference in this respect has been the work of anthropologist Victor Turner, whose research into ritual across cultures was developed across the issue of structure and anti-structure. More specifically, how ritual activities—here, readings of the *Bhāgavata*—both buttress the social systems and relations of power that make up people's worlds, while also providing the tools by which these structures can be overcome. The ritual process, for Turner,

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[68] Lutgendorf, *Life of a Text*, 115.

[69] Ibid., 243.

involved a model derived from French ethnologist Arnold Van Gennep's tripartite division of *The Rites of Passage*, where characteristic features of ritual involve first, participants' initial departure from the broader community, secondly the discarding of the social status they have during day to day life to occupy a space of 'liminality' outside of the community, and finally, reincorporation of participants into the broader community. [70] Victor Turner exercises a colorful analogy, describing the communitas experienced by liminal actors involved in ritual as comparable to the element of sacred connection—a blue ring symbolizing Kṛṣṇa drawn between a circle of dancing *gopī* milkmaids who fall into step with him. "Communitas is the link between the *gopī*s, the blue god between each milkmaid."[71] In this sense, the new relationships participants experience as part of their participation in readings, provides the possibility of new linkages, and new movements beyond the ritual itself.

Performance theorists such as Richard Schechner, who often collaborated with Turner in the later years of his career, recognize that the period of time ritual participants share away from broader society has many parallels with that of actors' communities and experiences of staged theatre.[72] Studies of performance that involve carefully tracking audience, director and performers insofar as the efforts of each expand a program for action set apart from day to day life. What is crucial to note here, for my purposes, is that instances of performance, such as those where the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* is read and interpreted, are liminal stages where meaning is produced from the get-go. Performances of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* provide a context for

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[70] See Van Gennep, Arnold *The Rites of Passage*, Monika. B. Vizedon, Gabrielle L. Caffee (trans.) (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1909/1960).

[71] Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1969): 157.

[72] Schechner's work with "The Performance Group" theater company was emphatically anti-authoritarian, and meshed well with Turner's turn away from notions of a fixed, immovable social structure. On the relationship of Victor Turner with performance theorist Richard Schechner, see Kees Epskamp "Intercultural Puzzles. Richard Schechner and the Anthropology of Theatre in the 20th Century," Anthropos, 98, 2, (2003).

participants to develop new actions, responsibilities, senses of personal space and public history in the face of their changing worlds.

Following such a view of performance, rather than theatre being a superfluous vector of society, the actions of the theatre—in my case, the actions of performers and readers of the *Bhāgavata*—are the interactive stuff by which change is acted out upon larger society. Theatre and performance then, is even more pertinent as a moment in which agency, empowerment and the intensity of ritual casts change upon the mundane world. Just as the ritual theatre is permeated by values circulating in the sphere of daily life—for example, the caste references, gendered spaces and Brahminical postures of *Bhāgavata* performances—performances, as rituals, inculcate a space of growth and empowerment for those involved. As Catherine Bell argues within her comprehensive summary of ritual theory, inasmuch as the actors of rituals find a place in which to strategize and perform ritual acts, these produce forms of empowerment.[73] The confluence of ritual and performance theories I take from that moment serve to emphasize that the actions of performance are not derivative or lesser social byproducts, but invoke forms of empowerment: these are performative readings which produce new values, discourses, narratives, status, and communal strategies as such.

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[73] See Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory and Ritual Practice*. Oxford, London, [1992/2009]. In refining her concept of *ritualization*, for example, Catherine Bell writes, "The ultimate purpose of ritualization is neither the immediate goals avowed by the community or the officiant nor the more abstract functions of social solidarity and conflict resolution: it is nothing other than the production of ritualized agents, persons who have an instinctive knowledge of these schemes embedded in their bodies, in their sense of reality, and in their understanding of how to act in ways that both maintain and qualify the complex microrelations of power. Such practical knowledge is not an inflexible set of assumption, beliefs, or body postures: rather, it is the ability to deploy, play, and manipulate basic schemes in ways that appropriate and condition experience effectively. It is a mastery that experiences itself as relatively empowered, not as conditioned or molded." (Bell [1992/2009]: 221). Similarly, readings in Andhra Pradesh involve participants in conditions of their own empowerment, allowing them to measure audience tones and postures, as well as the appropriate moments for narrative interventions, gaining receptivity to the ways that their broader, social worlds hold the potential to change.

Consequently, my focus is on how performative readings of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* provide the grounds upon which contemporary Hinduism is made and shared. I look to moments of metacommunication in *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* performances, and the ritual of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* performances, as these, give shape and meaning to the contemporary Hindu community, even among members who do not directly attend the performances, as these individuals often interact with those whom, coming out of the transformative space of the public *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* readings, bring with them values directed and colored by the intensity of narratives imparted in each performance.

In consideration of how the contemporary moment is informed by these collective meetings and readings I witnessed, I have drawn in part, on both this notion of an emergent quality—i.e. a processual elaboration of meaning—as well as performance theory, especially as this has encouraged me to highlight the agency of the readers and audience members involved in making and commenting upon, each performative event. In taking this approach, I have had reference to the work of Richard Bauman. In his article "Verbal Art as Performance," Bauman writes that speech acts—e.g. jokes, storytelling, anecdotes, oral discourse—and the ordering power of language may be more productively viewed as 'verbal art,' rather than as speech acts, since verbal art conveys more than just basic information or equivalences between signifiers.[74] As verbal art, speech acts are designated as performance, and thus, can be considered as an interpretive frame that acts as one available communicative resource (among others) to the participants of the performance.[75] Performance as a frame, therefore "calls forth special attention to and heightened awareness of the act of expression, and gives license to the audience to regard

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[74] Richard Bauman, "Verbal Art as Performance," 290-311.

[75] Bauman, "Verbal Art as Performance," 293.

the act of expression and the performer with special intensity."[76] In other words, by recognizing the speech act as performance, participants engage in metacommunicative processes, or meta-level activities in which they assess the performer and performance as it is happening.

For example, though performers in one sense seem to have vast freedom in deciding how to read, retell and lecture on the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, given its traditional reading practices, performers are constrained by multiple factors requiring them to negotiate their interpretations and performances of the text. For one, their participation in a shared world of literary and scriptural texts leads to an intense intertextuality that links them to other narratives and literary texts. Further, performances are limited by the performer's training and biases, as well as by what s/he thinks are the limits of the audience's textual background. For example, the orthodox Brahmin performer, Chandramurthy Shastry, supports his interpretation of the narratives by citing other religious texts ranging from the epics, other *purāṇa*s, prescriptive *śāstric* texts to devotional poetry, which would be familiar to his audience. In her cosmopolitan, urban discourse on the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, Professor Prema Pandurang not only had to provide a new set of qualifications to her modern, educated, upper middle class audience, but also had to give the discourse in English, citing from popular movies and English texts and less from *śāstric* texts. In this way, the fluid boundaries of the text are established in dialogue with other texts and manipulated by the performer to make the text relevant to his perceived audience, illustrating the direct influence of the performer and the indirect influence of the audience in the construction of the coherent text.

This shift towards verbal art as performance also allows for recognition of the emergent nature of such speech acts. For Bauman, "[t]he emergent quality of performance resides in the

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[76] Ibid., 293.

interplay between communicative resources, individual competence, and the goals of the participants within the context of particular situations."[77] In response to an issue of *The Journal of American Folklore* which compiled pieces reappraising the importance of "Verbal Art as Performance" in 2002, Bauman writes further, "[m]y point in *Verbal Art* and other writings was that one of the emergent outcomes of interaction in performance might be a turning of the tables, that power might be entailed or created in performance rather than simply confirming presupposed structures of dominance and subordination."[78] Among these relatively more recent reappraisals of Bauman's work, commentary made by Patricia Sawin has proved instructive in the case of Andhra Pradesh, inasmuch as her feminist critique of Bauman called for more finite attention to the reciprocal relations between performer and audience in making the performance, as opposed to an unequal power dynamic therein.[79] Though gendered subjectivity—i.e. the notion of gender performativity via Judith Butler[80]—is not especially a focus of my work, in the contexts of *Bhāgavata saptāha* and *kathā*, it is this co-substantiation of the performance, between orators and audience, and their reciprocal meetings in lecture halls and temples that I am concerned with. The impression that orators give in their self-presentation and in speaking of their qualifications, is that they are divinely inspired, and appropriately so, as audiences expect such a qualification from their performers. The performative frame however, reveals that the interactions which make up a performance are—as Sawin's critique of a divine, hierarchial artist suggests—much more complex, and collaborative. The audience has agency within the

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[77] Ibid., 302.

[78] Richard Bauman, "Disciplinarity, Reflexivity, and Power in Verbal Art as Performance: A Response," *The Journal of American Folklore*, Vol. 115, No. 455, (2002), 96-97.

[79] Patricia Sawin, "Performance at the Nexus of Gender, Power, and Desire: Reconsidering Bauman's Verbal Art from the Perspective of Gendered Subjectivity as Performance," *The Journal of American Folklore*, Vol. 115, No. 455, (2002), 28-61.

[80] i.e. Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," *Theatre Journal*, 40.4, (1988), 519-531.

performance, in that their lives and concerns must be spoken to, within the commentary of the performance. My focus, thus, is on how performances with the text of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* allow for a space of interaction in which notions of contemporary Hinduism are made.

Where an "emergent quality" for Bauman, may indicate that which turns the tables of established powers, be this text, event or social dynamic, the concept of the emergent may hold something more. In the case of the *Bhāgavata* performances I observed in Andhra Pradesh, I take Bauman's signaling of the emergent quality of a performance to extend to the particular, fleeting, ephemeral and transformative aspects of the performance, which are moreover, unique to each situation. In the two case studies presented herein, the emergent quality does not simply designate a performative stage upon which broader social dynamics are measured and made. In this thesis, the emergent also indicates an aspect of transformative action for participants; change which takes place through the performance itself, redefining the boundaries of communities, aspirations, histories, and of course, the text itself.

Though Bauman has been seen to ultimately make a structuralist argument, designating emergent qualities as the underlying properties of text, event and social structure,[81] I take the notion of emergent qualities to apply to those aspects of performance wherein participants are able to shape their world—in particular, their vision of Hinduism. Of significance from Bauman's writing is his emphasis on the value to be found in the unique circumstances of each performance. Also important from Bauman's discussion, for the purposes of this thesis, is his articulation of the unique collective circumstances that come out of a performance—the audience, the performer, the text, the setting and all the particular details that enable the performance's collaborative interactions. Thus, no performance is ever genuinely repeatable, and

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[81] Bauman, "Verbal Art as Performance," 304.

the constitution of this unique event is in many respects where I see the value of a term such as emergent.

For Bauman, "performance becomes *constitutive* of the domain of verbal art as spoken communication."[82] In this respect, he steps away from static models which reside initially in ordered text, language or discourse, and calls for a look at the living context in which performance is put on. Similarly, in this dissertation, the context (be it rural village or metropolitan city) in which a performance is made is crucially important, insofar as this establishes the emergent quality of the performance, and the parameters in which its participants exercise their agency.

Consequently, in order to highlight the agency of all participants, I draw upon a performance-centered approach as opposed to a primarily text-centered or a primarily context-centered approach. The text-centered approach focuses on the text only, giving less weight to the surrounding context, while the context-centered approach does the reverse, highlighting the context and ignoring the text. In their article, *Poetics and Performance as Critical Perspectives on Language and Social Life*, Richard Bauman and Charles Briggs, suggest adopting a performance-centered approach in the analyses of performances. Noting that studies of performances have either been primarily focused on the text or the context, Bauman and Briggs call for a move from 'context to contextualization'.[83] The generally practiced text-centered and context-centered approaches ignore the intricate metacommunicative processes that take place during performance. Much like Gerard Genette's concept of paratext—all the written materials and illustrations in a book surrounding primary narrative but not counting as part of the primary

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[82] Ibid, 293.

[83] Richard Bauman and Charles L. Briggs, "Poetics and Performance As Critical Perspectives on Language and Social Life," *Annual Review of Anthropology* v.19 (Annual Reviews, 1990, 59-88), 68.

narrative[84]—the metacommunicative processes are all the communications surrounding the primary narrative events in the performance, that are not the primary narrative. Just as the paratext can powerfully influence the reader, the metacommunicative processes can influence participants. Metacommunicative processes, however, also further reveal the negotiations taking place between participants and thus, the participants' agency in the performance. So, while in a text-centered approach the focus is often on the text upon which the performance is based, whereas in the context-centered approach emphasis is on socio-cultural aspects surrounding the performance, in both cases by ignoring the metacommunicative processes, they also ignore participant agency. Instead Bauman and Briggs suggest employing contextualization:

> Contextualization involves an active process of negotiation in which participants reflexively examine the discourse as it is emerging, embedding assessments of its structure and significance in the speech itself. Performers extend such assessments to include predictions about how the communicative competence, personal histories, and social identities of their interlocuters will shape the reception of what is said. Much research has focused on the way this meta-level process is incorporated into the textual form of performances, particularly in the case of narratives.[85]

Thus, where context might over-emphasize the outside factors couching the performers and the performance, contextualization seeks to look at the conscious ways in which the participants shape the performance as it is happening.

Bauman focuses primarily on one metacommunicative process in particular, metanarration. Metanarration is the commentary generated during the performance about the performance through "those devices which comment upon the narrator, the narrating and the narrative both as message and code."[86] Analysis of metanarrative devices in a performance is

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[84] Gérard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation,* (Cambridge; New York, NY, USA: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 1.

[85] Bauman and Briggs, "Poetics and Performance," 69.

[86] Ibid., 67

crucial to revealing the negotiations of the participants, because as Bauman asserts "meta-narrative devices index not only features of the ongoing social interaction but also the structure and significance of the narrative and the way it is linked to other events."[87] Because metanarrative devices refer to both the primary narrative and the act of narrating, metanarrative devices also serve to connect the two events—the primary narrative event and the narration of the primary narrative event. Closing the gap between the narrative and its narration, in turn, enables participants to renegotiate "meanings and social relations beyond the parameters of the performance itself."[88] Thus, including and analyzing metanarratives in the following *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* performances, reveals not only the participants' agency in negotiating meaning from this scripture, but also how they connect events in the ancient text to the reality of their own contemporary lives.

Because the term, "metanarrative," can encompass a wide range of meta-level processes, the work of literary theorist Monica Fludernik regarding narrative theory, particularly that of metanarration, provides useful distinctions when considering performances of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*. In her article "Metanarrative and Metafictional Commentary: From Metadiscursivity to Metanarration and Metaficton," which calls for a new model of metanarrative, Fludernik calls for ever greater differentiations of the categories of metanarrative, dividing this into subcategories such as metadiscursive, metanarrational and meta-aesthetic.

Of significance for performances of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* considered herein, is Fludernik's opposition of the categories of metanarrative and metafiction. Fludernik designates metanarrative as "all self-reflexive statements referring to the discourse and its

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[87] Ibid., 69.

[88] Ibid., 70.

constructedness."[89] Metafiction on the other hand, is just "one of the functions of metanarrative statements…. one of two types of self-reflexivity".[90] The designation of these two types of reflexivity in metacommunicative processes is especially pertinent to the order of religious oration as that delivered through the *Bhāgavata*. To label an act of communication as metafiction would be to imply the story being told is purely fictional, a stance orators of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* do not take. Thus, metafiction is rarely, if at all applicable in consideration of religious scripture by those reading the text as scripture, such as the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*. Where performances of the *Bhāgavata* have vacated the possibility of a reflexivity explored through metafiction, the category of metanarrative—and the interactions participants experience therein—become more germane.

While Fludernik is focused on discourse carried out in texts, it is at the point where she considers a metanarrative in the relative absence of the category of fictional representation that Bauman's call for attention to the performative context (of verbal art) may be well heeded. This dissertation, therefore is concerned with the performance of reading, and on the agentive moments orators and audience members realize together around the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, appreciating the production of these moments, as Bauman would have had it, as "verbal art"; art which makes anew the terms of contemporary Hinduism.

In the case of *Bhāgavata* performances in Andhra Pradesh, I have had to acknowledge the efficacity of a performative genre for the text. What has been most informative of these performances in my case, is the interactions between readers and their audiences which provide a metacommentary not only on the status of participants involved in the performance, but also

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[89] Monica Fludernik, "Metanarrative and Metafictional Commentary," *Poetica* 35 (2003): 28.

[90] Ibid. 29

upon the architecture, setting and communal gatherings of a world undergoing the changes of contemporaneity.

To accentuate the particular dimensions of their collective performance, and the time they take in *saptāha* and *kathā*, during instances of metanarration, participants are often increasingly self-reflexive or referential, referring to each performance as it is happening. This referential move sets up a performance within the performance, or levels of multiple perspectives for both the audience and orator to inhabit. This includes: being included, as listeners inhabiting a moment of genealogical transmission of the text, and listening to the story as a whole, from outside of the narrative—even as participants, they are simultaneously incorporated into the narrative itself. It is under these these circumstances that my thesis explores—especially through two performances—how men and women in Andhra Pradesh are involved in the process of making a contemporary Hinduism.

Chapter Previews

Chapter One: A Week in the Life of the *Bhāgavata*: The *Bhāgavata Saptāha*

This chapter explains the characteristics of a *Bhāgavata saptāha*, the seven-day discourse of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*. The chapter first explores the primary features of the *Bhāgavata saptāha* in terms of the prescription for *Bhāgavata saptāha*s as detailed in the *Bhāgavata Māhātmya*. The framework provided for *saptāha*s through the *Bhāgavata Māhātmya*'s prescription is then considered in terms of the five *saptāha*s observed in Andhra Pradesh: a massive, metropolitan *saptāha* held in a stadium in Hyderabad; a local, urban *saptāha* held in a temple in the town of Guntur; a special topics *saptāha* held in a different temple in Guntur; a remote *saptāha* held in an ashrama, and the ninetieth annual *saptāha* of the small village of Kolapalli. In so doing, this chapter describes common types and variances of *saptāha*s found in

Andhra Pradesh, while also demonstrating the relative flexibility enabled by the *Bhāgavata Māhātmya*'s prescription. Finally, a very detailed description of the Kolapalli *saptāha* is given as a prelude to the following chapter in which a case study of the Kolapalli *saptāha* is conducted.

Chapter Two: Customizing the *Bhāgavata*: The Ninetieth Annual *Bhāgavata Saptāha* of Kolapalli

In this chapter, the ninetieth annual *Bhāgavata saptāha* of Kolapalli, a small village in Andhra Pradesh, is analyzed using the performance-centered approach outlined above. Performed between September 1-8, 2006 by Chandramurthy Sastry, a traditionally-trained Brahmin performer of the *Bhāgavata*, this vernacular exposition featured many local traditions and rituals. With a primarily rural Brahmin audience, as this chapter will illustrate, the reading was more orthodox and Brahmanical in character. Nonetheless, by examining key metanarrative moments in the performance associated with the origins of this long-standing annual performance, as well as specific rituals unique to this performance, this chapter will demonstrate the ways in which the very traditions the village claims to come from the text are actually generated in their negotiations conducted within the performance. In particular, this chapter will explore the narratives of Kolluru's own *Bhāgavata saptāha* tradition, the *Bhāgavata Māhātmya*, and of Kṛṣṇa's marriage to Rukmiṇī, along with the concomitant rituals and practices observed during the telling of those narratives.

Chapter Three: Professor Prema Pandurang's "Highlights of the *Bhāgavatam*"

In her *kathā*, or exposition, of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* held from January 16-21, 2006 in the metropolitan city Hyderabad, Professor Prema Pandurang merges the traditional centuries-

old values of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* with the modern, cosmopolitan lifestyles of her urban, middle and upper class audience to generate a modern, cosmopolitan, global Hinduism for and *with* her audience. Examination of key metanarrative moments in this chapter reveals the ways in which the conflict between their traditional Hindu roots and their modern, global, technologically-wired, consumptive lifestyles are negotiated throughout the performance, ultimately generating a global, cosmopolitan Hinduism. Analysis of the metacommunicative processes that underlie those negotiations will reveal that the very traditions the participants seek to follow are in fact, being generated by them in this performance of the *Bhāgavata*. Specifically, this chapter will analyze the metacommunicative processes embedded in two narratives from Prema Pandurang's *Bhāgavata kathā*, her own personal narrative and the story of Kṛṣṇa-devotee Prahlāda in order to reveal the emergent text from this performance.

Chapter Four: Cosmopolitan *Kathā*

This chapter focuses on the model devotee of the emergent text revealed in Professor Prema Pandurang's *Bhāgavata kathā* in the previous chapter. By analyzing Prema Pandurang's exposition of three narratives—the *Prahlāda Caritra*; the *Kṛṣṇa Janma Kathā*, or the story of Kṛṣṇa's birth; and *Rukmiṇī Kalyāṇa*, or the Marriage of Rukmiṇī to Kṛṣṇa—this chapter brings to surface the model devotee of the emergent text, the "Hindu citizen of the world." This Hindu citizen of the world espouses all the ideals of the global, cosmopolitan Hinduism envisioned in this performance, including egalitarian, cosmopolitan and democratic ideals, in addition to modern and consumptive values. This model devotee reflects the modern, global, cosmopolitan Hinduism generated by participants of the *kathā*, thus demonstrating how participants use the

Bhāgavata to reconstitute the very Hinduism they seek to follow, as well as the agency of the *kathā* participants in defining themselves through the *Bhāgavata*.

Usage of Diacritics

I have employed the use of diacritics whenever transliterating quotes directly from texts or speech in other languages (namely Sanskrit, Telugu or Hindi). In the case of proper names of texts, deities, and other figures from the *Bhāgavata* or other Sanskrit texts, I have also used diacritics. For specific terminology related to performances and rituals, I have opted to also use diacritics (e.g. *saptāha*, *kathā, pūjā* etc.). With regards to other terms transliterated from Telugu or Hindi, I have also used diacritics with the exception of certain terms that are commonly found in English parlance (e.g. Brahmin, sari, ashram, guru, etc.).

However, for proper names of locations (cities, towns, buildings), I have chosen to not to use diacritics, preferring instead to use Anglicized spellings of these locations as are prevalent throughout India (e.g. Vrindavan, Mathura, Visakhapatnam, etc.). Likewise for proper names of participants and others encountered during research, I have opted not to use diacritics but instead to use the commonly accepted Anglicized spellings for those names (e.g. Chandramurthy Shastry, Prema Pandurang, etc.). I have also opted to spell the names of organizations and performances exactly as the organizations and/or performers have used to designate their respective organizations and/or performances. Thus, for Prema Pandurang's performance that was advertised as "Highlights of the *Bhagavatam*," I did not use diacritics for "*Bhagavatam*." Likewise, for the International Society of Krishna Consciousness, I did not change "Krishna" to "Kṛṣṇa."

Chapter One: A Week in the Life of the *Bhāgavata*: The *Bhāgavata Saptāha*

This chapter introduces a particular type of *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* performance known as a *Bhāgavata saptāha*, or sometimes simply '*saptāha*.'[91] The *Bhāgavata saptāha* is a seven-day discourse of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* performed by a traditionally-trained Brahmin expositor, or *paurāṇika*.[92] This chapter explores the main features of a *saptāha*, particularly with relation to the scripture in which they are prescribed: the *Bhāgavata Māhātmya*. Despite the prescription for a *saptāha* advanced in the *Bhāgavata Māhātmya*, or rather because of it, a framework for the *saptāha* is established which enables flexibility in the exposition and execution of the *saptāha*, particularly with regards to content, style, setting and ritual. This chapter details the prescription for the *saptāha* found in the *Bhāgavata Māhātmya*, comparing and contrasting that prescription with the descriptions of the various *saptāha*s observed during fieldwork in Andhra Pradesh.

This chapter also further catalogs the variety of *saptāha*s that occur in Andhra Pradesh, while detailing the five *saptāha*s observed during fieldwork. Variations amongst the *saptāha*s, as well as, commonalities are noted throughout. And finally, a detailed description of the ninetieth annual *Bhāgavata saptāha* at Kolapalli is given, to serve also as a background for the following chapter in which a detailed analysis of the Kolapalli *saptāha* follows.

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[91] In Telugu, a *saptāha* is also referred to as a *Bhāgavata saptāhamu* and sometimes, just *saptāham* for short. I have chosen to use the Sanskrit term *saptāha* to refer to these seven-day performances, as that term is used more widely throughout India, as well as, in Andhra Pradesh.

[92] These traditionally trained tellers, or *paurāṇikas*, are generally male Brahmins, though female expositors of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* do exist as well. One notable female expositor of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, is Professor Prema Pandurang, who is discussed in Chapters Three and Four, has performed *Bhāgavata saptāha* and *Bhāgavata kathā* for more than 25 years.

The *Bhāgavata Māhātmya* as a Prescription

The *Bhāgavata saptāha* is one of the most popular forms of *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* performances today. *Bhāgavata saptāha* performances can be found throughout India, Nepal and are even flourishing throughout the Hindu diaspora, with performances in the U.S., Mauritius, and Fiji.[93] And finally, as McComas Taylor demonstrates in his article, "Rādhe, Rādhe! Continuity and Change in the Contemporary Oral Performance of the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa,*" that examines a *Bhāgavata saptāha* performance in Vrindavan, Vrindavan is the hotspot for *Bhāgavata* s*aptāha* performances, where potentially twenty or so *saptāha*s can occur at a time.[94]

*Bhāgavata saptāha*s at their most basic are seven-day readings of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*. In the most general sense, there are two basic ways the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* is read during a *Bhāgavata saptāha*. The first method, consists of a seven-day stretch in which a Brahmin or more likely multiple Brahmins in unison, simply read aloud the entire *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* word for word in Sanskrit.[95] More common and popular is the second method, which consists of a narrative retelling and exposition in a regional language by a trained performer. In this latter type of *saptāha* performance, a Brahmin or Brahmins might also be enlisted to read the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* word for word alongside the main expositor.[96]

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[93] A street vendor in Kathmandu informed me that a *Bhāgavata saptāha* had just occurred the week before I arrived. Street vendor, personal conversation, April 15, 2006. Professor Prema Pandurang also has performed *Bhāgavata saptāha*s in Mauritius and the U.S. Prema Pandurang, interview by author, Gokuldham, Sri Perumbadur, February 2, 2006. Other scholars have also noted the prevalence of *saptāha* performances throughout India and the U.S., e.g. Fredrick M. Smith "Indra Goes West: Report on a Vedic Soma Sacrifice in London in July 1996." *History of Religions* v.39, No.3 (2000, 247-267), 263; Taylor, "Rādhe, Rādhe," 83-101.

[94] Taylor, "Rādhe, Rādhe," 84.

[95] Prema Pandurang had informed me that there was going to be a huge reading of the *Bhāgavata saptāha* like this in Guruvayur Temple in Kerala sometime in March 2006. Prema Pandurang, interview by author, Hyderabad, Andhra Pradesh, 20 January 2006.

[96] Rameshbhai Oza (Bhaishri) for example had enlisted 21 Brahmins to read the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* word-for-word to the side of the stage while he gave his exposition. McComas Taylor also notes in the Garhwale *Bhāgavata saptāha*, the expositor would come down to the event site early in the mornings before the scheduled discourse sessions and silently read through the *Bhāgavata*, ensuring that by the end of the *Bhāgavata saptāha* he had made

*Saptāha*s, moreover, can be a local event or a pilgrimage event. As a pilgrimage, a group of interested devotees plan to sojourn to a sacred religious site such as Vrindavan, the childhood home of Kṛṣṇa where he frolicked with and amongst the *gopī*s, or Mathura, the site of Kṛṣṇa's nativity.[97] The group may stay at an ashram or some other type of spiritual facility. Though I unfortunately did not have the opportunity to attend one of these retreats, the *Bhāgavata saptāha*s I did attend were similarly marked by austerities, and allowed me to witness how participants integrated the practice into their daily lives, in a context where readings happened in the very communities they and their families regularly resided in.

I was first informed of these pilgrimage *saptāha*s by Mahendra Shastry, whom I had actually met at a wedding many months prior to attending his *Bhāgavata saptāha*. Mahendra Shastry shared that he had lead several of these types of pilgrimage *saptāha*s. Mahendra Shastry proceeded to describe one such performance he had carried out in the previous year at Vrindavan. The group of devotees, all Brahmins based from his hometown, were used to hearing Mahendra Shastry expound upon the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa,* as well as the *Bhagavad Gītā*, *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa*. This group of devotees, of about 20 people, mostly married retired senior couples, each paid for their own travel and lodging expenses, and split the costs for Mahendra Shastry, who would perform the *Bhāgavata saptāha* in their vernacular Telugu, and for a cook, who would prepare traditional Andhra fare for them. The cook was also a Brahmin and aside from ensuring that the food was regional Andhra fare and ritually pure (as it was prepared by a Brahmin like themselves), he made sure it adhered to the various dietary restrictions of what they could and could not eat during the *Bhāgavata saptāha*, according to the

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his way completely through the text. McComas Taylor "Empowering the Sacred: The Function of the Sanskrit Text in a Contemporary Exposition," in *Orality, Literacy and Performance in the Ancient World*, ed. Elizabeth Minchin (Boston: Brill, 2011) 139.

[97] Conversation with Mahendra Shastry, August 2006.

prescription listed in the *Bhāgavata Māhātmya*. Though Vrindavan is rife with *Bhāgavata saptāha* performers and performances, these performances are all generally done in Hindi. By inviting a performer of their own choice, Mahendra Shastry, and hiring their own cook, these devotees from Andhra Pradesh were able to ensure that both their regional language and food were imported onto the pilgrimage site for their *Bhāgavata saptāha*.

As the entire pilgrimage is an act of devotion, oftentimes participants were motivated to undertake more intensive austerities than the usual austerities of abstaining from sexual activity, drinking, smoking, and imbibing intoxicants, sleeping on the floor and adhering to certain food restrictions. In some cases, devotees further undertook vows of silence and ate only fruit and water during the *saptāha*. Mahendra Shastry further told me that in general, people at these pilgrimage *saptāha*s often treated them like retreats, cutting off contact from the outside world. Overall, the impression I had been given by Mahendra Shastry was that these retreats are a group-intensive type of practice, which participants undertake as a serious devotional practice.

As a local event, *saptāha*s are usually sponsored by a temple committee, members of the community or even a single wealthy patron and are held in the town or village temple, a *vedapāṭhaśālā*, ashram, one's home, an auditorium, or even a huge stadium.[98] Most of the *saptāha*s I witnessed were local events. These *saptāha*s are advertised through fliers, word-of-mouth and perhaps a mention in the local paper. Larger urban *saptāha*s, like that of Rameshbhai Oza (Bhaishri), usually have corporate and/or religious organizational sponsors. These larger *saptāha*s are organized in expectation of a massive audience turnout, and are likewise advertised on billboards, in newspapers, city-event listings as well as being circulated by word-of-mouth.

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[98] A *vedapāṭhaśālā* is specifically a school for transmitting and teaching the Vedas to male Brahmin students.

This great variety of *Bhāgavata saptāha*s is enabled by the basic prescription detailed in the *Bhāgavata Māhātmya,* or the *Glory of the Bhāgavatam.*[99] The *Bhāgavata Māhātmya* is not originally a part of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, but is found in the section known as the *Uttara Khaṇḍa* of the *Padma Purāṇa*, chapters 193-8.[100] It is sometimes printed separately as a pamphlet, but more frequently with copies of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa.*[101] At all of the *saptāha*s I attended, the performer always began the discourse with exposition from the *Bhāgavata Māhātmya* and might further reference the *Bhāgavata Māhātmya* throughout latter portions of their discourse as well.

The *Bhāgavata Māhātmya* consists of six short *adhyāya*s, or chapters. In these chapters, not only does the *Bhāgavata Māhātmya* glorify and extol the virtues of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* (or rather of what can be attained by listening to it), but it also details the origins, procedures and benefits of conducting a *Bhāgavata saptāha*. This information is all framed within a central narrative in which the sage Nārada is seeking a cure for Bhakti's ailing sons, Vairāgya and Jñāna. Eventually, the cure Nārada learns from the four sages known as the Kumāras is, of course, performing the *Bhāgavata saptāha.*[102]

The *Bhāgavata Māhātmya* carefully distinguishes the *Bhāgavata saptāha* as a particularly efficacious ritual through the Kumāras' reply to Nārada, as they explain to Nārada

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[99] The *Bhāgavata Māhātmya* is a type of purāṇic text that falls into its own sub-genre, known as *Māhātmya*. Literally translated, *Māhātmya* means 'glorification.'

[100] In the Vangavasi edition it is *adhyāya*s 193-198; in the Anandasrama Sanskrit Series it would be 189-194. Most of the expositors of the performances I witnessed cited the version of the *Bhāgavata Māhātmya* that correlates to the Vangavasi version. Rocher, *The Purāṇas*, 211.

[101] Rocher, *The Purāṇas*, 211-2. Notably the popular Gita Press edition of the *Bhāgavata* includes the *Bhāgavata Māhātmya*. All references made to verses from the *Māhātmya* in this volume will come from the Gita Press volume of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*. Thus, the *Māhātmya* is treated as a separate volume from the *Padma Purāṇa* making the chapters of the *Māhātmya* span from 1-6, instead of chapters 193-198 of the *Padma Purāṇa*.

[102] The four male Kumāras—Sanatkumāra, Sanātana, Sanandana, and Sanaka—are sages that appear in the form of children or sometimes, young adolescents. The sages, born of Brahma's mind, are often portrayed as great devotees of Viṣṇu.

that the *saptāha* is a type of *yajña* or sacrifice, known as a *jñānayajña.*[103] As a *jñānayajña* the *Bhāgavata saptāha* is delineated as a ritual, specifically, a sacrifice (*yajña*) or offering of knowledge (*jñāna*). In other words, a *jñānayajña* is a spiritual discourse. Moreover, the *Bhāgavata saptāha jñānayajña* as a particularly efficacious ritual in comparison to other rituals, as other rituals only serve to remove the negative karma of one's deeds, whereas the *Bhāgavata saptāha jñānayajña* removes ignorance as well. Chandramurthy Shastry expounds upon this narrative of the *Bhāgavata Māhātmya*, as well as this very point during his performance in Kolapalli, as will be detailed further below.

The Kumāras, introducing the second major narrative in the *Bhāgavata Māhātmya,* then tell Nārada of another instance in which a virtuous Brahmin named Gokarṇa performs the *Bhāgavata saptāha* on behalf of his cursed brother, Dhundhukārī, leading to miraculous results. Dhundhukārī, who lived a wicked, sinful life, was doomed to an afterlife as a hungry ghost. Despite performing many auspicious death rites for Dhundhukārī, Gokarṇa had still not been able to free Dhundhukārī from his ghostly fate, as his accumulated sin was just too great. Dhundhukārī begs Gokarṇa to find a cure to alleviate his suffering. Gokarṇa searches and eventually learns that a *Bhāgavata saptāha* is the only thing that could help purify his brother of his sins. Sure enough, Gokarṇa performs the *Bhāgavata saptāha* in front of a full assembly of devotees. At the end of the *saptāha* performance, Dhundhukārī is released from his ghostly form, his exhaustive list of sins purified, and a celestial chariot comes to escort Dhundhukārī to Vaikuṇṭha, Viṣṇu's celestial abode. When Gokarṇa asks why he and the other virtuous devotees were not taken up as well, he is informed that they did not listen to the *saptāha* with as much concentration and focus as Dhundhukārī. Dhundhukārī, who ate nothing during the course of the

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[103] *Bhāgavata Māhātmya*, 2.59-60.

saptāha, listened intently and exclusively to the *Bhāgavata saptāha* discourse and meditated on nothing else except the discourse. Thus, the narrative of Gokarṇa and Dhundhukārī illustrates the powerful fruits of listening to the *Bhāgavata saptāha*, as well as how one must listen to the discourse in order to reap those fruits.

Finally, the Kumāras tell Nārada the correct procedure for when, where and how to conduct a *Bhāgavata saptāha* which forms the prescription for the *Bhāgavata saptāha*. The prescription details everything from what appropriate times of the year are to hold the *saptāha*; how to draft the announcement for the *saptāha*; choosing and preparing a site for the *saptāha*; seating of persons at the *saptāha* venue; qualifications for the performer of the *saptāha*; worship rituals and austerities the performer should observe before and during the *saptāha*; worship of the physical text of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*; dedications to be made to the sage Śuka; the schedule for imparting the discourse; dietary restrictions participants must make; austerities to be observed by listeners attending the *saptāha*; attitudes to be held by all participants; who should listen (and who should not listen) to the *Bhāgavata saptāha*; concluding rites for the *saptāha*; and rituals to be observed the day after the *saptāha*.

In terms of the specifics regarding the structure, venue and organization of the *Bhāgavata saptāha*, the *saptāha* should be held only during the months of *Bhādrapada* (August-September), *Aśvina* (September-October), *Kārtika* (October-November), *Mārgaśīrṣa* (November-December), *Āṣāḍhā* (June-July) and *Śrāvaṇa* (July-August), while an astrologer is to be consulted for the specific auspicious start time.[104] The performance should be held at a sacred place, in a forest or

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[104] The months *Bhādrapada*, *Aśvina*, *Kārtika*, *Mārgaśīrṣa*, *Āṣāḍhā* and *Śrāvaṇa* come from the Hindu calendar and are lunar months. Because each month begins and ends with a new moon, it partially covers two months as measured on the Gregorian calendar. *Bhāgavata Māhātmya*, 6.2-3.

even at one's home, so long as there is ample space for attendees.[105] The *Bhāgavata Māhātmya* contains detailed instructions regarding how to prepare the grounds, including instructions to clean, sweep and plaster the grounds with cowdung and instructions for constructing and decorating a four-posted pavillion for religious ceremonies. If performing a *saptāha* within a home, personal belongings should be removed from the room of the performance. Underneath the pavillion, seven platforms (representing the seven upper worlds) are to be placed, upon which Brahmins and renunciates are to be seated.[106] The expositor should be seated above everyone else facing either north or east.[107] Of the *saptāha*s I observed, as most were hosted either in temples or other established buildings and stadiums, no pandals were constructed, nor was cowdung used. At the largest *saptāha* I attended, that of Bhaishri in Gacchibowli stadium in Hyderabad, seven large platforms were set up for 21 Brahmins to sit upon as they recited the *Bhāgavata* from cover to cover.

The *Bhāgavata Māhātmya* instructs that with a calm and steady voice, the expositor should give discourse for ten and a half hours daily, taking an hour and a half break during noon. During the specified intermission, devotees should sing about the glory of Viṣṇu and continue chanting the names of Viṣṇu.[108] None of the *saptāha*s I attended held discourses for that long, though eight hours of discourse in two four-hour sessions seemed to be the usual length of discourse for the majority of *saptāha*s I observed. Devotional songs were sung at all times— before, during, and after discourse at almost all *saptāha*s I observed.

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[105] *Bhāgavata Māhātmya*, 6.12.

[106] *Bhāgavata Māhātmya*, 6.13-16.

[107] *Bhāgavata Māhātmya*, 6.17-18.

[108] *Bhāgavata Māhātmya*, 6.38-39.

The qualifications of the performer are clarified in the *Bhāgavata Māhātmya* as well. The performer should be a Brahmin who is well versed in the Vedas and *śāstra*s, a devotee of Viṣṇu, an excellent orator who can explain things with good examples, free from greed and material desires and has renounced the world. If, however, one does not understand the essence of religion, is a womanizer, or a heretic, then no matter how learned he may be, he should not even speak of the *Bhāgavata*. An equally learned Brahmin moreover, may be kept beside the orator and employed by the orator to dispel any questions that arise during the discourse.[109] All the orators were male Brahmins and seemed to be well versed in the proper textual traditions and good orators. Of course, some were better trained than others, and some more experienced than others.

The *Bhāgavata Māhātmya* prescribes certain rituals to be performed during and after the *saptāha* as well. The day before the *saptāha,* the *Bhāgavata Māhātmya* instructs that the Brahmin expositor must shave his head. On the morning of the *saptāha*, at dawn, the expositor should perform his other usual morning rituals. He should then undertake a *Gaṇeśa pūjā* to remove any obstacles from the *saptāha*. After making the usual oblations of water to the forefathers, the orator must also purify himself by performing *prāyaścitta*, various expiatory rites. Finally, he must install an image or idol of Kṛṣṇa upon an altar.

The speaker must then worship Kṛṣṇa by offering sixteen articles of worship and chanting the proper mantras. Then circumambulating the deity, the speaker must pray to Kṛṣṇa for refuge from the cycle of worldy existence known as *saṃsāra*.[110] Then, the physical text of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* is to be worshiped with a proper attitude of love, devotion and happiness.

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[109] *Bhāgavata Māhātmya*, 6.21-23.

[110] *Bhāgavata Māhātmya*, 6.26-27.

Ārati and incense are offered to the book. With a coconut in his hands, the expositor should offer prayers to the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* in book form. The expositor must seek refuge from the book, recognizing the book as Lord Kṛṣṇa himself, and praying that the *saptāha* be completed successfully.[111]

After this prayer, then the host(s) or sponsor(s) should worship the exponent, gifting him with clothes and ornaments. Prayers should be offered to the exponent recognizing him as the representative of the original expositor of the *Bhāgavata*, the sage Śuka. The sponsors should entreat the expositor to remove them of their ignorance through the discourse.[112] Also, during the *saptāha*, five Brahmins should be appointed to continuously utter in a low voice the mantra '*Oṃ namo bhagavate vāsudevāya*' in order to expatiate any potential mistakes during the exposition.[113]

Participants should also undertake some austerities in front of the exponent for the span of the *saptāha* week.[114] Physical austerities include abstaining from sexual activities, sleeping on the floor at night and taking meals on banana leaves. There are also dietary restrictions, which vary to some degree. The *Bhāgavata Māhātmya* suggests that if one can endure it, then one should abstain from all food during the *saptāha*, subsisting only on milk and ghee. Otherwise, one should just eat lightly, either limiting intake to only one meal and fruit, or exclusively fruit. However, this is quickly followed up with the caveat that if hunger impedes one's ability to listen attentively during the discourse, then fasting should be abandoned. In other words, the priority is attentive listening over any such physical abstention. The *Bhāgavata Māhātmya*

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[111] *Bhāgavata Māhātmya*, 6.28-31.

[112] *Bhāgavata Māhātmya*, 6.32-33.

[113] *Bhāgavata Māhātmya*, 6.35.

[114] *Bhāgavata Māhātmya*, 6.34.

further elaborates on particular foods to avoid during the *saptāha*, including such things as honey, sweet foods, oil, legumes, stale food, and contaminated foods.[115]

The *Bhāgavata Māhātmya* takes great pains to describe exactly what attitudes one should have when listening, as well as the conduct and austerities one should practice when attending the *Bhāgavata saptāha*. Listeners should observe vows to control their negative impulses (i.e. lust, greed, anger, arrogance, hatred, etc.) and instead harbor positive emotions and conduct (i.e. honest speech, compassion, silence, humility, purity of mind and body, etc.). The good listener should not speak in a derogatory manner at all, but especially not of the Vedas, Brahmins, devotees of Viṣṇu, teachers, kings, women, servants of cows and spiritual persons. Listeners to the *Bhāgavata* should avoid speaking to menstruating women, persons of lower castes, foreigners who eat beef (*mlecchas*), anyone not belonging to the Vedic religion, disgraced members of their own caste, enemies of Brahmins and members of their caste who have not had their *upanayana* ceremony yet.[116]

After the *saptāha* is finished, participants who want to bear the fruit of the *Bhāgavata saptāha* week should perform the same rituals that conclude the *Kṛṣṇa Janmāṣṭamī* fast.[117] Everyone should worship the book of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, as well as the pay obeisance to the expositor at the end of the *Bhāgavata saptāha*. *Prasād* should be distributed and everyone should

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[115] *Bhāgavata Māhātmya*, 6.41-46.

[116] *Bhāgavata Māhātmya*, 6.51-53

[117] *Bhāgavata Māhātmya*, 6.57. *Kṛṣṇa Janmāṣṭamī* is the celebration of the birth of Kṛṣṇa. The *Bhāgavata Māhātmya* does not specify exactly what those closing ceremonies are, leaving it open to interpretation. Celebrations vary from state to state in India, but in general most devotees fast until midnight, the time of Kṛṣṇa's purported birth. At midnight devotees might gather to sing Kṛṣṇa *kīrtana*s and sometimes dance. Kṛṣṇa nativities in the form of cradles holding images or statues of infant Kṛṣṇa are set up in temples and homes that celebrate the holiday. In my own personal experience of the *Kṛṣṇa Janmāṣṭamī* I have observed both in temples in the U.S. and during field work in Andhra Pradesh, the story of Kṛṣṇa's birth is told, as well as other childhood tales, at temple celebrations while waiting for midnight. At midnight, devotees take turns rocking Kṛṣṇa's cradle. The *Bhagavad Gītā* is also sometimes recited. The construction and rocking of the cradle is a practice that occurred at various *Bhāgavata saptāha*s and *Bhāgavata kathā*s that I observed as well.

sing devotional songs and chant the names of Hari. Food and alms should be distributed to Brahmins, mendicants and beggars.[118]

If the sponsor has renounced the world then the day after the conclusion of the *saptāha* the *Bhagavad Gītā* should be recited.[119] Otherwise, if the primary sponsor is a householder then a *homa* (a sacrifice to consecrated fire) should be performed to remove any sins committed during the *saptāha*.[120] Oblations should be offered while reciting each verse of the tenth canto. If homa is not possible, then offerings suitable to one's financial ability should be offered. The *Viṣṇusahasranāma* should be recited to rectify any lapses that occur during the *saptāha*.[121] Finally, if the sponsor can afford it, he should present a small golden lion-throne upon which a beautifully scripted *Bhāgavata* should be placed. The physical text should be worshiped again. The book and throne are given to the expositor.[122] In general, regardless of the status of the sponsor, most *saptāha* I observed concluded with the recitation of the *Bhagavad Gītā* and the *Viṣṇusahasranāma* either on the last day of the *saptāha*, or the day after. Unfortunately, I never saw the grand gesture of a *Bhāgavata* seated upon a solid-gold lion throne being donated to the expositor either.

Great pains are taken in the *Bhāgavata Māhātmya* to elaborate upon who may attend the *saptāha* and how one should go about inviting persons to the performance. Essentially, the instructions in the *Bhāgavata Māhātmya* aim to attract a broad audience, as organizers of the *saptāha* are instructed to invite those who have very little opportunity to worship Viṣṇu, including women and members of the lowest caste, as well as those who are ardent devotees of

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[118] *Bhāgavata Māhātmya*, 6.57-61.

[119] *Bhāgavata Māhātmya*, 6.62.

[120] *Bhāgavata Māhātmya*, 6.63.

[121] *Bhāgavata Māhātmya*, 6.65-66.

[122] *Bhāgavata Māhātmya*, 6.68-70.

Viṣṇu and renunciates.[123] Special verses are even dedicated to inviting the most unfortunate—the poor, those with diseases, the unlucky, sinners, childless persons, infertile women and women with fertility issues—as well as simply those who desire *mokṣa*, or final liberation from *saṃsāra*.[124] All persons, including the unfortunate just listed, will receive the religious merit of performing 10 million sacrifices, so long as they listen to the *Bhāgavata saptāha* as prescribed.[125]

Examples of *Bhāgavata Saptāha* Performances

During fieldwork I attended five *saptāha*s, all in Andhra Pradesh. The largest *saptāha* and also the first *saptāha* I witnessed took place in a stadium in Hyderabad. Rameshbhai Oza delivered the discourse in Hindi. The latter four *saptāha*s I attended were smaller affairs and all delivered in Telugu. The second *saptāha*, which is the subject of one of the two major case studies of this thesis, took place in a rural village, Kolapalli, and was performed by Chandramurthy Shastry. The third *saptāha*, delivered by Mahendra Shastry, took place in an ashram an hour away from Hyderabad. The fourth and fifth *saptāha*s were both performed in the central Andhra Pradesh city of Guntur in temples. The first of the two Guntur *saptāha*s was performed by Hariprasad Sharma at the Satyanārāyaṇa Temple and the second, at the Veṅkaṭeśvara temple by Nandakumaracharya Shastry.[126]

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[123] *Bhāgavata Māhātmya*, 6.5-7

[124] *Bhāgavata Māhātmya*, 6. 54-55

[125] *Bhāgavata Māhātmya*, 6.56

[126] With the exception of the large, metropolitan *saptāha* of Bhaishri, I have either changed or omitted the names of the expositors, participants, venues and locations of the other *saptāha*s in order to preserve the anonymity of the performers and participants. Because Bhaishri is a widely known, famous expositor of the *Bhāgavata*, publicly advertising his *saptāha*s in public forums such as the newspaper and internet, as well as selling tapes, CDs and DVDs of his various discourses, I did not deem it necessary to change his name as he is a public figure.

As the descriptions of the *saptāha* below will demonstrate, there is a great deal of variety to *saptāha* despite the prescription delineated in the *Bhāgavata Māhātmya*. Changes in venues, locations and audiences have a large bearing on proceedings as does the sponsor and of course, the performer and his style. For example, Bhaishri's *saptāha* held a lot of Northern components and style similar to what McComas Taylor describes in his article, "Rādhe, Rādhe!: Continuity and Change in the Contemporary Oral Performance of the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*" where he details a *saptāha* conducted in Vrindavan. In contrast, the rest of the *saptāha*, which was performed in Telugu, had a somewhat different style to them and was not as ecstatic, and emotionally expressive. The last *saptāha* performed by Nandakumaracharya Shastry in Guntur moreover, was a completely different *saptāha* than the others as the exposition focused primarily on the *Bhāgavata Māhātmya* and First Canto exclusively.

Mass Audience *Saptāha*: Bhaishri's "*Srimad Bhagawat* Katha Gyan Yagna*"*

Performed by a famous spiritual preacher from Gujarat, Rameshbhai Oza, the "*Srimad Bhagawat* Katha Gyan Yagna*"* took place in Goshamahal Police Stadium amongst an estimated audience of 5,000 people for seven days from February 18 through 24, 2006. Bhaishri, as Rameshbhai Oza is more widely known as, does not speak Telugu, but as Hyderabad has a large Hindi-Urdu speaking population, he was still able to fill out the stadium for his Hindi discourse on the *Bhāgavata*. Advertised prominently in Hindi on billboards throughout town, and in the local newspapers, including the Telugu daily paper *Vaartha*, Bhaishri drew people from all types of socio-economic backgrounds. Bhaishri's "*Srimad Bhagawat* Katha Gyan Yagna*"* was a huge affair sponsored by Akhila Bharatiya Vaishya Maha Sammelan—a national, multi-caste

Vaiṣṇava organization that specializes in promoting spiritual discourses, public education and other charitable acts—and the leading Telugu newspaper *Vaartha*.[127]

On the stadium grounds stood a grand pavillion that shaded the mass audience during the lectures, which were scheduled from 2:00 p.m. to 6:00 p.m. The pavillion was well equipped, having been outfitted with ceiling fans and mini chandeliers. The shade of the pavillion and ceiling fans placed on support beams provided some refuge from the dry February heat. Speakers mounted on stands and television sets placed on tables were also set up throughout the interior of the pavillion along the support beams, so that those of us sitting on the artificial grass carpets far back could see and hear Bhaishri. The stage was well lit with ceiling and stage lights.

Bhaishri delivered his lecture seated upon a raised dais upon the center of the festively decorated stage. In front of Bhaishri was a table upon which lay a copy of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* wrapped in a red embroidered silk cloth. Bouquets of flowers offered to Bhaishri and to the *Bhāgavata* also lay on the dais, as well as a microphone. The backdrop of the stage consisted of mural depicting the woodlands of Vrindavan. Centered on the mural behind Bhaishri was a life-sized image of Viṣṇu flanked by Nārada on his right and Kṛṣṇa with his flute and a cow on his left. On the stage to Bhaishri's left sat musicians who played music to accompany his exposition. To the right of Bhaishri on stage was a mini-temple of sorts consisting of a four-posted pavillion, decorated with flower garlands, housing large framed portraits of various deities, including Gaṇeśa, Kṛṣṇa, Hanumān, and Nṛsiṃha. This mini-temple served as the altar for the event where the *purohit*, the priest presiding over the rituals, would sit and conduct various rituals before, during and after the *saptāha*.

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[127] "All India Vaish Federation," accessed July 19, 2012, http://www.vaishfederation.in.

Off the stage, to the audience's left, twenty-one Brahmins sat on risers reading the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* from front-to-back, word-for-word, in unison. Though there were no microphones on the Brahmins—the microphones being reserved for the main orator, Bhaishri— their reading produced a steady background hum to the proceedings. Amidst the humming of the Brahmins, the lecture travelled across the expanse of the stadium grounds through the loudspeakers to the sea of listeners seated inside and wandering outside the pavillion.

The opening ceremony of Bhaishri's *saptāha* was a huge affair. The *saptāha* began with a procession led by the twenty-one Brahmins entered the stadium grounds carrying copies of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* wrapped in silk upon their heads. Live music played as they made their way from the stadium grounds into the pavillion, bowed before the stage altar and then took their places. A wrapped copy of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* was also placed in the stage altar amongst the portraits of the deities where ritual worship of the book was conducted by the Brahmin *purohit*. Bhaishri entered after the twenty-one Brahmins, also with a copy of the *Bhāgavata* on his head, which he then placed on the altar. He then made offerings and prostrations to that book on the stage altar, before finally sitting down to begin his exposition. After chanting various invocatory verses, Bhaishri, accompanied by his band of musicians, led the audience in the singing of many popular devotional songs to Kṛṣṇa, Viṣṇu and other incarnations of Viṣṇu, before beginning his discourse.

While formal rituals were conducted, for most of the audience members like myself who were in the back and far removed from stage, and thus Bhaishri, the altar and the performing of the rituals, these rituals were more for us to see (either by straining our eyes to the front or up close on the television monitors mounted throughout the tent), rather than participate in. The audience was not wholly composed of Brahmins, but as mentioned, was a mix of castes and

ages, though participants were mostly adults. The audience sat divided by gender: women on the right and men on the left. Socio-economic indicators of dress also made it plain that those more wealthy audience members sat towards the front, while those less materially fortunate, were seated amass in back. If anything, people sitting in the front section, closest to the stage, held the status of V.I.P. members, designated by patronage—i.e. their contributions as wealthy sponsors––rather than by caste. Though admission was of course free to the event, with large donations, one could procure a seat closer to the front of the stage and Bhaishri.

Given the size of the assembled audience, it was not clear if and what austerities audience members chose to observe. With such a large audience, any austerities undertaken during the discourse were not necessarily strictly shared or monitored and thus the austerities themselves were not a focus of this *saptāha*. Bhaishri and the performing Brahmins up front were of course maintaining the usual austerities, as Bhaishri made it a point to mention in his lecture. I would find that most performers of *saptāha*s, made their practice of austerities as transparent to their audiences as possible as it was a key indicator of their qualifications for performing the *Bhāgavata*.

The crowd nevertheless appeared to be devotionally-oriented. Most of the massive crowd sang along and clapped whenever one of the many devotional songs peppering the entire discourse was being performed by Bhaishri. The singing and clapping was quite enthusiastic as indicated by the volume of the singing and the many bodies swaying in tune with the music. This was also one of the only performances I witnessed where people stood to dance spontaneously when devotional songs were given, or during a particularly intense retelling of a Kṛṣṇa tale. Notably, there were three people in particular who would rise up spontaneously. Two such dancing devotees, one male and one female, were in the back section where I was. Another was a

woman seated towards the front of the stage who was dressed much more affluently than those dancers in the back of the crowd. The spontaneous expression of dance then, was not limited to those from any particular socio-economic status.

Bhaishri was an eloquent speaker and had a commanding presence. Perhaps in his late forties, early fifties, at that time, Bhaishri appeared to be a relatively tall man, handsome, with graying black hair and a mostly white, well-groomed beard. He had very striking dark brown eyes that penetrated his massive audience even through his large-framed glasses. He dressed traditionally, which meant wearing no stitched clothing, but instead a white *dhotī*, a white shawl draped over his shoulder and his upper body, with his *yajñopavīta* thread displayed prominently across his shoulder.[128] When performing, his face was softer, animated and engaging. When in repose, his face seemed to be quite serious, almost somber at times.

Bhaishri is a well-known and experienced performer of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, as the fact that he drew such a large crowd and sponsorship from both corporate and private sources. A quick search on the internet, moreover, demonstrates that Rameshbhai Oza has a very prominent career not only as an expositor of the *Bhāgavata* both through *saptāha* and *kathā*, but also of other texts such as the *Bhagavad Gītā*, *Rāmāyaṇa*, *Rāmcaritmānas* and *Mahābhārata*.[129] He not only makes a comfortable living delivering his discourses, but also makes many sponsored tours throughout India and the United States.

Bhaishri's discourse was entertaining, inspiring and professional. He and his musicians were in sync with one another. A skillful singer of devotional songs (*kīrtana*), Bhaishri sang

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[128] A *dhotī* is an article of men's clothing consisting of a rectangular piece of unstitched cloth about 4.5 meters long that is wrapped around the waist and legs and tied at the waist. The longer end of the cloth is then sometimes pulled through the legs and tucked in the back of the waistband, forming loose baggy pants. The *yajñopavīta* is a sacred thread worn tied over the left shoulder and under the right arm, that is to be worn at all times by all upper caste Hindu men who have completed the *upanayana*, or initiation ceremony.

[38] "Sandipani Vidyaniketan," accessed August 7, 2013, "http://www.sandipani.org.

many throughout his discourse. His musicians always picked up the cues from his discourse and gave back up music to his songs. The tempo and mood of the music was also coordinated with Bhaishri's discourse. If Bhaishri was describing a particularly playful scene from Kṛṣṇa's childhood, the musicians would play mirthful music prominently featuring the flute. In the case of a particularly tense confrontational moment in the narrative, the tempo of the music would reach a matching crescendo.

In terms of content, Bhaishri was well versed in the epics, the *śāstra*s*,* and devotional poetry. His discourse on the *Bhāgavata* often seamlessly interspersed quotes and narratives from the epic *Rāmāyaṇa*, and *Mahābhārata* as well as other *purāṇa*s, *śāstra*s, the *Bhagavad Gītā*, *Rāmcaritmānas*, and the rich Hindi tradition of the *bhakti* poetry of Surdas, Meerabhai and Kabir. Bhaishri was also able to draw from his Gujarati background, quoting the devotional poetry of Gujarati poet Narsi Mehta, a Gujarati sufi-muslim poet, and another famous Gujarati religious preacher, Morari Bapu.

Bhaishri's discourse on the *Bhāgavata* was a very integrative message. Without being overbearing, but rather in a very common-sense type of manner, he was able to speak upon a broad variety of topics, ranging from advocating personal hygiene (especially when conducting *pūjā*) and civic-mindedness, to protesting against communal violence and female feticide and infanticide. Bhaishri was also somewhat extemporaneous as he used his discourse to respond to recent events, including riots that took place the day before the start of his *saptāha* in the Muslim areas of Hyderabad in protest of a Danish cartoonist's irreverent depiction of the prophet Muhammad. Bhaishri used the riots as an example of the ills of "mob mentality." He pointed out that having been caught up in the mob mentality versus thinking for oneself, the rioters were behaving destructively, ultimately destroying their own community. At the same time, he voiced

an opinion that each religion must be respected in itself, and that thus, the Danish cartoonist had been wrong to depict their prophet Muhammad in this light. Bhaishri then quoted the devotional verses of an unnamed Muslim-Gujarati poet. Following these verses of devotion, he restated his position, against Muslim-Hindu violence, and said that in the past, *bhakti* had joined everyone. To that end, most of his lecture was about devotion, as opposed to themes that might divide the audience. The lecture did not settle upon specifically Brahminical themes, careful to not favor one particular caste or religious perspective. Instead, his speech seemed to serve the variety of castes and positions assembled within the crowd.

Bhaishri's was the first *saptāha* I attended. After listening to Bhaishri's lecture, I became more aware of how readers of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, through lectures and meetings, crafted devotional responses to be exercised in daily life when encountering a world of change—even a world which included abrupt violence. This lead me to question what roles readings of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* played in establishing a notion of contemporary Hinduism in Andhra Pradesh.

Urban Temple *Saptāha*: Hariprasad Sharma's "*Śrīmad Bhāgavata Saptāha*"

One example of a local *saptāha* held in a temple was the *saptāha* I attended in the Satyanārāyaṇa Temple in the central city of Guntur from November 23rd through November 30, 2006. The orator, Hariprasad Sharma, was from a city in Northern Andhra Pradhesh, more than 300 km away. Sharma's narrative was also in Telugu. The sole sponsor of the *saptāha* was a non-resident Indian Brahmin widower who lived in New Jersey, but originally hailed from Guntur. The sponsor, a retired engineer in his late sixties at the time, sponsored the *saptāha* because he wanted to sponsor some type of popular event to honor the memory of his wife who

passed away three years prior. As a result, the temple committee requested a *Bhāgavata saptāha* and named the *saptāha* in her honor. Though he was the primary sponsor for the event, he confided that he was not a very active in temple functions and preferred instead to be a silent donor.[130]

Located in a middle class neighborhood between one-story houses and some low-rise apartment complexes, the Satyanārāyaṇa Temple in Guntur was larger than other similar temples I had seen in residential neighborhoods. A few streets down from the temple was a *vedapāṭhaśālā*, which was closely associated with the temple. The walk towards the temple was punctuated with green space: carefully planted trees lined the sidewalks and the temple grounds. The discourse itself was held under the shade of the temple pavillion just next to the temple that housed the various deities, including the primary deity Satyanārāyaṇa, an incarnation of Viṣṇu. The trees and the pavillion provided adequate shade from the heat, while two floor fans kept the air circulating and the mosquitos at bay in the evening.

Hariprasad Sharma was one of the younger performers of *saptāha*s I had seen, in his late 40's, with a full set of thick black hair and thick, well-groomed beard and mustache. He dressed in a traditional white cotton dhotī and shawl. He did not make a living performing *saptāha*s, but like other performers I met, taught at a school in his hometown. During the *saptāha*, he stayed at the *vedapāṭhaśālā* with the students who also lived there. He came across as a humble, gentle-spirited presence, while at the same time, remaining young and jovial. His lectures were

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[130] The sponsor related to me that his father used to be in charge of the temple and also the nearby associated *vedapāṭhaśālā*. Instead of continuing the tradition, the sponsor, like many Brahmin men of his generation, obtained an engineering degree and moved to the U.S. He explained it to be an economic decision as there "wasn't much money to be made in learning Sanskrit" when he was growing up. Now, instead of continuing the transmission of the Vedas, Sanskrit and other religious texts and traditions by learning, propagating and performing them, Brahmin men like himself often made a good living in the U.S. and abroad as engineers and paid for others to continue to learn, transmit and perform sacred texts and rituals. He continues to fund the *vedapāṭhaśālā* in particular to ensure the transmission of the Vedas continues.

straightforward, his language familiar and simple, but not quite folksy. He spoke earnestly, but very rarely with overdue emotion. He had a solid steady voice and sang well, leading the small audience in various *kīrtana*s that peppered his performance. He had no accompanying musicians and sat on a simple white sheet on the pavillion floor facing his audience, also seated on the same floor.

The audience consisted mostly of retirees and a few housewives. The evenings saw an injection of a few more married couples and children as the work and school day ended. There were also about 10-14 students from the *vedapāṭhaśālā*, the younger students ranging in age from 8 to 12, who would come with Hariprasad Sharma in the morning for lectures, but then leave again at 9:30 a.m. as their own formal instruction began at that time. The students would return again in the evenings around 4:00 p.m. There were usually twice as many women as men attending and the numbers ranged from 20-45 attendees at a time. Weekend attendance was higher, as was evening attendance. There were about 18 participants that attended mostly all of the lectures.

The audience for the most part seemed to know each other. Audience members were cordial to me, curious as to who I was and why someone so young should be taking so many notes. The atmosphere was friendly and casual overall, though it seemed as though the *saptāha* was largely geared towards the surrounding neighborhoods and temple regulars. I had found out about this *saptāha* by word of mouth, through a contact I met at the Kolapalli *saptāha* a few months back, in September. I was informed by the sponsor that the *saptāha* had been advertised in the local Guntur papers, though I myself only found out about it through word of mouth.

Among regular attendees to the lectures that I spoke with, it seemed they adhered to the basic austerities of sleeping on the floor, practicing celibacy, and following a semi-restricted diet.

Another stricture that seemed to be observed in this *saptāha*—that no hair or nails ought to be cut during the *saptāha* week—was more visibly being observed, as the men in regular attendance were clearly not shaving.

Discourse began at 8:30 a.m. and lasted until noon, breaking for lunch and then resuming each evening from 4:00 p.m. to 8:00 p.m. The lecture schedule was punctuated by daily rituals such as the performing of *ārati* and distribution of *prasād* after each lecture. Coconuts were broken whenever any particularly violent or ominous story was told in order to dispel any residual negativity. Hariprasad Sharma also informed me that each day during the *saptāha* week, upon waking in the mornings, after doing his daily morning rituals, he performed a *Go Pūjā*, a simple worship ceremony performed to cows.

On the opening morning of the *saptāha*, at 7:00 a.m. *Gaṇeśa Pūjā* was performed in front of the alcove featuring the idol of Gaṇeśa to bless and begin all proceedings of the *saptāha*. Thereafter, at approximately 8:30 a.m. a procession, consisting of Hariprasad, the *purohit* with the *Bhāgavata* upon his head, the primary sponsor of the event, and the young students from the nearby *vedapāṭhaśālā*, formed. Those who came to listen to the *saptāha* trailed behind the procession. The procession proceeded to enter the main temple complex featuring the inner sanctum that housed the idol of the temple's primary deity, in this case, Satyanārāyaṇa. They circumambulated the inner sanctum once and then stopped in front of the installed image of Satyanārāyaṇa and bowed down. The physical copy of the *Bhāgavata* remained atop the *purohit*'s head the entire time, thus seemingly bowing down with him to Satyanārāyaṇa. Some devotional chants were then uttered by the *purohit* and then *ārati* performed to the deity. The procession then repeated the process with the other deities housed in smaller recessed alcoves in

the rest of the temple complex. In this way the physical copy of the *Bhāgavata* made its rounds amongst all the deities housed in the Satyanārāyaṇa temple.

Never having seen a procession involving another deity at the start of a *saptāha* before, I asked Hariprasad Sharma later, if the text had been taken to do *darśan* of the deities and/or to receive blessings from the deities. He quickly and emphatically corrected me, replying that the text was not taking *darśan*. He explained that the *Bhāgavata is* Kṛṣṇa, and thus, Kṛṣṇa was not required to do *darśan* to the deities. Rather, Kṛṣṇa (in the form of the physical text of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*) was being welcomed by the deities of the hosting temple.[131] I also asked another temple organizer the same question and also received an emphatic denial that the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* was taking *darśan*, but that instead it was just a custom and a means for the expositor to get blessings. The organizer further explained that this type of procession with the physical text of the *Bhāgavata* only happened during *saptāha*, and that it was necessary to get these special blessings, as a *saptāha* is a huge and difficult undertaking.[132]

This procession and responses to my inquiries about it, are reminiscent of McComas Taylor's observations during the *saptāha* that took place in the North Indian Garhwale community. There the local village deity, the *Saiñj devtā* carried by two men on a palanquin came to greet the physical text of the *Bhāgavata* that was carried on the head of the expositor's assitant. Thus, as Taylor describes, both foci of power (the local *devtā* and the visiting *Bhāgavata*) meet in a Derridean context of empowered host and honored guest under the recognized Hindu traditions of hospitality, *satkriyā*. As host, the local *devtā* welcomes the honored *Bhāgavata* and as host organizes the *saptāha* under its auspices, thereby incorporating

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[131] Hariprasad Sharma, interview by author, November 25, 2006.

[132] Satyanārāyaṇa Temple committee organizer, interview by author, November 24, 2006.

the entire event under its auspices in way that still honors the guest, the *Bhāgavata*. In this way, power is mediated between the two deities in the familiar context of *satkriyā*.[133] Likewise, I would suggest a similar metaphor of hospitality was at work here at the Satyanārāyaṇa Temple, as devotees of the local temple sought to honor, both their local deity, Satyanārāyaṇa, as well as the central power of the *saptāha*, the *Bhāgavata*.

Once the opening ceremonies were finished, Hariprasad Sharma made obeisance to the physical copy of the *Bhāgavata* that was then placed on the altar to his right and the audience's left—he would begin every lecture this way. *Ārati* was conducted to the altar, and then for about twenty minutes Hariprasad Sharma led the audience in singing *kīrtana*s. The altar consisted of a white plaster statue of Kṛṣṇa playing the flute, which was adorned around the neck with a fresh garland of flowers daily, as well as daily offerings of flowers and fruit from audience members laid by the feet. The physical copy of the *Bhāgavata* also lay in front of the feet of Kṛṣṇa's statue.

Finally after reciting the usual invocations to the *Bhāgavata*, to Śuka, to Gaṇeśa, Viṣṇu, Kṛṣṇa, one's own teachers, Hariprasad Sharma began his lecture. In the morning session, he covered the narratives in the *Bhāgavata Māhātmya*, while also stressing the importance of proper listening during the *saptāha* and the benefits of listening to the *saptāha*. In the evening session, Sharma moved on to cover the first canto and the story of Parikṣit.

On the morning of the second day, he quickly went through cantos 2 and 3, ending with an elaborate retelling of the narrative of Satī's self-immolation at the start of the fourth canto. During the evening session of the second day, Hariprasad Sharma concluded the fourth canto, taking time to elaborate on the story of Viṣṇu-devotee Dhruva. On the third day, Sharma spent

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[133] Taylor, "Village Deity and Sacred Text," 217.

the morning session going through the fifth canto and in the evening he went through the sixth canto quickly to conclude with the popular narrative of the seventh canto, that of the devotee Prahlāda and Viṣṇu's incarnation as Nṛsiṃha. At the end of the Prahlāda narrative, a couple of coconuts were cracked in order to dispel any negativity from the appearance of Viṣṇu's fierce man-lion *avatāra*, Nṛsiṃha.

On the fourth day, the morning was spent elucidating the formation of the *varṇa*s and the *dharma*s as written in the latter portions of the seventh canto. Then moving onto the eighth canto, focused on the popular *Gajendra Mokṣamu*, the narrative of the elephant Gajendra's release from the jaws of a crocodile he had been struggling with for over a thousand years. Sharma cited quotes from the Telugu version of the tale as found in the *Bhāgavatamu*, devotee-poet Potana's fifteenth-century Telugu version of the *Bhāgavata*. In large part because of it being in Telugu and more easily accessible, but also in part because Potana's version is more emotionally charged, and intensely devotional, *Gajendra Mokṣamu* is one of the most popular tales of the *Bhāgavatamu* and the *Bhāgavata* in Andhra Pradesh.[134] The fact that all the Telugu *paurāṇika*s cited from and retold the Potana version of *Gajendra Mokṣamu* in their *saptāha*s, and moreover, that the telling was met with the delight and full attention of the audience futher corroborates the place of *Gajendra Mokṣamu* in Andhra *saptāha*s.

During the evening session, a renunciate with white hair and a white beard in orange robes arrived to listen to the *Bhāgavata saptāha*. All were silent—including Sharma —as the esteemed guest was seated upon a chair near the Kṛṣṇa altar up front. Once seated, after acknowledging the guest renunciate with a quick bowed head and folded hands, Sharma

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[134] David Shulman, "Remaking a *Purāṇa*: The Rescue of Gajendra in Potana's Telugu *Mahabhāgavatamu*." in *Purāṇa Perennis: Reciprocity and Transformation in Hindu and Jaina Texts*, ed. Wendy Doniger (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1993).

continued his discourse on the ninth canto. I found out later the renunciate was actually an *avadhūta*.[135] His retelling of the ninth canto included a quick summary of various incarnations of Viṣṇu and then primarily featured the main narrative of the ninth canto, the story of Viṣṇu's incarnation as the dwarf Vāmana in order to defeat the evil King Bali. At the end of the session, Sharma announced that we should all dress up the next day for Kṛṣṇa's birth story, which would be covered during the discourse the next morning.

Day five began with another procession of the *Bhāgavata* through the temple, ostensibly to mark the occasion of the birth of Kṛṣṇa (through the narrative retelling of his birth narrative on that day; otherwise, it is not the actual birth day of Kṛṣṇa). Hariprasad Sharma who usually came dressed in simple white garb daily, wore indigo colored robes for the occasion. The procession proceeded exactly as before, with the exception that this time, the book-bearer (a temple organizer) held the copy of the *Bhāgavata* up, against his heart, instead of placing it on his head. Also, the highly esteemed *avadhūta*, who had arrived to listen to the *saptāha* the evening prior stood at the Dattātreya alcove, leading the worship there and giving blessings to prostrating participants.

Once the procession was completed at about 9:00 a.m., the participants sat down and Hariprasad Sharma began the tenth canto of the *Bhāgavata* with the story of the birth of Kṛṣṇa. Just a few minutes shy of 10:00 a.m., Kṛṣṇa was born and coconuts were cracked further announcing his birth. A special *prasād* was prepared and distributed after morning *ārati* for the occasion of Kṛṣṇa's birth: butter (Baby Kṛṣṇa's favorite food) and a sweet milk treat. Sharma

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[135] An *avadhūta* is a particular type of mystic or sage who is supposed to be pure consciousness embodied, and thus not conciencious of societal norms. *Avadhūta*s feature prominently in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, as Sage Śuka, who narrates the *Bhāgavata* to King Parikṣit is considered to be an *avadhūta*, as are the devotees Prahlāda and Dhruva. Moreover in the eleventh canto Kṛṣṇa gives an entire discourse to disciple Uddhava (known as the *Uddhava Gītā*) regarding the qualities of the *avadhūta*.

continued the morning lecture and evening lecture, going through the popular stories from the tenth canto, including the Kṛṣṇa's slaying of the demon Pūtanā, the *Rasa-Līlā* (which Hariprasad Sharma asked me not to record), and ending with Kṛṣṇa's slaying of evil King Kaṃsa, heralding the cracking of more coconuts. The evening lecture ran over by about a half hour on this day, though no one seemed to mind.

Day six was also spent on important narratives from the tenth canto, in particular the longing of the *gopī*s (cowheard girls of Vrindavan) for Kṛṣṇa, and Kṛṣṇa's marriage to Rukmiṇī were told during the morning. Surprisingly, Sharma became emotional and teary-eyed during his retelling of the *gopī*'s fierce, painful longing to see their beloved Lord Kṛṣṇa. Otherwise, Hariprasad Sharma's narratives were fairly straightforward, earnest retellings, featuring a few jokes here and there. In the evening, Hariprasad Sharma continued narrating select stories from the tenth canto, focusing largely on the story of Sudhāma, Kṛṣṇa's childhood friend.

On day seven, Hariprasad Sharma finished the tenth canto during the morning session in about an hour. Then an elaborate wedding ritual between Rukmiṇī and Kṛṣṇa, the *Rukmiṇī Kalyāṇa,* was reenacted. In the previous two Telugu *saptāha*s I had witnessed, the Kolapalli *saptāha* and the ashram *saptāha* (both detailed below), the *Rukmiṇī Kalyāṇa* ritual was conducted on the same day as the story was narrated (Day 6); here they decided to conduct it on the last day due to some time constraints. When I asked Sharma why this ritual reenactment was done, he replied—as did many others I asked—that it made Kṛṣṇa happy to do it. Then he added it was part of the tradition and a necessary ritual to complete the *saptāha*.[136]

As with the other two *saptāha*s I witnessed, more people came to attend the wedding ceremony than any of the *saptāha* discourse. The wedding ceremony here was almost as

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[136] Hariprasad Sharma, interview by author, November 25, 2006

elaborate as the one in Kolapalli. A miniature *maṇḍap*, or four-posted ritual pavillion, was created out of wood and decorated with flowers. Inside small, 2-3 inch-high silver idols of Rukmiṇī and Kṛṣṇa, also adorned with flowers and miniature silk garments, were placed. This ceremony was sponsored separately from the *saptāha*, by one couple, who also sat in front of the *maṇḍap*. They were very well dressed as it was also their duty to act as proxy to the deities, performing certain marriage rites on behalf of the deities as directed by the officiating Brahmin priest, such as making offerings into the fire, placing garlands around the idols, etc. The *maṇḍap* housing the idols, the priest, the sponsoring-proxy couple as well as all the ritual items, including the *homa* (sacred fire) and items to be sacrificed into the homa were all on a slightly elevated wooden platform about three square meters wide, covered with green cloth. This ceremony seemed to echo a typical Telugu wedding ceremony (minus the pre and post wedding rituals), as it included a mini gold *tala* for Rukmiṇī. The ceremony was of course condensed in many regards and completed within 3 hours.

The ceremony was held under the same pavillion as the discourse. This time however, chairs were set up for participants to sit and watch the ceremony. Some participants, especially young children gathered around the platform to view the ceremony. Though an informal gate was created to keep participants a good 5 feet away from all edges of the platform. Upon conclusion of the wedding ceremony *ārati* was conducted and *prasād* distributed.

This reenactment was very similar to what I had witnessed in Kolapalli, which will be detailed in the next chapter. It is interesting to note that this reenactment of the wedding ceremony is not mentioned anywhere within the prescription of the *Bhāgavata Māhātmya*. However, in the three *saptāha* that were done in the vernacular Telugu, I observed that they all included this reenactment of the Rukmiṇī and Kṛṣṇa wedding.

Finally, on the evening of the last day, Sharma finished the eleventh canto with particular deference to the last purport of Kṛṣṇa to his disciple Uddhava, also known as the *Uddhava Gītā*. In particular, he focused on the instructions regarding cultivating the mind of an *avadhūta*. He then quickly summarized the twelfth canto and closed his discourse with verses from Potana's *Bhāgavatamu* that he found personally meaningful. Participants were then given a copy of the *Viṣṇusahasranāma stotra*. One of the participants, a retired doctor, sang some *kīrtana*s she composed herself, which she only would sing at the temple. One of the primary event organizers then gave a speech thanking Sharma for coming and giving such a wonderful discourse. *Ārati* was performed concluding the *saptāha*.

Special Topics *Saptāha*: Nandakumaracharya Shastry's "*Śrīmad Bhāgavata* Saptāhamu"

The last *saptāha* I observed during fieldwork took place in Guntur as well, this time in the Veṅkaṭeśvara Temple. Conducted in Telugu with the usual sprinkles of Sanskrit verses and citations, this *saptāha* took place from January 22 through 29, 2007 from 6:30 p.m. to 9:00 p.m. in the evenings. Aside from the shorter duration of the daily lectures, this *saptāha* stood out from the other *saptāha* I had witnessed for many reasons. For one, Nandakumaracharya Shastry focused specifically upon the *Bhāgavata Māhātmya* and the *Bhāgavata*'s first canto, without concern for retelling the *Bhāgavata* in its entirety. Nandakumaracharya Shastry did read the entire *Bhāgavata* by himself during the course of the *saptāha*.[137] During the evening discourse, however, he only covered the *Bhāgavata Māhātmya* and the first canto of the *Bhāgavata*.

Organized by the temple committee and sponsored by committee members and local devotees who were actively engaged with temple activities, this *saptāha* was primarily

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[137] Nandakumaracharya Shastry, personal interview by author, January 25, 2006.

performed by Nandakumaracharya Shastry. I say primarily because the first evening and on the last evening of lectures, speakers from the temple community spoke about various narratives of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* that they found interesting or inspiring. These individual speeches ranged from personal stories of how the *Bhāgavata* inspired devotion, a speaker's favorite narrative, or more intellectual type speeches about the philosophy of the *Bhāgavata* or connecting themes from the *Bhāgavata* and/or a particular narrative of the *Bhāgavata* to the *Bhagavad Gītā*. Many of the speakers included verses from Potana's *Bhāgavatamu* or spoke exclusively of Potana's version of the *Bhāgavata* narrative. As the last day of the lecture was the purported anniversary of Bhīṣma's death in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, one person's speech recounted the narrative passage in the *Bhāgavata* wherein Bhīṣma lays dying on a bed of arrows, requesting to see Kṛṣṇa before passing.

The speakers were either volunteers whose positions had been approved by the head of the temple committee Swami Bolapalli Satyanarayana, or they had been asked by Swami Bolapalli Satyanarayana, the head of the temple committee to speak. Though the majority of the speakers were male, there were some women who spoke as well. Based upon their dress and speech, these women appeared to be educated, upper middle class women holding professional jobs. One woman, for example, worked as an editor at a local newspaper. I had also been asked to speak about my project for ten minutes on the last evening. However, as a number of the previous speakers ran over their allotted twenty minutes, time ran out and I did not end up speaking.

Nandakumaracharya Shastry was an elder Brahmin: a septagenerian, with a full set of white hair. Thin, yet quite agile, he always talked and moved with a slow, deliberate grace. He always wore a white cotton *kurtā* and a *dhotī*. Hailing from Guntur, he had been giving

discourses on the *Bhāgavata* for almost fifty years. He was a very seasoned, confident and skilled speaker, and perhaps one of the most serious that I had observed. Without accompanying musicians he just sat alone on stage in front of the microphone and a copy of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*. He did not refer to notes during his lecture, but seemed to speak quite extemporaneously and with an easy flow.

As for the content of his discourse, he spoke all seven days but never made it past the first canto. Nor did he intend to, as he pontificated (a bit indignantly initially) by the second lecture that the limited time frame of the *saptāha* made it impossible to truly cover the *Bhāgavata* with any depth. By the last lecture, he more cheerfully announced plans by the sponsors to try to raise money and organize a series of seven more *saptāha* over the course of the year. In these *saptāha*, Nandakumaracharya Shastry would continue to deliver his discourse eventually covering the entire *Bhāgavata*.

Nandakumaracharya Shastry spent the first two sessions meticulously going through the *Bhāgavata Māhātmya* and the rest of the five sessions going through the first canto. In terms of narrative, he was primarily concerned with the story of King Parikṣit, and spent a good deal of time discussing Parikṣit's downfall due to ego. As he was not in a hurry to move beyond the first canto, his lecture included more details in the retelling of the narrative, as well as, including various chapters from the canto that were usually skipped in most other *saptāha* I went to.

Unlike other *saptāha* I observed, Nandakumaracharya Shastry's lecture was also far more intellectual than devotional in content and mood. There was very little devotional singing, and only an occasional *kīrtana* before or after the *ārati*. There were also very few related rituals conducted during this *saptāha*. There were beginning ceremonies conducted on the first day—*Gaṇeśa pūjā* and worship of the *Bhāgavata*—done inside the temple, before the advertised start

time of the discourse; and thus, not stressed to the general public. There was no procession of the *Bhāgavata* into the temple. As the stories of Kṛṣṇa's birth and marriage to Rukmiṇī were never covered during the lecture, there were no reenactments or special displays set up for those events.

The discourse itself was held outside the temple on one side of its massive, semi-grassy front lawn. Plastic chairs were set up for audience members facing the large stage which was very simply decorated with a banner designating the event and a few garlands of real and fake flowers. There were approximately 400 chairs set up for the audience. One half to three-quarters of the chairs were occupied on the weekdays, and on the weekends the chairs were filled to capacity with a few persons left standing in the back.

Remote *Saptāha*: Mahendra Shastry's "*Śrī Bhāgavata* Saptāhamu"

The third *saptāha* I attended was a somewhat remote *saptāha*, sponsored by and held at an ashram about 60 km from Hyderabad from October 8, 2006 to October 14, 2006. The *saptāha* was commissioned in part to commemorate what would have been the 106th birthday of the late founding guru, who was believed by his devotees to have been the eleventh incarnation of Viṣṇu. Every year on his birthday, the ashram held a one *lakh* (10,000,000) flower *pūjā*, and in the past five years, began holding a *saptāha* as well.[138] The ashram owns various plots of land which yields the ashram its primary source of funding, enabling them to maintain the daily costs of running the ashram as well as sponsoring events like the annual one lakh flower *pūjā* and *Bhāgavata saptāha*.[139] Additional sponsorship for the *saptāha* came from individual contributions by devotees in attendance. The ashram also accepted donations.

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[138] A *lakh* is the term for the number 10,000,000.

[139] Ashram resident and descendent of founding swamiji, personal conversation, October 11, 2006.

The performer, Mahendra Shastry, was invited by the ashram's organizing committee to perform the *saptāha*. The ashram's fifth annual *saptāha* was Mahendra Sastry's first time delivering his *saptāha* discourse at this ashram. Mahendra Shastry hailed from a larger city in a central district of Andhra Pradesh, about 400 km away from the ashram. Mahendra Shastry was a clean-cut, married family man in his late fifties, possibly early sixties. A full time Hindi professor, he had lectured on the *Bhāgavata*, *Bhagavad Gītā*, the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata* in both Hindi and Telugu, and had gleaned a small, loyal following of his own in his hometown. Though he did not make a living from his discourses, he had enough success to be invited to lead a group of 20 or so devotees on *Bhāgavata saptāha* pilgrimages to Vrindavan and other holy sites almost yearly, as mentioned above.

Located in the countryside nestled within acres of trees by a small pond believed to hold healing waters, at least 10 kilometers from the nearest highway, fresh air all around, the ashram could not have been a more simple and idyllic setting for the *saptāha*. A bus left daily at 8:30 a.m. and 3:30 p.m. from a railway station located in Hyderabad's twin city, Secundarabad. It took about an hour to get to the ashram on the bus. Thus, daily return trips to Secundarabad from the ashram with the same bus ran at 10:00 a.m. and 5:00 p.m. The nearest village is ten kilometers away from the ashram. Devotees from far away either filtered in by bus or car, while devotees from the nearby village walked, bicycled or rode scooters to the ashram.

The local villagers who came during the day and left at night were more easily able to accommodate the 9:00 a.m. to noon morning lectures and 4:00 p.m. to 8:00 p.m. evening lectures than those from out of town. Those of us from further away, including the expositor, Mahendra Shastry, were accommodated in the guest rooms of the ashram. Women shared two rooms with a few cots and floor mats, while another two rooms were provided for men to share. Mahendra

Sharma was given his own accommodations. There were approximately five to ten women staying overnight at a time, and five to eight men.

Additional audience members were comprised of some of the twenty permanent residents of the ashram—descendents of the founding guru's family, disciples of the founding guru, the resident *purohit* and his family as well, all of whom kept the ashram running. The *saptāha* drew an average audience of thirty-five persons during any given discourse, with about twenty-five audience members attending at least three-fourths or more of the entire discourse. Audience members swelled in the evenings, as more local village members having completed their daily duties, came to listen to the discourse and/or worship at the temple housed on the ashram grounds. The audience seemed to be fairly split between men and women, mostly elder retirees with the exception of myself, a few other participants, and the ashram residents. The numbers waxed higher towards women in the evenings with the influx of middle-aged, married women from the village.

I found out about this *saptāha* by word of mouth, from a professor, whom I met at the Kolapalli *saptāha*. The ashram's *saptāha* was not as widely an advertised event as others had been, as no newspaper advertisements or other such pamphlets had been distributed. However, for anyone connected to the ashram, or living nearby, news of the *saptāha* was spread by word of mouth, as it had been for me. The professor who had informed me of the performance identified himself as member of ISKCON (International Society for Krishna Consciousness), and told me he made it a point to attend as many *saptāha*s and *Bhāgavata kathā*s that he could during his free time. As a result, he was always in the know for various *saptāha*s and *kathā*s that were occurring and graciously passed the word on to me via email or the occasional sms text message. I soon learned through my interactions with the professor and a few other devotees attending this

ashram *saptāha*, that there were some devotees like the Professor who passed knowledge of these lesserknown performances to one another, in a sort of *saptāha* circle.

The grounds of the ashram consisted of a main temple hall which housed the main deity, a mausoleum housing the remains of the founding guru, a large complex that includes guest rooms, a main dining hall, some of the ashram's residential housing, a separate resident house, and an assembly hall. The assembly hall consisted of a small stage in the front and a pavillion, with its roof branching off the main building of the complex. All the ashram's religious discourses such as *saptāha*s and *harikathā*s were held there. The small but adequate stage upon which the speakers sat facing the audience was placed in front of a small dais with a microphone upon it. In the right-hand corner of the stage, facing the audience, were portraits of the founding guru and his guru, adorned with flower garlands, elevated upon a chair. There were some plastic flower garlands decorating the frame of the stage, though otherwise decorations were sparse. Nonetheless, the serene beauty of the countryside nearby and the quiet, clean, peaceful atmosphere of the ashram made for an entirely lovely, idyllic retreat.

Mahendra Shastry sat on the stage, slightly raised upon a wooden platform about two feet high. Directly in front of Mahendra Shastry was a dais covered in red velvet cloth, upon which sat the microphone and his copy of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, along with whatever accumulated flowers and fruits were offered to him by devotees during the course of the day. There was no altar with pictures or idols of Kṛṣṇa and various other Viṣṇu *avatāra*s, as in the other *saptāha* I had witnessed. Instead, every time Mahendra Shastry arrived to give his discourse, he would prostrate to the photos of the founding guru placed in the corner of the stage, before finally taking his place in front of the audience. *Ārati*, which was conducted at the end of each lecture, was also done to the pictures of the gurus in the corner.

The audience faced the stage, seated upon a simple tarp rolled out along the floor. The stage and the seating area for the audience were shaded by a simple tin roof extending off of the main building complex, supported by pillars at the audience's left edge. The space was open, allowing for fresh air to circulate throughout. There was one ceiling fan above the stage but otherwise, only a few tubelights were hooked up to the rooftop rafters. The open pavillion also looked out onto the open courtyard to the audience's left, where a colorful, plaster statue of Kṛṣṇa playing his flute stood.

The schedule for the *saptāha* consisted of a morning lecture from 9:00 a.m. to 12:00 (though we often stretched over to 12:30 or even 1:00 p.m.) and an evening lecture from 4:00 p.m. to 8:00 p.m. *Kīrtana*s were often sung in the morning by the temple before the morning lecture would begin, and in the evenings before and after the evening lecture. The evening singing seemed to be a standard practice of nearby villagers, mainly women, who would often come to do darshan at the temple, leaving some offerings and singing together. Some would stay for the lecture, though many would leave.

Lunch and dinner meals were also provided as a form of *prasād*, in addition to the *prasād* offered at the end of each lecture after the *ārati* conducted at the stage altar was completed. The dining hall was a communal space and not very segregated. In general, the ashram maintained a caste-blind stance, believing that devotion was the great equalizer. Nonetheless, the dining hall did have a small partition where Brahmins could sit separately if they so desired. Also, all of the cooking was done strictly by Brahmins. Mahendra Shastry and the chemistry professor from Warangal sat in the separate section, as did a few other members of the audience. Otherwise, most people (some Brahmins included) sat in the general section. Despite the partition, everyone was served food at the same time and ate at the same time, a notable difference from proceedings

in Kolapalli, where Brahmins were fed first and separately in the main hall. The family of the founding guru who resided at the temple were Vaidikī Brahmins and usually just ate at home, rarely in the hall.

Mahendra Shastry wore large, dark-colored, plastic-framed glasses that seemed to cover half of his face and sometimes slightly magnified his dark, black eyes. His thick, salt and pepper toned hair was mostly white. He wore the traditional Brahmin garb: a white cotton *dhotī* with a thin colored border and a shawl. In repose, his face was always quite serious. He always seemed to carry himself in a very proper and dignified manner and expected those around him to do so as well. Multiple times during his discourse, he stopped and directly addressed audience members or even cooks in the nearby kitchen who were talking too loud, ordering them to respectfully be quiet. This was the only *Bhāgavata* performance where I had witnessed that type of direct chastising of the audience by a performer. For the most part, other performers simply ignored such behavior (as it seemed to be an inescapable part of smaller performances in villages especially) or alternately, would become silent themselves, cueing other audience members to intervene in quieting down any chatty or oblivious offenders during a lecture.

Of all the performers I had witnessed, Mahendra Shastry also had the most emotional delivery of his materials. When narrating various passages in which devotees were in need of or longing for their beloved Lord Viṣṇu or Kṛṣṇa, he engaged in a passionate retelling of the story. His voice would break at times, as he appeared overcome by the suffering imparted in the *Bhāgavata* and occasionally cried. In particular, when retelling the story of the elephant Gajendra who struggled for over a thousand years to free his foot from the mouth of a crocodile trying to pull him into the lake, at the moment within the narrative that Gajendra desperately cries for help from Viṣṇu, Mahendra Shastry broke down in tears. Notably, for the tale of

Gajendra, he cited and retold the more emotionally charged Telugu version of the narrative from Potana's *Bhāgavatamu*. He also cried when narrating about the indignities suffered by the young child devotee Prahlāda in the seventh canto and when narrating the passage in the tenth canto, in which the *gopī*s desperately long to see Kṛṣṇa again. His passionate, emotional narration seemed to impress audience members as a sign of his great devotion to Kṛṣṇa.

In terms of content, Mahendra Shastry's discourse followed a very similar schedule of topics to that of Mahendra Shastry's *saptāha* discourse in Guntur as listed above, with the small exception that his first morning lecture on the *Māhātmya* was much shorter as his lecture time was cut in order to perform the one lakh flower *pūjā*. Mahendra Shastry's discourse also stood out from other *saptāha* discourses that I observed in that he cited much more from Potana's Telugu *Bhāgavatamu* than the other performers I had witnessed. In fact, with the exception of 3 sessions, Mahendra Shastry's discourse always cited back to the *Bhāgavatamu*, as well as the Sanskrit *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*.

Not realizing that the bus arrived at 9:30 a.m., I initially missed the early moments of the first day of the *saptāha*. Discourse was already under way upon my arrival, so I immediately sat down and started recording. I later found out that I had missed the *Gaṇeśa Pūjā* and a worship of the *Bhāgavata*, which had commenced at 8:00 a.m. As far as I could ascertain, no procession had been done with the *Bhāgavata*. The first discourse broke early, at 11:00 a.m. that first morning, as the 10,000,000 flower *pūjā* was to be conducted in the small mausoleum housing the remains of the founding guru, his wife, his sister and his most beloved disciple. During this worship ceremony the 10,000,000 flowers are offered one by one while chanting various mantras.

In front of the mausoleum a large hanging cradle adorned with flowers was also erected. The adorned cradle is reminiscent of cradles built for *Kṛṣṇa Janmāṣṭamī* celebrations, *Kṛṣṇa*

Janmāṣṭamī being the birthday of Kṛṣṇa. By about 1:00 a.m. the flower *pūjā* was completed and then worshipers were directed to the hanging cradle, lining up to take turns rocking it. Devotees of the founding guru believe him to have been the eleventh incarnation of Viṣṇu. Thus, on his birthday they rock the cradle, and in much the same way, the decorated cradle's containing idols of baby Kṛṣṇa are traditionally rocked during celebrations of Kṛṣṇa's actual birthday. The cradle remained up for the entire duration of the *saptāha*, though on the fifth day when Mahendra Sharma narrated the birth of Kṛṣṇa from the tenth canto, no ritual rocking of the cradle or any type of interaction or reference to that cradle was made.

Aside from those few rituals conducted on the first day, the only other major ritual conducted with the *saptāha* was the *Rukmiṇī Kalyāṇa*, the wedding ritual of Rukmiṇī and Kṛṣṇa. During the evening session on the sixth day of the *saptāha*, Mahendra Shastry completed his narrative retelling of the wedding of Rukmiṇī and Kṛṣṇa by 8:00 pm. Thereafter, a wedding ceremony, far less elaborate than what I had witnessed in the *saptāha*s at the Satyanārāyaṇa Temple in Guntur and in Kolapalli, was conducted between gold idols of Kṛṣṇa and Rukmiṇī. The gold idols were actually joined under a decorative golden halo as one entire sculpture and had, since the morning, been placed in front of the dais facing the audience adorned with fresh flowers. Whereas in previous reenactments of Kṛṣṇa and Rukmiṇī's weddings that I had witnessed, the proxy couple acting on behalf of Kṛṣṇa and Rukmiṇī were always the sponsors of the elaborate wedding ritual, in this case, the proxy agents were always members of the founding guru's lineage that lived at the ashram. The ceremony consisted of dressing the idols in wedding finery, making some offerings and having them place garlands (via human proxy agents) around one another. After the ceremony, the members of the founding guru's family prostrated to

Mahendra Shastry, offered him fruits, flowers, a shawl and a *dhotī*. Many *kīrtana*s were sung before and after the wedding ceremony.

Also unique to evening of the sixth day was the appearance of *avadhūta* renunciates. Two thin, long-gray haired, bearded renunciates appeared in saffron robes with staffs and traditional paduka sandals. They came for the evening lecture and stayed throughout the ritual wedding reenactment. The renunciates acknowledged the *Bhāgavata* and the idols of Kṛṣṇa and Rukmiṇī on the stage by tapping their staffs to them. Before taking the stage for his evening lecture, Mahendra Shastry prostrated to the renunciates, then to the portraits of the founding guru and his guru, before finally sitting down to perform the discourse.

Local Village *Saptāha*: A First Look at Kolapalli's Ninetieth Annual *Bhāgavata Saptāha*

The second *saptāha* I attended, and the most elaborate of them all, was the ninetieth annual *Śrīmad Bhāgavata Saptāha Jñānayajña Mahotsavamulu* of Kolapalli village performed by Chandramurthy Shastry. Kolapalli is a small village located 4 kilometers from the Krishna River, in Andhra Pradesh's central eastern district of Guntur. Aside from its state-wide reputation for brick production, Kolapalli is known regionally for their annual *saptāha*, organized by a committee of volunteers from the village. A traditional Brahmin village, or *agrahāra*, Kolapalli is the head village of a group of 12 villages. The estimated population of Kolapalli is 15,000, and for the entire group of villages, 54,000.[140] Delivered in Telugu, the primary language spoken by residents of Kolapalli, this *Bhāgavata* discourse was a traditional, highly-ritualized, highly-localized performance that demanded an intense level of participation—

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[140] Figures from Kolapalli's Chief Medical Officer Uma Devi. Uma Devi, interview by author, Kolapalli, Andhra Pradesh, 8 September 2006.

including a lecture schedule which lasted eight hours per day, as well as the undertaking of austerities and practicing of rituals—from those who attended the entire discourse.

Kolapalli's *saptāha* immediately struck me as different and unique from the *Bhāgavata saptāha* that I attended up until that point: that of Bhaishri's grand metropolitan *saptāha* in Gosh Mahal Stadium in Hyderabad. Aside from obvious differences such as that Kolapalli's *saptāha* had a smaller, rural audience composed primarily of local persons and was sponsored by the local community with a decidedly smaller budget, I found the local atmosphere was overall congenial, and the size of the crowd lent a certain intimacy to the proceedings. At the same time, it became quite evident from the beginning of the first lecture, that this *saptāha* was much more austere—both in terms of aesthetics and participant practice—than any of the performances I had observed thus far. Even though I would go on to attend a great number of *saptāha*s, in comparison, Kolapalli's *saptāha* continued to be the most austere of all *saptāha* I had attended, with its very strict code of conduct, practice of austerities and observances of caste.

I arrived in Kolapalli with my Sanskrit teacher, Shastryji, who had first informed me of the *saptāha* through an invitational flier his mother had received. We had taken an early morning bus from a small city nearby—where we stayed overnight with the family of a former student of my teacher. He and his wife were like many residents of Kolapalli, Brahmins who had moved out of Kolapalli into the nearby city. With him, I walked from Kolapalli's only bus stop, coming right off the dusty highway, down the main road of the village, which ran parallel to the village's market road.

After about ten minutes of walking, we reached the small hall where the *saptāha* was scheduled to take place. From outside in the street, the hall appeared to be an unceremoniously small, concrete building. This building was formerly Kolapalli's *vedapāṭhaśālā,* which was also

used for religious discourses and programs, as well as for Brahmin marriage ceremonies. There was a wall with a gate surrounding the building compound and its outside courtyards, which included a row of water taps that were used for washing hands and feet before entering the *vedapāṭhaśālā*. Inside, the main hall dominated the compound. At one end of the rectangular room was a cot where the *paurāṇika*, Chandramurthy Shastry, would sit, back to the wall facing his audience to deliver his lectures. Audience members would eventually fill up the room, seated on the floor. On his right (the audience's left), an altar had been set up in the front of the room. This altar was decorated daily with fresh flowers that had been donated by various village women, hand-picked from their gardens. These colorful, scented arrangements stood out in the otherwise simple room.

Various photos of Kṛṣṇa had been placed upon the altar. Overlooking all these arrangements were photos of Nṛsiṃha and Hanumān, posted to the wall. Underneath these pictures, I noticed two men, busy attending to the arrangement of ritual items, performing *pūjā*. The elder of the two, a middle-aged, round-faced man was the *purohit*, the presiding Brahmin priest, and the younger, his student, Vamsi, a bright, friendly teenager whom I would get to know over the course of the week.

Everyone in the room sat upon the floor, aside from the *paurāṇika*, who sat upon the bare cot, preparing to deliver the *saptāha*. Hanging on the wall above where the *paurāṇika* would sit were the portraits of two older Brahmins. The first photo, dated and faded, was of the original founder of the Kolapalli *saptāha*, the *paurāṇika* who started and led Kolapalli's annual *saptāha* tradition for approximately 50 years until he passed away. The photo next to this one was of the *paurāṇika* who had succeeded him for some years. Their prominently featured portraits painted the rich history of this particular performance, as well as the sense that all performances would

continue to transpire under the watchful eyes of this chain of *paurāṇika*s. Unlike in former times however, when the serene profiles of these two *paurāṇika*s had exercised a longstanding tenure over the performance, the role of *paurāṇika* in Kolapalli during recent years, had fallen to a different Brahmin each year.

For Kolapalli's ninetieth consecutive year of *saptāha*, Chandramurthy Shastry was selected to give the discourse. While he usually gave three to four *Bhāgavata saptāha* each year throughout Andhra Pradesh, these performances were not enough to sustain him or his family. Chandramurthy Shastry still kept his day job as a sixth and seventh grade Sanskrit teacher—a form of employment complimentary to his duties as a *paurāṇika*—in the government school in his hometown village, located more than 300 km southwest of Kolapalli in the Kurnool District of Andhra. Though not from Kolapalli himself—and therefore, as a leader of ceremonies, an outsider who would define the conditions for maintaining local tradition within a group—Chandramurthy Shastry's orthodox linguistic qualifications still enabled him to ensure the correct transmission of the highly localized, traditional *saptāha* carried out each year in Kolapalli. In fact, this was the second time Chandramurthy Shastry was performing the annual *saptāha* at Kolapalli.

I first saw Chandramurthy Shastry when he entered the *vedapāṭhaśālā* to deliver his first lecture. He quietly entered the room and sat on the makeshift dais. He seemed very serious, with a no-nonsense attitude. Initially, he answered questions regarding set up of the *saptāha* and offers for chai, food or other comforts (made outside of the discourse) with looks, nods and gestures, speaking very minimally. He also refused to answer questions during his discourse, and in most cases, if he chose to acknowledge a question it was only to defer it to after the discourse. He was dressed in orthodox Brahmin fashion, including a shaved head with tonsure and smears

of *vibhūti* (sacred ash) on his forehead. Of all of the *saptāha* I had observed, Chandramurthy

Shastry was the only performer to adhere to the *Bhāgavata Māhātmya*'s instructions that the

performer must shave his head the day before the start of the *saptāha*.[141] He dressed in traditional

Brahmin garb. Like many of the people in Kolapalli, he was a Smārta Brahmin.

All of the Brahmins in Kolapalli that I spoke with identified themselves as Vaidikulu or

Vaidikī Brahmins, a subsect of Smārta Brahmins that are predominantly Telugu-speaking and

found in Andhra Pradesh.[142] Traditionally, Vaidikī Brahmins master and teach the Vedas, hence

their name Vaidikī is derived from the Vedas. Vaidikī Brahmins often conduct religious rituals

and as with all Smārta Brahmins in general, are concerned with upholding religious traditions,

particularly Vedic traditions. As such, Vaidikī Brahmins have a reputation for being more

conservative and orthodox. The functioning *vedapāṭhaśālā*, where young Brahmin boys are

being taught to memorize the Vedas, provides an example of how these Kolapalli Brahmins

continue to uphold the Vedic tradition. Moreover, as Vamsi and some of his other

contemporaries who occasionally appeared at the *saptāha* to help with facilitating the rituals

exemplify, not only are the Vedas being passed down, but the knowledge of how to conduct

religious rites and rituals is also being taught from the *purohit* to younger generations.

In terms of the performance here in Kolapalli, it was not a particularly *Vaiṣṇavite* or

Kṛṣṇa-centered audience as Vaidikī Brahmins subscribe to the belief that all the major deities are

a manifestation of Brahman. Alternatively, as multiple participants I interviewed, including

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[141] *Bhāgavata Māhātmya*, 6.23

[142] As Hilary Peter Rodrigues notes of Smārtas in a study of a Bengali *Pūjā*, "Smārtas are Brahmins (*brāhmana*) who typify Hindu orthodoxy, and who worship at the shrines of five deities (*pañcāyatana*), among which are Śiva, Viṣṇu and Durgā." Hillary Peter Rodrigues, "Fluid control: Orchestrating blood flow in the Durgā *Pūjā*," *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses*, 38,2, (2009), 264. Though by definition, Smārta Brahmins worship these five deities, Leela *Prasād* notes that "in practice, there is great variation" Leela Prasad, *Poetics of Conduct: Oral Narrative and Moral Being in a South Indian Town*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2007, 232.

Chandramurthy Shastry and Vamsi stated, they worshipped all gods while recognizing there was only one *paramātman,* or Supreme Being (*Brahman*). It is common and acceptable practice for Vaidikī Brahmins to have a particular *iṣṭa devatā*, or personal favorite deity to worship, and still partake in devotional practices and religious ceremonies for other major deities, so long as these deities hail from the Vedic traditions. In particular, Vaidikī Brahmins recognize Śiva, Śakti, Gaṇeśa, Viṣṇu, Sūrya and Skanda to be the six major deities or manifestations of the formless Brahman.[143]

Shastryji and I had managed to arrive in the hall at Kolapalli early, at about 8:00 a.m. as we were unsure when exactly the *saptāha* would begin. The hall was still relatively empty. Aside from the *purohit*, Vamsi, Shastryji and myself, only one elderly couple was in attendance when we first arrived. A local couple, they had sponsored the *Gaṇeśa Pūjā* that the *purohit* and Vamsi were performing to mark the beginning of the *saptāha*. I was surprised that there were not many other people attending this opening event and learned later that attendance at the *Gaṇeśa Pūjā* was usually viewed as optional by most residents.

Shastryji and I went upstairs once the *Gaṇeśa Pūjā* ended, as we were informed that quarters for out-of-town attendees could be found there. On the second floor was another large room almost as large as the hall below. There was a long dusty hall that seemed unfinished, its thin veneer of paint now cracking, showing metal-support rods protruding from one corner of the wall. At the end of this hall were two rooms—the guest rooms. However, as I learned soon enough, one of the rooms was already reserved for the *paurāṇika*. Each room had one fairly old cot in it with an old cotton mattress, though it seemed that guests were expected to sleep on the

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[143] Most of this information I gathered in various interviews and conversations with Chandramurthy Shastry, Uma Devi and Vamsi. Their accounts of common Smārta beliefs and practices are further substantiated in the following sources: Rodrigues, "Fluid control," and Prasad, *Poetics of Conduct*.

floor anyways. None of the windows on this upper floor had nets or window panes across them—just metal bars—and the mosquitoes that congregated in cool shadows on the inside of the building were nearly unbearable, especially as there were no ceiling fans upstairs. The absence of glass windowpanes also allowed for a layer of dust to settle indoors. Most of this was made up of concrete particles blowing in from across the street outside, where a newer, bigger, *vedapāṭhaśālā* was under construction. That building would eventually provide space for holding subsequent *Bhāgavata saptāha*s, as well as Kolapalli's annual *Rāmāyaṇa navāha*s, nine-day discourses on the *Rāmāyaṇa*.

The simple accommodations we found outside these rooms however, would allow us substantial interactions with members in the community. As Shastryji made inquiries on our behalf, a local Brahmin woman, Uma Devi, kindly offered to let Shastryji and I stay with her for the duration of the *saptāha*, as there were no hotels or such facilities within this small village. The only option was staying with someone, or staying in the spare rooms of the *vedapāṭhaśālā*. Thankfully, Uma Devi had two spare rooms on the second floor of her home. Fortunately for me, my own heritage as an *Anāvil* Brahmin[144]—something I did not think much about while living in the United States—came to use, as Uma Devi nor any other Brahmins living in Kolapalli would likely allow me to board with them, had I not been Brahmin. For that matter, I learned later that the rooms in the *vedapāṭhaśālā* were also only for Brahmins to share. Shastryji, as his surname common for Smārta Brahmins in Andhra Pradesh and the South in general, was also definitely

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[144] Anāvil Brahmins are predominantly a Gujarati Brahmin caste. They are Brahmin in every sense, except that they do not have the rights to perform Vedic rites or rituals. Anāvil Brahmins established their elite caste status by avoiding manual, agricultural labor, thereby necessitating a differentiation between their own interests and those of laborers tied to the land. See Binay Bushan Chaudhuri (ed), *Rise and Growth of an Affluent Peasant Stratum and the Process of Peasant Differentiation*. New Delhi: Pearson Education in India, 2008, 601.

indentifiable as a Brahmin.[145] Uma Devi, who was the retired health inspector of Kolapalli, proved to have a wealth of knowledge of Kolapalli and its surrounding villages. It was from her that I learned that Kolapalli was a traditional Brahmin *agrahāra*. And as I would soon realize, their *saptāha* was a very traditional Brahmin *saptāha* steeped in the local customs, traditions and practices of Kolapalli.

In fact, as I considered the infrastructure of the town more closely, realizing that no hotels or lodging for strangers from outside were available, I began to understand more and more that this was a very exclusive community. Though fliers had been sent out to neighboring towns and villages advertising Kolapalli's *Bhāgavata saptāha*, it became very evident that they rarely expected outsiders to attend their events, as the only provisions they made for out-of-town attendees were the two basic rooms above the *vedapāṭhaśālā,* both of which were falling into disrepair. In fact, I had only found out about the performance less than two weeks in advance by chance, through Shastryji. Shastryji had invited myself and two other Sanskrit students of his who were studying with him in a coastal city in Andhra Pradesh, to his natal village, Mangalpatnam, where his mother and sister hosted us for lunch. There, his mother, upon learning about my research on performances of the *Bhāgavata*, gave Shastryji a flier she received for Kolapalli's *saptāha*. Mangalpatnam is about an hour's journey from Kolapalli and had we not gone there, I most likely would not have known about the *saptāha*. Fortunately, Shastryji, who was also curious about the performance, decided to attend with me.

With the community being so closely-knit, it happened that the disciple of the *purohit*, Vamsi, was also Uma Devi's grandson. When the discourse finally got underway at about 9:00

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[145] On numerous occasions during my time in Kolapalli and Andhra Pradesh in general, I became accustomed to inquiries about my caste status, as my surname Desai, a common surname for Gujarati Anāvil Brahmins, did not immediately register within any particular established caste category in the South.

a.m., I counted six elder married women, two elder widows wearing white, and congregated on the other side of the room, six elder men seated in the hall. There was also one younger man, who looked to be in his early thirties, and one older, married couple sitting next to each other roughly in the center of the room. The older married couple that sat next to each other (rather than separating into the male and female sides) were disciples of Chandramurthy Shastry who traveled from Hyderabad to hear his discourse. The younger man, was Gopal Rao, the professor who identified himself with ISKCON and would later inform me about other *saptāha*s. The professor and the couple from Hyderabad were the few other outsiders, besides Shastryji and myself, who attended the *saptāha*. Though the majority of attendees at the ceremony were local, elder Brahmin men and women, the audience at Kolapalli on occasion also included non-Brahmins. In the lecture hall during the *saptāha* performance, while no formal seating arrangements were set up between different castes, generally, the non-Brahmins seemed to sit in the back intermingled with other Brahmins who chose to sit in the back as well.

As I later observed, there were no consistent non-Brahmin attendees with the exception of one person, a male member of the Vaiśya caste, from one of the neighboring villages. He did not attend every lecture, but he was present for a majority of the discourse. He often sat amongst the other Brahmins, though he frequently chose to sit towards the back. Like the other men, he wore no shirt, displaying his *yajñopavīta* thread and a *dhotī*. His *dhotī* though, was always green or sometimes yellow, but never just plain white. He came across as an ardent devotee of Kṛṣṇa as he often was more animated and excited by the Kṛṣṇa narratives, often shaking his head in seeming ecstasy during favored parts of the narratives and singing the devotional songs more passionately and loudly than others. His exuberance seemed to rub Chandramurthy Shastry the wrong way, as he would occasionally punctuate Chandramurthy Shastry's discourse by blurting

out praise for Kṛṣṇa and once even asked a question during mid-discourse. Save his own vocal

presence, this Vaiśya devotee was not definitively separated from the rest of the audience during

performance and members of the community seemed familiar with him. Nonetheless, he never

joined in meals with the Brahmin members of the community and left immediately after each

lecture's closing *ārati* had been conducted and *prasād* meted out.

Loudspeakers were also placed outside of the *vedapāṭhaśālā*, so that the lecture could be

heard by those who might not enter the hall for the lecture: in other words, members of lower

castes who occasionally sat outside of the hall. These speakers made it possible for the

community to adhere to rules prescribed in the *Bhāgavata Māhātmya*, which state that members

of the lower castes should also be informed and allowed to hear the *saptāha* performance.[146] No

one may be excluded based on caste per se. The black, conical speakers mounted just outside the

vedapāṭhaśālā's main hall broadcast the lecture, through its two thin, vibrating wires, for anyone

to listen to; for all castes and members of the broader surrounding community, all of whom were

free to congregate outside the hall, in the street. In practice, however, I rarely observed any lower

caste individuals stopping outside to listen to the lecture.[147]

Although a more detailed analysis of the Kolapalli discourse and rituals are provided in

the following chapter, a quick summary of the discourse topics covered and the rituals observed

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[146] *Bhāgavata Māhātmya*, 6.6.

[147] When the lecture began on the second day, I did notice a small Dalit girl, standing in the doorway as the lecture began. She looked to be perhaps five or six years old, peering curiously at the beginning of the performance. One of the married ladies, an outsider from Hyderabad, who was inside, sitting on the ground, waved to the Dalit girl to come in, but the Dalit girl shyly refused to enter. In retrospect, I realized that throughout the week, I never saw any Dalits sitting inside of the hall. On occasion, I did see this young Dalit girl come inside of the hall after lectures however, following her mother, who set about sweeping the hall during breaks. In contrast with the girl's hesitation, on the second day, two young Brahmin boys sat freely near the lecturer's bench at the front of the hall, next to Vamsi. On another occasion, four non-Brahmin ladies and a few non-Brahmin men came to attend. They arrived late and left soon after the lecture, so I did not have time to speak to them. I asked Uma Devi about them, and she informed me that they were from the surrounding villages. So even though they were not Brahmins, most people were familiar with one another, and their presence was no cause for alarm, provided the rules of purity and pollution were observed.

day by day follows here. At once obvious to the reader by glancing at the topics covered during discourse, is how much Chandramurthy Shastry moved throughout the *Bhāgavata*, as well as the interpolations of narratives and rituals.

Once attendees were seated after the *Gaṇeśa Pūjā*, from his seat on the cot, Chandramurthy Shastry began to recite verses invoking and praising the Sage Śuka. Worship of the physical *Bhāgavata* text was then conducted by the *purohit*. A physical copy of the text was placed on the altar. Water and red powder (*kuṅkuma*) were sprinkled on it while the *purohit* spoke some verses. Then the flowers were placed near the text and incense was offered to it. It was a quick, simple affair led by the *purohit*, concluding with Chandramurthy Shastry bowing before the text, then *ārati* being done to the text. Having taken his place on the dais once more, Chandramurthy Shastry recited few more invocatory verses to Gaṇeśa, Sarasvatī, Śuka, Kṛṣṇa and then finally began his discourse. In front of him, a small podium upon which he put his copy of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* and a small notebook, which he referred to periodically, though he never read from it.

Chandramurthy Shastry began the morning lecture with the discourse on the *Bhāgavata Māhātmya*. Chandramurhty Shastry would usually sing whatever he deemed to be the relevant Sanskrit verses from the text he was citing, then translating them into colloquial Telugu for the audience. He would either expound upon the verses during or after his translation. Most often, in the case of longer narratives from the *Māhātmya*, the *Bhāgavata*, or other texts he interpolated like the *Mahābhārata*, he would punctuate the retelling of the narrative with only a few relevant verses or passages to make his points. The first lecture was spent entirely on the narration and explanation of the *Bhāgavata Māhātmya*.

In addition to delineating the correct procedures for a *saptāha*, Chandramurthy Shastry's exegesis of the *Bhāgavata Māhātmya* focused upon what it meant to be a good listener and participant in at a *Bhāgavata saptāha*. In order to be a good listener, Chandramurthy Shastry advised taking what he termed *Bhāgavata saptāha dīkṣā*:

> How should you listen to the *Bhāgavata*m? There are two precepts when
> doing this *saptāha dīkṣā*:
> You must be truthful (take a vow of truth). You must be celibate
> (*brahmacarya)*.
> You must have these two [principles] and listen with devotion.[148]

These two vows, of honesty and celibacy, I soon learned from interviewing other participants, were the basic austerities that a *Bhāgavata saptāha dīkṣā* entailed. The term *dīkṣā* is defined as "preparation or consecration for a religious ceremony, undertaking religious observances for a particular purpose and the observances themselves."[149] Thus, the *Bhāgavata saptāha dīkṣā* here is referring to the consecration of oneself in preparation for listening to the *Bhāgavata*, as well as, the austerities undertaken in order to purify oneself for the act of listening. *Dīkṣā* in general, however, often refers to an initiation ceremony, usually by a guru to his disciple and is indicative of a serious spiritual undertaking.

And as I soon learned from interviewing other participants, most of whom had experience attending many *saptāha*s, the vows of truthfulness and celibacy outlined by Chandramurthy Shastry above were not the only austerities participants undertook. The more stringent austerities participants practiced came from the *Bhāgavata Māhātmya*, and included, as mentioned, abstaining from sex; abstaining from drinking alcohol and smoking; fasting during the entire *saptāha*; and sleeping on the floor at night as opposed to a bed. Fasting could be as rigorous as

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[148] *bhāgavatanni eṭlā sravaṇam cēyāli aṇṭē rendu niyamāṭa ī saptāha dīkṣalo unnappuḍu. satyavratam kaligi vunḍāli. brahmacaryam kaligi vunḍāli. ā rendu kaligi bhāgavatanni śraddhaga śravaṇam ceyāli.* Chandramurthy Shastry, "*Śrīmad Bhāgavata* Saptāha Jñanayajña Mahōtsavamulu," September 7, 2006.

[149] Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, 480.

eating one meal a day or simply abstaining from particular foods during the course of the week. When I asked why they undertook these austerities, a few of the participants explained to me that the austerities were undertaken to purify and to amplify the *puṇya,* or merit they were already accruing from just listening to the *Bhāgavatam*.

At about 12:30 p.m. the first lecture finished with *ārati* conducted at the altar and the distribution of a simple *prasād* of raisins, nuts and dried coconut. In general, all lectures were concluded with *ārati* and the distribution of *prasād*. Attendees got up to stretch, take a breath of fresh air, etc. and soon returned to the hall as a specially prepared lunch was to be served. This lunch was prepared in accordance with the strictures mentioned in the *Māhātmya* as well as any other local strictures. The lunch was considered to be *prasād* for the *saptāha* as well. Men were seated on one side of the hall in rows and women on the other side. The men were served first then the women. While waiting for meals to be served, often *kīrtana*s were sung by the participants. The lunch was served on traditional banana leaves and was conducted fairly efficiently, leaving participants at least two hours to relax before the evening session. During this break time, those who were not volunteers in the kitchen occupied in cleaning the cooking utensils would often go home and take rest. Chandramurthy Shastry would also go upstairs to his room in the *vedapāṭhaśālā* and take a short nap before meeting with participants who wished to ask questions about the discourse.

The evening session began promptly at 4:00 p.m. During the evening session Chandramurthy Shastry began with a narrative from the tenth canto, the story of Kuchela, Kṛṣṇa's poor friend who comes to visit him and is received like a king by Kṛṣṇa order to convey the point to the audience that it wealth and status did not matter to Kṛṣṇa, but devotion does. Chandramurthy Shastry then continued on narrating and expounding upon the first canto, with

particular attention given to the story of Parikṣit, his birth and his curse. While he was expounding, Vamsi took over the duties of the *purohit*, which primarily included attending to the altar, (re)placing fresh flower garlands, ghee lamps, and conducting small *pūjā* on the side of the ceremonies. Once the lecture was concluded, Vamsi would lead the *ārati* and another volunteer would distribute the *prasād*.

A dinner was also provided soon after the discourse ended, proceeding much like the lunch session described above. Usually at the meals more people arrived than were actually present at the discourse. Most participants attending the discourse had undertaken the *Bhāgavata saptāha dīkṣā*, and thus were vowing to fast in accordance to the strictures outlined in the *Bhāgavata Māhātmya*. The only meals they would eat would come from these meals provided at the *saptāha*, with the possible exception of a small portion of fruit and tea for breakfast.

On the second day of the *saptāha*, in the morning session, Chandramurthy Shastry finally completed his discourse on the first canto after a long exposition on the Sage Śuka and what it means to be *avadhūta* like Sage Śuka, interpolating some material from the eleventh canto. He then moved swiftly through the second canto, continuing the discourse between King Parikṣit and Sage Śuka, wherein Sage Śuka answers Parikṣit's questions on how to prepare for death as well as listing the ten *avatāra*s of Viṣṇu. He then moved onto the third canto, focusing on the narrative of Varāha, the boar *avatāra* of Viṣṇu who kills the demon Hiraṇyakṣa. A coconut is cracked at the end of this narrative to restore the peace after Hiraṇyakṣa's violent death.

During the evening session, Chandramurthy Shastry continued with the third canto, expounding upon Kapila's Sāṃkhya teachings to his mother Devahutī. The audience did not seem to be following this part of the discourse as well. Chandramurthy Shastry, noting this, responded by speeding through that section in order to move onto the next one and offered

audience members the opportunity to meet with him during the afternoon if they had any further interest or questions regarding the Sāṃkhya purport. He then moved onto the fourth canto focusing on the story of Satī's self-immolation, wherein a coconut was broken to dispel the negativity of her inauspicious death. During his retelling of this narrative he spent a lot of time talking about Śiva and Pārvatī mythology. Many invocations were spoken to Śiva and Pārvatī at that time. The session ran overtime until 9:00 p.m., presumably so that Chandramurthy Shastry could finish the fourth canto, though he informed us he still had one more story to tell from the fourth canto eventually.

On day three, in the morning Chandramurthy Shastry moved onto the fifth canto, relating the detailed cosmology of the world and the origins of the Bhārata dynasty found in the *Bhāgavata*. He also recited Vedic mantras, but required that I turn my recorder off first.

During the afternoon session on the third day, Chandramurthy Shastry finished the fifth canto, elaborating on the 28 *naraka*s, or hells, listed in the *Bhāgavata*, and how avoid ending up in any of them by practicing *bhakti* (devotion) as well as practicing *prāyaścitta*, or expiatory rites conducted in order to ameliorate the negative karma from sins. During this particular lecture he further reiterates proper habits and behavior for reading the *Bhāgavata*. He then glossed through the sixth canto, focusing heavily on the narrative of the wretched Brahmin Ajāmila, who attains entrance into Vaikuṇṭha after dying for uttering "Nārāyaṇa" on his deathbed, even though he was seeking to summon his son and not remembering the deity Nārāyaṇa. Chandramurthy Shastry gives an elaborate breakdown of the meaning of the syllables "Nā-rā-ya-ṇa," before concluding the narrative and calling for the singing of *kīrtana*s.

Finally, that evening he moved onto the seventh canto and one of the most popular narratives, the story of the devotee Prahlāda, which involves the man-lion incarnation of Viṣṇu,

Nṛsiṃha, who ultimately slays the demon Hiraṇyakaśipu. Chandramurthy Shastry begins the tale with some verses from the Telugu *Bhāgavatamu* of Potana, but then reverts to the Sanskrit *Bhāgavata*. At the moment in the narrative when the terrifying Nṛsiṃha emerges from a pillar, a coconut was cracked to dispel Nṛsiṃha's anger and bring back the peace. So fearsome is Nṛsiṃha's wrath, that another coconut is cracked upon the conclusion of the narrative, which also marked the end of the evening lecture. Soon after, a special *prasād* consisting of coconut, soaked but uncooked mung daal and jaggery water was distributed. Vamsi explained to me that this *prasād* was especially prepared to appease the angry Nṛsiṃha. This was one of the more popular narratives, as a total of 90 people (40 men and 50 women) came to hear the story, whereas normal attendance at evening lectures usually averaged about thirty-five people.

The morning lecture of the fourth day began with the conclusion of the seventh canto, discussing Prahlāda's legacy. Chandramurthy Shastry also told the narrative of another famous child devotee of Viṣṇu, Dhruva, from the third canto, comparing the purity of the two child *bhakta*s, Dhruva and Prahlāda. As Chandramurthy Shastry was finishing his exegesis about Dhruva and Prahlāda, an elder octogenarian Brahmin from the village came up to the *paurāṇika* impromptu and presented him with a shawl and *dhotī*. He said something unintelligible to the rest of us, prompting a short conversation between the *paurāṇika* and the octogenarian and pausing the discourse. Chandramurthy Shastry kept his head bowed and humbly accepted the gift with palms raised and folded in a *namaskāra* gesture. Once the elder had sat down again, the discourse resumed.

Chandramurthy Shastry continued discussing Prahlāda, comparing him to the Sage Śuka, noting that both were *avadhūta* and that both delivered the *Bhāgavata*. Prahlāda however, delivered the *Bhāgavata* in one verse, which states the nine types of *bhakti*, considered the main

purport of the *Bhāgavata*.[150] Chandramurthy Shastry expounded upon that one verse, explaining the nine types of *bhakti* for almost one hour. Upon concluding that verse, he called for the singing of *kīrtana*s once again.

Chandramurthy Shastry then began the eighth canto, recounting the various *avatāra*s of Viṣṇu briefly. He then narrated the tale of the *kūrma avatāra* of Viṣṇu. Finally, he launched into the very popular narrative, *Gajendra Mokṣamu*. Chandramurthy Shastry cited exclusively from Potana's version found in the *Bhāgavatamu*. Many people in the audience knew the verses by heart and recited them with him. This was the only time during the entire discourse where Chandramurhty Shastry opened up the discourse for discussion and questions, an open period within the discourse that lasted for about ten minutes. The audience was quite engaged in the discussion.

During the evening session on the fourth day, women distributed flowers to the ladies to wear in their hair. Chandramurthy Shastry spent another half hour recounting the Vāmana *avatāra* from the eighth canto. He then moved on to the ninth canto, featuring the narratives of Viṣṇu devotee King Ambarīṣa, and King Yayāti, ancestors of Kṛṣṇa. Everyone was advised that the next day we would begin the tenth canto and that by 9:00 a.m. Kṛṣṇa would be born. As we would be celebrating *Kṛṣṇa janmāṣṭamī*, the birth of Kṛṣṇa, we were all to dress up in our finest clothing for the morning session.

On day five, Chandramurthy Shastry arrived wearing a red shawl on his left shoulder; red with gold sequin embroidery to mark the occasion. Chandramurthy Shastry, who had not shaven during the entire time since the start of the discourse, had shaved on this morning. Women were

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[150] *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, VII.5.23.

dressed in fine silk saris and men in silk or bordered *dhotī*s. There was an abundance of red hibiscus on the altar that day and flowers were passed out to women to wear in their hair.

The morning offerings to the altar were extended that morning and the *purohit* took over the duties from his apprentice Vamsi. Just after 10:00 a.m., Chandramurthy Shastry completed the narrative of Kṛṣṇa's birth. The discourse was paused at this time as the *purohit* performed a special *pūjā* to Kṛṣṇa, which included performing an *abhiṣeka*. Usually conducted by a priest, an *abhiṣeka* is a ritual in which a libation, or sometimes multiple libations—usually water, milk, ghee, honey, rosewater, precious oils, etc.—are poured upon the image or idol of the deity being worshiped.[151] The *purohit* poured a commonly used mixture of milk, honey, yoghurt, ghee, and sugar, known as *pañcāmṛta,* upon the image of Kṛṣṇa, and then poured the mixture around, not on as the fluid would damage, the physical copy of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*. The *purohit* chanted mantras while pouring the ablutions, and devotees sang *kīrtana*s. The worship ceremony was concluded with *ārati* done to both the idol of baby Kṛṣṇa and the physical copy of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*. Discourse continued thereafter, with Chandramurthy Shastry narrating tales of Kṛṣṇa's childhood, with particular attention to the narrative featuring the slaying of the demon Pūtanā by an infant Kṛṣṇa. A special *prasād*, of crushed black gram, bananas, yogurt, jaggery, and laddu, was distributed at the end of this session.

By the evening session, Chandramurthy Shastry had removed his red shawl and was once again clothed in his plain white, cotton garb. Discourse on the tenth canto continued. In particular, Shastry focused upon narrating the *Rasa-Līlā,* giving an extensive exegesis of it. I was not allowed to record his exposition of the *Rasa-Līlā*, as he was worried that my recordings of such sensitive materials might be misinterpreted and/or fall into the wrong hands. After

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[151] *Abhiṣeka* was also sometimes performed as part of coronation ceremonies, when kings and government officials used to be anointed by Brahmin priests when ascending to their royal throne or position.

completing the *Rasa-Līlā*, *kīrtana*s were sung for almost twenty minutes by the participants. Chandramurthy Shastry then began narrating about the marriage of Rāma and Sītā, contrasting it to Kṛṣṇa's nuptuals to Rukmiṇī. Shastry announced that the story of Kṛṣṇa and Rukmiṇī's marriage, as well as the reenactment of their marriage ceremony, would take place the following day. Participants were encouraged to dress up for the wedding. More *kīrtana*s were sung before ending the session.

On the sixth day of the *saptāha*, Chandramurthy Shastry made his way into the narrative of the *Rukmiṇī Kalyāṇa*. During the early morning, he told the story of the marriage in detail. Then, from ten in the morning onwards, ritual preparations began for the *Rukmiṇī Kalyāṇa* ritual. Tiny gold statues of Kṛṣṇa and Rukmiṇī, each perhaps only four inches tall, were prepared for an elaborate wedding ceremony as detailed in the following chapter. Once Chandramurthy Shastry finished retelling the marriage narrative, closing out the morning session early at about 10:30 a.m., ritual reenacting the marriage of Kṛṣṇa to Rukmiṇī commenced. The small gold idols were brought into the hall an entire wedding was conducted with them in the local traditions local. All in all, local turnout was far higher than for any other ritual or lecture of the entire *saptāha*, indicating that this ritual was popular and highly regarded in and of itself.

During the evening session of the sixth day, Chandramurthy Shastry continued with the tenth canto. His exposition featured the narratives of Kṛṣṇa's other notable marriages and once again the Kuchela narrative. Because of the solar eclipse, special considerations had to be made with regards to worship and diet. No *pūjā* was conducted during the evening session and the dinner meal consisted of a very simple *upma* (a savory cream of wheat type dish). Upon finishing the discourse, Chandramurthy Shastry announced that the next day would be the final day of discourse. Once the discourse had finished, two of the sponsors of the Kolapalli *saptāha*

praised Chandramurthy Shastry's elaborate exegesis of the *Bhāgavata*, asking him to return to Kolapalli to give a special *saptāha* on the tenth canto only. Shastry humbly responded that he was divinely inspired and could take no personal credit for the discourse. Regarding the possibility of another *saptāha* on the tenth canto, he deferred the conversation for later.

On the seventh and final day of *saptāha* discourse, Chandramurthy Shastry finished the remainder of the tenth canto, and then spent the rest of the discourse on the eleventh canto. In particular, he focused on Kṛṣṇa's final discourse to his disciple Uddhava, otherwise known as the *Uddhava Gītā*.[152] Once again, Shastry returned to the theme of the *avadhūta*, as he focused on the descriptions of the unnamed *avadhūta* found in the *Uddhava Gītā*, comparing him to the narrator of the *Bhāgavata,* Sage Śuka, and devotees Dhruva and Prahlāda.

During the final session of the *saptāha*, Chandramurthy Shastry finished the eleventh canto with the narrative of Kṛṣṇa's final ascent into Vaikuṇṭha. He then covered the twelfth and final canto, focusing on the eventual death of Parikṣit by snakebite, as was his curse. He finished his entire discourse by having all participants present recite the final verse of the *Bhāgavata* together.

After he finished, various sponsors came up to the dais to give speeches thanking Chandramurthy Shastry for his skillful exposition, extolling their long-standing *saptāha* tradition and their own founding *paurāṇika*s featured in the photos above. *Ārati* was conducted at the altar, and then to Chandramurthy Shastry and his copy of the *Bhāgavata*, which sat on his dais in front of him. Gifts of shawls, fruit and envelopes (encasing cash) placed on top of traditional betel leaves were given to Chandramurthy Shastry by the eldest sponsor on the sponsoring committee. Individual participants lined up to give gifts of fruit, flowers and money to

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[152] *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, 11.6.40-11.29

Chandramurthy Shastry thereafter, while seeking his blessings as they did so. Announcements were made for everyone to reconvene the next morning in the *vedapāṭhaśālā* for concluding ceremonies.

Convening in the morning once again at the *vedapāṭhaśālā*, now on the eighth day, those who chose to participate came wearing clean, simple clothing. After a quick recitation of the *Bhagavad Gītā* read by Chandramurthy Shastry, the group moved as a festive parade, singing various devotional songs as we walked down the main streets of Kolapalli and down to the river. Upon reaching the nearby tributary of the Krishna River participants prepared to bathe in the river to partake in the other main ritual residents of Kolapalli added to their *saptāha*. This ritual they referred to as the *Rāma abhiṣeka snāna*.

The *Rāma abhiṣeka snāna* occurred the day after the completion of the *saptāha*, and though technically not a part of the seven-day retelling, it marked a ceremonial and festive end to the entire *Bhāgavata saptāha dīkṣā*, or the austerities undertaken by participants during the *saptāha*. As is detailed further in the following chapter, participants proceeded to the nearby river tributary, stood in the water and took turns being anointed with water. Either the *purohit* or Chandramurthy Shastry would place a small silver statue of the diety Rāma on the participant's head and pour the river water from a traditional copper water pot, letting it trickle down our heads, drenching our hair, shoulders and clothing.

This final ritual of bathing in the river together transpired in a light, if not jovial atmosphere, full of rejoicing. Most of us opted to fully dunk ourselves after the ritual ablution, thus fully bathing ourselves in the water. What I remember most was the sense of camaraderie experienced amongst those of us that chose to take the bath together. All smiles, it seemed as though we had all accomplished something together.

Chapter Two: Customizing the *Bhāgavata*: The Ninetieth Annual *Bhāgavata Saptāha* of Kolapalli

This chapter more closely examines the ninetieth annual *saptāha* of the village Kolapalli, performed by Chandramurthy Shastry from September 2, 2006 to September 8, 2006. Because Kolapalli's *Bhāgavata saptāha* has taken place for ninety years in the same village, at the same time every year, with many of the same local rituals attached to it, it would seem that this performance is a stable, established tradition or even an institution. Even still, the increased vigilance with which the stability of 'traditional' was framed around *saptāha* in contemporary Kolapalli indicates that this institutional tradition has its place in allowing the community to revitalize its religious, caste-based, central identity in the midst of a wider, changing Indian world. The fact that Kolapalli is in many ways a traditional Brahmin *agrahāra* further adds to the sense of their *saptāha's* orthodoxy, as well as to the sense that this discourse is in some ways more 'authentic' and in line with the purport of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*.[153]

By analyzing the performance's metacommunicative processes—those communications that encompass the primary narrative events in the performance—however, this chapter will reveal that negotiations are constantly underway between the participants of the performance—Chandramurthy Shastry and his audience, particularly the majority of the audience members from Kolapalli—and that this performance and its concomitant traditions and rituals are not as fixed as they might seem at first glance. Instead, these metacommunicative processes expose how the negotiations between participants fashions an emergent text that is localized, ritualized,

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[153] Kunal Chakrabarti traces the introduction of *Purāṇa*s in India between the eighth and thirteenth centuries, noting that historically, these functioned as rhetorical movements which amalgamated other minor religious beliefs and communities, co-opting practitioners into a series of ritual observances and social relations subservient to Brahmins. See Kunal Chakrabarti, *Religious Process: The Purāṇas and the Making of a Regional Tradition*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001. Similarly, my work in Kolapalli provides an opportunity to note how the contemporary practice of reading the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* is both variable and subtly influential with regard to ongoing transitions in appropriations of caste, economic and religious affiliations.

and Brahminical, even as it also regenerates the very traditions the Kolapalli participants claim to uphold during the performance itself. In particular, these metacommunicative processes reveal how the emphasis on local history, lineages and traditions, and establishing their continuity with the lineages and traditions outlined in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* through the *saptāha* performance, generates an emergent text in which the Hinduism envisioned brandishes the air of being *the* authentic, traditional Hinduism. This historical continuity further lends a solid, immutable and static quality to the Hinduism envisioned in this emergent text. Moreover, the very aspirations that are drawn upon in solidifying this idea of tradition allow the members of the community in Kolapalli to frame their *saptāha* as a resilient source of local history, thereby reinforcing the very traditions they claim to uphold.

The metacommunicative moments that will be explored in this performance demonstrate negotiations in which the local audience members of Kolapalli exert a sizable influence over the comprehensive proceedings of the performance. The metacommunicative processes explored in this chapter consist primarily of interpolations for local narratives, lineages, and rituals in the performances, as well as the metanarratives commentaries—commentary surrounding the narratives of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*—of Chandramurthy Shastry. The interpolation of local narratives and lineages, which results in the creation of an emergent text that is traditional and distinctly Kolapalli, demonstrates the agency of the sponsors and participants of Kolapalli in the performance. Chandramurthy Shastry's metanarratives demonstrate his careful negotiation of the previously mentioned metacommunicative processes—the interpolation of local narratives, lineages and rituals—in conjunction with his own knowledge and background of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, gained through his traditional training. In particular, Chandramurthy Shastry's mastery of the vast corpus of Sanskrit religious texts, as well as his folksy style of speech, lend the

discourse of the *saptāha* both an orthodox and intimate tone. Both the interpolations of local narratives, rituals and lineages, and Shastry's metanarratives, in turn demonstrate the fact that negotiations are taking place, indicating that participants in Kolapalli's *saptāha* are actually creating and recreating traditions which are thus not as static as they seem at first glance, but in fact, dependent on this dynamic negotiation between participants.

Specifically, this chapter will consider four instances of metacommunicative moments of the performance. The first instance is the analysis of the participants and the setting—both in terms of the venue (the *vedapāṭhaśālā*) and the town of Kolapalli itself. The initial impressions that these give communicate early on to participants what is expected of participants, as well as initiating the narrative of Kolapalli's long-standing history of their annual *saptāha*. This in turn, contributes to Kolapalli's image of practicing the authentic, traditional Hinduism. The next set of metacommunicative processes examined are the addition and practice of ancillary austerities during the *saptāha*, especially in conjunction with the prescription of the *Bhāgavata Māhātmya,* as well as, Chandramurthy Shastry's exegesis on the narrative frames of the *Bhāgavata* found in the *Bhāgavata Māhātmya*. The third metacommunicative moment considers those same supplementary practices as well as the significance of the date of the *saptāha* within the added context of Chandramurthy Shastry's metanarrative regarding Kṛṣṇa-devotee King Parikṣit. Shastry's metanarrative regarding King Parikṣit will demonstrate how these supplementary austerities transform the Kolapalli's *saptāha*, and in turn, the discourse of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa,* into an orthodox, local religious institution, as it further suggests that the audience reenact the role of the ideal listener, King Parikṣit.

The final metacommunicative processes explored in this chapter are the performance of two rituals in Kolapalli's annual *saptāha* every year, which are not mentioned in the *Bhāgavata*

Māhātmya. These rituals, the *Rukmiṇī Kalyāṇa*, or the reenactment of the wedding of Kṛṣṇa and Rukmiṇī, and the *Rāma abhiṣeka snāna,* serve as metacommunicative processes in that they mark the interpolation of local rituals deemed as necessary to the completion of the *saptāha* as per the interpretation of the local community. Chandramurthy Shastry's metanarrative commentaries during his exposition of the *Rukmiṇī Kalyāṇa* further ties together the *Rukmiṇī Kalyāṇa* narrative in the *Bhāgavata* with the ritual reenactment of the *Rukmiṇī Kalyāṇa*, a long-standing ritual Kolapalli has practiced in conjunction with their *saptāha*.

Cast[e]ing for the Kolapalli *Saptāha*: The Audience and Performers

This section will explore the participants of the *saptāha*, both audience and performer, and the setting of the *saptāha*, with an eye towards initial impressions and aspects of the participants and setting which act as metacommunicative moments. These metacommunicative moments that occur before the start of the *saptāha* immediately communicate that the performance is a traditional, Brahminical *saptāha*, as well as a *saptāha* that is unique to Kolapalli. As a traditional Brahmin *agrahāra*, the village of Kolapalli sustains a circle of Brahmin practitioners, people who attend and arrange the performance year after year. Because they have been organizing and performing this *saptāha* for ninety years, the audience members of this *saptāha* garner a substantial amount of agency within the shaping of this performance. In fact, their agency, as well as their Brahmanical orthodoxy, is reflected in the choice of *paurāṇika*, Chandramurthy Shastry. Chandramurthy Shastry, on the other hand, though not a native of Kolapalli, fulfills the community's requirements of adhering to a strict Brahmanical code of conduct, while also displaying his own competence as a traditionally trained performer of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*.

Kolapalli is a community closely-knit by the intermeshed daily movements and schedules of its inhabitants, structured in such a way that it carefully supports and sustains caste differences. Though Kolapalli-proper, as an *agrahāra*, is inhabited exclusively by Brahmins, as the head village of twelve villages dubbed the Lanka villages, whose occupants are not necessarily Brahmin, Kolapalli is not completely isolated from a variegated social world.[154] Individuals from these other villages, as well as approximately 50 other smaller satellite villages come into Kolapalli to carry out transactions in the marketplace, take up employment, perform religious ceremonies and undertake prospects in education. These villagers come to Kolapalli's marketplace to buy all of their living supplies such as food, medicines, home supplies and clothing.[155] Kolapalli also features temples of various sizes, each dedicated to one of the following dieties: Śiva, Viṣṇu, Durgā, Rāma and Āñjaneya (Hanumān). Therefore, both for worship and weddings—ceremonies that produce the significant socio-religious framework for their lives—these same villagers also come to Kolapalli.

Known statewide for its brick production, Kolapalli employs many surrounding villagers, particularly those of lower castes, in both the production and distribution of their famous bricks, which have a reputation for being the best bricks for building houses. Kolapalli is also home to the local governing and educational institutions, including the police station, local governmental administrative offices, schools and a college, thereby drawing in adults with official business to transact, as well as, children and youth seeking schooling. Kolapalli also contains at its center, a central bus stop, leading to a highway, connected to other villages throughout Guntur district.

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[154] As Uma Devi explained to me, Kolapalli and the 12 other villages form what is called a *maṇḍal*, a smaller rural administrative subdivision. Kolapalli village acts as the head of this *maṇḍal*, and therefore the entire *maṇḍal* itself is referred to Kolapalli as well. References to Kolapalli throughout this volume, however, refer to the village Kolapalli and not the entire *maṇḍal*, unless otherwise stated. Personal conversation with Uma Devi, Sept. 3, 2006.

[155] Ibid.

People from the surrounding villages commute daily into Kolapalli for transactions exchanged within these various institutions. However, the only residents living in Kolapalli-proper are Brahmins. In this sense, Kolapalli acts as both a central hub for the co-mingling of caste within the marketplace, while resolutely organizing social space geographically, as the Brahminical 'head' of the surrounding villages. While there is a commingling of castes in public space, the patterns of residency and land tenure within Kolapalli effectively reinforce caste hierarchies.

Those attending the *saptāha* were primarily residents of Kolapalli and its surrounding villages, some of whom had been attending for thirty or more years. There were about eighteen people who attended that year's performance consistently. Of the eighteen consistent attendees only five of us were not from Kolapalli. Having asked these participants why they attended, I received a variety of answers. One retired married Brahmin couple from Hyderabad came to the *saptāha* primarily as disciples of Chandramurthy Shastry, but also told me "Kṛṣṇa *bhakti* is important. Also, we can get peace of mind from listening to his story."[156] One science professor, also Brahmin, from a northern city in Andhra Pradesh, came to the *saptāha* as he was a self-described "Kṛṣṇa *bhakta*" and identified with ISKCON (International Society for Kṛṣṇa Consciousness).[157] He in fact attended as many *saptāha* throughout Andhra Pradesh as he could during the year.

Among the Kolluru natives that I interviewed, the common responses as to why they came year after year were "It brings religious merit (*puṇya)*"[158] and "It brings peace of mind."[159] When I asked specifically about the content of the *saptāha*, 'What do you remember? What part

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[156] J. Laxminarayana Murthy, interview by author, Kolapalli, Andhra Pradesh, 3 September 2006.

[157] Professor Gopal Rao, interview by author, Kolapalli, Andhra Pradesh, 4 September 2006.

[158] Annapurna Amma, interview by author, Kolapalli, Andhra Pradesh, 25 February 2007.

[159] Kalluri Venkata Suryanarayana Murthy, interview by author, Tenali, Andhra Pradesh, 25 February 2007.

is important?,' the replies shifted to a more personal, devotional response. In particular, one elderly widow who had been attending for the past thirty years stated, "I don't know much of anything and I don't remember much. But I am just happy listening to the stories of Kṛṣṇa. I don't understand much of the discourse, but I feel good when I listen to stories of Kṛṣṇa. That brings me peace of mind."[160] I found her answer to be typical of most of the responses—after establishing that "this is a good thing to do" many claimed that they did not know much or remember much of the details of the discourse, but enjoyed hearing the stories of Kṛṣṇa.

These testimonies demonstrate V. Narayana Rao's assertion in his essay "Purāṇa as Brahminic Ideology," that *bhakti* or devotional *Purāṇas*, such as the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, "essentially create an atmosphere of participation in religious ecstasy. The emphasis is not on information but rather on a renewed opportunity to experience the divine. It is not communication but communion."[161] Narayana Rao's primary example for this is none other than the *Bhāgavata's* own King Parikṣit, who longs to hear stories of Kṛṣṇa that he already knows just "for the joy of listening to Kṛṣṇa's story another time, for the mere joy of hearing."[162] Likewise, while audience members in Kolapalli attended for multiple reasons, such as purification and attaining merit, they also definitely came to hear these stories again and again, not because they did not know these stories, but because they seek communion with God.

Nonetheless, Kolapalli's *saptāha* is not a totally devotional event in which participants solely cultivate divine communion. As set forth in the previous chapter, this performance is still a very Brahmanical affair. Most of the people in attendance identified themselves as Vaidikulu (Vaidikī) Brahmins. The entire village of Kolapalli is a Brahmin *agrahāra*, and all deference is

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[160] Shakutalamma, interview by author, Kolapalli, Andhra Pradesh, 5 September 2006.

[161] Narayana Rao, "Purāṇa as Brahmanic Ideology," 99.

[162] Ibid.

given to Brahmin performers, priests and people. The prescribed rituals throughout the performance incorporate a mix of Brahmanical and *bhakti* influences. This clash of alternately demanding Brahminical and *bhakti* aesthetics explains partly why there is so much ritual and 'rigidity' within the practices that make up the full *saptāha*.

The organizers and sponsors of the *saptāha* were solely Brahmins who lived or used to live in Kolapalli. A good portion of the initial money donated to perform the *saptāha* came from U.S. sponsors; that is Non-Resident Indians (NRI). These NRI donors were for the most part Brahmins who were born in Kolapalli, but instead of undergoing classical training in the Vedas, opted to obtain engineering degrees and pursue more lucrative opportunities abroad. None of the NRI donors were present for the performance. However, some of the elder Brahmin sponsors who served on the organizing committee shared that their NRI children abroad had sent money to fund the *saptāha*. All of the Brahmins serving on the organizing committee lived in Kolapalli, or in a close neighboring town, and were regular attendees of the *saptāha*, with the exception of one organizer who was in his mid-forties, and a lawyer. The rest of the organizing committee members were older, ranging from 60-80 years old, retired and male. Often the wives of the committee members were very active in organizing and coordinating events for the *saptāha*, though they never officially sat on the committee. Though the NRI Brahmins of Kolapalli are responsible for sponsoring the majority of the costs for the *saptāha*—ranging from meal costs, *prasād* costs, paying the *paurāṇika*, gifts for the *paurāṇika* and ritual items—participants also offered Chandramurthy Shastry fruit and money throughout the *saptāha*, and particularly at the end of the *saptāha*.

The very structure of the *vedapāṭhaśālā* where the performance was held also served as a metacommunication, situating the performance in an austere setting that reflected the austerities

practiced. Additionally, the purpose of the *vedapāṭhaśālā*—to instruct younger generations of Brahmin men in the Vedas—reinforced orthodox Brahminical practices and the continuation of the tradition and lineage. Water taps set up outside of the hall ensured that all attendees of the performance washed their hands and feet prior to entering the hall. In this way, they adhered to the usual customs of ritual purity for a religious event. Moreover, traditional seating arrangements within the hall were maintained, in that women sat on the left, and men sat on the right. All audience members sat on the hard, black tiled floor, while the *paurāṇika* sat slightly elevated, on an extremely simple wooden bed frame, without cushion. Other than the microphone placed in front of Chandramurthy Shastry, the ceiling fans and lights in the hall, not much else heralded the comforts and conveniences of modern life.

Perhaps the most interesting metacommunicative element prior to the start of the performance were the photos of the previous founding performers of this ninety-year-old *Bhāgavata saptāha* tradition. Hanging on the wall above the performer, these images immediately displayed the history of this particular performance, and showed how it was rooted in the local community, while also seeming to imply the continued presence of past performers and their approval of the current proceedings. These photos also served to directly place audience members beneath a representation of the *saptāha*'s lineage. These photos charged the hall with an atmosphere of historical continuity.

Despite the distribution of an invitation flier welcoming any and all persons to attend the *saptāha*, the circulation of the fliers seemed rather sparse. The invitations were distributed only to a small radius around Kolapalli, and from person to person. Despite having a flyer, the way in which it was distributed seemed much more in line with word-of-mouth distribution than a general, free-for-all invitation. This feeling was reiterated by the sparse accommodations

available to outside attendees in Kolapalli. Though there were minimal, provisional lodging for out of town attendees, it was clear that not many guests were expected, as only two rooms—one of which was taken by Chandramurthy Shastry—were reserved in the *vedapāṭhaśālā*. Furthermore, Kolapalli had no hotels. The immediate community of the *agrahāra* remained, at least each evening, closed to non-Brahmins, strangers, passers-by and any other kind of outsider. On the other hand, the generosity of Uma Devi, to take in Shastryji and myself, both complete strangers, albeit Brahmin ones, indicated that the community held welcoming and kind people.

Further establishing an expectation for how the performance was to be run, the austere environment of the lecture hall was also consistent with the conservative aesthetic promoted throughout the *saptāha* in Kolapalli. The *vedapāṭhaśālā* performance hall, which primarily functioned as a school for teaching the Vedas to Brahmin boys, simply by being used for these other forms of orthodox instruction, already drew upon the attentions of upper caste practitioners in the community; men and women who would be aware that this was a space associated with sacred texts. The rituals carried out here, while performative, also provided opportunities for apprenticeship. Vamsi, who was usually attending the alter, as well as any requests of the Chandramurthy Shastry during the performance, was also clearly being taught, at a relatively young age, to do all of the rituals. He was, in person, an apprentice priest, always by the side of the *purohit*, and always ready to provide the necessary assistance. On weekends, during the ceremony, there were one or two other young boys seated next to Vamsi. On weekdays however, these boys attended a local school, and were not to be seen at the *saptāha*. Vamsi, on the other hand, was not in school for the duration of the *saptāha* and therefore attended the majority of the lecture. In many ways, Vamsi, always at (right) hand, attentive to the *paurāṇika*, provided a vital, re-generative, and trans-generational presence during the performance, demonstrating that

traditional ritual knowledge was being actively transmitted, from the photos of the founders of their *saptāha* tradition, hanging high upon the hall's wall, above the *paurāṇika*, on through the *paurāṇika*, and—as with Vamsi—to the generations far younger than most of the audience members in attendance.

Thus, the lack of guesthouses or alternate guest accommodations except for the two unfinished rooms on the second floor of the *vedapāṭhaśālā*, and the controlled dispersal of the invitation leaflets prior to the start of the *saptāha* also signaled the insular way in which the *saptāha* was organized. Even though members of other castes were officially invited to the performance, Brahminical hierarchies and codes of conduct were still maintained throughout the hall. A primary example of this was the segregation of the Brahmin participants from the rest of the participants during meal times. Not only were the Brahmins fed separately, but they were fed first. Amongst the Brahmins moreover, traditional gender separation was also maintained, as men were seated on one side and women on the other, the men of course being served first. In many unspoken ways, Kolapalli's *saptāha* was thus a steadfastly local, insular event.

The majority of people who attended every lecture were elder, retired men and women, as their schedules actually afforded them the time to do so. The only other people who were able to attend every lecture were the out of town guests, who made the time commitment to be there, including myself, my Sanskrit professor Shastryji, and a retired couple from Hyderabad. Notably, none of us from out of town had any commitments to employers or other schedules. This is not to say that only retired people, with nothing better to do, came to the performance. There were also attendees who came to all of the evening sessions after work, some housewives who came intermittently throughout the day, and then other people who simply filtered in occasionally, depending on their own schedules and interests, which narrative was being told,

and if any particular rituals were being conducted. For example, the highest attendance during the entire *saptāha* came during the narrative of the *Rukmiṇī Kalyāṇa*, which was followed by an elaborate ritual reenactment of the wedding of Kṛṣṇa and Rukmiṇi. This reenactment allowed for a rich wedding feast for all attendees to subsequently enjoy.

As all of these above factors ultimately imply, Kolapalli's *saptāha*, though on the one hand open to outsiders and non-Brahmins, in practice was not entirely accommodating of anyone who was not a Brahmin, or anyone who was not somehow intimately connected to Kolapalli. Moreover, what these metacommunications demonstrate is that the sponsors within the community exercise substantial influence. As a committee of Kolapalli Brahmins sponsors the *saptāha* performance every year, even prior to the beginning of the *saptāha*, this committee of Brahmins already has a substantial agentive role. By selecting the *paurāṇika*, they have input into the measure of tradition that will be afforded to the performance as it is carried out. As the promoters of the event, furthermore, these same men and women, to some extent control who is invited, by limiting the dispersal of their invitations. And finally, by carefully delegating their influence over the proceedings of the *saptāha*, participants are able to ensure that the entire *saptāha* performance and its concomitant rituals are conducted in accordance with their own caste codes and local traditions.

For Kolapalli's ninetieth consecutive year of *saptāha*, Chandramurthy Shastry was selected to give the discourse.[163] Since the death of Kolapalli's second *paurāṇika*, the townspeople in Kolapalli had brought performers from outside the community to perform the *saptāha*. Though not from Kolapalli himself—and therefore, as a leader of ceremonies, an

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[163] Chandramurthy Shastry was one of five traditionally trained Brahmins I learned of during my fieldwork, all of whom gave *saptāha* discourses in Telugu. During my fieldwork, I attended *saptāha*s by four of these *paurāṇika*s, whose names I have changed, and was told of the fifth, Samvedam Samukham Sharma.

outsider who would define the conditions for maintaining local tradition within a group—
Chandramurthy Shastry's orthodox linguistic qualifications made him the most appropriate
individual to ensure the correct transmission of the highly localized, traditional *saptāha* carried
out each year in Kolapalli.[164]

Chandramurthy Shastry successfully managed several other markers of authenticity to
maintain an elevated position among audience members in the lecture hall. As a Smārta
Brahmin, he was an ideal fit among the Vaidikī Brahmins of Kolapalli. Sharing the status of a
group known to especially adhere strictly to rituals, Chandramurthy Shastry exemplified
orthodoxy. This was most immediately apparent through his orthodox, Brahminical apparel and
demeanor, both of which served as metacommunications to the audience regarding his traditional
Smārta background, as well as his conservative attitudes.

Over the course of the week, the extent of his qualifications became more apparent. Not
only was Chandramurthy Shastry an accomplished Smārta Brahmin with a mastery of the
Sanskrit corpus and extensive knowledge of the Vedas, but he was also able to verify his official
status as an orthodox *paurāṇika*. Chandramurthy Shastry had himself been trained by three
different gurus, one of whom was a specialist in *Bhāgavata* performances, Manguru Subbana
Shastry. Another guru of his, the late Tadepally Raghava Narayana Shastry had also once given a
saptāha performance at Kolapalli. Chandramurthy Shastry repeatedly staked claim to this
lineage, emphasizing that he was traditionally trained and not self-made. Continuing his lineage,
Chandramurthy Shastry had his own disciples who were not from Kolapalli.

It was apparent when he delivered the *saptāha*, that Chandramurthy Shastry had a great
degree of familiarity with the text, and at the same time, was comfortable with adding the

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[164] The *saptāha* I observed was not the first Chandramurthy Shastry had presided over in Kolapalli.

repetitive ceremonial flourishes—such as the cracking of a coconut to dispel negative energy from particularly violent or frightening narratives—that conveyed an appropriate degree of traditional authenticity. While he also periodically referred to a small notebook kept on the elevated platform in front of him, during the most intense parts of his lecture, he rarely glanced toward these notes, and was instead comfortable with extensive recitations of portions of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*. His narrative style was conversational and colloquial, rather than grandiose and oratory, and thereby much better suited to his rural audience. His whole performance was very much focused on delivering the continuous *saptāha* that his largely Brahmanical audience had come to expect, while also carefully ensuring that local customs, long established in Kolapalli, were upheld.

A high degree of decorum was also expected from audience members during the performance. Chandramurthy Shastry commanded as much: people were not given opportunities to interrupt him with questions. They were permitted to ask questions before and after his lectures, but never during, in the event that the direct transmission of the text would be interrupted. The only exception he made for interruptions was for the elder Brahmin gentleman, who as an octogenarian, was quite senior to Chandramurthy Shastry, and therefore, had to be respected by the otherwise stern *paurāṇika*.

Chandramurthy Shastry's conservative attitudes extended towards his views about the treatment of the text. After lunch, just prior to lecture on the second day of performance, I was given a short, personal audience with Chandramurthy Shastry. He used this as an opportunity to request that I not share the recordings from his discourse with other westerners. Our meeting was rushed, since several other participants were waiting nearby to speak with him. I initially asked about the details of his performance. I asked about how he learned to deliver his performance,

and also about the particular decisions he made in choosing texts to provide commentary upon. These inquiries of mine, however, were repeatedly sidelined.

Chandramurthy Shastry instead wanted to focus on theological questions. He was very interested in what I knew about the contents of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, and how serious I was about the text. He wanted the *Bhāgavata* to be the basis of our conversation, and not any other inquiries into his performance. He was encouraged by, and approved of, the fact that I was studying Sanskrit. Chandramurthy Shastry clearly had a high degree of reverence for the text, and intended to preserve each part of the text exactly, to the best of his ability. In some ways, his tendency to redirect our conversation was a way of monitoring against my potential consumption or analysis of the text; of discouraging any approach that might put the text to 'use', and instead elevating it as a sacred object of devotion.

As my conversation with him progressed, his efforts at preserving the text began to extend further. He was strict about which aspects of the performance I could record. He asked that I not record any Vedic chanting, and also forbid me to record the *Rasa-Līlā*. He was also suspicious of my recording his lecture. Though he did give me permission to record the lecture, he detailed particular passages of his lectures that he did not want to be distributed to westerners, a request I have kept. As Chandramurthy Shastry explained to me, he did not want to be responsible for any people who might misunderstand, misinterpret, or misuse the sacred text. He continued to press at this issue, repeatedly describing his concerns, that westerners did not know how to respect or understand the text. He gave examples of people who smoked, drank or lay down while reading the text. According to Chandramurthy Shastry, even the tapes of *saptāha* discourse should only be listened to by someone who was properly attired (wearing clean, modest clothing), sat upright and exercised their full attention, and was not sleepy or feeling

drowsy. The discourse was ideally for personal edification and spiritual growth only. He was weary of the kinds of analysis western academics might make of the text.

His concerns about respecting the text were once again stressed on the third day of the *saptāha*. This time however, his comments were directed towards me, versus the category of westerners in general. On the third day of the *saptāha*, I was running late. I had opted to make do with wearing a conservative *salwar khameez*—a traditional long knee length tunic shirt, with matching loose pants, and long scarf—rather than delaying my arrival at the hall any further by taking the time to wrap a sari.

Chandramurthy Shastry's public performance that day compounded my embarrassment at having arrived late to lecture that morning. In the early moments of lecture, Chandramurthy Shastry focused on the importance of arriving to lecture in timely fashion and wearing proper clothing, both actions that were said to show proper respect for the text. He yet again mentioned that the proper dress code for *saptāha* and even just privately reading the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, should be traditional dress. For men this meant a *dhotī*, no shirt and for women this meant saris.

Though I was not sure I had heard this commentary correctly when Chandramurthy Shastry had first stated it, it ultimately did not matter. During the break later, my Sanskrit professor, informed me of Chandramurthy Shastry's veiled admonishment. In fact, my Sanskrit professor was not the only one to see to it that I received the message. The husband of the couple from Hyderabad also very politely informed me of Chandramurthy Shastry's review of the dress code. Needless to say, I returned for the afternoon session on time and in a sari. After Chandramurthy Shastry's public commentary had all but singled me out, I considered that by not wearing proper attire, I had somehow instilled doubts in him or others about the sincerity of my work. Thereafter that week, I was placed in a position of indebtedness, for having committed a

crucial error. In retrospect, Chandramurthy Shastry's focus on my superficial clothing was continuous with his professed relationship to the text as well. In both cases, he offered a sustained focus on text or clothing simply as they appeared. His expectation was that little secondary message might be analyzed hidden within the changeable text, and that instead, yielding to repetition of the text's perfect form would allow its readers, and by extension, his audience members, to achieve a measure of spiritual success. In the same way, the forms I clothed myself in were to be taken at surface level, as matters of fact expressing my seriousness of devotion.

From out of the lesson made of my lateness and lackluster attire, Chandramurthy Shastry developed his teachings further, seizing upon another opportunity for critical commentary. In front of the audience that day, he made a statement that he did not want recorded details of his lectures to be used for a Ph.D. dissertation, lest something incorrect and sinful be written and he would subsequently have to share in that sin. While this request automatically accorded me the status of a flawed academic transcription device, his public admonishments also alerted other audience members that my mere presence, by virtue of my affiliation with the outside, foreign world, constituted a potential threat to the closed, concentrated circle of local readers that had assembled around the *saptāha* in Kolapalli. While I never felt any animosity from audience members at the *saptāha*, these didactic moments during lecture thereafter assigned me to a publicly manageable position among the participants of the *saptāha*.

Chandramurthy Shastry was also critical of any translation of the Sanskrit *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, particularly into English. He claimed that these inferior translations were the same as reading a pulp novel. He was sure to communicate to the small audience that so many translations were not the same thing, as the only authentic and efficacious *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*

was the Sanskrit version. Moreover, to receive the full benefit of this authentic essence, one must listen to *saptāha* discourse.

Chandramurthy Shastry's own orthodox dress code and comportment, along with his insistence that others adhere to a similar dress code when attending the *saptāha* or reading the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* constitute a metacommunicative moment. In particular, his stipulation for this dress code is a metacommunication which tells the audience not only how to read the text, but also what sort of people they should aim to be when convening with the text. In addition to his comportment, his traditional training in a long line of *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* performers, communicated his credentials as a qualified performer of the *Bhāgavata saptāha*. His Smārta Brahmin background and his training with Tadepalli Shastry—a *paurāṇika* who formerly performed a Kolapalli *saptāha* in the past—further communicated his credentials as a correct fit for performing the Kolapalli *saptāha*. Moreover, his extreme caution about the transmission of the text—his ambivalence towards letting me record his discourse; his barring me from sharing his discourse with westerners; disapproval of translations—all serve as a further metacommunication regarding the performance. These cautions function to elevate his *saptāha* discourse as sacred, exclusive and in need of protection from outside forces.

The Glory of the *Bhāgavata*: Framing the *Saptāha* Performance

In providing both a formula for performing the *saptāha* performance, as well as, suggestions for ritual austerities to be undertaken during the *saptāha*, the *Bhāgavata Māhātmya* is in and of itself a metacommunication about how to read. Usually told at the start of most *Bhāgavata saptāha*s, including Kolapalli's *saptāha*, the *Bhāgavata Māhātmya* clearly frames the entire narrative of the *saptāha* as it communicates the expectations for both performers and

audience members regarding their participation in this specialized *Bhāgavata* discourse. Moreover, the definition of the *saptāha* as a *jñānayajña* significantly shapes this performance as a special type of ritualized discourse. While the *Māhātmya* does give a basic blueprint for performing *Bhāgavata saptāha*s, the performer's telling of the *Māhātmya* adds further metanarrative commentaries that more specifically customize and localize the *Bhāgavata saptāha* performance. Such is the case, with Chandramurthy Shastry's telling of *Māhātmya* during the first session of the ninetieth annual *Śrimad Bhāgavata Saptāha Jñānayajña Mahotsavamulu* of Kolapalli.

Not surprisingly, Chandramurthy Shastry spent the entire four hours of his first morning lecture discussing the *Bhāgavata Māhātmya*. While including the *Māhātmya* itself served as a metacommunication—that is to say, a commentary for the participants regarding how to read and receive the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*—Chandramurthy Shastry's rendition of the *Bhāgavata Māhātmya* at Kolapalli further functioned as a specific negotiation between performer and audience. Chandramurthy Shastry's telling of the *Māhātmya*, while adhering very closely to most of the narrative and prescriptive content of the Sanskrit *Māhātmya*, still managed to emphasize certain values important to all of the participants, which in turn marked this *saptāha* as particular to Kolapalli.

Specifically, Chandramurthy Shastry incorporated more Shaivite references throughout the discourse—effectively promoting the Vaidikī Smārta Brahmin notion that all deities are equal as they are simply manifestations of one supreme being, Brahman—and emphasizes the role of *sampradāya*—that is, the cycle of transmission of a text or knowledge (here the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*) from one teacher to the other. This cycle of transmission is especially pertinent in Kolapalli, where the established lineage of *paurāṇika*s is prominently displayed

upon the wall of the lecture hall. These photos, which relay the local cycle of *Bhāgavata saptāha* transmissions, not only suggest the importance of Kolapalli's own *saptāha*'s history, but they also augment the legitimacy of their *saptāha* tradition. Additionally, Chandramurthy Shastry further emphasizes the attitude and behavior that listeners should embody in order to receive the *saptāha*. All of these things, Chandramurthy Shastry manages to convey in a colloquial, entertaining fashion that resonates with his audience. Analysis of Chandramurthy Shastry's retelling of the first half of the *Bhāgavata Māhātmya*—the story of the Nārada's first performance of the *Bhāgavata saptāha*—exposes these metacommunicative processes mentioned above that make this *saptāha* a specifically Kolapalli *saptāha*.

In general, Chandramurthy Shastry's Telugu retelling of the *Bhāgavata Māhātmya* is a faithful account of what is found in the Sanskrit *Bhāgavata Māhātmya*. However, as a trained *paurāṇika*, Chandramurthy Shastry does skillfully weave in references from his extensive Sanskrit background, while also managing to update the language so that it reflects the way his audience talks, thereby better conveying the narratives to his audience. Such is the case, with Chandramurthy Shastry's opening of the *Māhātmya*. Though not explicitly stated in the opening chapter of the *Bhāgavata Māhātmya* itself, the entire purport of the *Bhāgavata Māhātmya* is based on a conversation initiated by Pārvatī, who asks Śiva to tell her about the glory of the *Bhāgavata*. Pārvatī and Śiva therefore, constitute the outermost frame, which is more evident when looking at the larger *Padma Purāṇa*. However, this frame between Pārvatī and Śiva is not mentioned in the chapters of the *Bhāgavata Māhātmya* itself, and therefore, depending on the preference of the performer, only optionally mentioned in *saptāha* performances.

Chandramurthy Shastry not only kept Śiva and Pārvatī in his retelling, but also referenced Śiva and Pārvatī throughout the discourse. Chandramurthy Shasty spent nearly 45 minutes

intertwining various other stories about Śiva and Pārvatī into the *Padma Purāṇa* narrative of Pārvatī's request to Śiva to hear the *Bhāgavata Māhātmya*. It is her request that generates Śiva and Pārvatī's conversation, which forms the outermost frame of the main narrative of Nārada's performance of the *saptāha* in the *Bhāgavata Māhātmya*. Moreover, during the seven-day discourse, despite the fact that this is a Kṛṣṇa-centered text, at the end of a narrative, or during a transition, he would have the audience chant a short mantra praising a deity. While one would expect these mantras to be directed towards Kṛṣṇa, sometimes the audience was directed to chant "*namaḥ pārvatī-pataye hara hara mahādeva*" in praise of Śiva.[165] When I later asked Chandramurthy Shastry about this, I was told that it made no difference to whom we chanted— all deities are ultimately from one source.[166] Considering that the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* is a *bhakti* text centered on Kṛṣṇa, this attention to Śiva and Pārvatī throughout his *Bhāgavata saptāha* further indicates Chandramurthy Shastry's and the audience's Vaidikī Brahmin background which considers all major deities to be one in the same. In other words, though participants considered the *saptāha* a devotional practice, not everyone necessarily subscribed to a Kṛṣṇaite or even Vaisnavite theology in which Kṛṣṇa or Viṣṇu respectively are considered the supreme deity. This prominent inclusion of Śiva is one further example in which the participants at Kolapalli, as a predominantly Vaidikī Brahmin community, negotiate a more customized *Bhāgavata saptāha*.

After expounding on the Śiva and Pārvatī narrative that frames the *Bhāgavata Māhātmya*, Chandramurthy Shastry launches into the main narratives found in the chapters of the *Māhātmya* itself. Chandramurthy Shastry narrates the conversation between Sūta and Śaunaka in which

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[165] Translation: "Salutations to Pārvatī's husband, Śiva." Hara is another name for Śiva, as is Mahādeva.

[166] Chandramurthy Shastry, interview by author, September 4, 2006.

Śaunaka asks what is the most effective way to find Kṛṣṇa and reach Vaikuṇṭha, Viṣṇu's celestial abode. Sūta replies that listening to the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* is the answer and further elaborates how the procedure of listening to the *Bhāgavata* in seven days came about. The sages' conversation frames the primary narrative, in which Nārada happens upon a distressed young woman, who is Bhakti (devotion personified). She is lamenting her two comatose, aged, withered sons, Jñāna (knowledge personified) and Vairāgya (detachment personified). Desperate over this horrid inversion of nature—a young mother and two aged sons–Bhakti begs Nārada for help. Nārada tries reciting the *Vedas*, *Upaniṣads* and *Bhagavad Gītā* but nothing stirs the sons from their slumber. Nārada then vows to find a cure for them.

After meditating and beseeching the gods, Nārada is told by a voice from the skies that the cure must come in the form of a *satkarman*. Unsure of what a *"satkarman"* is, Nārada searches far and wide for someone who can tell him what *satkarman* means. Eventually, Nārada encounters the Kumāras. After reciting specific verses from the *Bhāgavata Māhātmya* in Sanskrit, Chandramurthy Shastry continues the narrative with the Kumāras benevolently clarifying to Nārada that performing a *satkarman* means performing a sacrifice of knowledge in the form of a *Bhāgavata saptāha*.[167] They explain to Nārada that while other sacrifices—material sacrifice, sacrifice of austerities, the sacrifice of yogic practices, etc—address ritual action by reducing one's karma (and thereby, effectively help with zero-balancing one's karmic accrual), only the *Bhāgavata saptāha jñānayajña* is capable of reducing ignorance, too. Thus, by emphasizing the importance of the *Bhāgavata saptāha* as a *jñānayajña*, Chandramurthy Shastry not only stresses the ritual aspect of the *Bhāgavata saptāha*, but he further distinguishes it as a special type of ritual discourse.

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[167] *Bhāgavata Māhātmya*, 2.59-60.

Chandramurthy Shastry further defines the criterion for a *Bhāgavata saptāha* as he inserts commentary about *sampradāya* and its significance. *Sampradāya* is the transmission cycle of texts (or various forms of knowledge) from one trained teacher to the next in a lineage or *paramparā* of teachers. Chandramurthy Shastry first introduces the celestial *sampradāya* of the *Bhāgavata* in the *Māhātmya* narrative right at the point where Nārada agrees to perform the *saptāha*. The Kumāras explain how much more efficacious the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* is than other rituals, holy places, and texts, as it is in fact equal in stature to the Vedas.[168] As Chandramurthy Shastry narrates, Nārada prepared to perform the *saptāha*, asks the Kumāras for the transmission of the *Bhāgavata*. Chandramurthy Shastry then interjects into the narrative here the transmission cycle of the *Bhāgavata*. Chandramurthy Shastry explains that the *Bhāgavata* is first told by Nārāyaṇa to Brahma, who then transmits the *Bhāgavata* to his sons, the Kumāras. The Kumāras share the *Bhāgavata* with Nārada, who then passes it on Vyāsa. From Vyāsa the *Bhāgavata* is told to Śuka, who then transmits it to Sūta.[169] Finally, Chandramurthy Shastry emphasizes, from Sūta the *Bhāgavata* is transmitted to all earthly *paramaparā*.[170]

Chandramurthy Shastry's interjection of the *Bhāgavata*'s transmission cycle from Nārāyaṇa (Viṣṇu) to the earthly *paramparā*, or lineages impresses the importance of *sampradāya* in two ways. First, the juxtaposition of this celestial *paramparā* at this point in the narrative, when Nārada is about to deliver his *saptāha*, highlights the fact that Nārada is starting a new transmission cycle. Secondly, and perhaps more significant for both performer and audience is how Chandramurthy Shastry connects the celestial transmission cycle to earthly *paramparā*,

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[168] *Bhāgavata Māhātmya*, 2.71.

[169] Sūta is the sage Ugraśravas, son of Romaharṣaṇa. *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* I.2.1.

[170] Chandramurthy Shastry, "*Śrīmad Bhāgavata* Saptāha Jñānayajña Mahōtsavamulu," Sept. 2, 2006.

suggesting that ultimately all *Bhāgavata saptāha paramparā* should be able to connect back to that original transmission cycle. This not only adds more legitimacy and authority to such lineages, but more specifically for the audience at Kolapalli, it enables them imagine some connection between their own earthly, local lineage of tellers back to the celestial origins.

Sampradāya features prominently throughout Chandramurthy Shastry's discourse, as he not only considers *sampradāya* as a mark of legitimacy for performers and/or transmitters of knowledge, but also as a necessity to true and proper understanding of the knowledge being transmitted. In fact, soon after reciting the *paramparā*, Chandramurthy Shastry mentions *sampradāya* again. This time, it is in reference to how one should read the *Bhāgavata*. Continuing the narrative of Nārada, the Kumāras then take Nārada to the banks of the Ganges River in Haridwar. There, a huge audience of saints, sages and celestial beings wait for Nārada to recite the *Bhāgavata* to them. At this point, Chandramurthy Shastry interjects suddenly with an anecdote about an audience member he once encountered during a *saptāha* discourse of his own:

> One elder gentlemen asked, 'Sir, if you give me one *Śrīmad Bhāgavata*
> book, then I can read it by myself, right?'
>
> [Chandramurthy Shastry replied to him,] 'Just like if you want to learn
> music, you buy a book and bring it home—does music come to you?
> Likewise, this [*Śrīmad Bhāgavata*] too. Every story also has a
> *sampradāya*.'[171]

In the above quote, Chandramurthy Shastry further reinforces the significance of the *sampradāya*, as he declares that without proper training, one cannot properly read and understand the *Bhāgavata*. Proper training here is acquired and passed on through the knowledgeable teachers in the *sampradāya*. Thus, in order to properly read and understand the

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[171] *ekkaḍo oka peddāyana adigāḍaṭa ēvaṇḍi māku oka śrīmadbhāgavatam pustakam istē caduvukuṇṭāmu kadaṇḍi ani. ēlagaitē sangītam nērcukovali ani pustakam teccukuntē sangītam vastundā? alāgē idi kūdā. prati kathālo kūdā sampradāyam uṇṭundi.* Ibid.

Bhāgavata one must be a trained member of that lineage or, in the case of the gentleman above (and for that matter, the audience seated in front of Chandramurthy Shastry), one must listen to a trained member of the lineage.

Chandramurthy Shastry also stressed the minimum requirements a listener of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* must follow when attending a *saptāha*. He was particularly adamant that the audience members gathered to listen to him must undertake the *Bhāgavata saptāha dīkṣā*, which as outlined in the previous chapter, entailed vows of celibacy and of speaking the truth during the entire course of the *saptāha*. To be an active listener, according to Chandramurthy Shastry, was to make oneself a pure conduit, sitting still, removed from bodily desires, as maintaining *brahmacarya* means taking vows of celibacy. Moreover, one should always speak the truth. Both speaking the truth and maintaining vows of celibacy indicate a type of purification of speech and body. This purification suggests, ultimately, a consecration of one self during the performance. It is through undertaking this *saptāha dīkṣā*, that Chandramurthy Shastry insists participants during the *saptāha* can overcome any obstacles.

As the narrative of Nārada and Bhakti comes to a close, Chandramurthy Shastry further emphasizes the power of taking the *saptāha dīkṣā* by referring to the four reasons the Kumāras cite for conducting the *Bhāgavata saptāha* in seven days. Three of the reasons have to do with human frailty: the inability of people to maintain control over their minds for long enough periods of time, short life spans, and illness. The fourth reason is the general evils lurking in the Kali age. The Kumāras then cite Śuka as the one who has guaranteed the text's efficacy in a week, as well as the one who has prescribed the particular prescription for the *saptāha*. When Nārada finally performs the *saptāha*, Bhakti and her sons, Jñāna and Vairāgya are all restored to their youthful splendor by the end of the week. Chandramurthy Shastry uses this moment to

reinforce for everyone in attendance: 'If you do the *saptāha dīkṣā*, you can overcome all these things.'[172]

Despite the restrictions the *Bhāgavata saptāha dīkṣā* requires of its listeners, Chandramurthy Shastry insists submission will nonetheless allow for an overcoming of greater obstacles. Consecration allows one to avoid the very disorders that make up experiences of life: restless attention spans, losses of both personal and collective time, life spans which attain a fleeting duration, and physical disorder in the form illness. By devaluing these characteristically human experiences, Chandramurthy Shastry implies a broader realm of consecrated, strong, authority beyond the pains of life; a realm each suffering human subject must aspire to. While Chandramurthy Shastry thereby frames the *Bhāgavata saptāha dīkṣā* as an empowering process for his audience, it is also through their collective efforts at performing the *saptāha* that the disorder of life will be channeled, and local identities and histories will be made.

Audience is King: The Model Devotee of the Kolapalli *Saptāha*

Having framed Kolapalli's *saptāha* through the *Bhāgavata Māhātmya* in terms of connecting the narrative to the *Bhāgavata's* chain of transmission, and the *Māhātmya's* prescription to audience members' practices of austerities, Chandramurthy Shastry further connects the Kolapalli *saptāha* to the first narration of the *Bhāgavata* on earth by the sage Śuka to King Parikṣit. He reiterates the frame stories of the *Bhāgavata*. The *Bhāgavata* is set initially in Naimiṣa forest with Śaunaka and the other sages present, asking and longing for Sūta to tell them about Kṛṣṇa. Sūta begins to praise Kṛṣṇa and extol the virtue of Kṛṣṇa *bhakti*. He then proceeds to tell them how the *Bhāgavata* came to be composed by Vyāsa, who told it to his son

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[172] *ī saptāha dīkṣa cēstē avanni jayincavaccu*. Ibid.

Śuka, who in turn narrated the *Bhāgavata* for the first time on earth to the dying King Parikṣit. Sūta narrates the life of King Parikṣit, explaining how Kṛṣṇa saved him from almost certain annihilation when the deadliest of all weapons, the *brahmāstra*, was launched towards the entire Pāṇḍava camp, including Parikṣit's mother, whilst Parikṣit was still in her womb. From that moment, before he is even born, Parikṣit's devotion to Kṛṣṇa is established as he has his first *darśan* of Kṛṣṇa in the womb. [173]

As Sūta recounts Parikṣit's life, it is the king's final days that ultimately produce the second narrative frame. King Parikṣit, otherwise virtuous, insults a meditating sage in a single moment of arrogance, and is subsequently cursed to die in seven days by snakebite.[174] He cedes his kingdom to his son, Janamejaya, and goes to the banks of the Ganges River to die.[175] There, longing to hear about Kṛṣṇa, Parikṣit encounters the sage Śuka. So begins the second frame of the story, as Śuka proceeds to narrate Vyāsa's *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* to the dying King Parikṣit.

Thus, the *Bhāgavata* has two major narrative frames: the innermost in which Śuka shares the bulk of the content of the *Bhāgavata* with King Parikṣit, and the outer frame where Sūta tells the Sages in Naimiṣa about Śuka's narrative to King Parikṣit. During a *saptāha* however, a third narrative frame is generated by Chandramurthy Shastry as he retells the *Bhāgavata* to his attentive audience, beginning with the outermost frame story of Sūta and the sages in Naimiṣa forest. The construction of this new frame during the *saptāha* performance effectively positions the audience member in the same place as the listening sages in Naimiṣa forest and of course,

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[173] *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, I.12, see particularly verses 7-11.

[174] *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, I.18.

[175] *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, I.19.1-16.

King Parikṣit. Moreover, due to the *saptāha's* seven-day structure, this new outer frame mimics the inner frame story in which the cursed King hears the entire *Bhāgavata* in seven days.

This re-enactment of the internal frame between Śuka and Parikṣit is particularly reinforced in the Kolapalli *saptāha*, moreover, as great pains are taken to conduct the *saptāha* every year on the anniversary of the first transmission between Śuka and Parikṣit. By performing their annual *Bhāgavata saptāha* on the anniversary, not only are they honoring that event, but also ultimately they are recreating it. The prescribed austerities that the participants undertake further mimics the way King Parikṣit listened to the *Bhāgavata*, thereby further suggesting that the audience is modeled after the ideal listener and Kṛṣṇa *bhakta*, King Parikṣit.

The more stringent austerities participants practiced came from the *Bhāgavata Māhātmya*, and included, as mentioned, abstaining from sex; abstaining from drinking alcohol and smoking; fasting during the entire *saptāha* week; and sleeping on the floor at night as opposed to a bed. Fasting could be as rigorous as eating one meal a day or simply abstaining from particular foods during the course of the week. King Parikṣit, who is by all accounts a Kṛṣṇa devotee par excellence, exemplifies the model devotee. As described in the text, Parikṣit listens to the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* with full, untiring attention, sitting attentively at all times.[176] He does not eat or drink for the duration of the seven days, claiming the sweet nectar of the *Bhāgavata* (*bhāgavatāmṛta*) abates his thirst and hunger.[177] Thus, what seems to happen is that the audience member ends up performing the role of Parikṣit, while Chandramurthy Shastry performs the role of Śuka. Like the king, the audience members are householders who live

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[176] Parikṣit often asks Śuka questions throughout the narrative that demonstrate that he is not only listening, but actively processing the story, thereby generating these questions which serve to also further the narrative along. One such example is *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* VIII.1.1-3.

[177] For example, *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* II.8.26 and *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* X.1.11-13.

worldly lives, but now suddenly take on an ascetic posture, while Chandramurthy Shastry who is also a householder, takes on those austerities, as well as the act of retelling the narrative.

Despite the obvious parallels between the audience and King Parikṣit, admittedly, none of the participants seemed to place much importance on it. When I asked why they undertook these austerities, a few of the participants explained to me that the austerities were undertaken to purify and to amplify the *puṇya,* or merit they were already accruing from just listening to the *Bhāgavata*.[178] Likewise, Chandramurthy Shastry never directly mentions the fact that the *saptāha* is a reenactment of the original frame story. The closest Chandramurthy Shastry came was during the first session, as he expounded upon the importance of listening to the *Bhāgavata*. At one point, Chandramurthy Shastry commented on the fact that Parikṣit knew he was going to die in seven days. Chandramurthy Shastry suggested that because other people do not know when and at what minute they are going to die, it was important for them to do good deeds as long as they lived. Even in relating this lesson, however, Chandramurthy Shastry does not directly make the connection for the audience that they are modeling Parikṣit's final days. Chandramurthy Shastry does still encourage the audience to practice austerities like Parikṣit, though he does not present a direct invitation to audience members to approach the text as if they are Parikṣit.

Nevertheless, by constantly referring to King Parikṣit as the ideal listener of the *Bhāgavata*, Chandramurthy Shastry effectively suggests his audience take King Parikṣit as an example of an ideal listener. In particular, Chandramurthy Shastry often emphasized in his lecture, that Parikṣit never drank during the whole time he listened to the *Bhāgavata*, since all of

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[178] Laxminarayana Murthy, interview by author, Kolapalli, Andhra Pradesh, 3 September 2006. Professor Gopal Rao, interview by author, Kolapalli, Andhra Pradesh, 4 September 2006. Annapurna Amma, interview by author, Kolapalli, Andhra Pradesh, 25 February 2007.

his thirst and hunger was dispelled by the nectar of the *Bhāgavata*. Parikṣit's level of intense

engagement with the *Bhāgavata*, to the extent that all other corporeal needs are unrecognized

and/or fulfilled by the act of listening to the *Bhāgavata,* becomes an ideal the audience is

encouraged to live up to as best they can. Chandramurthy Shastry, recognizing how impossible it

might seem—to go without food and water for an entire week—shares an anecdote about

someone who did forgo food and water for the entire seven days during a *Bhāgavata saptāha*:

> 'Is there anybody in the world who did like this [go without food or water
> for seven days]?' people asked.
> I saw a Swami who listened seven days without touching anything.
> In a village, my guru Manguri Subbanna Shastry Gāru did a *Bhāgavata*
> *Saptāha*. There [at the *saptāha*] was a Swami.
>
> The Swami said one thing:'King Parikṣit, didn't he listen to the *Bhāgavata*
> for seven days without touching anything? Why can't I listen [like that]?'
> he said.[179]

In the anecdote above, Chandramurthy Shastry employs both his own eyewitness account, as

well as the credibility of his own lineage—by invoking his teacher—in order to declare that it is

possible to completely forgo food and drink for an entire *saptāha*. In so doing, Chandramurthy

Shastry encourages his audience to maintain their own fasts—which are not as stringent as that

of Parikṣit or the Swami—outside of the lecture, and to completely forgo food and drink during

the lectures. More significant, however, is that the quote above reinforces Parikṣit as the ideal

listener, as the Swami cites Parikṣit as a model listener that he wishes to emulate. Though as

stated before, Chandramurthy Shastry never directly conveys to the audience that they are

performing Parikṣit's role, indirectly, as demonstrated through the above quote and other

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[179] *prapanchamlō ilā vinnavāḷḷu evarainā unnārā ani nīladīsāru. ēḍu rōjulū ēmi muṭṭakuṇḍā śravaṇam cesinavamti swāmula vārini cūsānu. ūrulo mā gurudevulu manguri subbanna śāstrulu gāru bhāgavata saptāham cēstuntē akkaḍa oka swāmula vāru uṇḍēvaru. ayana okkate annāru, parikṣitnārendrula vāru ēḍu rōjulū ēmi muṭṭakuṇḍā śravaṇam ceyyaledā? nēnenduku śravaṇam ceyyalēnu annārāyana.* Chandramurthy Shastry, "Śrīmad Bhagavata Saptāha Jnanayajna Mahotsavamulu," Sept. 2, 2006.

suggestions about Parikṣit's status as a model listener and devotee, Chandramurthy Shastry does encourage audience members to model their behavior after Parikṣit.

By the same token, when listening to the lecture, audience members were expected to be impervious to exhaustion, sitting, with their backs held straight and erect throughout the lecture. Chandramurthy Shastry seems to comment on this both in a literal and figurative sense as he defines the *Bhāgavata* at one point in his lecture as:

> The *Bhāgavatam* is 18,000 verses, has twelve cantos [and] is in the form of
> the pillars of Parikṣit and Śuka. This is the *Bhāgavatam*.[180]

By referring to Śuka and King Parikṣit as the pillars that constitute the form of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, Chandramurthy Shastry draws upon the physical image of both Śuka and Parikṣit during the telling of the *Bhāgavata*. Chandramurthy Shastry often mentions throughout his discourse how Parikṣit sat with rapt attention for the entire seven days and seven nights listening to the *Bhāgavata* and further how this is the ideal way to listen. The comparison of Śuka and Parikṣit to pillars, moreover, encapsulates their roles as the innermost narrative frame betwixt which the *Bhāgavata* is being told. For the model reader, this further emphasizes the parallel performance of the Chandramurthy Shastry as Śuka and the audience as King Parikṣit.

Chandramurthy Shastry's indirect suggestions at once encouraging the audience to emulate Parikṣit, in combination with the narrative frames and concomitant austerities of the *saptāha* also suggest that the audience *is* King Parikṣit. That is, he suggests that they are re-enacting the role of King Parikṣit. For the participant who recognizes this parallel performance, the reading is at once transformed. Positioned as Parikṣit, re-enacting his role as the recipient of the *Bhāgavata* discourse, the participants can experience themselves as King Parikṣit, and in so

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[180] *bhāgavatam aṇṭē 18,000 ślokālu annāru. 12 skandhālugā uṇṭundi. parikṣiṭṭu śuka stambhala rūpaṃgā uṇṭundi iha idē bhāgavatam.* Ibid.

doing, are encouraged to read or listen to the *saptāha* discourse from the king's perspective. This second-order reading, that is reading the *saptāha* discourse as King Parikṣit, opens the door to multiple interpretations of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* and the *saptāha* discourse itself.

However, even for those participants who do not envision themselves as King Parikṣit, the suggestion that they are imitating the time-honored practice of listening to the *Bhāgavata* in seven-days is inescapable. As is the fact that King Parikṣit still provides an exemplary model as an ideal listener for them to follow. But ultimately, the Kolapalli *saptāha* manages to claim even more authenticity through the example of King Parikṣit, when considering the particular scheduling of Kolapalli's *saptāha*—always on the anniversary of the sage Śuka's *Bhāgavata* discourse to the King Parikṣit. By being scheduled on the anniversary of that event, the Kolapalli *saptāha* already suggests that the entire event is not just commemorative, but also a re-enactment of the original *Bhāgavata* discourse of the sage and the king. Thus, the performer, in our case Chandramurthy Shastry, becomes the sage, and the audience becomes the king.

Customizing the *Saptāha*: Interpolation of Local History and Rituals

On the sixth day of the *saptāha*, Chandramurthy Shastry made his way into the narrative of the *Rukmiṇī Kalyāṇa*. During the early morning, he told the story of the marriage in detail. From ten in the morning onwards, ritual preparations had begun. Tiny gold statues of Kṛṣṇa and Rukmiṇī, each perhaps only four inches tall, were placed in a pan and seated outside in the sun. Waiting inside was a beautifully decorated miniature wooden palanquin that would also serve as the *maṇḍap*, or four-posted marriage pavilion. The palanquin had been used for years in this ceremony. It was painted in a bright yellow color with some red and green decorative details, such as flowers and vines cascading along the bottom and top. The palanquin had further been

decorated with betel leaves and red hibiscus flowers framing the edges of the pavilion top and hanging down from the center like a chandelier were some red roses. The miniature Kṛṣṇa and Rukmiṇī were dressed in new, matching white silk saris with a red border: colors expected during a marriage ceremony.

Once Chandramurthy Shastry finished retelling the marriage narrative and closed out the morning session early at about 10:30 a.m., he signaled the end of his lecture and for the commencement of the ritual reenacting the marriage of Kṛṣṇa to Rukmiṇī. The small gold statues were brought into the hall and gingerly placed within the pavilion by the *purohit*. The *purohit* spoke mantras while these statues were brought into the hall. The entire wedding was conducted in a style familiar to Telugu communities, including such ritual practices as providing a tiny *maṅgalsūtra* or auspicious wedding necklace for Rukmiṇī, application of turmeric on the feet and distributing oranges and perfumes to the wedding guests. The *maṅgalsūtra* varies in name and style regionally throughout India and in Telugu weddings—as with the case in Telugu weddings. The *maṅgalsūtra*—or *thāli*, as it is called—is unique in that it consists of two gold discs at the bottom of the chain.

Other local rituals specific to Kolapalli were also observed. One such ritual was the grinding of rice puffs. The rice puffs were ground by two older women in their sixties, both of whom were very actively involved throughout the *saptāha* as participants and volunteers in the kitchen. The women stood while holding long, blunt wooden sticks with rounded ends that they would pound on the rice puffs which were in large straw baskets, an arrangement much like that of a large mortar and pestle. The ground rice puffs were then used in the ceremony, both as offerings into the sacrificial wedding fire, and then as substance scattered on the deities at one point in the ceremony. When I asked one of the women what this part of the ritual meant, I was

told that it was an auspicious ceremony conducted in order to bring about abundance and wealth. I was told also that this was performed in all Brahmin wedding ceremonies in Kolapalli.

Within the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, Kṛṣṇa and Rukmiṇī had famously eloped in a *gāndharva*-style wedding. Having abducted Rukmiṇī with her consent, Kṛṣṇa then marries her in front of family and honorable guests in accordance to proper ritual rites. When I asked what the purpose of conducting the ceremony was, I was given general responses indicating that the ceremony was being done to please Kṛṣṇa.

This wedding was both properly attended, and attended to. I noticed on that day, that for the local participants of the Kolapalli *saptāha*, this meant that everyone had to dress in their best formal clothing, as though they were attending a real wedding. One couple from the city of Chennai sponsored the wedding. This couple was formerly connected to Kolapalli, as both were Telugu and from Brahmin families hailing from the village. Vamsi informed me that this couple, by sponsoring the wedding, accrued a great amount of religious merit (*puṇya*), and blessings for long lives, good fortune and prosperity. During the ceremony, these young, sponsoring newlyweds dressed in fancy clothing and sat in proxy for Kṛṣṇa and Rukmiṇī, performing rites of the wedding such as the *Gaṇeśa pūjā* and making offerings to the fire.

After the wedding ceremony, this sponsoring couple also helped to serve a large meal they had sponsored to all local participants in attendance, thereby raising their own profile within Kolapalli. Based on the warm reception of the couple from the community, as well as their own proud faces during and upon completion of the wedding ritual, it was evident that it was considered a prestigious honor to sponsor this ceremony. While as mentioned, the young couple solely attended ceremonies on this sixth day, their importance in the community was pronounced through their roles on this sixth day, distributing food among an audience that had quadrupled on

this day. While as mentioned, many of the members in the audience hailed from surrounding communities, with ties to Kolapalli, the renown of the young hosts could be spread beyond the community accordingly.

The other main ritual residents of Kolapalli added to their *saptāha*, was what they referred to as the *Rāma abhiṣeka snāna*. The *Rāma abhiṣeka snāna* occurred the day after the completion of the *saptāha*, and though technically not a part of the seven-day retelling, it marked a ceremonial and festive end to the entire *saptāha* event. Though there was no formal initiation for undertaking vows or austerities during the *saptāha* as a *Bhāgavata dīkṣā*, the *Rāma abhiṣeka snāna* did mark the formal ending *Bhāgavata dīkṣā* for those participants undertaking those vows. Especially for men and women who lived nearby in Kolapalli, it was easier to reconvene on the morning after the seventh day at the *vedapāṭhaśālā*, and for those who chose to participate, to arrive in simple, clean clothing which would not indicate interference with any ritual prohibitions.

Standing at least knee-deep in the water, we took turns holding a small silver statue of the deity *Rāma* above our own head, while the *purohit* or Chandramurthy Shastry poured the river water over the statue from a traditional copper water pot, letting it trickle down our heads, drenching our hair, shoulders and clothing. Unlike the *abhiṣeka* ceremony performed previously in celebration of *Kṛṣṇa Janmāṣṭamī*, wherein the *purohit* poured libations upon the image of Kṛṣṇa and around the *Bhāgavata*, this *abhiṣeka* was performed on the participants and consisted more of a ritual ablution. This *Rāma abhiṣeka snāna* seemed reminiscent of royal *abhiṣeka* ceremonies in which kings, government officials, were consecrated to their new positions with a ritual *abhiṣeka* conducted by a priest. This seemed to echo the earlier notion of the audience as reenacting the role of King Parikṣit, moreover, as they now received a royal anointing.

With the cursory recitation of the *Bhagavad Gītā* read by Chandramurthy Shastry, proceeding a festive atmosphere that further encouraged the energies of the community, the local atmosphere of Kolapalli was not only encouraged, but was moved through and physically experienced by participants who walked through the streets, down to the river. The act of bathing in the river was also expressly communal, with bathers holding the statue of *Rāma,* co-operating with the *purohit* or Chandramurthy Shastry, as they poured the river water over the statue and on down upon the participants. This final, local addendum to the *saptāha* produced a sense of comraderie and community: it left attendees of the *saptāha* in a collective, open space—literally, outside—where the accomplishment of the *saptāha* could be carried on into the greater community.

The two rituals mentioned above serve as significant examples of ceremonial additions to the *Bhāgavata saptāha* by the participants from Kolapalli. Both the ritual reenactment of the wedding of Rukmiṇi and Kṛṣṇa, as well as the *Rāma abhiṣeka snāna* serve as metacommunicative processes, in that they demonstrate the terms by which audience members from the village negotiate the unfolding of their *Bhāgavata saptāha*. This metacommunication reinforces a message of local authority, ultimately communicating that narratives and tradition will only be carried out according to the principles already repeated for years in Kolapalli. However, these traditions are not fixed, and they are not objectively stable things in any text, including the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, or *Māhātmya* in this case. It is always through the generative performance done by the gathered audience members and *paurāṇika*s, and through their metacommunicative processes, that these 'traditions' are being negotiated, and thereby created. Overwhelmingly then, in Kolapalli, even as practitioners carry out an apparently standardized,

traditional, adherent version of the *saptāha*, they receive a metacommunicative message about the importance of Kolapalli's specific local variations of the *saptāha* performance.

The degree to which the *saptāha* has been localized can further be better understood through the analysis of the interpolation of narratives and, in the case of this performance, rituals. In terms of narrative interpolation, Chandramurthy Shastri weaves various local narratives into his discourse, thereby connecting the narratives of the *Bhāgavata* to the history and lineage of Kolapalli's own annual *saptāha* tradition. As sponsors and primary participants, attendees from Kolapalli assert their own village traditions by adding local customs above and beyond the usual prescriptions for *Bhāgavata saptāha* performances. All of these respective interpolations act further as metacommunicative narratives that not only localize and customize the performance, but ultimately also serve as demonstrations of the negotiations taking place between audience and performer. These negotiations, in generating the particular performance of this *saptāha*, also demonstrate that the very tradition of *saptāha* that is considered an institution—and a longstanding annual one at that, in Kolapalli—is being regenerated and thus, created anew within the performance itself.

The section below will thus analyze these interpolations as metacommunications. There are multiple types of interpolation at play in Kolapalli's *saptāha*. First, is the notion of communicating an authentic lineage associated with the local *paramparā*. Some of the efforts to do so can be seen above, with Chandramurthy Shastry's retelling of the Nārada narrative from the *Bhāgavata Māhātmya*. Chandramurthy Shastry does not limit his interpolation of local lineages to summaries of *sampradāya*, or transmission cycles, as he also weaves local history into narratives from the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, especially as will be seen in the analysis of the Rukmiṇī wedding narrative. A second type of interpolation oversees an instance of ritual

reenactment within the narrative itself, in particular, the reenactment of the wedding of Rukmiṇī to Kṛṣṇa. And finally, the *Rāma abhiṣeka snāna,* or ritual ablutions performed in the Kṛṣṇa River constitutes an instance in which local participants attach their own traditional customs to the *saptāha*.

As seen earlier in his treatment of the *Bhāgavata Māhātmya*, Chandramurthy Shastry adds some historical details into the narrative dealing with the local *paurāṇika*'s lineages and the history of Kolapalli. Concerned with portraying the importance of *sampradāya*, Chandramurthy Shastry emphasizes both the need for *sampradāya* in being able to properly engage the text, but also in establishing the legitimacy of the performer of the text. In his retelling of Nārada's first recitation of a *Bhāgavata saptāha*, Chandramurthy Shastry mentions the celestial *sampradāya*, demonstrating how the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* was transmitted from the diety Nārāyana all the way down to what he generally terms as earthly *paramparā*s, or lineages. By connecting this line of celestial lecturers to all earthly *paramparā*, Chandramurthy Shastry lays down the foundation for Kolapalli to establish a link to the ancient, mythological lineage expounded in the *Bhāgavata Māhātmya*. This in turn further legitimizes the authenticity of their own performers and the longstanding history of their own annual *saptāha*.

Other individuals who participated in the performance echoed Chandramurthy Shastry's reverence for establishing lineages reaching into the far past. For example, one of the elderly sponsors of the *saptāha*, Veera Raghava Sastry, an octogenarian, during a speech at the close of the final day of the *saptāha*, shared his recollection of how the Kolapalli's ninety-year *saptāha* was initiated in the first place. Veera Raghava Sastry said that his father, Kuchibhotla Nagabhushana Sastry, and Bhagavatula Suryanaryana Avadhani met Lakshminarayana Shastry––who was also known as Brahmam Garu— from the village of Konseema, and subsequently

decided to organize a *Bhāgavata Saptāha* in Kolapalli. Veera Raghava Sastry was also able to recount that the initial financial support for Kolapalli's first annual *saptāha* was provided by three families: the Bhagavatula, Cheruvu, and Lolla families. Another sponsor provided the lineage of *paurāṇika*s who performed the *saptāha*. He cited Kadiyala Seetharama Sastry as the first *paurāṇika*, followed by Narayanabhatla Krishnamurthy Dasu, Bhagavatula Radhakrishna Murthy, and the sponsor's own guru, Manjuluri Subbanna Sastry of Ananthavaram. Additionally, Chandramurthy Shastry often cited the original *paurāṇika*s from Kolapalli's lineage when giving his discourse. These lineages of sponsors and performers serve as metacommunicative narratives signifying the longstanding, continuous history of Kolapalli's *saptāha*, thereby solidifying their sense of tradition.

Another example of how Chandramurthy Shastry weaves Kolapalli's local history into his discourse can be found in his exposition of the *Rukmiṇi Kaḷyāṇam*. Chandramurthy Shastry, as with most narratives he retells, remains faithful to the original Sanskrit account in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*. In fact, his retellings are often very close translations into colloquial Telugu of many of the Sanskrit verses, as he himself considers the Sanskrit text to be the only authentic version. This, however, does not prevent Chandramurthy Shastry from expanding on narratives using either information from other Sanskrit texts—i.e. *purāṇa*s, epics, *śāstra*s, Vedas, etc.—as well as, events from recent local history deemed relevant to the current narrative.

In the case of the *Rukmiṇī Kalyāṇa*, Chandramurthy Shastry begins the narrative by citing a previous *Bhāgavata saptāha* performance in which the participants also performed a ritual reenactment of the wedding of Rukmiṇī to Kṛṣṇa:

> In the *Śrīmad Bhāgavata* the *Rukmiṇī Kalyāṇa* chapter is just half. Actually there's a lot of story (a lot more narrative) about *Rukmiṇī's kaḷyāṇam*. That's why Potana told it in its entirety. In the gathering of the *Rukmiṇī Kalyāṇa Mahotsava* we once did a [*Bhāgavata*] *saptāha*. Then you know

who did this *yajña*? Those other people who are connected to Kolapalli itself. They married a daughter from the Cheruvu family.

There used to be one person called Golapuri Gopalakrishna Shastry. This Cheruvu family asked this Shastry Gāru to do the *saptāha*. So in the seven days, by the time the story reached the chapter on the *Rukmiṇī Kaḷyāṇam*, the devotees were so excited that they wanted him to tell the entire story. Then the Shastry said 'We are not going to have enough time to tell the story in its entirety.' Moreover, people were in a hurry and eager to get their wedding meals. [*Chandramurthy Shastry laughs along with the audience*][181]

In the anecdote above, Chandramurthy Shastry references this Cheruvu family, who of course are not in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, but who are eminently connected to the village of Kolapalli. This Cheruvu family refers, in fact, to one of the three original families that sponsored the first annual *Bhāgavata Saptāha* at Kolapalli. This referencing of such a prominent local family serves to connect the lives of local audience members to the narrative being generated in the performance. The mention of the Cheruvu family functions as a local addendum, or, for those present listening, an anecdote which serves as a bridge from the bodies of the text, to the world of material things and social histories they all share on a daily basis within the village.

Additionally, referencing the Cheruvu family functions to add more legitimacy to the point Chandramurthy Shastry seeks to make by sharing this anecdote. Chandramurthy Shastry mentions this anecdote of the Cheruvu family and their *saptāha* as a means of supporting a larger point he was making—that the *Rukmiṇī Kalyāṇa* narrative is much more extensive than what is found in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*. Using this anecdote to weave in another narrative from the

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[181] *ayite śrīmadbhāgavatamlō rukmiṇi kaḷyāṇam sagame unnadi inkā rukmiṇi kaḷyāṇāniki sambhandhincinaṭu vanṭi katha cālā unnadi andukani potana sampūrṇaṅgā ceppāru rukmiṇi kaḷyāṇa mahōtsavam sanghamlō oka parvāya yajñam śrīmadbhāgavatam saptāha jñānayajñam jarigindi ā yajñam evaru cēstāraṇṭē Kolapalli lō sambhandham undē dāḷḷē ceruvu vāri pillanu cēsukunnāru āyana gollapuri gopāla kṛṣṇa śāstri vārani unḍēvāru śāstrigāru āyinni saptāha cēyamaṇṭē appuḍu āyana cēptaru vāram rōjullo ī rukmiṇi kaḷyāṇa daggiriki vaccētappaṭiki a bhaktulaṇṭā svāmi ā ghaṭṭānni mīru ceptē vinālani undi ani srotalantā kūḍā aḍigitē appuḍu samayam unḍadu annāru kontamandi tōndaragā muginci bhōjanālu tinadāniki tōndara paḍutunnāru.* Chandramurthy Shastry, "*Śrīmad Bhāgavata* Saptāha Jñanayajña Mahōtsavamulu," September 7, 2006.

Brahma Purāṇa, which adds more details about the *Rukmiṇī Kalyāṇa,* Chandramurthy Shastry is able to support his point about the Rukmiṇī narrative's extensiveness through the immediacy of a local witnessed event, in addition to quoting further Sanskrit scripture (the *Brahma Purāṇa*). Thus, as a metacommunicative process, by utilizing familiar figures from the community of his audience to exemplify his point, Chandramurthy Shastry adds a local sensibility to the *saptāha* discourse, further tailoring his discourse to the residents of Kolapalli. And finally, Chandramurthy Shastry's introduction of this Cheruvu family *saptāha* anecdote anticipates what the audience is preparing to do themselves. Just as the Cherevu family indicated in his anecdote were eagerly awaiting the Rukmiṇī narrative, the wedding ceremony, and most likely, the wedding feast, so too were the audience members in attendance at that time.

As this chapter has demonstrated, the metacommunicative processes—by juxtaposing the audience's positions being both within the textual narrative and greater community simultaneously—reveal an emergent text. This emergent text includes all the metacommunicative processes surrounding the discourse. In Kollapali, this allowed the traditional, conservative, Brahminical, ritualized Hinduism practiced locally to continue achieving aspirations to remain unchanged and continuous with the past. The first section of this chapter demonstrated the ways in which the metacommunicative processes between predominantly Brahmin participants—sponsors, audience members and performer—reflected the Brahminical hierarchy predominant in Kolapalli within the *saptāha* discourse and performance. The chapter's second section explored the ways in which the *Bhāgavata Māhātmya* as exposited by Chandramurthy Shastry instructed the performance of Kolapalli's *Bhāgavata saptāha*. More specifically, analysis of Chandramurthy Shastry's rendition of the *Bhāgavata Māhātmya*

demonstrated the ways in which his *Māhātmya* served as a metanarrative guiding the listeners on how *sampradāya* is used to frame the *saptāha* performance. Moreover, the *Māhātmya*'s instructions on how participants must conduct themselves in order to properly receive the *Bhāgavata* during a *saptāha* performance emphasizes the undertaking of austerities and particular vows by participants. These austerities in conjunction with Chandramurthy Shastry's exposition of the key narrative frame of the *Bhāgavata*, Śuka's seven-day *Bhāgavata* discourse to King Parikṣit, further served to generate a connection to that original discourse, as the participants' austerities, along with the commemorative date of the *saptāha*, are all factors which persist in having the participants model themselves after King Parikṣit. In so doing, Chandramurthy Shastry takes on the role of Śuka and the audience that of King Parikṣit, thereby reenacting the original discourse event between the sage and the king. This in turn, is another way of establishing the authenticity of Kolapalli's *saptāha*. The final section of this chapter recounted the interpolation of local rituals and customs, illustrating the ways in which Kolapalli's *saptāha* performance is made unique to their small village community.

Chapter Three: Professor Prema Pandurang's "Highlights of the *Bhagavatham*"

This chapter examines a modern, cosmopolitan *kathā* of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, performed by Professor Prema Pandurang during the period of January 16 through 21, 2006, in Andhra Pradesh's rapidly growing metropolitan capital city, Hyderabad. Professor Pandurang, delivering her performance in the global vernacular, English,[182] drew to her *Bhāgavata kathā* an audience filled with English-medium educated urban Hindus, comprised of college and university students, engineers, information technology professionals, software engineers, computer programmers, businessman, doctors, bankers, lawyers and politicians—in essence the rising urban middle and upper classes of Hyderabad. While delivering her talk in English enabled her to target and attract such a crowd, or what she herself dubbed "the modern, educated man,"[183] as this chapter will demonstrate, her ability to negotiate inherent conflicts between the modern, global, cosmopolitan lifestyles of her audience with the traditional, medieval Hindu world of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa,* for and *with* her audience, sustained audience attention and encouraged her audience to continue to attend her *Bhāgavata kathā*. Moreover, through these negotiations, Professor Pandurang and her audience envisioned a global Hinduism that could both encompass their long-standing religious traditions, while still engaging their new cosmopolitan, university-educated, professional middle and upper class lifestyles. Analysis of the metacommunicative processes that constitute those negotiations reveals that the very traditions the participants seek to follow are in fact, being regenerated, reshaped and reinforced

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[182] As opposed to the local vernaculars of Telugu—the statewide regional language—or Hindi/Urdu used throughout the city, particularly in the Old City region of Hyderabad.

[183] Prema Pandurang believes it is her calling to reach the "modern, educated man," and thus, consciously targets the well-educated, modern Hindu population for her performances. Prema Pandurang, interview by author, Hyderabad, Andhra Pradesh, 20 January 2006.

by them in this performance of the *Bhāgavata*. In particular, Prema Pandurang's *Bhāgavata kathā* reinforces the importance and necessity of the continuation of oral tradition with specific regard to the transmission of all Hindu scripture. Pandurang's *Bhāgavata kathā* redefines the parameters for a legitimate *Bhāgavata* transmission cycle, as well as the qualifications and methods for proper transmission of oral scripture. In this way, the oral transmission effectively complies with the traditional world of the *Bhāgavata* while still fitting into the modern lifestyles of the audience.

The urban scene in Hyderabad differs in extreme from the ancient, traditional portrait of life described in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa,* with its pastoral depictions of Vrindavan, majestic Hindu kingdoms, evil demons, powerful god-king Kṛṣṇa, orthodox Brahmanical hierarchy, antiquated modes of transportation (i.e. horse-drawn chariots, oxen carts), and the miraculous powers and abilities displayed by demons, gods and devotees. In contrast, Hyderabad, vying with Bangalore to be the nation's top information technology metropolis,[184] is a modern, multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, global, technologically-driven society more stratified by economic class than Brahmanical hierarchy. Hyderabad is marked by consumption of not only modern technological gadgetry and machines—smart phones, cell phones, laptops, computers, cars, even SUV's—but also a large proliferation of luxury and brand-name items including designer clothing labels, jewelry and even home furnishings. In other words, because of the state government's agenda, *Andhra Pradesh: Vision 2020*, to establish Hyderabad as "an information-based society in which IT is a way of life" through specifically targeting three knowledge-based industries cited as "information technology, biotechnology and pharmaceuticals,"[185] Hyderabad is projected to be

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[184] Bangalore is another South Indian megacity—a city with total population exceeding 10 million people—that is globally recognized as a technology corridor and developed in that way.

[185] James Heitzman, *The City in South Asia* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 220.

one of ten South Asian megacities with a population of 10.5 million people by 2015.[186] As more international banking, pharmaceutical and information technology corporations take root and expand in Hyderabad, more people are relocating to the city from all over India, and even the world, to be employees in those multi-national corporations.[187] Still many more migrate to the city in hopes of finding job opportunities in other sectors of growth associated with a booming city. As a result of this citywide movement towards becoming an information-technology based city, members in Prema Pandurang's target audience, in addition to being educated, are much more technologically savvy. They are also more familiar with secular, egalitarian modes of co-existing, and live busy, on-the-go schedules in which material consumption is very much an ingrained part of their lives.

Thus, it would seem that there is great disparity between the modern, cosmopolitan lives of the audience and the values and lifestyles portrayed in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*. Though there is some overlap, in general, the apparent conflicts Professor Pandurang and her audience must reconcile between their lifestyles and that of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* can be reduced to three categories: modern vs. traditional, secular vs. religious and global vs. local. More specifically in terms of this analysis, modern is defined by the reliance on and/or deference to science, technology and the tangible; materiality and consumerism; and contemporary institutions of knowledge such as universities and colleges. This notion of the modern also involves questioning the meaning of conventional Hindu customs, practices and rituals. In contrast, the traditional, as depicted in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, advocates, relies upon and/or favors the miraculous, magical, intangible and ephemeral; immateriality and austerity; respects utmost traditional institutions of

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[186] In 1975 the population was measured as 2,086,000 and tripled by 2007 when it was recorded as 6,358,000. Ibid., 176, 180.

[187] Some examples of these global corporations are Oracle, GE Capital, Google, Sprint, Satyam International, and Citibank.

knowledge (i.e. gurus, ashrams, divine revelation); and compliance to conventional customs, practices and rituals. To some extent, the conflicts between the secular and religious are due in large part to the realities of urban life and governance in these two worlds. On the one hand, the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* features a religiously organized world centering upon Kṛṣṇa devotion, that also includes Brahmanical hierarchies and monarchies that reinforce caste and feudal hierarchies, subordinating all women to their fathers, brothers and husbands. However, on the other hand, urban Hyderabadis live in a multi-ethnic, multi-religious, democratic society governed by a secular government. As such, the Hyderabadi Hindus in this performance live in a society where legally all religions, ethnicities and genders are recognized and given equal rights. In this situation, a new hierarchy is emerging that is more class-based than caste-based. Thus, any Hyderabadi Hindu attempting to lead a religiously-centered lifestyle as strictly as described in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa,* engages in much more of an individual undertaking that is now ironically at odds with—as opposed to conforming to—the larger realities and values expressed by the world surrounding them.

Finally, intertwined to some extent with the modern and the secular, is the global. Given that many participants, including and especially, Prema Pandurang herself, are not natives of Hyderabad, or even Andhra Pradesh itself, her discourse would fail to resonate with her audience if it were rooted in specifics concerning local customs, traditions and language as all participants don't share those things in common. Moreover, given the international presence in Hyderabad—ranging from international persons visiting for work, tourism or family, international corporations, international retail chains and even the greater access to English language signage, movie films and cable television channels—Pandurang's audience lives with an awareness of the world at large, as well as a sense of their own place as member of the global market and

community. As a result, not only must Pandurang use English, a global language, to reach her audience; but she must also present customs and traditions in ways that are at the very least trans-local and portable, resulting in more generalized—and, therefore less specific and less localized—aesthetics and practices.

Professor Pandurang reconciles these seemingly disparate worlds by ultimately generating a global, spiritual Hinduism that in essence combines the best of both worlds. Analysis of the metacommunicative processes—those communications surrounding the primary narrative events in the performance that are about the performance, performers and/or primary narrative events of the performance—in the emergent text generated from her *Bhāgavata* discourse, reveals the negotiations Professor Pandurang makes with her audience in order to reconcile the conflicts outlined above. For example, Prema Pandurang uses technocratic, business, and other types of secular institutional terms and references throughout her performance. These terms, while clearly anachronistic to the world of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, enable Prema Pandurang to retell and explain *Bhāgavata* narratives to her audience in more relevant and accessible ways. Other techniques employed by Professor Pandurang during this performance include establishing her credentials both as a spiritual teacher and as a modern, global person just like her audience; co-opting, inverting and juxtaposing various secular, modern institutional paradigms to create new Hindu spiritual paradigms; and redefining terms and concepts from both the global world and the world of the *Bhāgavata* so that they coalesce into the global spiritual Hinduism she and her audience envision. These metacommunicative processes mark the negotiations that occur amongst participants, thereby highlighting the agency the participants have in shaping the text during the performance. Analysis of these negotiations illustrates not only how this new contemporary Hinduism is envisioned, but also the ways in

which certain traditions are not simply found within the text, but are also a result of the performance itself.

Though Pandurang's discourse stretched over six days for an average of two hours a day and covered many narratives of the *Bhāgavata*, this chapter explores two particular narratives from Prema Pandurang's *Bhāgavata kathā* incorporating ethnographic observation with metacommunicative analysis. The first narrative is not in fact, found in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* at all, but features prominently in Pandurang's first lecture and is intertwined throughout the performance. It is Pandurang's own self-narrative through which she establishes her credentials on multiple levels as a legitimate *Bhāgavata* orator and as another member of the audience, albeit a 'special member of the audience'. Without establishing those credentials, as is detailed below, Pandurang cannot authoritatively speak about either world, let alone reconcile them. Moreover, by establishing her credibility and legitimacy as a performer, Prema Pandurang establishes a new transmission cycle through which she and her audience can partake in and thereby continue the oral transmission cycle of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*.

The second narrative, the story of the Kṛṣṇa devotee Prahlāda, is one of the most popular stories from the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*. The Prahlāda narrative perfectly exemplifies the conflicts between religious and secular orders, as Pandurang uses the narrative to flesh out and redefine secular vs. spiritual educations (and their accompanying institutions) through a concept she terms "soulware." Through this process of redefining and promoting spiritual education, Prema Pandurang further extols the necessity of learning and preserving Hindu scripture, especially through its oral transmission. Thus, by listening to the *Bhāgavata kathā,* Prema Pandurang and the audience reify the oral tradition expounded upon within the performance.

The Narrative of Prema Pandurang

As mentioned earlier, metacommunicative processes can comment on the form as well as content of the performance. These metacommunications often help set the entire tone of the performance, generating the most basic terms of engagement between the performer and the audience. As a result, many of these communications happen at the start of the performance and even prior to the actual performance. The performer seeks to call forth a specific audience, while meanwhile those who comprise the audience immediately begin to evaluate the performer's qualifications and performance style: *Is she knowledgeable enough? What is her training? What distinguishes her to perform? Is she a good performer? Storyteller? Do we trust her?* And specifically, in this Hindu context: *What is her spiritual lineage or paramparā—is she a legitimate transmitter of the Bhāgavata?*

My first glimpse of Prema Pandurang was actually on a billboard in Panjagutta, a residential neighborhood in transition, which was quickly being overtaken and remodeled as a commercial shopping area, thanks primarily to the recently opened five-story Hyderabad Central Mall. I had only been in Hyderabad for twelve days when I saw the billboard in Panjagutta advertising:

> HIGHLIGHTS OF THE BHAGAVATHAM
> A Srimad Bhagavatham Discourse
> by Sri Sri Pujya Prema Pandurang[188]

Aside from the fact that the billboard advertised a *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* performance, precisely what I had come to research, I could not help but notice the sign, as it was one of the few signs written completely in English. Most other signage in this commercial district was either in both English and Telugu or solely Telugu. Prema Pandurang's sign, however prominently displayed,

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[188] I saw this billboard on top of a building near the southwest corner of Panjagutta Road and Nagarjuna Circle Road on January 13, 2006.

was one of very few signs written completely in English. As I soon learned, advertisements for discourses, spiritual or otherwise, are almost exclusively done in the same language as the discourse would be given in. In Hyderabad, this was an important fact, since three languages—Telugu, English and from its former days as a predominantly Muslim territory, a localized Hyderabadi Hindi-Urdu—were predominantly spoken throughout the city. Thus, the language one chose to advertise with ultimately included and/or excluded certain populations. Prema Pandurang's billboard, in other words, not only effectively communicated the logistical details of the performance, but also immediately targeted English-medium educated audience members, most obviously including myself.

Also on the billboard, to the right of the centered words forming the announcement (which also featured time, date and location of the event in smaller print) was a color photo of Prema Pandurang smiling benevolently with her right hand palm up and open, conveying her blessings to everyone. Her look at first glance seemed to immediately convey to me elegance, kindness, spirituality and an undercurrent of something else seemingly familiar and yet incongruent that I could not at that time name. It was not until I arrived at the first lecture and saw Prema Pandurang for the first time in person that I was able to understand what made me feel both familiar and somehow at odds with Professor Pandurang. It was the subtle display of wealth and status through a well-packaged, deliberate and neat presentation that went beyond her person and permeated the entire discourse. For example, before Professor Pandurang made her entrance, these qualities—elegance, simple aesthetics, wealth and spirituality—were communicated to the audience from the venue and stage settings.

The performance was held at Sathya Sai Nigamagamam, a premier public complex that had been built using funds from a public trust founded by global guru, Sathya Sai Baba.[189] Located in the upper class neighborhood of Srinagar Colony in Hyderabad, the lecture hall definitely contributed to the posh, elegant tone within which the entire discourse would unfold. The auditorium also seemed familiar, reminding me of my American suburban high school auditorium, with its rows of steel-backed, cushioned seats that squeaked if one fidgeted in them too much. The similarities ended there however, as this auditorium was considerably larger, better equipped and more beautiful than my high school auditorium.[190] The ample stage was framed with a lavishly decorated archway and velvet curtains. Centered atop the stage's archway lay a brightly colored relief sculpture of the deities, Śiva and Pārvatī. Images of Sathya Sai Baba abounded throughout the hall, including a portrait above the Śiva and Pārvatī image. This setting offered a serene oasis amidst the noisy hustle and bustle of the city with its auto-rickshaws, blaring traffic, the catching onrush of people in crowds, constant construction, clutter of signage, stores, street-vendors and litter, all of which lay outside the gate surrounding the grounds of the hall.

Adding to the serene ambiance of the hall were the devotees that were already there, as well as the stage displays set up for the staging of discourse. I arrived at the auditorium a little

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[189] Sathya Sai Baba (23 November 1926 – 24 April 2011) was a world-famous, global spiritual leader, considered by himself and his devotees to be the reincarnation of the saint, Shirdi Sai Baba. As Tulasi Srinivas argues in her book *Winged Faith: Rethinking Globalization and Religious Pluralism Through the Sathya Sai Movement*, Sathya Sai Baba is a global guru, an example of an instance in which India is actually exporting religion globally, as well as drawing the world (via international devotees from all ethnicities and backgrounds) to India. Thus, though it might have been more an issue of pragmatics by having the performance in the Sathya Sai Nigamagamam, Sathya Sai Baba's presence via images seems a somewhat fitting addition to the global aspect of this *Bhāgavata kathā*. "A short history of Sathya Sai Baba," International Sai Organization, accessed June 10, 2013, http//www.sathyasai.org/intro/history.htm; "Prema Sai" International Sai Organization, accessed June 10, 2013, http//www.sathyasai.org/intro/premasai.org; Tulasi Srinivas, *Winged Faith: Rethinking Globalization and Religious Pluralism Through the Sathya Sai Movement*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

[190] Featuring an upper tier of balcony seats, the auditorium is capable of seating 1372 people. The acoustic planning and speaker system—provided mainly by the Bose corporation—provided amazing sound quality. "Sri Sathya Sai Nigamagamam Trust," accessed June 10, 2013, http://www.srisathyasainigamagamam.org/html/complex.htm.

after 5:30 pm, thinking I was early for the scheduled 6:00 pm lecture. In fact, I found that I was just in time, as a group of ten or twelve women sitting on a clean white sheet on the left side of the stage were engaged in *Viṣṇusahasranāma stotra*, the chanting of Viṣṇu's one thousand names. These women, volunteer devotees, appeared to range in ages from early thirties to sixties. Each was married, and all generally wore differently colored classical solid-toned silk saris with embroidered gold borders.

As their chanting buzzed pleasantly in my ears, my eyes were no less delighted by the elegant stage displays set up by volunteers and sponsors of the lecture, the Hyderabad chapter of Kshetropasna Trust, the national religious, charitable not-for-profit organization co-founded by Prema Pandurang. Five framed images of Kṛṣṇa hung individually on their own respective large white panel along the back of the stage. These portraits were carefully decorated with lavish floral arrangements comprised of white, pink, yellow and red flowers, nested further in plenty of green leaves which were also hung on the panels.

The altar on the house right of the stage, also featured similar bouquets of flowers surrounding a three foot long statue of Kṛṣṇa playing his flute. The Kṛṣṇa statue was light blue and his clothes and eyes were all painted in lighter, calm pastel colors. He was adorned with a thick flower garland and a richly brocaded gold and red shawl. Raised on a two-tiered altar below him were many ritual worship items, including shiny copper plates, pots, lamps, incense burners, fruit, a hard copy of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* and a live Brahmin who would conduct certain rituals throughout the discourse, while also reading along silently from the *Bhāgavata* text. Incense was burning, though I could not smell it, even from the first row.

Everything on this altar, and upon the stage for that matter, looked to be in new and/or pristine condition. It was quite different from the kinds of altars I would later see in Kolapalli

and throughout various homes and temples in India, which were generally a messy, sticky, colorful confusion of flowers, vermillion powder, rice grains, milk and the various powders which lent another more chaotic beauty to the proceedings. The aesthetics of this *Bhāgavata kathā* however, was overall contained, organized, elegant and beautiful—much in the way that my hometown temple in the United States was. The things on display did not run into each other and there would hardly be much to clean up later. I felt quite at home.

All this remained different than what I would later observe in the various famous, grand temples, where one could expect at the very least a grain of rice or two to find its way under foot while circumambulating the deities housed in the interior chambers of the temple. I later learned to appreciate the messiness of those temples, as they reflected the organic messiness of life in India in general. That is to say, daily life in India, and certainly in Hyderabad, is messy. Mixing with other people is unavoidable, both in and out of the home. Unless, of course, one has a lot more money. In these cases one can afford to drive—or be driven by a personal diver—in air-conditioned cars with the windows up, from location to location, avoiding interacting with persons, animals and the chaos of the streets. One could also live in the larger, more posh houses which were often gated and located in less commercial areas. This arrangement also afforded one fewer interactions with auto and foot traffic, less people around the house and, of course, more personal space within the house. Ultimately, with more money in India one could live a cleaner, more sanitized life, removed from the daily grind and organic messes of the city. I soon realized that in many ways the contained, organized aesthetic of Prema Pandurang's discourse was reflecting the slightly elevated, sanitized, upper class lifestyles audience members were living and/or aspiring towards.

When finally Prema Pandurang entered at the start of the lecture, her presence only reinforced the serene, elegant, sanitized, affluent aesthetics permeating the room and ultimately the entire discourse. Her physical person was just as regal and elegant as her demeanor. Though slightly shorter than I expected, at perhaps five feet and a few inches she remained an imposing figure. Her round face matched her round, plump body. She was not obese, but certainly not a frail, thin ascetic type either. She wore a rich, white, elegant sari with a thick maroon gold-brocade border and a conservative white sari blouse that covered her entire midsection and featured elbow-length sleeves. I would come to know this as her staple sari outfit. She always wore a conservative white blouse that matched her white sari, featuring either a single jewel or earth toned, colored border, usually embroidered or brocaded with gold thread. Her mostly grey hair was neatly tied back in a singular thin braid that lay down between her shoulders. And while she exuded none of the colors, ornaments or traditional markings of a married woman, what surprised me was that she always wore some jewelry—namely two large gold bejeweled nose rings on each nostril and large diamond earrings. She also wore thick gold necklaces and strings of pearls that usually hung somewhere between her sternum and midsection, gold bangles with matching thin white and colored glass bracelets and a gold, jeweled bracelet watch. The simplest and longest necklace she wore was a rosary made of browned seeds from the *rudrākṣa* tree. Her face seemed almost as round in person, and was—again to my surprise—adorned with make-up. She seemed to be wearing powder, some foundation, dark red lipstick, and thick kohl that lined her bespectacled eyes. A fairly large red *bindī* centered on her forehead capped off her entire look, which so much reminded me of the wealthy matriarchs—usually mother-in-laws— portrayed in popular Hindi soap operas. Like those soap opera matriarchs, Prema Pandurang also exuded that particular powerful maternal persona indicative of a matriarch, a figure who was not

only central to the running of the house and family, but was also still contemporary, stylish, and above all else, commanding.

Pandurang's regal persona was further enhanced by her arrival. Her accompanying band of live musicians (including a *dhol* player, flautist, harmonium player and male vocalist),[191] now sitting where the women chanting the *Viṣṇusahasranāma stotra* were seated, played some soft music prior to her entry. A devotee and co-organizer of the discourse quickly introduced Prema Pandurang, as the program was running a few minutes behind schedule. Once she entered upon stage the music stopped, as Prema Pandurang, without looking elsewhere, purposefully walked straight to the altar on the stage. She prostrated in front of the altar to the image of Kṛṣṇa, and then again to the copy of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* laying at Kṛṣṇa's feet. She then turned slightly and bowed with folded palms to the Brahmin, who, seated next to the altar, would periodically conduct various rituals before, during and after the discourse.

Finally, she made her way to the center of the stage and with great pleasure thanked everyone for coming, especially "our esteemed guest", the then governor of Andhra Pradesh Sushilkumar Shinde.[192] Once Governor Shinde alighted upon stage, Prema Pandurang presented him with both a thick garland of fresh flowers and then, a gilded, framed portrait of Kṛṣṇa. In return he greeted her warmly, bowing the traditional *namaste* greeting with his palms folded as she placed the garland around his neck. He then took to the microphone and proceeded to thank her for inviting him. Governor Shinde went on to express his support and praise of the good works being done by Prema Pandurang and her non-profit religious charitable organization, Kshetropasna Trust. Governor Shinde further emphasized government support of Kshetropasna

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[191] The *dhol* is a double-headed drum widely used throughout India and Pakistan.

[192] Prema Pandurang, "Highlights of the *Bhagavatham*: A *Srimad Bhagavatham* Discourse" (Spiritual discourse, Sathya Sai Nigamagamam, Hyderabad, AP, January 16, 2006).

Trust by emphasizing the organization's rare distinction of having a tax-exempt status from the Indian government. Throughout this entire display, multiple photographers and reporters crowded at the front of the stage, constantly snapping photos and taking notes around both the governor and Prema Pandurang. After completing his ten minute long speech, Governor Shinde took his leave, citing more important government matters to attend to and bidding everyone an auspicious *kathā*. He exited quickly, trailed by the flurry of reporters and photographers. Prema Pandurang then proceeded to conduct more elaborate starting ceremonies for the discourse.

Thus, before the actual *Bhāgavata* discourse had even begun, through these various cues happening outside of the discourse, Prema Pandurang already began negotiating for a particular kind of audience, while also commencing her personal narrative: a narrative in which she negotiated and communicated her authority and legitimacy as a qualified performer of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*. Prema Pandurang's billboard that was in English and located in a major higher-end commercial shopping area began her audience selection process for middle and upper class English speaking, educated audience members. The posh venue and clean, elegant aesthetic design of the discourse setting, continued to provide an ambience that was comfortable, familiar and in concert with the lifestyles of Prema Pandurang's target audience. Prema Pandurang's own regal bearing, rich attire, accompanying entourage and very public endorsement by none other than the state's own highest ranking government official, Andhra Pradesh Governor Sushilkumar Shinde, served to communicate Prema Pandurang's qualifications as a respected spiritual leader in the community.

Even more significant was how these metacommunicative moments described above unfolded into a more vivid, compelling personal narrative that was woven throughout the discourse.

Prema Pandurang and her Multiple *Paramparā*s

In order to create this synthesis of two worlds—that of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* and of the modern, global, cosmopolitan reality she and her audience live in—Prema Pandurang must both prove to her audience that she is authorized to give a discourse on the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, as well as demonstrate her credibility as one who also is aware of and lives in the same modern, global, cosmopolitan reality as her audience. Her success in establishing these qualifications was further complicated by the fact that she, as a *woman* giving exposition in *English*—as opposed to a male Brahmin in a South Asian vernacular—was not exactly a conventionally-trained or conventionally-accepted performer. As a result, she meticulously places herself in traditional and non-traditional *paramparā*s, or lineages, that serve to establish her as a credible academic scholar, a leader of a politically-recognized charitable institution, and a modern, global Indian, in addition to a spiritual authority on the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*.

Prema Pandurang's *paramparā*s further demonstrate a metacommunicative process, as she negotiates her legitimacy and credibility with the audience based on her own evaluation of the communicative competence, social and personal backgrounds of her audience. In that sense, her qualifications must match up to her perceived expectations, as well as, some very real expectations of her audience. For the purposes of the audience she wants to attract, the "modern educated man," her non-traditional modern *paramparā*s—academic, political and global—are as important, if not more important, than the traditional spiritual qualifications.[193] This particular negotiation of her qualifications via her personal narratives runs through her overall *Bhāgavata* discourse as a supporting foundation undergirding her entire performance. Aside from maintaining a live, attentive audience, her multiple *paramparā*s also enable Prema Pandurang to

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[193] Prema Pandurang, interview by author, Hyderabad, Andhra Pradesh, 20 January 2006.

portray herself as being just like one of her audience members, albeit a *distinguished* one of them. As one of them, she can then speak as one who understands the tensions her audience might face between modern, cosmopolitan values and traditional, orthodox Hindu values. Additionally, as a distinguished one of them, she can navigate those tensions and in due course, steer towards a resolution.

Like anyone seeking to give a spiritual discourse on any Hindu scripture, Prema Pandurang must demonstrate that she has been divinely ordained to give spiritual discourses. Without spiritual legitimacy, not only will she be unable to draw an audience, but also her exposition of the text will not be considered legitimate or authoritative. The stakes are even higher for Prema Pandurang as two of the major themes of her performance are the importance of having a spiritual education, or "soulware," as she dubs it, and her interpretation of traditional, Hindu values into modern, cosmopolitan frameworks (and vice versa). Without this divine authority, the religious, spiritual and ethical aspects of her discussion are not likely to be considered credible by her audience. The divine ordination must be proven both in terms of her personal narrative as well as by establishing herself as a holy person. As a result, she must prove herself to be worthy both in the traditional sense and in a practical sense that would appeal to her modern metropolitan audience.

Unlike Chandramurthy Shastry, the traditionally trained Brahmin scholar who performed the seven-day ritual retelling of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* in the previous chapter, Professor Pandurang cannot rely upon a formal, traditional, male Brahmin education. Chandramurthy Shastry had been trained in a formal *vedapāṭhaśālā*, memorizing the *Vedas* and then being taught the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* formally by his teacher, who in turn had been trained in a long lineage of *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* tellers that traced their lineage back to the original teller of the *Bhāgavata—*

as mentioned in the *Bhāgavata* itself, the divine sage Nārada. Through his lineage of teachers, Chandramurthy Shastry established both his divine connection to the original text, as well as his thorough training in the text, as the receiving and orating end of hundreds of years of transmission.

Prema Pandurang did not have such an education. As a woman, she likely was unable to obtain such traditional training while growing up, as training in such a role was only available to men. Instead, Prema Pandurang demonstrated her spiritual qualifications by establishing herself as a divinely ordained preacher of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*. During the course of her first lecture Pandurang shared a story from her childhood illustrating how religious scriptures were innately a part of her and ultimately a divine calling:

> When I was a very young girl, I always loved listening to the *Bhāgavatam*, the *Bhagavad Gītā*, *Mahābhārata*, *Rāmāyaṇa* …all these texts I loved listening to. And then when I was 10 years old, my father's guru Anantharam Dikshitar—maybe some of you recognize his name… he had proclaimed 'this girl will speak on the incarnations of Kṛṣṇa.'[194]

Using this personal narrative, she establishes her innate love for the *Bhāgavata* and other scripture from an early age by explaining how much she always loved listening to scripture, particularly Kṛṣṇa-related scripture, even before she was ten years old. By further recalling that Anantharam Dikshitar decreed that she would give discourses about Kṛṣṇa when she was ten years of age, Pandurang communicates to her audience that her calling as a preacher was recognized early in life by a legitimate spiritual authority. Anantharam Dikshitar, a well-respected scholar trained in the Vedas and *śāstra*s, was also known for his religious discourses

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[194] Prema Pandurang, "Highlights of the *Bhagavatham*: A *Srimad Bhagavatham* Discourse" (Spiritual discourse, Sathya Sai Nigamagamam, Hyderabad, AP, January 16, 2006).

on the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, *Mahābhārata*, *Rāmāyaṇa*, and other various *purāṇa*s and scripture.[195]

In particular, as an ardent devotee of the *Nārāyaṇīyam*—a poetic summary of the *Bhāgavata*

Purāṇa composed in Sanskrit by Melpathur Narayana Bhattathiri in the sixteenth century at

Guruvayur Temple—he had performed multiple *Bhāgavata saptāha*s at Guruvayur Temple.[196]

An endorsement from Anantharam Dikshitar is therefore an endorsement from not just any

Brahmin, but from a highly esteemed Brahmin amongst Brahmins who is also a skilled and

popular performer of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*. Thus, both internally (her love of Kṛṣṇa scripture as

a child) and externally (Anantharam Dikshitar's decree at age ten), Prema Pandurang establishes

her preaching to be nothing less than a divine calling from a young age.

Prema Pandurang concludes the above passage by sharing that soon after Anantharam

Dikshitar's decree she learned all the scriptures sitting at his feet and at the age of fifteen she

gave her first discourse on the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*. Moreover, she adds that since that first

discourse, she has continued to give spiritual discourses on the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* and other

scripture, such as the *Bhagavad Gītā*, *Mahābhārata* and *Rāmāyaṇa*. Thus, Prema Pandurang

simultaneously demonstrates both her training from a traditional source, her Brahmin guru, thus

connecting her to a traditional lineage of Brahmin expositors of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* and also,

that she has had decades of preaching experience.

If, however, some members of her audience are unfamiliar with or unimpressed by her

guru, Anantharam Dikshitar, Professor Pandurang does produce one more spiritual ace up her

conservative elbow-length white sari-blouse sleeve—her blessings from His Divine Grace

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[195] K. V. Gopalakrishnan, "Pioneer of Religious Discourse," The Hindu, August 8, 2003, accessed August 1, 2013, http://www.hindu.com/thehindu/fr/2003/08/08/stories/2003080801620400.htm.

[196] Ibid. Noticeably, Prema Pandurang always placed a copy of the *Nārāyaṇīyam* in the stack of books on her dais while performing her *Bhāgavata kathā*.

Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, the internationally recognized founding guru of the International Krishna Consciousness Movement (ISKCON). She had an audience with Swami Prabhupada when she was a young woman and at that time received his blessings to preach about the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, which is a central text for his Kṛṣṇa-centered devotional sect also sometimes recognized internationally as the "Hare Krishnas."[197] Later in 1974, Professor Pandurang gave a short discourse in front of Swami Prabhupada at the Zurich ISKCON Center.[198] Aside from illustrating that she has been blessed by two different spiritual lineages to preach the *Bhāgavata*, Prema Pandurang's blessing from Swami Prabhupada also connects her to a globally recognized guru, and thus his global lineage. Not only would everyone in her audience likely recognize Swami Prabhupada's authority, but his holy reputation and international recognition gives Prema Pandurang more global cachet.

Her appearance and conduct further underscore her divine calling and ever-present devotion. As an unmarried spiritual preacher, it is expected that she live a *brahmacarya* lifestyle. *Brahmacarya* in this context refers to maintaining celibacy. As Olivelle notes, *brahmacarya* has both meanings of celibacy, "a state socially defined as different from marriage and free from sexual activity, and chastity, which relates more to individual morality."[199] So aside from abstaining from sexual activity, Pandurang would be expected to refrain from indulging in any intoxicants, worldly pleasures and sensual pursuits. Any breach of this lifestyle would severely compromise her credibility with the audience. Though she preaches throughout her discourse for her listeners to stay away from intoxicants and promiscuous behavior, her own abstinence from

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[197] Prema Pandurang, "Highlights of the *Bhagavatham*: A *Srimad Bhagavatham* Discourse" (Spiritual discourse, Sathya Sai Nigamagamam, Hyderabad, AP, January 17, 2006).

[198] Ibid.

[199] Patrick Olivelle, *The Āśrama System: The History and Hermeneutics of a Religious Institution* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 80.

these vices is never explicitly stated. Instead Prema Pandurang communicates her purity and chastity through her clothing and demeanor. Her choice of white clothing in the form of conservative blouses with minimally colored borders indicates to the audience her chaste status. Often white clothing in India is associated with celibacy, as persons proclaiming a *brahmacarya* status, such as Gandhi or members of the *Brahma Kumari* religious cult, wear all white. Even with her light make-up routine and gold ornamentation, Pandurang's appearance is maternal, pleasant-looking and rich, but could never be construed as sensual, attractive or sexy. Rather, her appearance is more of strength and vitality, rather than any type of sexuality.

During the performance itself she went to great pains to communicate that she observed ritual austerities associated with reading the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, such as sleeping on the floor, and abstaining from a larger list of restricted foods (in addition to her general abstinence from alcohol, meat, and all other unsavory activities). Each session began with her silently walking to the Kṛṣṇa altar and paying obeisance to Kṛṣṇa, the copy of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* lying on the alter and the Brahmin priest seated near the altar. Then settling into her seat in the center of the stage, she would recite various invocatory verses to the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* and Kṛṣṇa, having the audience repeat them after her. Then she would perhaps lead the singing of a *kīrtana*, a call-and-response type of devotional song, in Hindi or sometimes Sanskrit. Following this, she would give thanks to Kṛṣṇa, other deities, volunteers and the audience for showing up and then finally begin her discourse. Every discourse would further end with more *kīrtana*s, then the *ārati* ceremony and distribution of *prasād* to everyone. By not only conducting, but also leading these ritual actions, Professor Pandurang indicated her spiritual leadership in the room, as well as her piety.

Moreover, as co-founder of her own charitable organization, Kshetropasna Trust, she establishes herself as a guru, philanthropist and humanitarian in her own right. While Prema

Pandurang does not exactly belong to any lineage of monastics or renunciates, she does maintain a monastic lifestyle and live a self-made spiritual path through her preaching and work via Kshetropasna Trust. In particular, Kshetropasna Trust runs a huge ashram and charitable complex based in Sriperumbudur, Tamil Nadu.[200] Though multiple deities are worshipped at Gokuldham, the primary deity invoked is Kṛṣṇa.[201] Perhaps the most impressive feature of Gokuldham were its multiple facilities, which included: accommodations for many live-in and visiting disciples and devotees of Prema Pandurang; *annadāna* facilities, or facilities for feeding the poor, which served free lunch and dinner to two hundred and fifty impoverished people on a daily basis; a fully sponsored *vedapāṭhaśālā*; a *gośālā* (a refuge for taking care of elderly cows); five temple complexes; Harmony Home, a home for the elderly who have been abandoned by their families; Ayurveda Therapy Hospital, a hospital that treats illnesses with traditional ayurvedic medicines and therapies; and Prema Pandurang's own dwellings when she is not traveling the world giving lectures. The *annadāna* facilities, *vedapāṭhaśālā*, *gośālā*, temple and ashram complexes for devotees are traditional institutions that most Hindus would easily recognize as upholding traditional values: feeding the poor; continuing Vedic transmission; honoring and caring for the sacred cow; temples for worship and meditation; and learning centers for disciples and devotees. The old-age home, a relatively new institution in India in recent years, Prema Pandurang explained as also adhering to Hindu values of respecting our elders, particularly those elders who have been abandoned by their "selfish children who have lost

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[200] Sriperumbudur is a small town located near Kanchipurum, a Tamil city famous for its production of traditional saris, known as Kanchipurum saris. Kanchipurum itself is not so far from Chennai, the capital of Tamil Nadu, a state just south to Andhra Pradesh.

[201] In fact, in consultation with Nambudiri Brahmins from Kerala, a reconstruction of the famous Kṛṣṇa temple, the Guruvayurappa Temple located in Guruvayur, Kerala, has been built upon the Gokuldham premises. "Kshetropasna Trust," accessed July 25, 2012, http//www.ppandurang.org.

respect for their elders."[202] Likewise, the ayurvedic hospital hearkens back to traditional Indian methods of treatment versus complete reliance on western medicines. Kshetropasna Trust and its good works featured throughout Prema Pandurang's discourse, both as an element of her personal narrative—further reinforcing her status as a spiritual leader, upholder of traditional Hindu values and a good, holy person—and as will be discussed later, as an example of what values and behaviors constitute the modern Hindu.

Aside from establishing her legitimacy and authority as a divinely ordained preacher and spiritual leader, it was imperative that Professor Prema Pandurang still established herself as having the modern equivalent of institutional training: academic credentials. As a distinguished academic scholar, Professor Pandurang does this with ease. Possessing a doctorate in English, Pandurang was an English professor for postgraduate students at the prestigious Presidency College in Chennai for twenty years, thus leading to her title of Professor. This not only demonstrates her credentials as an academic scholar, but also as fluent English speaker. In fact, her English speaking skills are as good as, if not usually better than most of her audience. Throughout her lecture in fact, she cites English texts ranging from canonical poetry and literature to popular self-help books. Arguably for her audience members who were educated in English-medium schools and currently paying substantial amounts of money for their children to go to English-medium schools, her fluency in English and her professorial title might carry more weight than her traditional qualifications.

Moreover, Pandurang's English doctorate degree and her expertise as a professor in a prestigious college for twenty years demonstrates more than just her linguistic capabilities, but also gives her the type of legitimacy and authority that can only be granted by the university

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[202] Prema Pandurang, "Highlights of the *Bhagavatham*: A *Srimad Bhagavatham* Discourse" (Spiritual discourse, Sathya Sai Nigamagamam, Hyderabad, AP, January 20, 2006).

system. This is particularly significant with her audience, as most members of this audience have been college- or university-educated and work hard to ensure that their children receive degrees in higher education as well. The modern university system is so valued by this upwardly mobile middle class because it is what enabled them to obtain the forms of employment that led to their own financial success. In fact, as will be discussed in more detail in a later section, throughout her discourse Professor Pandurang often criticizes her modern, educated audiences for their reverence for modern college and university educations over more traditional Hindu spiritual educations, as the former, being a secular institution, can only teach them 'how to make a living' as opposed to the more traditional Hindu spiritual education which teaches them 'how to live.'[203]

In addition to these academic credentials, more practically speaking, Professor Pandurang must still prove that she has had some further training in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* than having been inspired by lectures when she was young. She must demonstrate not only that she has read and studied the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* in its original Sanskrit, but also that she has read and studied the larger corpus of Hindu epics, *purāṇa*s and other scripture. Rather than receiving the traditional training in these texts through a lineage of traditionally trained tellers as Chandramurthy Shastry had, Prema Pandurang also received this training from a more academic source. As Prema Pandurang explained in the course of the first lecture, she learned Sanskrit from her father Dr. P. Nagaraj Rao, an accomplished philosopher who earned a doctorate under Dr. S. Radhakrishnan, former president of India. With her father she read and studied the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, the epics and other Hindu scripture, becoming well versed in the philosophical traditions espoused in these texts. As will be detailed further in this chapter, her discourse in fact incorporates occasional references to what she learned with her father, further reinforcing her own philosophical lineage.

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[203] Prema Pandurang, "Highlights of the *Bhagavatham*: A *Srimad Bhagavatham* Discourse" (Spiritual discourse, Sathya Sai Nigamagamam, Hyderabad, AP, January 17, 2006).

At the same time, by peppering her discourse with various technological, business and bureaucratic terms, Prema Pandurang demonstrates that she is connected to the contemporary, modern world. Pandurang displays a good grasp of these technologies and business terms, as she utilizes these terms in generating metaphors, such as "soulware," which will be discussed below in further detail.

Furthermore, Pandurang herself uses these technologies for her own discourses and work with Kshetropasna. In the lobby of the lecture hall, Prema Pandurang's discourse on the *Bhagavad Gītā*, "The *Bhagavad Gita* in a Nutshell," was being sold in CD format. Kshetropasna Trust previously had a website which included various informational links about Prema Pandurang and Kshetropasna Trust, as well as mp3 recordings of some of her discourses and *kīrtana*s for sale; however the website is now defunct.[204] Instead, changing in step with the times, Kshetropasna Trust has a facebook webpage where pictures of Gokuldham and Kshetropasna Trust events are displayed.[205] Also, future discourses by Prema Pandurang and other Kshetropasna Trust events are advertised. Finally, Prema Pandurang herself leaves daily inspirational messages and lessons on her Facebook page in the form of comments, images and video snippets from her discourse. Also in the past few years, videos of various lectures Pandurang has given have been posted on YouTube.[206]

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[204] "Kshetropasna Trust," accessed July 25, 2012, http//www.ppandurang.org.

[205] "Kshetropasna Trust" Facebook, accessed August 1, 2013, https://www.facebook.com/kshetropasna.trust.

[206] Among the various Youtube videos of Prema Pandurang uploaded at this time most seem to be videos uploaded by devotees of performances they have witnessed first-hand. For example, one video clip presents a clip from the performance of of a Hanumān Kathā in Hindi. "Paropkar Hanumanth katha," YouTube video, 1:02, from a performance of a Hanumān Kathā in Sri Lanka, date unknown, posted by "Ajay Banka," July 4, 2010, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TB6Y6fOxaKU. There is also a series of 16 videos of excerpts from an unidentified lecture Prema Pandurang conducts on the Mahābhārata. One such video features Pandurang's exposition of Kṛṣṇa. "Pujya Premaji—Krishna 1/3—Mahabharatam," YouTube video, 32:24, from an exposition of the Mahabharata, posted by "tube1o1," May 5, 2013, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uKAjQxEuH1g. Links to the other 15 performances can be found at that website.

One such notable lecture is a *Bhāgavata kathā* Prema Pandurang delivered at the Parashakti Temple in Pontiac, Michigan.[207] While only two in the series of three roughly 2-hour lectures have been posted online, Pandurang's distinct style and sensibilties still come through. Masterfully reducing the purport of the massive *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* into six hours, Pandurang's considerable skills as a *Bhāgavata* orator are also displayed. Organized much differently than her lecture in Hyderabad, Pandurang makes one verse, the devotee Prahlāda's teachings on the nine-forms of *bhakti*, the focal point of her lecture.[208] The nine types of *bhakti* listed in the verse become the frame of her discourse. As she exposits each of the nine types of *bhakti* from the verse, she pulls examples of each type of *bhakti* from narratives of devotees found in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, the *Rāmāyaṇa*, and the *Mahābhārata*. Just as she does in her *Bhāgavata kathā* in Hyderabad as will be discussed below, Pandurang also intersperses into her discourse verses from other notable scripture such as the *Bhagavad Gītā*, the *Rāmcaritamānasa*, the *Nārāyaṇīyam* and *śāstra*s, as well as references to popular books and culture, various technological, business and bureaucratic terms and *kīrtana*s (devotional songs), both popular and those composed by herself. Though Pandurang did not arrive at this discourse with a grand entourage, she did have a devotee accompanying her discourse on the *dhol*. Just as she presents the credentials above in her *Bhāgavata kathā* presented in Hyderabad, she does so at her performance in Michigan. In Michigan, sensing perhaps that her U.S. based audience might not

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[207] Of the three lectures, only the first two days have been uploaded and are available for viewing. There is no indication from the videos as to the actual date of the lecture. Fortunately, however, the two lectures uploaded have been uploaded in their entirety. "Srimad Bhagavatham by Smt. Prema Pandurang at Pontiac Parashakti Temple day 1" YouTube video, 1:56:41, from a performance conducted at the Pontiac Parashakti Temple, Pontiac Michigan, date unknown, uploaded by TheEternalMother, September 11, 2011, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ji7lsn_9KnE; "Day 2 Srimad Bhagavatham by Smt. Prema Pandurang at Pontiac Parashakti Temple" YouTube video, 1:39:57, from a performance conducted at the Pontiac Parashakti Temple, Pontiac Michigan, date unknown, posted by "TheEternalMother," September 12, 2011, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dzLMh8Chb6U.

[208] *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, VII.5.23. This verse is further detailed and analyzed in a later section below.

be familiar with Anantaram Dikshitar, she displays and references a photo of him that she keeps on the podium with her near the microphone and her stacked copies of the *Bhāgavata*, the *Nārāyaṇīyam* and her notebook. Many of the same themes that appear in this *Bhāgavata kathā* in Michigan, appear in her *Bhāgavata kathā* performed in Hyderabad and will be further detailed below. In particular, themes regarding the use of technology and its place with regards to spirituality are discussed in her lecture.

By appearing in modern communicative forums such as organizational websites, Facebook, and Youtube, and using these various technological, business and bureaucratic terms, along with her own implementation of modern communication technologies, Prema Pandurang signals to her audience that she does not reject, disparage or dismiss these modern facets of life. Instead, Pandurang accepts and fully embraces them. Pandurang is very careful and very clear, however, to emphasize throughout her lectures that as wonderful as all this technology might be, it is not more important than spiritual knowledge and Hindu values. For Pandurang's audience her knowledgeable and accepting attitude towards technology is significant, as for some audience members technology is the means by which they make their livelihood. Thus, this demonstrates to her audience that Prema Pandurang is also a modern preacher who is willing to adapt to the modern ways of life, which includes their technology-filled lifestyles.

Spiritual Education: Who Needs It?

While Prema Pandurang's credentials and qualifications are indeed impressive, more striking is her ability to juxtapose the modern and the traditional through comparisons or even single words in order to generate this vision of Hinduism that ultimately incorporates both the modern and the traditional. By employing comparisons, particularly between members of the audience and characters in the Prahlāda narrative, Pandurang ensures that the values in the

Bhāgavata Purāṇa remain relevant to the modern lifestyles of the audience. These comparisons and juxtapositions inherent within the metanarrative will be examined in this section, with particular reference to Pandurang's arguments regarding spiritual and secular educations.

Personal Interview and Public Example

On the first day of the lecture, soon after she had taken the stage, Prema Pandurang announced her goal for the new year, stating "I want to start a school of ethics, a College of Values for our children."[209] Thereafter, in each lecture Prema Pandurang would mention her vision of the College of Values, making the case for it while also asking for support and donations from the audience. This College of Values that Prema Pandurang envisioned would include the regular curriculum of colleges, in addition to teaching Hindu values and scriptures in an effort to prevent the educated youth of today from being spoiled by their lack of Hindu values and customs. In order to convince the audience of the necessity of the College of Values, Prema Pandurang often depicted young educated persons, especially diasporic Hindus, as being spiritually and culturally ignorant. Prema Pandurang often spoke about how "our children abroad" are so lost and "spoiled" as they have no sense of values. With one or two exceptions, nearly all examples Prema Pandurang cited of youth she met abroad, rendering portraits of culturally clueless youth who did not know even the most basic customs. One of Prema Pandurang's most common examples involved first meetings with various youth throughout the diaspora—London, various cities in America, Singapore—who did not know how to greet her, as a spiritual leader and their elder, with the traditional gesture of *namaskāram.*[210]

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[209] Prema Pandurang, "Highlights of the *Bhagavatham*: A *Srimad Bhagavatham* Discourse" (Spiritual discourse, Sathya Sai Nigamagamam, Hyderabad, AP, January 16, 2006).

[210] *Namaskāra* or *Namaste* is a common honorific greeting throughout the Indian subcontinent.

In general, Prema Pandurang's depiction of younger diasporic Hindus, particularly the overseas-educated generation that was losing their values, fit the widespread stereotype amongst Hindus living in India about their diasporic counterparts being westernized, culturally deficient and culturally confused. Prema Pandurang's depiction of diasporic Hindus reinforced the stereotypical image of the westernized diasporic youth, a type who are only able to speak in English, always wear western clothes, uses western mannerisms and casual greetings, and is completely unaware of Indian customs, languages, manners, formalities adrituals, let alone any Hindu Sanskrit scripture. While indeed there were diasporic Hindu youth abroad who were as out of touch with their culture and heritage as the stereotype would portray, there were just as many, perhaps even more, examples of diasporic youth who worked hard to retain the traditions, language, culture and customs of their Hindu heritage. What might be regarded as proper retention, understanding and display of one's culture, moreover, is a complicated question and with regards to diasporic youth it is better to think of it in terms of a broad spectrum with the stereotype of the fully westernized as one pole and the completely orthodox, non-segregating diasporic Hindu on the other. Notably, this characterization of the "spoiled" and "lost" diasporic youth was absent from the *Bhāgavata kathā* Prema Pandurang performed in Michigan. Instead, the loss of heritage amongst youth was seen as a generational issue spanning all Hindus, including those in India.

Prema Pandurang's description of diasporic youth did raise the question 'what did I, as one of these diasporic youth represent for Prema Pandurang?' As a second-generation Gujarati Indian who studied Hinduism and was seated in her audience, what would she make of me? I was soon to find out after meeting her for a personal audience. I was contacted by her assistant and given directions to meet her at a bungalow in Lumbini Park. Lumbini Park at that time was a

fairly new luxury apartment complex. In fact, even as I took the lift up to the sixth floor, it was obvious that the building still had a few unoccupied new bungalows. There were some nicer sedans, SUV's and even a Mercedes in the carport below. It was also noticeably far more quiet and isolated from the rest of the city. The building and it's adjoining grounds were relatively pristine.

The flat Prema Pandurang resided in was a luxury three-bedroom apartment with white marble floors and ceiling fans in every room. The flat seemed new and hardly used. Prema Pandurang later explained to me that this flat actually belonged to a devotee who was generously letting her use it while she was there. I arrived at the appointed hour and found myself seated with a group of other people in the living room waiting to be called. Everything—the furniture, the curtains, the floor—was white and people spoke briefly in whispers or just remained quiet. I waited for about an hour before being granted the private audience.

I met Professor Prema Pandurang in a small bedroom. It was quiet except for the hum of the air conditioner installed in the window. It was also clean, mostly all white, with little furnishings except for a small altar with a portrait of Kṛṣṇa and a thick cotton mattress on the floor against the wall.

Prema Pandurang was already seated in the middle of the room on the floor and greeted me with a 'hello', even as her eyes scanned from my head to my toes, busily sizing me up. I prostrated and gave her my offering of fruit and a monetary donation in an envelope as a token of respect. Her face relaxed into a smile as she made the gesture of blessing me. She then asked me where I was from, what I was doing there, and what was my research topic. In answering her questions, I attempted to explain how I wanted to study the performances of the *Bhāgavata*

Purāṇa in order to see how the *Bhāgavata* was read and told. I explained that I wanted to understand how that affected the meaning of the text. She interjected:

So you are not studying the *Bhāgavatam* itself?[211]

Seeking control of the interview, I quickly answered yes, so that I would be able to ask the questions I had prepared about her performance and the choices she made. To her question, I mumbled a yes and something about how I was looking at reading practices surrounding the text. Pandurang then asked:

So you want to write about how people present the *Bhāgavatam?*[212]

Impatient to ask my questions I replied "Yes,". Even though, this still seemed like an oversimplification, I thought that she understood the gist of the topic. I then asked her about how she decided what content should go into the performances, especially considering she only has such a limited time to cover the text. Her answer was that it was all by inspiration. She then began to explain that as much as she would like to give longer performances "nowadays, the modern educated man does not go to the longer performances."[213] She further explained that it was important to reach these audiences, however, as they needed spiritual guidance the most. She believed it was her divine calling to do her discourses in English just for that reason. She then asked if I knew Sanskrit or any other Indian languages. I told her I was studying Sanskrit and told her what other Indian languages I knew and had studied. Her eyes widened and she smiled when I mentioned I had studied Sanskrit: "Oh you do?! That's very good."[214] She then informed me of all the upcoming *Bhāgavata* performances occurring throughout India that she

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[211] Prema Pandurang, interview by author, Hyderabad, Andhra Pradesh, 20 January 2006.

[212] Ibid.

[213] Ibid.

[214] Ibid.

was aware of, as well as names of some other more famous performers. She then gave me one of her assistant's cell phone numbers and invited me to visit her at her ashram, Gokuldham. She then ended the audience, saying that she was running late and needed to prepare for the discourse that night. She added that we could talk more if I would visit her at the ashram. I prostrated once more and she gave me her blessings for my work and said she would be happy to help in any way that she could.

Later that evening though, I was surprised to hear my name in the lecture.

> I'm quite fascinated to meet a young person in the audience named Sangeeta Desai, comes from the U.S. and very strange, she's working on her PhD thesis and you know what topic she's working on? She's working on the presentation of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* in Southeast Asia. Imagine, what a lovely research topic for a PhD. [*She smiles for a brief pause.*]
>
> There is so much difference in saying you are reading the *Bhāgavatam* in the West than reading it in the East. And when you are considering the source of the *Bhāgavatam* it's a Godsend, a Godsend.
>
> You know, for us Sangeeta, the *Bhāgavatam* is not a book about God. It is an experience of God. [*applause*] It's not an exposition it's an ecstasy [*more applause*] It's not a book but a book form of the lord [*applause*] …The *Bhāgavatam* is the Lord himself and every time I read the *Bhāgavatam* I'm giving you a verbal translation. But you read the *Bhāgavatam*; that's what I want.[215]

Once the flush died down in my cheeks, I had considered the possibility that there was perhaps some truth to what she was saying—my research was indeed an intellectual project. I was not exactly seeking to study the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* as a personal spiritual undertaking. At the same time, I was seeking to study the reading practices and experiences surrounding the text, which were among the very things for which she admonished me.

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[215] Prema Pandurang, "Highlights of the *Bhagavatham*: A *Srimad Bhagavatham* Discourse" (Spiritual discourse, Sathya Sai Nigamagamam, Hyderabad, AP, January 20, 2006).

More compelling however, was that with this seemingly personal reprimand, Prema Pandurang managed to simultaneously use me as a negative example and put me in my place as it were, all the while generating more prestige and credibility for herself. As a graduate student from the U.S. who was there to study Prema Pandurang's discourse, I lent more credibility to her discourse as being worthy of study for a university degree. Moreover, her public critique of me in front of the entire audience, further asserted her position of power as the master of the discourse, as well as the principle authority regarding the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa.*

Prema Pandurang also yet again generated another clever comparison. Using me as an immediate live example, not just of any modern youth, but a misguided-by-Western-education diasporic Hindu, I was the perfect example of someone from abroad who was spoiled-by-secular-education. Furthermore, my presence offered Pandurang a great segue into the topic of how Western education—and relative to that secular education—was useless with regards to understanding spiritual knowledge, here chiefly considered as scripture. In other words, with all my fancy Western learning, I had no idea how to read this text, and nor did anyone in the West. This was a perfect message for her to then lead into her retelling of the *Rasa-Līlā* narrative in which young Kṛṣṇa dances with multiple adoring *gopī*s, or female cowherders. According to Prema Pandurang (and virtually all other performers I witnessed),[216] western readers almost always misinterpret the *Rasa-Līlā* as a romantic tryst between Kṛṣṇa and his multiple *gopī* lovers. However, as Prema Pandurang (and others) assert, only foolish and ignorant minds interpret the narrative that way as it is actually a story about Divine love. As will be detailed

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[216] In Kolapalli, Chandramurthy Shastry did not allow me to record his exposition of the *Rasa-Līlā* as he wanted to be sure to protect it from coming into the hands of any westerner, who would surely misinterpret it. Similarly Hariprasad Sharma and Mahendra Shastry asked me not to record their discourse on the *Rasa-Līlā* either during their *saptāha* performances.

below, had these ignorant western readers had a proper spiritual education, however, such misinterpretations and misunderstandings would not occur.

Soulware: Spiritual Education vs. Secular Education

Most, if not all of Prema Pandurang's discourse revolved around citing the lack of—and thus establishing the need for—a spiritual education amongst modern, educated Hindus. Pandurang further often asserted that this spiritual education is particularly lacking most in the younger generations, i.e. children and young adults. According to Prema Pandurang, this lack resulted from the priority given to secular educations over spiritual educations, or what Pandurang dubbed as 'soulware.' So central was this theme to her discourse that when she finally began her first lecture she told the audience that her mission was to restore to the educated modern man "the values that are relative and pertinent,"[217] distinguishing those values from everyday knowledge and technology:

> People are so busy learning the latest software and making sure their children know the latest software. But what about soulware? Are you teaching your children soulware? [*enthusiastic applause*][218]

Pandurang's solution to the problem, as she mentions later on in that session and throughout her discourse, is to continue to keep traditions of oral transmissions of scripture going. This of course included establishing her College of Values, an institution where the "youth of today can learn about their own Hindu heritage and values."[219]

Both her coined term soulware and her College of Values presented interesting juxtapositions of modern systems with spiritual concepts, phrasings which served not only to

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[217] Prema Pandurang, "Highlights of the *Bhagavatham*: A *Srimad Bhagavatham* Discourse" (Spiritual discourse, Sathya Sai Nigamagamam, Hyderabad, AP, January 16, 2006).

[218] Ibid.

[219] Ibid.

define and differentiate what Pandurang meant by secular and spiritual educations, but also to exemplify Pandurang's negotiation of the modern and the traditional. Once she introduced the term soulware, Pandurang co-opted and repurposed the modern and technological in service of the spiritual and traditional, starkly contrasting the former to define what she meant by a spiritual education. By using the computer terminology 'software,' defined in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*) as "the programs and procedures required to enable a computer to perform a specific task, as opposed to the physical components of the system,"[220] Pandurang immediately invokes notions of technology, mechanized, cold, unthinking systems and data. Software stands out further, in contrast with the term 'soulware,' which itself seems to be a contradiction. Soulware, as the odd juxtaposition of two opposite notions—the abstract, non-corporeal, feeling and/or thinking aspect of living beings, the 'soul,' with the concrete, physical, inanimate, commodity, 'ware'—suggests a hybrid spiritual commodity. Contrasted with software, soulware suggests a spiritual education, or to be more precise a '*spiritual* program or procedure required to enable the soul to perform its specific tasks.' Thus, though she never explicitly defined soulware, by using a series of contrasting terminology Pandurang was able to place into relief her concept of a spiritual education versus a secular one—a central concept she builds upon throughout her entire discourse.

Likewise, Prema Pandurang's College of Values provided another interesting contrast in terminologies. While the term college may broadly be applied to various associations and institutions, with Pandurang's use of the term invoking an intention to educate the misguided

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[220] Full definition in the *OED*: 1 a. The programs and procedures required to enable a computer to perform a specific task, as opposed to the physical components of the system (see also quot. 1961). b. esp. The body of system programs, including compilers and library routines, required for the operation of a particular computer and often provided by the manufacturer, as opposed to program material provided by a user for a specific task. *Oxford English Dictionary*. 2nd ed. 20 vols. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989. Also available at http://www.oed.com/.

youth of today, she references college as an educational institution.[221] In that specific context, a college generally conjures the idea of an academic, secular institution of higher learning that offers degrees in various fields of study. In colleges, students primarily read and study textbooks, works of literature and occasionally scripture and religious texts. Scripture and religious texts, however, are treated as religious and/or cultural objects of study in religious studies, philosophy, and occasionally literature courses. In other words, religious texts would not be read the same way that readers from religious communities surrounding those texts might read the texts. Instead, the text would receive a secular treatment, objectified and analyzed using academic protocols. These procedures potentially conflict with the devotional and faith-based assumptions and attitudes religious readers bring to their texts.

Values, on the other hand, seem incongruous with such a secular institution, particularly since Prema Pandurang specifically references teaching Hindu values at her College of Values. Thus, even though value is primarily defined in the *OED* as the "worth or quality as measured by a standard of equivalence," implying a potentially objective "standard of equivalence," Hindu values would be subjective, measured by a standard of equivalence based on Hindu principles and/or moral standards.[222] Because of this, the values mentioned in Prema Pandurang's College of Values easily evoke a sense of subjective values tethered to religious Hindu beliefs. The College of Values, therefore, would seem in contradiction to a secular college institution which would strive to present knowledge in an objective way and/or seek to expose any biases or

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[221] A society of scholars incorporated within, or in connection with, a University, or otherwise formed for purposes of study or instruction. Ibid.

[222] It would be something more akin to the following definition in the *OED*: d. orig. *U.S.* In *pl.* (freq. collectively). The principles or moral standards held by a person or social group; the generally accepted or personally held judgment of what is valuable and important in life. Also occas. in *sing.*: any one of these principles or standards. Ibid.

subjective viewpoints, as it would seem that the College would only present knowledge about Hindu values and/or knowledge influenced by distinctly Hindu perspective.

Throughout Prema Pandurang's discourse, however, it becomes apparent that the College of Values is not intended as an exclusively Hindu religious education, but is meant in fact as a compromise between the modern and the traditional. Knowing her audience, Pandurang knows she cannot (nor does she wish to) dismiss or dismantle all of the secular components of education—math, science, engineering, information technology, English language, English literature, etc.—that have brought her audience to their current middle and upper class status. Thus, Pandurang's College of Values is meant to ensure students also learn about ethics, religious values and Hindu customs and traditions, alongside the usual secular fare.

Prema Pandurang also stated that one important subject to be taught at the College of Values would be "world religions," as everyone should be able to "speak of each religion's values."[223] This course on world religions Prema Pandurang emphasized further suggested that the College of Values was not an institution fundamentally biased by Hindu values. Moreover, as was also abundantly mentioned throughout her discourse, Pandurang often strove to present

Hindu values as universally applicable values, based upon egalitarian and universally acceptable principles that were not necessarily exclusive to Hindus. In fact, she has at times continued to refer to the College of Values as a College of Ethics, and has used the term ethics throughout her discourse, further implying that Hindu values are congruent with universal and egalitarian ethics, rather than the reverse. Thus, through her assertions, a more ethics-based curriculum versus a religious-values based curriculum becomes more congruent with the concept

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[223] Prema Pandurang, "Highlights of the *Bhagavatham*: A *Srimad Bhagavatham* Discourse" (Spiritual discourse, Sathya Sai Nigamagamam, Hyderabad, AP, January 21, 2006).

of a college education. It is more of what Prema Pandurang seems to have in mind with her College of Values.

Ultimately, soulware and the College of Values have become important idioms for Prema Pandurang's definition and advocacy of spiritual educations. Soulware, consisting of traditions and values that must be taught, or possibly "programmed" into the mind, differentiates spiritual education from secular education. As Pandurang has expanded on the soulware idiom throughout her lecture by elaborating on the meaning of a spiritual education and why it is meaningful to have it as such, she highlights and problematizes the general lack of spiritual education amongst Hindus today. Prema Pandurang preaches that the solution to this problem is to ensure the continuation of oral tradition, primarily in the form of listening to *kathā*s and other religious discourses, through parents passing stories and practices down to their children, and establishing a College of Values. The College of Values not only provides a vehicle for obtaining spiritual education, but also demonstrates Pandurang's emphasis on a spiritual education that is compatible with (rather than opposing) secular education. Moreover, the way in which these terms are constructed—by juxtaposing opposing terms from the modern and material with terms from the spiritual and immaterial—illustrate one of the skillful techniques Pandurang employs to fuse objects and concepts from the modern, cosmopolitan lifestyles of her audience with the traditional world of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* to create a new vision of Hinduism that can straddle both worlds.

By focusing on her exposition of the Seventh Canto of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, featuring the popular life story of Kṛṣṇa-devotee Prahlāda and Kṛṣṇa's incarnation as the fierce man-lion, Nṛsiṃha, this section will demonstrate how Prema Pandurang defines a spiritual education as opposed to a secular one. Additionally, analysis of the metacommunicative processes—namely

Pandurang's metanarration regarding the primary narrative (the Prahlāda story) and the narrative process itself—throughout her exposition of the Prahlāda story reveals a meta-discourse on spiritual knowledge, its dissemination and the reading practices (the *kathā* discourse) she and her audience are currently engaged in. This self-reflective discourse demonstrates the level of agency participants have in negotiating the meanings of the text together, and specifically in Prema Pandurang's case, the self-reflexive discourse offers a context in which to merge the traditional, mythological, Sanskrit world of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* with the modern, technologically, scientific, fact-based, English-speaking world she and her audience live in.

To those familiar with the story, the Prahlāda narrative is well-suited to echo themes regarding the spiritual education of the young. Prahlāda, himself a young child, receives a unique education about Kṛṣṇa devotion, subsequently teaches others these devotional lessons and is then subjected to a failed 're-education' program by his father Hiraṇyakaśipu, an ardent hater of Kṛṣṇa. Analysis of Prema Pandurang's exposition of the Prahlāda narrative further demonstrates how she draws out those specific plot events to illustrate her concept of soulware. Pandurang's English retelling of the verses, her choice of Sanskrit verses and, of course, her own commentary on the story all served to distinguish spiritual education from secular education, while ultimately defining Kṛṣṇa devotion in terms of listening to and preserving the Sanskrit scriptures and maintaining traditional values—the very acts Prema Pandurang and her audience are simultaneously engaged in through the *kathā* discourse.

Prahlāda's Soulware: Basic Spiritual Programming

The differentiation between spiritual and secular educations surfaces most clearly in the first half of Pandurang's Prahlāda narrative, as she focuses on Prahlāda's disposition and

education. After beginning the narrative exposition by establishing Prahlāda as one of the greatest devotees of Kṛṣṇa, Pandurang quotes her first verse from the seventh canto:

> Nyasta krīḍanako bālo jaḍavat tan manastayā |
> kṛṣṇa graha gṛhītātmā na veda jagad īdṛśam ||[224]
>
> You buy all the toys for the children and keep buying more. Our children have so many toys. You buy toys for the children and they forget all else! With all the toys around Prahlāda he was only interested in Śrī Kṛṣṇa, [*her voice now booming, enunciating each syllable*] Nā-rā-ya-ṇa![225]

Pandurang's paraphrase of the quote in English—"With all the toys around Prahlāda, he was only interested in Śrī Kṛṣṇa,"—simplifies the verse, primarily emphasizing Prahlāda's single-minded focus on Kṛṣṇa despite how many toys, or material pleasures, surround him. Compare this to a more exact translation of the verse:

> The child [Prahlāda] by whom toys were cast aside was senseless [his] mind [intently] absorbed by Him [Kṛṣṇa],
> Possessing a mind caught in Kṛṣṇa's grip, he did not know of the world as such.

Pandurang's translation excludes the finer points of the verse in which Prahlāda actively discards the toys, as well as, the description of Prahlāda's mind being "caught in Kṛṣṇa's grip" to the extent that Prahlāda has nearly no awareness of the outside world. In the Sanskrit verse, Prahlāda is withdrawn from the outer, material world and focused inwardly, towards the spiritual, his Lord Kṛṣṇa.

Instead, Pandurang conveys the thrust of those finer points more simply by comparing Prahlāda to other children, specifically the privileged children of her audience. The children in

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[224] *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, VII.4.37.

[225] Prema Pandurang, "Highlights of the *Bhagavatham*: A *Srimad Bhagavatham* Discourse" (Spiritual discourse, Sathya Sai Nigamagamam, Hyderabad, AP, January 18, 2006).

her audience, in contrast to Prahlāda, are so focused on their toys that they "forget all else." Switching the object of each subject's focus—Kṛṣṇa for Prahlāda and the toys for the children—also puts those objects of their attention in contrast, suggesting that children of today are focused on toys—meaningless, superficial, material, replaceable objects of pleasure—instead of Kṛṣṇa, or God, who would be the ultimate source of meaning, consciousness and spiritual liberation.

Moreover, though both the children and Prahlāda display a focus so intent that they "forget all else," it is clear that Prahlāda's focus is constant, steady and much more aptly described as devotion. In contrast, the focus the children have for their toys is sustained only until they get a new toy. Unlike Prahlāda, who is loyal in his singular devotion to Kṛṣṇa, the children have no attachments to a particular toy, but are tied rather to material pleasures, consuming as many toys as they are given.

By introducing this contrast between the children and Prahlāda as a way of glossing over the precise connotations of the above verse (rather than giving a literal translation of the Sanskrit), Prema Pandurang is able to invoke that contrast throughout the retelling of the Prahlāda narrative. This contrast, in turn, further allows her to prove how much the children need a spiritual education, while in the same breath, also continues to provide her with a platform to develop the differences between spiritual and secular educations. As the constant comparison between the children and Prahlāda inevitably portray Prahlāda as a shining example of devotion, the comparison also shows the children as being deficient in religious and spiritual matters. Clearly they are in need of spiritual educations. Moreover, Prahlāda, as someone with a spiritual education, depicts some qualities and virtues associated with a spiritual education—unwavering devotion to Kṛṣṇa and an internalized focus on divine, spiritual things. The children, lacking spiritual education, are devoid of these qualities and instead are fickle and materialistic, focusing

on superficial objects external to them. Through this example, spiritual education can be described as internalized, non-material and devoted to Kṛṣṇa, whereas secular educations are external, material, and attached to the tangible.

Spiritual Education—Why do we need it?

The children of the assembled audience members continue to be featured prominently, as Pandurang continues the Prahlāda narrative, further expanding on spiritual education and why it is so important. She gives an account of Prahlāda's early education at an ashram, where he and other young boys are taught lessons by a guru. This ashram is of course where his father, Hiraṇyakaśipu, sent him to get the education he deemed appropriate. Everyone in the audience is familiar with this narrative. In fact, as she begins the Prahlāda story, Pandurang asks the audience whether they had seen *Bhakta Prahlāda*, a popular old film about Prahlāda, that is televised in every Indian language throughout the year.[226] There was a general murmur and nodding of heads indicating that everyone was familiar with the film. Knowing her audience was familiar with the story, she did not delve into too many details about the plot, but she instead began this portion of the narrative simply by stating:

> When the child came home from school his father asks him,
>
> [louder, in a deeper, manly voice] "What did master teach you?"
>
> [*in her normal speaking voice*] We always send our children to school to study maths and science and how to make a living. We don't even ask them what they study. What do they study and what do they learn?
> [momentary pause as she scans the audience]

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[226] *Bhakta Prahlada* is a popular Telugu film version of the Prahlāda story. It was released in 1967 and directed by Chitrapudu Narayana Rao. Pandurang also mentions that it is one of her favorite movies and if she ever catches it on television, she must watch it. Prema Pandurang, "Highlights of the *Bhagavatham*: A *Srimad Bhagavatham* Discourse" (Spiritual discourse, Sathya Sai Nigamagamam, Hyderabad, AP, January 20, 2006).

> I see. But *why* don't we teach them about Śrī Kṛṣṇa? But *why* don't you
> teach meaning to life? Why don't you teach them these things?
> They are at such a wonderful age! Their minds can absorb and remember.
>
> Please teach your children *ślokas*—it may be Potana, it may be *Bhāgavata*,
> it may be the [*Bhagavad*]*Gītā*. Please teach something you know.[227]

The contrast between secular and spiritual continues in the above passage, as Pandurang indicates that what is learned at school, a secular institution, is "how to make a living" versus learning the "meaning of life," which is gleaned through the spiritual educations that they should be learning at home. In other words, the education their children receive at school has no added value beyond providing them with the knowledge and skill sets required to get a job and earn money. On the other hand, by memorizing Hindu scripture and being taught about Kṛṣṇa from their parents, the children are learning the very meaning of life, which she later argues is fundamental to their happiness and future. Moreover, Pandurang here emphasizes the parents' responsibility in imparting spiritual educations—represented by scripture and values—to their children. Spiritual education, therefore, should be orally transmitted within the family.

Prema Pandurang then gives the example of a little boy named Pinky, whom she met while lecturing in Singapore. She shares how this five or six year old greeted her by reciting a well-known devotional verse to Kṛṣṇa from the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*. In fact, using a child-like voice, she imitates the boy hesitantly reciting:

> Kṛṣṇāya vāsudevāya devakī nan-nan-nandanāya ca, nandagopakumārāya
> govindāya namo nama*ḥ* [228]

The audience loudly applauds this scene Pandurang paints, as she then further lavishes blessings on the boy for being so well taught. Pinky is an example of a child of today, in fact, that rare

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[227] Ibid.

[228] *kṛṣṇāya vāsudevāya devakī nandanāya ca | nandagopakumārāya, govindāya namo namaḥ || Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, I.8.21 Translation: Salutations! Salutations! To Kṛṣṇa, son of Vasudeva, the delight of Devakī, boy of the cowherd Nanda, Govinda!

diasporic modern Hindu child, who is learning proper spiritual values. As such, he also becomes

a positive example for parents in the audience to model their children after.

Pandurang continues to expand on the need for children to not only learn, but to

memorize scripture, asserting that doing so is what will bring them happiness:

> All children are born with such capability and unspoiled. All children.
> Every child! Teach them to memorize these even if they can't understand it
> yet. It is the key to their happiness.
>
> The Christian child knows his Bible.
> The Muslim child knows his Quran.
> The Hindu child is the only one who doesn't know even one single śloka!
>
> In the name of secularism we have made ourselves impoverished!
>
> Don't allow children to be polluted.
> There is a need for a College of Values.
> I want the children to regain their values.
>
> Without this beautiful legacy, we have no future. Without this beautiful
> language, we have no future.
>
> What is the point of having all this high technology if you don't know how
> to make your soul happy?[229]

Pandurang's emphasis on memorizing verses, and thus internalizing them, reiterates her

soulware theme. The *ślokas*, that Pandurang insists children memorize whether they understand

them readily or not, provide the basic programming code for soulware. By stating how

secularism has left "ourselves impoverished," Pandurang is further implying that true wealth

comes from spiritual education, thereby indicating that money, status, material objects—all

garnered by secular education—are not the greatest forms of wealth to be enjoyed. Instead only

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[229] Prema Pandurang, "Highlights of the *Bhagavatham*: A *Srimad Bhagavatham* Discourse" (Spiritual discourse, Sathya Sai Nigamagamam, Hyderabad, AP, January 18, 2006).

spiritual education—as opposed to secular education and high technology—can enrich the soul, and thereby bring happiness.

Aside from bringing happiness, Pandurang claims that memorizing these verses also helps children to remain "unspoiled" and keep them from being "polluted." While she does not explicitly state here what is spoiling and polluting the children, Pandurang's implication is that preferencing secular educations over spiritual educations is having a negative impact on the children. By not memorizing and internalizing the *ślokas*, Hindu children become disconnected from Hindu customs and traditions, and as a result become spoiled. Because these Hindu children of today cease to learn their "beautiful language," Sanskrit, and thereby become incapable of passing on these scriptures, they cease the chain of transmission. In so doing, these children are jeopardizing not only their happiness, but also the future of these oral traditions, and therefore, Hinduism, in general. This is compounded by the comparison she makes between Hindu children as the "only ones" who do not know a single verse of scripture, compared to Christian and Muslim children who *know* their entire holy texts. Moreover, by citing both an incentive (the "key to happiness") and a dire consequence (loss of the Hindu legacy), Pandurang further makes the case for not just the need for a spiritual education, but also for the need to establish her College of Values to restore those values to the children who have already been spoiled and to prevent future ruination of other children, and in turn, ultimately the chain of transmission.

Having established the need for spiritual education and specifically for memorizing and thus internalizing the verses, Pandurang continues the narrative and with it, her comparison of spiritual and secular educations. Expanding more on the dissemination of secular knowledge

versus spiritual knowledge, Pandurang returns to Prahlāda's story, sharing his reply to his father's question:

> Listen to Prahlāda.
> This little child goes to his father and tells him,
> 'This world is a huge trap. A huge well! Don't fall into it. Go in the forest and chant 'Hari'!'
>
> The moment he mentions the name Nārāyana, [his father] thinks it's a big joke [in a deep voice imitating Hiraṇyakaśipu]:
>
> 'Ha ha ha. Change all the texts books! New textbooks! No name of Hari. Delete the names of Hari!'
>
> That's what he says.[230]

In the original *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* narrative, Hiraṇyakaśipu does laughingly dismiss Prahlāda's reply, assuming that someone else must have influenced his seemingly naïve son. Hiraṇyakaśipu remains oblivious to the fact that Prahlāda is sharing his internal spiritual knowledge, or soulware. Instead, he sends Prahlāda back to school and sternly commands Prahlāda's teachers to reteach, or reprogram, the boy so that Prahlāda no longer speaks of Kṛṣṇa, but instead learns about worldly topics as prescribed by Hiraṇyakaśipu. In Pandurang's retelling of Hiraṇyakaśipu's reply, however, the teachers are replaced with an anachronistic reference to textbooks. By introducing textbooks to the narrative, Pandurang continues the contrast between spiritual and secular knowledge, as textbooks not only elicit an image schools, a source of secular education, but textbooks also generate a stark contrast to scripture. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, a textbook is "a book used as a standard work for the study of a particular subject."[231] In a more general sense, at least certainly in Pandurang's paradigm,

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[230] Prema Pandurang, "Highlights of the *Bhagavatham*: A *Srimad Bhagavatham* Discourse" (Spiritual discourse, Sathya Sai Nigamagamam, Hyderabad, AP, January 18, 2006).

[231] *Oxford English Dictionary*. 2nd ed. 20 vols. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989. Also available at http://www.oed.com/.

textbooks contain facts, data, theories, and objective knowledge about subjects, all of which would be forms of secular knowledge. Unlike scripture, textbooks are not necessarily memorized or internalized, but are instead referenced and studied. While scripture can also be read and studied, as Prema Pandurang maintains, scripture must also be received through oral transmission, memorized and ultimately internalized.

Pandurang's soulware message comes to a peak as she continues with the narrative sharing that an enraged Hiraṇyakaśipu demands to know where this child learned this. Prahlāda's teachers reveal that Prahlāda was born with this knowledge, having learned it from the private *kathā* Nārada gave to Prahlāda's mother while Prahlāda was still in her womb.[232] Pandurang then makes this impassioned plea to her audience:

> The things you get from kathā, from the Bhāgavata, you will never learn in textbooks. You must make time for it! You can never learn it from textbooks. I am very learned in Shakespeare, Milton, all great English works…
> All the great literature in English doesn't have this!
> This is why we need a College of Values. So children can learn these things. Please pray for it.[233]

Here, Pandurang once again summarizes her position on spiritual and secular knowledge, as well as reiterating the importance of *kathā* and the need for a College of Values. Secular knowledge is yet again represented by textbooks, and expanded further to the entire English literary canon. Professor Pandurang, with her over twenty years of collegiate English teaching, is able to both appreciate the complexities and nuances of English literature, while simultaneously declaring that it does not provide the spiritual knowledge or 'happiness to the soul' that the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* and more specifically listening to *Bhāgavata kathā* provide. Notably, Pandurang does

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[232]See *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, VII.7.1-17.

[233] Prema Pandurang, "Highlights of the *Bhagavatham*: A *Srimad Bhagavatham* Discourse" (Spiritual discourse, Sathya Sai Nigamagamam, Hyderabad, AP, January 18, 2006).

not completely disparage, dismiss or forbid reading the English literary canon at all, but rather relegates it to a lower position than scripture, and in so doing, yet again balances the modern and the traditional realities of her audience. By citing a great canon of English authors as well, Prema Pandurang simultaneously raises her own worldly credentials.

Additionally, Hiraṇyakaśipu's commands to "Change all the textbooks!" and to "Delete the names of Hari!" highlights another potential difference between secular and spiritual knowledge; it suggests secular knowledge can be manipulated and censored by governing authorities. Spiritual knowledge, on the other hand, because it is memorized—as opposed to being relegated specifically to a physical text--cannot be forcibly deleted, altered or erased from the mind of the person who has internalized it. Pandurang advances this suggestion of the immutability of spiritual knowledge through the rest of her retelling of the Prahlāda narrative, which seems as though it were tailor-made to support this idea. Continuing with Prahlāda's return from his 'reprogramming' at school, Pandurang narrates how his father lovingly takes him in his lap and asks yet again:

> [Hiraṇyakaśipu] What did you learn in school today? What did the master teach you?
>
> [Prahlāda] Listen I will teach you:
>
> *śravaṇaṃ kīrtanaṃ viṣṇoḥ smaraṇam pādasevanam |*
> *arcanaṃ vandanaṃ dāsyaṃ sakhyam ātmanivedanam ||*
>
> (louder, more emphatically)
> *Viṣṇu śravaṇam! Viṣṇu kīrtanam! Viṣṇu smaraṇam!*
> *Viṣṇu pāda-sevanam! Viṣṇu arcanam! Viṣṇu vandanam! Viṣṇu dāsyam!*
> *Viṣṇu sakhyam! Viṣṇu ātma-nivedanam!* [234]

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[234] Hearing about Viṣṇu, singing about Him, remembering Him, serving Him, worshipping Him, saluting/bowing down to Him, being His servant, being His friend, and surrendering completely to Him. *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, VII.5.23. She retells this key verse with emphasis on Viṣṇu (Kṛṣṇa). Translation: Hearing about (*śravaṇa*) Viṣṇu! Singing about (*kīrtana*) Viṣṇu! Remembering (*smaraṇa*) Viṣṇu! Serving (*pāda-sevana*) Viṣṇu! Worshipping (*arcana*) Viṣṇu! Saluting/bowing down to (*vandana*) Viṣṇu! Being Viṣṇu's servant (*dāsya*), being Viṣṇu's friend

Prahlāda responds yet again with spiritual knowledge, this time the nine forms of devotion to

Kṛṣṇa. Returning to the point above, Prahlāda's soulware, his internal spiritual programming,

remains intact and unaffected despite undergoing his father's failed re-education program.

Having learned, memorized and thus internalized this spiritual knowledge about Kṛṣṇa *bhakti*,

Prahlāda validates Pandurang's earlier assertions that spiritual knowledge must be taught and

memorized in order to be preserved, as well as her suggestion above that spiritual knowledge

once embedded within the individual cannot be forcibly removed.

Moreover, this particular verse about the nine types of *bhakti* that constitutes Prahlāda's

reply is not just any nugget of spiritual knowledge; this verse is often considered one of the most

famous verses from the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* and by some as the very essence of the *Bhāgavata*.[235]

Prema Pandurang also emphasizes the verse, repeating it once more, but inserting Viṣṇu with

each form of *bhakti*. This extra emphasis combined with the fact that Pandurang spends extra

time to reflect on this verse with some detail, signals to the audience the importance of the verse,

and its message of Kṛṣṇa *bhakti*. It is Pandurang's exposition of the verse, however, that

eventually enables her to tie together all of the various threads of her soulware concept. These

include the contrasts between spiritual knowledge vs. secular knowledge; spiritual education vs.

secular education; the need for oral transmission and a College of Values; learning, memorizing

and internalizing scripture and Kṛṣṇa *bhakti*—such that gaining a spiritual education does not

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(*sakhya*)! Completely surrendering to (*ātma-nivedana*) Viṣṇu! Prema Pandurang, "Highlights of the *Bhagavatham*: A *Srimad Bhagavatham* Discourse" (Spiritual discourse, Sathya Sai Nigamagamam, Hyderabad, AP, January 18, 2006).

[235] Prema Pandurang's *Bhāgavata kathā* discourse at the Pontiac Parashakti Temple in Pontiac, Michigan cited earlier in this chapter, is built entirely around this discourse. Rameshbhai Oza, Chandramurthy Shastry, and Hariprasad Sharma also indicated during their discourses that this was considered the main purport or the essential lesson of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*. Rameshbhai Oza, "*Srimad Bhagawat* Katha Gyan Yagna" Goshamahal Police Stadium, Hyderabad February 18-24, 2006; Chandramurthy Shastry, "*Śrīmad Bhāgavata* Saptāha Jñānayajña Mahōtsavamulu," Sept. 1-8, 2006. Kolapalli, Andhra Pradesh; Hariprasad Sharma, "*Śrīmad Bhāgavata* Saptāha" (Spiritual Discourse) Satyanarayana Temple, Guntur, Andhra Pradesh, November 23-30, 2006.

only mean learning about *bhakti* and scripture and then putting those lessons into practice, but also that the *process* of gaining a spiritual education in and of itself is an act of devotion. Thus, all those attending the performance are engaged in a devotional act as they listen (*śravaṇa*) to the stories of Kṛṣṇa and thus, remember (*smaraṇa*) Kṛṣṇa. After citing the nine different forms of *bhakti* that enable everyone to "worship the Lord according to your aptitude,"[236] Prema Pandurang applies the verse to her current lecture:

> *Smaraṇam*! When you go home after lecture, remember!
> Today in our lecture, you do *śravaṇam*. And after
> Govinda *śravaṇam*, we do *kīrtanam*; after *kīrtanam* comes *smaraṇam*;
> after *smaraṇam* comes *pādasevanam*;
> after serving comes *arcanam*; after *arcanam* then *vandanam!*[237]

Prema Pandurang brings the entire verse back to the current lecture as she tells the audience to remember (*smaraṇa*) the lecture once they go home. Besides apprising her audience that they are presently engaging in *śravaṇa-bhakti* by attending her *kathā* discourse and listening to narratives about Kṛṣṇa, Pandurang recognizes and generates awareness amongst her audience of the communicative experience (the *kathā*) that she and her audience are sharing together. This metanarrative moment, in which Pandurang speaks to her audience about the discourse they are engaged in, serves to not only make the audience aware of their own participation in the performance, but also links them—the audience and Prema Pandurang—in the *Bhāgavata's* chain of oral transmission. Thus, the nine types of *bhakti* have come to the audience from the sage Nārada who taught it to Prahlāda while he was still in his mother's womb, who in turn tells it to his father, and through Prema Pandurang's retelling of Prahlāda's narrative, from Prema

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[236] Prema Pandurang, "Highlights of the *Bhagavatham*: A *Srimad Bhagavatham* Discourse" (Spiritual discourse, Sathya Sai Nigamagamam, Hyderabad, AP, January 18, 2006).

[237] Ibid.

Pandurang to the audience. By locating themselves in the chain of transmission, the audience is also recreating one of the traditions that they are purporting to uphold.

In conclusion, this chapter examines the various negotiations that occurred between Prema Pandurang and her audience during her *Bhāgavata Kathā* to reveal how modern, cosmopolitan, educated, elite Hindus make meaning from the traditional, Brahmanical world of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*. Prema Pandurang attracted and thus, negotiated for, the upper, middle class, educated, modern audience she wanted through metacommunications that took place before the start of the discourse—such as the billboard advertisement, the aesthetics of the performance, the posh location and Pandurang's regal entrance. The audience in return also assessed Pandurang's competence from the various credentials—academic, spiritual, political, global, etc.—she presented through her self-narrative that was woven throughout the discourse. Once establishing the qualifications of the other, the performer and audience continued to negotiate the meaning of the text, as they seek to reconcile the disparate worlds of their modern lifestyles and the traditional world of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*. Once again, by examining the metacommunicative processes, in particular, the various comparisons between the audience and others (diasporic youth, westerners, Prahlāda), as well as her concept of soulware, Prema Pandurang redefines a proper spiritual education for and with her audience. This new spiritual education incorporates a more universally applicable ethic, as Pandurang promotes learning the values of other religions, both in her discourse and in her College of Values.

Finally, as Pandurang's definition of spiritual education also requires listening to *kathā* as a particular act of devotion (*śravaṇa bhakti*), the participants of the performance find themselves already engaged in upholding this tradition. Thus, while looking to the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* for

guidance on maintaining their traditions, in this case with regard to *śravaṇa bhakti* the tradition is not simply an object to be found in the text. Instead, the tradition is reified in the performance of the *kathā* itself. In this way, the audience is regenerating the *kathā* tradition while upholding it as a devotional act. Additionally, as will be detailed in the next chapter, Pandurang and her audience also generate a cosmopolitan *kathā*, which envisions a global Hinduism and ultimately a new self-definition of the model Hindu.

Chapter Four: Cosmopolitan *Kathā*

Whereas the previous chapter introduced Professor Prema Pandurang's *Bhāgavata kathā,* examining the metacommunicative processes that enabled Pandurang to reconcile the world of the *Bhāgavata* with the modern, global, cosmopolitan world of the audience, this chapter takes a more in-depth look at the emergent text of Prema Pandurang's *Bhāgavata kathā.* Closer inspection of the emergent text exposes a modern, global, cosmopolitan Hinduism generated in this performance by Prema Pandurang for and with her audience. Further exploring this newly engendered Hinduism reveals a corresponding model or ideal devotee to which *kathā* participants aspire: the "Hindu citizen of the world." This modern, global, cosmopolitan Hinduism generated by participants of the *kathā*, in turn demonstrates how participants use the *Bhāgavata* to reconstitute the very Hinduism they seek to follow. Likewise, the model devotee conceptualized by the *kathā* participants exemplifies the agency of the participants in defining themselves within the context of this new, global, modern, cosmopolitan world as "Hindu citizens of the world."

This chapter considers three narratives of the *Bhāgavata* performed by Prema Pandurang during her *Bhāgavata kathā*: the *Prahlāda Caritra*, or the story of devotee Prahlāda; the *Kṛṣṇa Janma Kathā*, or the story of Kṛṣṇa's birth; and *Rukmiṇī Kalyāṇa,* or the Marriage of Rukmiṇī and Kṛṣṇa. The analysis of these three narratives and their accompanying metanarratives show the metacommunicative processes that enable Prema Pandurang and her audience to collectively construct their own modern, cosmopolitan Hinduism and its subsequent model devotee. In her retelling of Kṛṣṇa's birth story—one of the highlights of any *Bhāgavata* performance— Pandurang redefines the ideal Kṛṣṇa devotee such that modern ways of life and consumption are

not in conflict with the messages of non-materiality and austerity found in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, but are instead celebrated. A quick review of salient points from the *Prahlāda Caritra*, which was analyzed in detail in the previous chapter, further illustrates the engagement with secular educations and other religions, monikers of the cosmopolitan global world of the participants. Finally, the marriage story of Rukmiṇī and Kṛṣṇa serves as a platform for modern, egalitarian values in which women are considered equal to men and brahmanical hierarchy is subverted, such that one rises up by virtuous character, rather than caste, birth or status.

The metacommunicative processes analyzed in this emergent text mostly involve narrative strategies in which Prema Pandurang presents the modern and cosmopolitan values of these pan-Indian, urban Hyderabadi audience members as core values of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*. These include: universalizing and delocalizing the values of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* such that they have a more global and portable application; defining Kṛṣṇa devotees in contrast to Rāma devotees (such that Kṛṣṇa *bhaktas* resemble the audience members); reinforcing democratic and egalitarian values through redefining the top of the hierarchy in terms of character instead of by birth. These narrative strategies successfully reconcile the two worlds—that of the modern and cosmopolitan urban life of the participants and the hierarchical, Brahmanical, traditional world of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*—creating a Hinduism that is a modern, cosmopolitan, global Hinduism.

To reiterate from the previous chapter, modern here is used to refer to processes of conspicuous consumption, success measured by wealth and status, and various trademarks of the present. These include a marked preference for education deemed as secular and globally competent, global sensibilities, the procurement of a higher class status, fluency in the use of the latest technology and a more scientific and rational approach to life (as opposed to behaviors inclined towards superstition). This definition in part builds upon Breckenridge and Appadurai's

approach to modernity in India found in their essay, "Public Modernity in India."[238] There, Breckenridge and Appadurai, while acknowledging multiple approaches to public modernity, choose to focus on consumption, stating:

> In part, this is because we assume that in trying to understand the political imaginary of modernity, it is important to engage with the subjective experience of modern life, which is closely tied up with particular sorts of pleasure, desire, and agency. Consumption, conceived as 'the work of the imagination,' (Appadurai 1990, forthcoming) is an activity that simultaneously captures the distinctive disciplines of modernity and draws attention to the new forms of expenditure and social identity.[239]

Even as they focus on consumption as an activity that involves the production of aspirations, imaginative abstractions and distinctive selves, Appadurai and Breckenridge simultaneously point out that the very procedures of consumption that make such subjectivities, also generate new associations and collective affiliations. This insight can be applied when considering the audience (and thus, broader community) involved in collective consumption of performances such as Prema Pandurang's *Bhāgavata kathā*. The words and lectures orators such as Prema Pandurang expend during each performance, in many instances, provide the very grounds upon which new associations and communal bonds can be established. In many respects, Prema Pandurang's performance solidifies bonds among a comfortably wealthy, religious middle-class, whose patterns of consumption apply not only to the commercial goods they decorate their lives with, but also to the authoritative scriptures they echo and applaud.

Breckenridge and Appadurai's argument above is based on their stance that consumption is an "activity and modality of social life," which is in turn based on the premises of what they

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[238] Carol Breckenridge and Arjun Appadurai, "Public Modernity in India," in *Consuming Modernity: Public Culture in A South Asian World,* ed. C.A. Breckenridge (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995).

[239] Ibid., 5.

term a "global theory of reception" and "public culture."[240] For them, the reception of processes

of modernity does involve the creation of subjectivities and agencies reinforced through

processes of globalizing consumption. However, they further suggest that reception also entails

an agent who is actively involved to varying degrees with these processes of self-creation within

an increasingly global context. This focus on an agent involved in reception, Breckenridge and

Appadurai counterpose to critical theories of public culture that stress that processes of

globalization primarily bring about a consumptive, and thus passive, individual subject.[241] Mass

media then, for Breckenridge and Appadurai, rather than simply engendering an automated,

populous mass, constitutes a space of 'public culture' in which contestation, contradiction and

debate take place:

> From this point of view, the contestatory character of public culture has
> much to do with the tensions and contradictions between national sites and
> transnational cultural processes. These tensions generate arenas where other
> registers of culture encounter, interrogate, and contest one another in new
> and unexpected ways. Thus national culture seeks to co-opt and redefine
> more local, regional, or folk cultural forms. Commercial culture (especially
> in the cinema, television, and the audio industry) seeks to popularize
> classical forms. Mass cultural forms seek to co-opt folk idioms. This zone
> of contestation and mutual cannibalization—in which national, mass, and
> folk culture provide both mill and grist for one another—is at the very heart
> of public modernity in India. In identifying the public modernity of any
> given national space, we are obliged to identify the broad dynamics that
> characterize the local dynamics of the site.[242]

Breckenridge and Appadurai's attention to modernity's spurring of these local dynamics in

India—where the overlapping authorities of nation, commerce and folk cultural forms compete

with each other—are suggestive for performances entangled with processes of modernity such as

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[240] Ibid., 4-5.

[241] Breckenridge and Appadurai oppose strictly negative positions towards mass-culture espoused by the Frankfurt school, and particularly Jürgen Habermas, whose portrayal of *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* suggest that transitions into modernity effectively entails, through the automatic depoliticization of public life, an ultimately disempowered subject. Ibid., 2-3.

[242] Ibid., 5.

Prema Pandurang's *Śrimad Bhāgavata Kathā*, insofar as the 'public culture' of these performances produce a new self-identity, here particularly, that of modern, educated Hindus.

The other key term that is linked to Prema Pandurang's global *kathā* is cosmopolitanism. In the context of this project, cosmopolitanism means recognizing the world as a global community, and further, one's membership in that global community. Moreover, this global community extends to include various ethnic, religious, and cultural communities, transcending any singular local, urban, state or national borders. Paradoxically, though one may recognize themselves as part of this global community, at the same time, one still identifies with their own cultural, ethnic, religious, local and national communities. In other words, cosmopolitanism here specifically means being not just a 'citizen of the world,' but a *Hindu* citizen of the world. In essence, participants who inhabit a partial cosmopolitanism on the one hand, are 'citizens of the world'—subscribing to a universal ethical moral code above all local relationships—however, not to the point at which they are unable to recognize the immediacy of other people within their own various personal and local communities; in this case, the Hindu community. This definition of cosmopolitanism draws partly on what Appiah terms "partial cosmopolitanism":

> And the one thought that cosmopolitans share is that no local loyalty can ever justify forgetting that each human being has responsibilities to every other. Fortunately, we need to take sides neither with the nationalist who abandons all foreigners nor with the hard-core cosmopolitan who regards her friends and fellow citizens with icy impartiality. The position worth defending might be called (in both senses) a partial cosmopolitanism.[243]

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[243] Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007), xvi-xvii. Appiah's notion of a partial cosmopolitanism stems from his earlier summary of cosmopolitan thought from the Greeks to Voltaire, such that it would seem that two positions seem to exist, or as he writes, there are "two strands that intertwine the notion of cosmopolitanism. One is the idea that we have obligations to others, obligations that stretch beyond those to whom we are related by the ties of kith and kind, or even the more formal ties of a shared citizenship. The other is that we take seriously the value not just of human life but of particular human lives, which means taking an interest in the practices and beliefs that lend them significance." (Ibid., xv.) In light of this position, one aspect of cosmopolitanism, in its most extreme form, would hold that one should be completely impartial to any personal ties of family, community, tribe, nation, or other particularity. The suggestion is that these would necessarily be discarded in favor of obligatory actions acquiescing to, and indeed, serving a larger humanity. On the other end of the spectrum, against cosmopolitanism totally, Appiah cites Stalin

Thus, by recognizing one's membership in a larger world community, one must also recognize that others within the community have equivalent membership. Naturally, with this membership come concomitant rights and responsibilities. Ethics, under this framework, must be inclusive of as large a community as possible and, thus, universal. This is displayed throughout Pandurang's *kathā* through egalitarian and democratic values, as well as through her marked appreciation and privileging of values that seem to be universally accepted and applicable. Therefore, while this is a Hindu *kathā*, participants are often encouraged to coexist and even respect other religions and religious traditions within the context of shared universal values. Paradoxically however, the audience members are also not able to be completely impartial to their own nations, communities, families, and religion. In general, they must still, at the same time, keep their Hindu identity, grounding cultural, historic and familial roots even as they travel abroad, experiencing new functions and interacting in the mixed cultural, predominantly urban, national and global sphere. Spurred on by the conditions of expansion and exploitation that are part and parcel of colonialism, this type of cosmopolitanism spreads easily from any designated, authentic cultural, geographic core into diasporic communities. A partial cosmopolitanism, working among lives that have often experienced patterns of travel, expansion and resettlement as a result of colonial domination, is a cosmopolitanism which is much more universal and portable. Its limitations and contradictions are less localized and less parochial.

It is noteworthy that nowhere in this *kathā* is the term cosmopolitan used, nor do any participants mention the word cosmopolitan, nor necessarily identify themselves as cosmopolitans. For the participants of this *kathā*, cosmopolitanism is not a theory, or even

and Hitler as nationalists who were against acknowledging others. Being loyal only to their own nation, both Stalin and Hitler saw cosmopolitanism and cosmopolitans as a threat, consequently seeking to destroy them. Thus, Appiah concludes that some balance between the two extremes of either being in servitude to, or completely disregarding cultural alterity is needed. This balance is the partial cosmopolitanism Appiah proposes.

something that they claim to be. Rather, to refer in some sense to Pollock's sense of cosmopolitanism, it is something they do, or more so a way of being.[244]   Therefore, as this chapter will demonstrate, this close reading of Prema Pandurang's *Bhāgavata kathā* ultimately imparts guidelines that demonstrate how to be a good, modern Hindu in a global context. Thus, while the word cosmopolitanism is never directly referred to by any of the participants during the *kathā*, the *kathā* reflects and promotes a more cosmopolitan, universal outlook as opposed to a local or parochial position.

Based on these definitions of modernity and cosmopolitanism, it is clear that globalization is a key element and area of intersection. As will be detailed below, the global elements of this *kathā* are exemplified by the language being used (English—currently the global language of transnational, commercial business and its domination), the portability of this religion in practice (allowing for a Hinduism with practices that are not limited to particular locales and/or times), and Pandurang's own recognition throughout her *kathā* of not only trans-Indian members of her audience, but the Hindu diaspora at large, thereby constantly reinforcing a sense of global community. Moreover, while Pandurang never completely rejects the local—in fact, sprinkling her performance with relevant homage to local languages, preferences and customs—she still manages to address her presentation to a larger, more transient, pan-Indian audience, with implications of a larger, more global Hindu community. Indeed, Pandurang's *kathā* discourse is a global discourse, but as will be seen it does not just stop at being global in a diasporic sense. Pandurang's inclusion and awareness of other religions (namely Christianity and

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[244] Consider Pollock, whose contribution to the edited volume "*Cosmopolitanism*", seeks to understand the term in less Euro-centric ways, through multiple vectors and venues. Pollock's essay shows cosmopolitanism to be broader than any specific time period. Through literature, Pollock explores cosmopolitanism as a recurrent, resilient phenomena—a thing that is done, as opposed to a theory. Sheldon Pollock, "Cosmopolitanism and Vernacular in History," in *Cosmopolitanism*, ed. C.A. Breckenridge, S. Pollock, H.K. Bhabha, D. Chakrabarty (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002).

Islam), particularly with reference to admirable and universal values from those religions, is what ultimately places her *kathā* into the realm of cosmopolitan discourse.

Based on the modern, cosmopolitan, global Hinduism, therefore, the model devotee must be a worldly person who has mastered several different roles. They are successful in procuring monetary wealth, demonstrating ease with economic exchanges. They are modern, moving easily in and out of the secular realm. They claim and adhere to democratic values, promoting egalitarianism. They are educated in a global sense, in that their educations are secularly accredited and also in the sense that they are aware of and able to appreciate other religions, cultures and ethnicities. Furthermore, while they do learn about and appreciate other religions and cultures, they always ultimately remain Hindu at heart and in practice, thus, becoming 'Hindu citizens of the world.' In this way, Prema Pandurang's *Bhāgavata kathā* engenders a model devotee who lives competently in the modern, cosmopolitan world of today with the traditional values of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*. This model devotee in turn, ultimately represents a moment in which the participants of the *kathā* engage in self-definition, thereby redefining what it means for them to be 'good Hindus.'

Thus, a new example of contemporary Hinduism clearly begins to take shape, as does a new model devotee. In generating a model devotee that incorporates their modern, cosmopolitan, global values with their traditional Hindu values, participants of Pandurang's *kathā*, mark a self-defining moment in which their values are reflected in the model devotee, who is ultimately a mirror of themselves. Prema Pandurang's exposition of various narratives from the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* incorporate particular modern values—democracy, egalitarianism, capitalism, consumerism, rationalism and even secularism—such that these values seem to be embedded in the context of the narratives. Having rooted these values in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, she further

presents these ideals as important spiritual values not just for Hindus alone, but also amongst devotees of all major global religions. By thus universalizing these values, thinking about them more as universal applicable values as opposed to specifically Hindu, not only does Pandurang's *kathā* become a cosmopolitan *kathā*, but the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* generated from this performance is a cosmopolitan *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*.

The Divine Nectar to Go: Portable, Convenient, Universal, Individualized *Bhāgavata*

One of important aspect of this modern, cosmopolitan, global Hinduism that Prema Pandurang develops throughout her discourse is that it is more portable, convenient and individualized. And yet, paradoxically, this is a Hinduism that is more universal. That is to say, as a daily practice, this emergent text's Hinduism is not confined to any specific time or location. The metacommunicative moments that give rise to this portable, and thus, global Hinduism are found in Prema Pandurang's concepts of soulware and spiritual education, in the use of other world religions in comparison to Hinduism, and in the repackaging of Hindu rituals and practices such that they are more easily accessible and practicable. This section will examine these metacommunicative moments leading to this universal yet individualized Hinduism.

In the previous chapter, Prema Pandurang's concept of soulware is defined as a "spiritual program or procedure required to enable the soul to perform its specific tasks." In other words, according to Pandurang, soulware is spiritual education, or "programming" for the soul, which enables one to foster and practice devotion to God. In general, this programming consists of learning and memorizing Hindu scripture and listening to discourses regarding scripture. This concept of soulware is developed throughout Pandurang's treatment of the Prahlāda narrative, demonstrating an internalized and subsequently, individualized devotion.

Prema Pandurang's oration of the Prahlāda narrative portrays Prahlāda as an example of a devotee, whose devotion is deep and abiding and also extremely internalized. He does not display any externalized objects of worship, though all of his thought and concentration revolve around Viṣṇu. As Pandurang vigorously stresses at multiple junctures through her narrative retelling, Prahlāda has memorized by heart, all devotional lessons about Viṣṇu, such that when he is tortured, all he thinks about is Viṣṇu. Pandurang carefully contrasts spiritual education with secular education, particularly through her enunciation of the narrative event in which Prahlāda's father, Hiraṇyakaśipu, attempts to re-educate (or reprogram) Prahlāda. Hiraṇyakaśipu tries to make Prahlāda deny Viṣṇu's existence by sending Prahlāda to one of Hiraṇyakaśipu's own 'state-sponsored' schools where he orders that the textbooks be stricken of any mention of the existence of Hari (Viṣṇu). This anachronistic reference to textbooks made by Pandurang in her retelling, sharply contrasts internalized, spiritual knowledge with the externalized, objectified knowledge in the form of textbooks that can easily be altered. The spiritual knowledge or soulware that is internalized by Prahlāda proves also to be inalterable and indestructible as it is safely programmed within Prahlāda. The power and indestructibility of Prahlāda's devotion are reiterated when finally Hiraṇyakaśipu scornfully demands physical proof of Viṣṇu's existence. Because of Prahlāda's intense devotion, Nṛsiṃha, the man-lion incarnation of Viṣṇu, manifests from the pillar and rips Hiraṇyakaśipu apart. In this telling, emphasis goes towards the internalization of spiritual knowledge, and particularly devotion to Kṛṣṇa (as Viṣṇu).

This internalized devotion is a broader theme found throughout this emergent text and is significant because it matches the subdued responses of the *kathā* audience. As noted above, no onlooker could determine whether any members of the audience might have been having an ecstatic, devotional experience, as their responses were fairly restrained. Pandurang's narrative

retelling of the Prahlāda story reinforces the subdued devotional responses of the audience. In this story, it is completely acceptable to demonstrate devotion in an internal, individualized way, and not necessarily through a visible, collectively shared experience. This is in great contrast to the intimate seven-day performance at Kolapalli featured in the first and second chapter, where the smaller audience became familiar with one another, undertook many austerities, participated more visibly throughout the performance and celebrated the end of the *saptāha* together. Thus, through this retelling of the Prahlāda narrative, particularly in conjunction with the concept of soulware, the model reader is directed towards more internalized, individualized practices of devotion.

This internalization as soulware, appears in the Prahlāda narrative more pointedly as Pandurang instructs her audience to ensure that they teach their children Hindu scripture:

> Teach them to memorize [Hindu scripture] even if they can't understand it
> yet. It is the key to their happiness.
>
> The Christian child knows his Bible.
> The Muslim child knows his Quran.
> The Hindu child is the only one who doesn't know even one single *śloka*![245]

To reiterate from the previous chapter, Pandurang is driving home her point about internalizing scripture, or in other words, programming proper soulware. Additionally, this quote also stands as an instance of her frequent comparisons between Hinduism and other world religions. In this example, she speaks of Christian and Muslim children in a positive light as she suggests that they are well versed in the soulware of their own religions, the Bible and the Quran. This casts a further positive reflection on Christian and Muslim parents and Christians and Muslims in general, as being dedicated practitioners of their respective religions. Moreover, by making this

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[245] Prema Pandurang, "Highlights of the *Bhagavatham*: A *Srimad Bhagavatham* Discourse" (Spiritual discourse, Sathya Sai Nigamagamam, Hyderabad, AP, January 18, 2006).

comparison, she also illustrates how devotion is a universal value or practice within major religions of the world.

Also within the Prahlāda narrative, Pandurang takes the opportunity to speak about other world religions within her proposed College of Values, an institution in which students will be given spiritual educations alongside secular curriculum. While she does not divulge the exact curriculum for the College, she does mention, on multiple occasions that students of the College will be required to learn about Hindu customs, traditions, practices and values. Additionally, Pandurang insists that students must also learn about other religions, particularly their values. Though she never quite defines what she means by values (oftentimes interchanging 'values' with 'ethics'), in general values for Prema Pandurang are often presented as universally applicable, and oftentimes found all religions.

Primarily though, her discussion of other religions within the *kathā* centers upon their devotional practices. She demonstrates how devotion can be found and admired in any religion, thereby positing devotion as both a universal religious value and as a value to cultivate. This is clearly seen at one point during the discourse, when Pandurang admonishes her audience to always practice daily worship:

> Do not give up your [daily *pūjā*s] for Heaven's sake! [I have] toured everywhere and never missed a day of *pūjā*! Never allow a day to go without doing *pūjā*—We should not give up our *pūjā*!

> My Muslim brother never forgets his *namāz*. The Christian brother never misses a Sunday. In Kuwait [there was] *namāz* in the middle of the market. I was so impressed. . . . But we don't …[inaudible]. Sad, sad, sad.

> As a preacher I must say this. Will you make me a promise? Every day do a *pūjā*. Have a bath, offer a flower…[inaudible].[246]

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[246] Ibid.; *Namāz* is an Islamic daily practice of performing prescribed ritual prayers five times a day.

In the above passage, Prema Pandurang reinforces her own request for her audience members to practice *pūjā* on a daily basis by showing her own example of practicing daily no matter where she travels and by comparing devotional practices from other world religions with those of *pūjā*. This is a very sophisticated rhetorical move, in that by talking about her own example—aside from the obvious evidence of practicing what she's preaching—Prema Pandurang also shows that the devotional practices she suggests are highly portable and may be accommodated within a cosmopolitan lifestyle. *Pūjā*, by her estimation, can be done anywhere. It need not be limited to your home, your local temple, or any other fixed location. She, Professor Prema Pandurang, the cosmopolitan, world-traveling preacher, makes time for *pūjā* wherever she goes. Thus, by demonstrating to her modern audience her own dedication to daily worship despite her extremely busy schedule, Prema Pandurang further implies that there is no reason anyone else, as a modern individual equivalent to her, can not also do as much.

Secondly, in this instance, it is possible to see that Prema Pandurang raises Hinduism onto the global arena by comparing it with other world religions. As she compares Hindu devotional practices (or lack thereof) to the devotional practices of her Christian brothers, religious men and women who never miss a Sunday of church, and to her Muslim brothers who never fail to do *namāz* five times a day, Prema Pandurang is not just critiquing the devotional fervor of her audience, or Hindus at large for that matter. Rather, by employing this comparison, she is also again placing Hinduism in conversation with other universal, or globally recognized religions. Rather than defining the specificity of devotional practice in local context, she shows that devotion is a universal practice that other people in other religions adhere to as well. She illustrates that all globally modern men and women have a capacity for the dedication required to practice devotion. *Pūjā* is Hinduism's daily devotional practice, and with its consistent,

scheduled status, the activity of *pūjā* becomes one that is comfortably associated with a sequential, modern calendar. Therefore, if Hinduism is to be compared to these other religions and if Hindus are to be considered real, enduringly modern Hindus, then they too must have their own regular devotional practice. Moreover, through this praise of the unfailing, constant devotion of members of other religions, Prema Pandurang further challenges her audience members to rise to the occasion, so that as Hindu devotees, they are not outdone by their Christian and Muslim counterparts.

This comparison also has the added effect of universalizing devotion amongst all religions and making other religions known, or making their widespread, prominent existence alongside Hinduism (the visibility of other religions becoming increasingly difficult to deny in instantaneous global media) an acceptable situation. That is to say Prema Pandurang emphasizes the idea that Hinduism is tolerant of other religions. For Pandurang, what other religious practitioners do within the contexts of their own traditions is considered acceptable, and by the same token, Hindus will also have their own practices. A "live and let live" type philosophy of tolerance and learning is once again prominent in the overall narrative of Hinduism.

Even as these statements about Christians and Muslims allow Prema Pandurang to demonstrate an inclusive stance regarding other religious practices, she is in the same breath, also able to demonstrate that she recognizes, and has authoritative knowledge of, other religions and cultures. The demonstration of this knowledge is an important component for a globally positioned, metropolitan preacher to display to her audience, especially as she simultaneously instructs them on the importance of maintaining their own Hindu practices. Since she also demonstrates that she has studied the scriptures and practices of other religions, Pandurang's instruction that Hindu scripture and practices are important, unique and the exact medicine that

her audience requires is much more credible to a modern, educated, cosmopolitan audience that has had exposure to various cultures, religions and ethnicities.

As with her call to delocalize religious practices, Prema Pandurang suggests the abandonment of more local austere aspects of timings for Hindu practices in favor of making them more flexible and thereby more likely to be practiced on a daily basis:

Throw away your almanacs!! . . . Don't give up your *pūjā!*[247]

And, at another moment during her lecture:

Any day that you decide to do anything good, is a good day. What is the [good] day to come?

Śrī Rāma and Kṛṣṇa came when needed. Don't listen to the almanac.[248]

These quotations from her lecture illustrate how she directly addresses the audience to do *pūjā* at any time. Her bold statement, "throw away your almanacs" empowers her audience to pray outside of the tight domains of astrologically-determined auspicious and inauspicious times designated in religious almanacs. Instead, as she reiterates in the second quote above, anytime is a good time to do *pūjā*. In other words, more important than the *when* is the *what*; it is more important that *what* one is doing is good and virtuous versus *when* one does it. The deed makes the timing more auspicious, rather than the timing imbuing the deed with auspiciousness. As an example of this, she cites Rāma and Kṛṣṇa who did not operate according to any almanac, but whose deeds were undoubtedly good and beneficial to the lives they touched. Thus, by presenting *pūjā* as a good, auspicious devotional practice to perform at anytime, *pūjā* becomes more convenient to perform—even on a daily basis, perhaps—for her audience, whose lives are dictated by Gregorian calendars and enmeshed in corporate schedules. Aside from being a

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[247] Ibid.

[248] Prema Pandurang, "Highlights of the *Bhagavatham*: A *Srimad Bhagavatham* Discourse" (Spiritual discourse, Sathya Sai Nigamagamam, Hyderabad, AP, January 20, 2006).

pragmatic move that might encourage more daily worship from her audience, Pandurang's rejection of almanacs also expresses a rejection of superstitious behavior, as it rejects the idea of auspicious and inauspicious times being determined by astrology alone. This rejection of astrologically-based decision making and worship also appeals to the more scientific, logical and rational members of her audience whose growing distaste for the superstitious aspects of Hinduism is demonstrated in the way they eschew horoscopes, street fakirs and other such things.[249]

Finally, Prema Pandurang's pragmatism for portable practice is also made evident by the packaging of her own *Bhāgavata* discourse. The *kathā* performance she offered was held in the evenings from 6:00 p.m. to 8:00 p.m. over the course of six days. Not only was this a relatively short period of two hours per lecture, but more importantly it was scheduled in the evenings after the usual nine to five working hours. This comfortable schedule exemplifies the performative, shared repertoire Pandurang and her audience make together. The discourse's schedule ideally fits around the schedule of the modern workday and workweek, thereby enabling audiences to partake in this type of religious discourse without sacrificing their paychecks. This is yet another way in which Pandurang packages a more portable Hinduism for her audiences.

Kṛṣṇa *Bhakta*s vs. Rāma *Bhakta*s

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[249] Consider the Federation of Indian Rationalists, an organization committed to promoting an ethos of scientific rationalism. As an example of their ongoing sentiment against superstition, the Federation secretary, chemistry professor Narendra Nayak, using his positivistic scientific background, travels around India debunking fraudulent fakirs who cheat the poor, and has been featured doing so on the televised, National Geographic special "Is it Real?". "Is it Real?" National Geographic Channel. Television. 2005-2007.

Among the various marks of the audience's relative affluence and middle and upper class status was the clothing and ornamentation of the audience members. Scanning the audience, it was apparent that the ladies, with the exception of a few elderly women, were all dressed in elegant saris. Most wore fine silk saris in rich colors, often decorated with gold embroidery or other embellishments. The ears, necks and wrists of all the women I noticed were also adorned with gold. This was how most women dressed for every discourse, as this attire—saris and matching jewelry (earrings, necklace and bangles at minimum) to complete their outfits—was considered appropriate for religious functions. Of all the audiences at performances I sat among, Prema Pandurang's was undoubtedly one of the best dressed. This was especially the case on the fourth night of the discourse, as the audience was instructed the night before by Prema Pandurang to dress up for the "Lord's birthday."[250] By the "Lord's birthday" Pandurang was referring to the performance of the birth narrative of Kṛṣṇa. Surveying the well-dressed room with approval, Prema Pandurang introduced Krsna's birth story with an interesting comparison that commented on clothing and Kṛṣṇa *bhakta*s:

> What difference between Rāma and Kṛṣṇa? The same Nārāyaṇa came to be
> Rāma and Kṛṣṇa. But these two personalities differed so much.
> One came to obey; The other came to command
> One came to give; The other came to demand
> One came to live a simple life; The other a princely one!
>
> There is also a difference between Rāma *bhakta*s and Kṛṣṇa *bhakta*s.
>
> If you are a Rāma *bhakta* you say 'Yes. *jī-hān. Sarē, sarē. Aṭlā*'[251]Kṛṣṇa
> *bhakta*s say: 'Please open the door! Get the *prasād*! Get the oil lamps!' All
> the commanding people are Kṛṣṇa *bhakta*s and all the obeying people are
> Rāma *bhakta*s.

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[250] Prema Pandurang, "Highlights of the *Bhagavatam*: A *Srimad Bhagavatham* Discourse" (Spiritual discourse, Sathya Sai Nigamagamam, Hyderabad, AP, January 18, 2006).

[251] *Jī-hān. Sarē, sarē. Aṭlā* are all ways of saying 'yes' or 'ok' in Hindi, Telugu and Telugu, respectively.

> If you ask the Rāma *bhakta*s to wear jewelry they will make do with mother's or sister's. But if you ask the Kṛṣṇa *bhakta*, they all require gold ornamentation.
>
> If you ask Rāma *bhakta*s how many clothes they want they will simply say 'Whatever is practical.' The Kṛṣṇa *bhakta*s will say 'I owned that sari last year. But how can I repeat it? How can I share from someone else? I'm not sharing.'
>
> All the jewelry shops and your cloth shops are simply because of Kṛṣṇa *bhakta*s. [The audience begins applauding even before she asks them to.] Please give them a hand.[252]

The audience not only clapped loudly at this fascinating comparison, but their reaction was perhaps one of the most enthusiastic they produced during the entire six-day discourse. Prema Pandurang's well-dressed audience seemed to take immense pride in these statements. They were extremely happy to be identified as affluent, commanding Kṛṣṇa *bhakta*s. Their boisterous clapping—even before the statement's conclusion—expressed their ready acceptance of this fact.

Through this comparison of Rāma and Kṛṣṇa devotees, Prema Pandurang validates her own and the audience's consumptive modes, making wealth completely acceptable, at least rhetorically, with the example of the affluent, domineering Kṛṣṇa *bhakta*. Interestingly enough, through this contrast of *bhakta*s, the humble, modest, and austere Rāma *bhakta*--which would seem to be the more virtuous role model to be emulated—is in fact depicted as somewhat subservient both in manner and in comparison to the commanding and consumptive Kṛṣṇa *bhakta*. To be clear, Prema Pandurang did not necessarily dismiss or deride Rāma *bhakta*s and their austerity, but rather, she pointedly celebrates the wealth, power and consumption of the Kṛṣṇa *bhakta*.

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[252] Prema Pandurang, "Highlights of the *Bhagavatham*: A *Srimad Bhagavatham* Discourse" (Spiritual discourse, Sathya Sai Nigamagamam, Hyderabad, AP, January 19, 2006).

Based on this delineation between Kṛṣṇa *bhakta*s and Rāma *bhakta*s, Kṛṣṇa *bhakta*s become central figures in the production of their world. By balancing the forces of modernity and celebrating glamorous consumption, Kṛṣṇa *bhakta*s make the world go round, or at least—the local economy. The audience members are encouraged to take pride in being bossy and decisive, and in having a finely honed sense of where to buy the best (i.e. high-end, luxurious, most fashionable and expensive) things. They know the finest restaurants, most stylish sari shops and upscale jewelry boutiques. The fact that they know where these locations are is indicative of the highly skilled consumption that is part of their socio-economic status.

To summarize, the verse above—which compares Kṛṣṇa to Rāma, and in turn Kṛṣṇa devotees to Rāma devotees—transmits three main concepts that Prema Pandurang reiterates in her lecture. Firstly is the value accorded to wealth. Her narrative presents consumption and wealth as completely acceptable and normative. The princely aspects of Kṛṣṇa, his regal manner, beautiful clothes and jewelry are often stressed throughout her lecture.

Secondly, her lecture glorifies what might, in other contexts, seem offensive. Prema Pandurang paints the bossy, managerial persona in a positive light, and indeed, celebrates the characteristics of an authoritative commander. Instead of pointing out these individuals' domineering characteristics as a negative in her portrayal of the Kṛṣṇa *bhakta,* these people are the leaders who get things done, even though they do not do it themselves. They are natural managers. This description appeals to her audience members, many of whom are managers, businessmen and various other types of leaders—from housewives running households to politicians running state and local governments. The positive values Prema Pandurang accords them fall in line with Kṛṣṇa's personality as a commander. The audience, in identifying with Kṛṣṇa, asserts that they are commanders and kings. These categories are now occupied by the

rich, upper classes, subverting hierarchy such that class hierarchies, and the authoritativeness that goes along with them, are more prominent than brahmanical authority. No one in the audience wants to identify with the meek and austere, or to take to the roles of obedient workers or humble servants.

And thirdly, it is worth mentioning that the above comparison of Rama *bhakta*s and Kṛṣṇa *bhakta*s recognizes women just as much as men, as being Kṛṣṇa *bhakta*s. This is facilitated most readily through a focus on the consumption of saris and jewelry. Aside from consumption, women's roles as leaders are also portrayed in the comparison above through the commands doled out, such as, 'Please open the door! Get the *prasād*! Get the oil lamps!' While those commands could be meted out by a man, it is more in line with the portrait of a woman behind the scenes, organizing a *pūjā* for her house or the greater community. Women play a more important and equal role in Pandurang's discourse, and this will be explored more fully in the final section of this chapter.

Prema Pandurang's discourse often returned to the themes of wealth and consumption. As seen in the previous chapter, Prema Pandurang attracts her audience by favorably portraying the signs of wealth and modernity during her performances. Within the auditorium, Pandurang leverages a refined display of aesthetics on the stage and on her person. Outside the auditorium, this aesthetic sensibility is visible on billboard advertisements that highlight her refined pedigree as a cosmopolitan scholar and modern spiritual leader. Not surprisingly, one of the more prominent themes running through Prema Pandurang's lecture is the focus on material wealth and consumption. As seen in the performance at Kolapalli featured in the first two chapters, renunciation and austerity are considered important aspects of ritual practice. Renunciation and austerity however, constitute a tremendous clash of values for upwardly mobile middle class

families who define themselves and their new identities through consumption. The cosmopolitan world they engage with not only provides a context in which to obtain material sustenance and an upper-class way of life; it also provides a myriad of new material markers of success. In many ways, the distinctions and material luxuries offered through a consumptive modern lifestyle align themselves with a source of pride that practitioners would not want to give up or relinquish. Practitioners do not see anything wrong with being wealthy. Processes of industry and commercial consumption—the pursuit of wealth—are celebrated as providing the push needed to grow the country. Hyderabad in particular concentrates this nationalistic push to grow info-commerce sectors.[253] This acceptance of modern technology and industry is seen to be extremely urgent. In this respect, the way in which Prema Pandurang deals with wealth and renunciation has broader implications that stretch beyond the walls of the auditorium.

In her comparison of the Kṛṣṇa *bhakta* and Rama *bhakta* above, Pandurang is able to celebrate, and almost advocate wealth and consumption as a natural facet of being a Kṛṣṇa *bhakta*. The brilliance of her lecture is that she balances these attitudes towards wealth and consumption alongside those more traditionally expected values of renunciation and austerity. More specifically, she utilizes two strategies to present wealth and consumption as acceptable and even positive within the context of her *kathā*.

The first strategy involves redefining renunciation as it is negotiated by the modern *tapasvin*, an ascetic who practices *tapasyā*, religious austerities.

> We want to behave as we want but we cannot; We have to control our greed, anger, jealousy. We have to behave as we should. Behave as we should—this is called *tapasyā*.
>
> You can practice *tapasyā* at home. Do *tapasyā* by controlling *kāma* and *krodha*. . . .The [*Bhagavad*] *Gītā* tells us 5th chapter 23rd verse:

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[253] James Heitzman, *The City in South Asia*, 220.

śaknotīhaiva yaḥ soḍhuṃ prāk śarīra-vimokṣaṇāt |
kāma-krodhodbhavaṃ vegaṃ sa yuktaḥ sa sukhī naraḥ || [254]

[This is] the formula for being a *tapasvin*, which says 'control yourself.' You don't have to have matted hair. You don't have to wear garments of tree bark, or live in the forest with matted hair. You can be a *tapasvin* at home. You practice self-control.[255]

In other words, Pandurang rejects traditional images of wandering forest ascetics who made their clothes from tree bark and donned matted tresses. Nor as she explains further is there a need to cling to such an outdated model of going to the forest or even an ashram to practice *tapasyā* (severe austerities). Instead, she redefines *tapasyā* as simply practicing self-control. By bolstering this argument with the words of Kṛṣṇa himself, taken from a verse from the *Bhagavad Gītā*, she argues that the "formula for being a *tapasvin*" is control over desire and anger. Pandurang stretches this further to explain that such self-control over desire and anger in any context does not require full or even partial renunciation. One should be able to practice self-control anywhere—including in the comfort and convenience of one's home—simply by undertaking the discipline to reflect upon and control one's greed and anger.

This redefining of a *tapasvin* is an important metacommunicative moment in which Prema Pandurang negotiates these conflicting ideals of asceticism and consumerism for and with her audience. The traditional definitions of *tapasyā*—living under ascetic conditions which include not attending to one's hair (such that it grows and eventually becomes matted), wearing few if any clothes, living in the forest and undertaking harsh physical austerities—might normally engender feelings of irrelevance within her audience members, who might view these

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[254] *Bhagavad Gītā*, V.23. Translation: One who is able to withstand the urges arising from desire and anger before shedding this body, that one is a yogin [lit: united or joined]. He is a happy man.

[255] Prema Pandurang, "Highlights of the *Bhagavatham*: A *Srimad Bhagavatham* Discourse" (Spiritual discourse, Sathya Sai Nigamagamam, Hyderabad, AP, January 18, 2006).

things as not only undesirable and archaic, but also as simply impossible given their current lifestyles. Pandurang redefines and thereby renegotiates the terms of religious austerities or *tapasyā* to accommodate the audience's modern, consumerist, middle-class, family-oriented, urban-dwelling lives. Thus, whereas negotiating a place for asceticism to even be acknowledged in their day-to-day lives might seem near impossible, Prema Pandurang makes it completely possible to practice at all times, regardless of material circumstances, by placing *tapasyā* within the realm of the individual. That is to say, that by defining *tapasyā* as an individual practice of self-control, the notion of *tapasyā* is shifted from these outwardly tangible practices of austerity to a more personally-determined, internally-focused ethical practice.

Prema Pandurang's designation of an individualized space for internalized ascetic practices of self-control is in sharp contrast to what was seen in Kolapalli, where audience members collectively practice obvious austerities for the entire duration of the *saptāha*, along with concomitant rituals and local traditions. By designating self-control as an acceptable form of *tapasyā*, not only does Pandurang allay any complaints regarding the archaism or impracticality of *tapasyā* as envisioned in earlier texts—matted hair, ascetic practices, etc.—but she also provides her audience members a means by which they can continue to assert themselves as practicing the customs and traditions of Hinduism, thereby defining themselves as good, modern Hindu practitioners.

Moreover, within her new appraisal of individual and practical ritual realms, wherein *tapasyā* becomes more about self-control than physical austerities, Pandurang is further shifting the practice of *tapasyā* into the realm of universal ethics. The particular practice of controlling greed, anger and jealousy are universally recognized in most religions—and indeed, most social situations—as good and pious behavior. Pandurang's definition of *tapasyā* defines and

designates the matters that must be adhered to in order to be a good person and Hindu practitioner; that being good conduct. What is good is also determinedly sanitary and resolutely modern, rejecting the forest-dwelling, disheveled, non-fashionable appearance of traditional ascetics to instead take up the position of a well-dressed, and thereby, well-contained human being who resides in the world. Again, this rhetorical move shifts the conversation about *tapasyā* to something the individual is able to achieve, thereby connecting *tapasyā*—through the idea of a singular, particular individual equally recognizable among all others—to the realm of universal ethics. This differs from the approach audience members took in Kolapalli, in the sense that while people there practiced self-restraint, not all of their practices of self-restraint necessarily resonated on a universal level. For example, sleeping on the floor and abstaining from certain foods are practices that delineate *tapasyā* within a very particular set of material parameters, and not necessarily in reference to more universal ethical positions.

This self-control, however, does not necessarily limit consumption—certainly not in regards to fine clothing. Prema Pandurang often instructs her audience to be sure to wear not only nice, clean clothing, but also *new* clothing, whenever attending *kathā*s, *pūjā*s or any other religious ritual:

> Don't forget your *pūjā*; not for any reason. And when you go for *pūjā*, don't wear old clothes to the *pūjā*. Wear only nice new dresses, appropriate clothing only! [You] come to *kathā* wearing clothes with spots—what is this? Nobody is coming in this. . .
>
> I want children to reclaim their Indianness.
>
> For the *kathā*, for the *pūjā*, please wear only nice new dresses. Even the poorest of the people come wearing a new sari.[256]

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[256] Prema Pandurang, "Highlights of the *Bhagavatham*: A *Srimad Bhagavatham* Discourse" (Spiritual discourse, Sathya Sai Nigamagamam, Hyderabad, AP, January 20, 2006).

Though it is a longstanding practice to bathe and wear clean clothes prior to attending a *pūjā*, a temple or performing any other religious act, Prema Pandurang's additional call to dress in *new* clothing, adds another requirement—a noticeably more affluent requirement—to ritual practices, particularly *kathā*s. While certainly, when sponsoring a *pūjā* or other religious ritual, practitioners often do wear new clothing, new clothing is by no means the standard of respectful comportment for daily *pūjā*s, attending *kathā*s, or other religious discourses and events. Therefore, Pandurang's instruction to wear new saris and clothing condones and further encourages the cycle of consumption amongst her audience members, as she insists that even the poorest person can afford to wear a new sari for religious events. While on the one hand, her instruction seems to recognize economic inequalities, on the other, it seems to greatly downplay the difficulty that members of the lower socio-economic classes would encounter when trying to purchase new clothing for every proposed religious event. Instead of addressing these material inequalities, Prema Pandurang prescribes for everyone, regardless of economic class, a program of consumption.

At the same time, this instruction about personal attire also encourages the people in her audience to prepare themselves as ideally packaged individuals. This emphasis on self-presentation resonates with the notion of a modern, clean, self-contained individual. The commands Prema Pandurang makes are consistent with a generalized, neat, clean, fresh comportment of the self. Well-dressed audience members, in maintaining their careful appearance, remain well-ordered recipients of her lecture. Moreover, clothing, particularly *new* clothing, becomes yet one more item by which to define one's self. The higher one's economic status, the more elaborate and extravagant one's clothing and jewelry become. Finally, Pandurang connects wearing new clothes to *pūjā* as an important Indian value, as she connects

this to lessons that must be taught to children in order to help them maintain their 'Indianness.' Thus, Pandurang's insistence that new clothes are the basic standard of comportment for performing and/or attending any religious rituals or discourses, establish new clothes (and thereby their consumption) as an important Hindu value, while simultaneously stamping out notions of economical reuse of clean attire, let alone ascetic attitudes towards dress.

Besides redefining *tapasyā* in such a way that her audience members do not need to compromise their lifestyles nor entirely limit their consumptive patterns, Prema Pandurang employs another strategy to reconcile wealth and consumption with the ascetic strands of the *Bhāgavata Purana*; Prema Pandurang establishes the claim that Kṛṣṇa *bhakta*s have a god-given right to wealth. Wealth is redefined as good and inherent with Kṛṣṇa *bhakta*s, as in the following example, when she recounts an anecdote between her father and herself regarding why Kṛṣṇa was born with jewels:

> My learned father wanted to test me, his learned student. . . . 'I can answer all your questions,' I said.
>
> So he asked me sternly, 'Why is Śrī Kṛṣṇa born with all the jewelry?'
>
> I thought, 'My God! No one has asked me why was Kṛṣṇa born with jewelry.'
>
> Everybody likes to give something to a new baby. They like to buy a new dress for the baby. Even the poorest person wants a new dress for the baby. Vasudeva and Devakī had all their wealth and riches—even from her dowry!—everything was taken away by Kaṃsa. They had nothing to give Kṛṣṇa when he came. They were lamenting this fact.
>
> Kṛṣṇa said, 'Don't worry. I will come with a solution. No matter. . . . I'll wear everything I need.'
>
> What does this mean? [*momentary pause*]

> [*In a booming voice:*] No Kṛṣṇa *bhakta* is allowed to feel an inferiority complex, because the Lord will never allow his *bhakta*s to feel an inferiority complex! [*Audience applauds enthusiastically.*][257]

As the quote above demonstrates, it is Kṛṣṇa's birthright, as royalty, to be given all of the fineries associated with royalty—a crown, fine silk clothing, jewelry, etc—but, because his uncle, King Kaṃsa has stripped his parents of their wealth, with the further intention of killing Kṛṣṇa upon his birth, he is denied these birthrights. As Pandurang explains, in response to his parents' despair, and because he is Kṛṣṇa after all, his birthright cannot be denied. Therefore, Kṛṣṇa is born with his own crown and royal accoutrement. Considering this more carefully, Kṛṣṇa does not wait for or expect anyone to give him his birthright, but asserts it himself right at birth. Likewise, based on this example, Kṛṣṇa *bhakta*s are also empowered to assert their own place at the top of the socioeconomic hierarchy, and to some extent as cosmopolitans, their place in the world-community. Thus, Kṛṣṇa *bhakta*s are not to feel bad about consumption and luxury, but are instead to understand how to use their consumption of luxurious goods such that they never appear or seem inferior to any other group, class or community. Furthermore, under this paradigm, wealth becomes symbolic of Kṛṣṇa taking care of his *bhakta*s, as it serves to act as a shield or protective armor, protecting *bhakta*s from feeling inferior to any other group, while simultaneously broadcasting their status.

Prema Pandurang's carefully crafted discourse on wealth ultimately stresses that Hindus have as much right to a place in the world community as any other group, and thus, with it, concomitant rights and responsibilities. They are as worthy of partaking in, and enjoying this world's offerings and material goods, as are members of any other nation or religion. Though it is never explicitly mentioned throughout the discourse, this mention of a potential inferiority

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[257] Ibid.

complex that Kṛṣṇa *bhakta*s must be protected against suggests the specter of oppression from a colonial history in which Indians were treated as less than British nationals, and where Hindus were considered polytheistic, idol-worshipping, and therefore primitive natives in comparison to the monotheistic, 'enlightened' Christian colonizers. The inferiority complex can also refer to a struggle at a national level, against third-world status, especially in light of the fast-developing information, technology and consumer goods sectors. The explosive growth in these economic sectors is currently further expanding the huge gap between the rising middle/upper socioeconomic classes and the lower socioeconomic classes, who live and labor in abject poverty without access to education, opportunity, or for that matter, basic plumbing. Thus, often with an image of two Indias that seems to operate in the world—this rising, affluent, educated, democratic metropolitan India versus this downtrodden, poor, uneducated, superstitious, patriarchal, rural and slum-filled India—the upper and middle classes who attend Prema Pandurang's lecture tend to want to push back against the negatively stereotyped India. While no one is suggesting that poverty is not evident in India, Pandurang's audience members struggle against constantly being measured against that in the larger global scene. Instead, they want the positive aspects of their religion, culture and nation to be portrayed, accounted for and placed in the primary narrative of the nation and themselves.[258]

Based upon the strategies employed above therefore, it is clear that wealth and consumption are an important value in this *kathā*. Among her audience members, wealth

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[258] These dialogues and aspirations to achieve a uniformly progressive, successful national narrative are not without innocent bystanders. Conspicuous consumption by India's growing middle class is part and parcel of a lifestyle often modeled after the practices of Non-Resident Indians and global entrepreneurs. (See Salim Lakha, "The state, globalization and middle class identity." *in* Culture and Privilege in Capitalist Asia. Michael Pinches (ed.), London: Routledge, (1999), 252-276.) These practices of globally inspired consumption within India's middle class produce an increasingly exclusive realm of services, neighborhoods, bylaws and infrastructures that also marginalize an underclass without access to the most basic forms of material stability. See Leela Fernandes, "The Politics of Forgetting: Class Politics, State Power and the Restructuring of Urban Space in India." *Urban Studies,* vol. 41, (2004), 2415-2430.

represents status, achievement, protection and a modern passage into a global future. It also represents a means of constructing self-identity, as it allows members to adorn themselves in the outward trappings of a modern, successful, cosmopolitan person. This is not to say that Prema Pandurang only cares about monetary wealth. For her, as well as for the modern audience she has, wealth expresses a value, and is still subordinate to cultivating virtue in oneself. These concepts of virtue are further explored in the following section, through the narrative of the wedding of Rukmiṇī and Kṛṣṇa.

Banking on Virtue: Egalitarianism in the *Bhāgavata Kathā*

Earlier, in this chapter's discussion of cosmopolitanism and modernity, it became clear that egalitarian and democratic ideals are cosmopolitan, modern values. This is in contrast to the world of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, in which Brahmanical hierarchy and patriarchy are honored and upheld. How then does Prema Pandurang manage to support the egalitarian ideals that are part of modern, cosmopolitan thinking, even while the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* maintains a Brahmanical, patriarchal system? How then, can both coexist within this cosmopolitan *kathā*? This section focuses on Prema Pandurang's discourse on virtuous character, which ultimately reconciles a discourse on egalitarian and democratic values with the Brahminical and patriarchal hierarchy inherent in the *Bhāgavata*. In this emergent text, one's virtue, or more specifically, one's virtuous character, becomes the most important criteria by which any one individual might be judged. Virtue trumps—and consequently informs upon—all other forms of social, familial or global-economic currency.

Because virtue is given priority over all other values, whenever Pandurang talks about a devotee who embodies virtue, this also provides her with an occasion to illustrate equal opportunity, showing how devotees can come from any gender or caste, and thereby, in their

religious practice, overcome the limitations of their socioeconomic categories. Ultimately, Pandurang's discourse achieves this by highlighting the narratives in the *Bhāgavata* in which devotees of Kṛṣṇa transcend the worldly hierarchies of caste, gender and social group through their virtuous character and ultimate submission of themselves to Kṛṣṇa. These devotees are placed on the top of the more important hierarchy, that of Kṛṣṇa *bhakti*. Certainly, there is a great deal of evidence that the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* itself subverts these hierarchies by privileging the purest *bhakta*s.[259] While the *Bhāgavata* does not denounce the caste system, it does subvert it with multiple examples of devotees from lower castes and economic status who have immediate, direct access to Kṛṣṇa, and are favored by Kṛṣṇa because of their supreme devotion and virtue. Thus, by highlighting that subversive aspect of the *Bhāgavata*, Prema Pandurang's discourse presents an egalitarian discourse in which one rises to the top through virtuous conduct and submission to Kṛṣṇa.

In this way, the possibility for a more democratic and egalitarian society is presented, where people's status changes and flows freely from generation to generation, superseding a static social world where privilege, passed from elder to successor, is a given. To that end, people's virtuous character based on their virtuous thoughts and deeds is what will really make a difference when it comes to accruing status. The virtue par excellence, furthermore, is complete devotion or submission to Kṛṣṇa. These ideas will further be explored through the retelling of the

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[259] In his essay, *The Social Teaching of the Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, T.J. Hopkins makes the case that the *Bhāgavata* subverts the traditional Vedic religious ceremonies, not by criticizing the Vedas, but instead, by consistently showing how Kṛṣṇa *bhakti* is superior. Moreover, this new *bhakti* glorified in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* has no restrictions on participation based on birth and status, unlike participation in orthodox ceremonies. He writes, "The *Bhāgavata* thus not only recognizes the significant differences between *bhakti* religion and Vedic or orthodox religion, but also repeatedly stresses the independence of *bhakti* from all alternative means of salvation. Criticism of orthodoxy does not stop at the theological level. Dissatisfaction with the *status quo* extends beyond the strictly religious sphere and includes all the traditional socioreligious system. Here the primary objective is to refute the idea that a person's birth, social status, or caste membership is of any significance with respect to salvation by means of devotion." Thomas J. Hopkins, "The Social Teaching of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*," in *Kṛṣṇa: Myths, Rites, and Attitudes*, ed. M. Singer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 13.

Rukmiṇī Kalyāṇa, and again in Kṛṣṇa's birth story, both of which feature the metacommunicative moments that place virtue above gender, skin color and caste.

Though Pandurang's lecture is full of examples of virtuous devotees and lessons about virtue, perhaps the most compelling example is found in her telling of Rukmiṇī's wedding to Kṛṣṇa, also known as *Rukmiṇī Kalyāṇa* or *Rukmiṇī Vivāha*.[260] Proclaiming Rukmiṇī and Kṛṣṇa as role models for householders, Pandurang reproduces this love story by featuring virtue at the heart of it. Rukmiṇī is not just a devoted partner to Kṛṣṇa, but also an ardent devotee of Kṛṣṇa and as such displays all of the requisite virtues of a devotee in abundance. In fact, because of her virtuous character she wins Kṛṣṇa's heart and is considered a suitable match for Kṛṣṇa himself.

From the very start of her telling of the Rukmiṇī narrative, Pandurang begins to lay down the foundation for Rukmiṇī and Kṛṣṇa's marriage as a role model for other relationships and family values:

> Rukmiṇī Vivāha—A role model for householders…
> [In a musing tone] The subtleties of life. . . . [inaudible] You all have homes; you should have. But what are you earning for? 'I work seven a.m. to seven p.m. I work hard.' You go overseas for money. What is the point of earning so much, and leaving wives and children? What value [going] from millionaires to billionaires?[261]

Aside from labeling of Rukmiṇī and Kṛṣṇa as model householders, Pandurang reiterates messages from earlier regarding wealth—that while wealth is good and brings security (here, in the form of a home), it does not bring happiness and is not the most important value. While Pandurang even insists that everyone *should* have homes, she simultaneously engages the audience in questioning how much they really need, as she asks them, what is the point of

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[260] Both *kalyāṇa* and *vivāha* mean 'wedding,' the first in Sanskrit and the latter in Hindi. Most persons in Andhra refer to the Wedding of Kṛṣṇa and Rukmiṇī as the *Rukmiṇī Kaḷyāṇamu* or *Kaḷyāṇam*.

[261] Prema Pandurang, "Highlights of the *Bhagavatham*: A *Srimad Bhagavatham* Discourse" (Spiritual discourse, Sathya Sai Nigamagamam, Hyderabad, AP, January 21, 2006).

earning so much money if you cannot enjoy life? Enjoying life in the scenario above means spending time with one's family. While Prema Pandurang does not continue this theme of family values in the rest of the Rukmiṇī narrative, she does use this moment of relegating wealth into an inferior position to spending quality time with family. By putting family life above material considerations, she begins to position virtue as the most important consideration in choosing a life partner, and ultimately, as the most important qualification for evaluating a person.

As Pandurang continues to introduce the narrative, she is careful to ensure that the love story between Rukmiṇī and Kṛṣṇa unfolds as one based on virtues and not on wealth, status, and looks, even though both Rukmiṇī and Kṛṣṇa are often described as exceedingly attractive by all standards:

> *śrībādarāyaṇir uvāca |*
> *rājāsīd bhīṣmako nāma vidarbhādhipatir mahān |*
> *tasya pancābhavan putrāḥ kanyaikā ca varānanā ||*
> *rukmy agrajo rukmaratho rukmabāhur anantaraḥ |*
> *rukmakeśo rukmamālī rukminy eṣāṃ svasā satī ||*[262]
>
> Five sons and one good girl—Rukmin, Rukmaratha, Rukmabāhu, Rukmakeśa, Rukmamālin. Then there was Rukmiṇī with the golden complexion, very beautiful.
>
> *sopaśrutya mukundasya rūpavīryaguṇaśriyaḥ |*
> *gṛhāgatair gīyamānās taṃ mene sadṛśaṃ patim ||*
> *tāṃ buddhi lakṣaṇaudāryarūpaśīlaguṇāśrayām |*
> *kṛṣṇaś ca sadṛśīṃ bhāryāṃ samudvoḍhuṃ mano dadhe ||*[263]

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[262] *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, X.52.21-22. Translation:
Śrī Suka said:
There was a great king of Vaidarbha known as Bhīṣmaka. He had five sons and a lovely-faced daughter. [21]
Rukmīn was the first-born, and then Rukmaratha and Rukmabāhu, Rukmakeśa, Rukmamālin. Their sister was the virtuous Rukmiṇī. [22]

[263] *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, X.52.23-24. Translation:
Having heard the beauty, valor, virtues and wealth of Kṛṣṇa being sung by those who came to [her] house, she thought him to be a deserving husband. [23]
Kṛṣṇa too, considered her [Rukmiṇī], the embodiment of intelligence, physical marks, nobility, beauty, good conduct and virtue, a befitting wife to marry. [24]

> She heard about Kṛṣṇa from people who came to her father's court and decided she would marry him. He also accepted her because he heard all her *guṇa*.[264]

Rukmiṇī is introduced as beautiful right at the start of the narrative, both in the original Sanskrit as well as in Pandurang's telling. However, as Pandurang stresses to the audience, Kṛṣṇa does not fall in love with her because of her looks, as he has never even laid eyes on her at this point. Instead, according to Pandurang, he falls in love with her because of the virtues she possesses. But even before Kṛṣṇa falls in love with Rukmiṇī, she falls in love with Kṛṣṇa sight unseen based on the reports she hears of his great qualities and decides that Kṛṣṇa would make a suitable life partner. It is worth noting that in the original verses from the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* that Pandurang cites, alongside of virtue, physical appearance also makes it on both Rukmiṇī and Kṛṣṇa's lists of compatibility factors, while wealth also appears as a consideration on Rukmiṇī's list. Nonetheless, as neither has seen each other, it is evident that neither lover based their decisions primarily on appearance, but on something more substantial. In these verses and in Prema Panurang's gloss of the verses, both Rukmiṇī and Kṛṣṇa are portrayed as embodiments of the highest virtue and therefore, compatible with one another. Pandurang further makes the case that Rukmiṇī and Kṛṣṇa's mutual attraction and decisions to marry one another is based upon each other's superior character.

As Pandurang continues to emphasize the foundation of virtue in Rukmiṇī and Kṛṣṇa's wedding narrative, she also contrasts their marriage to current marriage practices in India, in which potential mates choose one another based on wealth and physical attributes, particularly with a pervasive bias towards lighter skin complexions and against darker skin complexions.

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[264] Prema Pandurang, "Highlights of the *Bhagavatham*: A *Srimad Bhagavatham* Discourse" (Spiritual discourse, Sathya Sai Nigamagamam, Hyderabad, AP, January 21, 2006).

Prema Pandurang proceeds to make this critique, while expounding upon the auspicious verses

that Rukmiṇī sends to Kṛṣṇa expressing her feelings for him and request for marriage:

> śrutvā guṇān bhuvanasundara śṛṇvatāṃ te
> nirviśya karṇavivarair harato 'ṅgatāpam |
> rūpaṃ dṛśāṃ dṛśimatām akhilārthalābhaṃ
> tvayy acyutāviśati cittam apatrapaṃ me ||[265]

> 'Kṛṣṇa, I have not seen you but I have heard of you.'
> Our first interaction with the Lord is auditory. We don't know him but we
> have heard of him—*Śravaṇa!*

> kā tvā mukunda mahatī kulaśīlarūpa-
> vidyāvayodraviṇadhāmabhir ātmatulyam |
> dhīrā patiṃ kulavatī na vṛṇīta kanyā
> kāle nṛsiṃha naralokamano 'bhirāmam ||[266]

> Don't choose a life partner merely for complexion or for dowry, but choose
> a good person. Think about a transfer of virtues not bank accounts.
> [applause] Not for external beauty. Not for the color of the cheeks.
> *śrutvā guṇān te bhuvanasundara*!
> A good man! A good man that is what is important—that is what is
> *bhuvanasundara*![267]

Prema Pandurang begins her exposition of the verses by first establishing Rukmiṇī's love for

Kṛṣṇa as "love at first sound" and connecting that with *śravaṇa bhakti,* or devotion through

hearing. As Prema Pandurang explains, one's first experience of the God is through *śravaṇa*, or

hearing about him. By punctuating the word '*śravaṇa*' in her discourse, Pandurang further

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[265] *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, X.52.37.Translation:
Having heard your good qualities which, having entered through the openings of the ears of those who are listening, carry away the suffering of the body, O Beautiful One in [All Three] Worlds, [and] your form which, having entered the eyes of those who are beholding, is the acquisition of all benefits, O Acyuta [Kṛṣṇa], entering in you, my mind is one whose bashfulness is gone.

[266] *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, X.52.38. Translation:
In the right time, O Mukunda [Kṛṣṇa], what good woman, courageous and of good breeding, would not choose you as the husband who is equal to herself by means of family, character, beauty, learning, age, money and glory, who is pleasing to the minds of the human world, O Man-Lion [Kṛṣṇa]?

[267] Prema Pandurang, "Highlights of the *Bhagavatham*: A *Srimad Bhagavatham* Discourse" (Spiritual discourse, Sathya Sai Nigamagamam, Hyderabad, AP, January 21, 2006).

connects Rukmiṇī's act of love at first sound, to her earlier exposition of *śravaṇa bhakti* from the Prahlāda narrative. There, Prahlāda explains in his famous verse in the Seventh Canto that *śravaṇa bhakti*, or devotion through hearing about God, is one of the nine forms of devotion.[268] Thus, the concept of love at first sound, particularly as it pertains to Lord Kṛṣṇa in this situation, takes on a more devotional aspect, in addition to its earnest and noble casting as being virtue-based as opposed to superficially based on appearance or wealth.

Progressing to the second verse, which has Rukmiṇī asking 'why wouldn't anyone choose someone as virtuous as Kṛṣṇa for a partner?' Pandurang glosses the verse such that it is about choosing future mates wisely. Pandurang further develops the point that marriage must be based on compatibility of virtues, as she censures marriage choices based on complexion and/or dowry, two prominent types of discrimination in match selection in India. Once again, co-opting modern institutional practices, in this case that of bank account transfers, Pandurang generates a more spiritual counterpart, a "transfer of virtues," in order to contrast virtues with material wealth. Using this language of modern banking, Pandurang encourages her audience to envision virtue as not only a transferrable asset, but also as a commodity that can be accumulated and increased by building relationships with virtuous persons. With this model of transferring virtues, Pandurang further encourages her audiences to opt for 'transfers of virtue' above transfers of bank accounts (i.e. dowry) or even the superficial desires for lighter-skinned partners.

Pandurang ends her gloss of the second verse by repeating a line from the first verse, "*śrutvā guṇān te bhuvanasundara*," in order to reinforce virtue above all else. The Sanskrit line, which is addressed to Kṛṣṇa by Rukmiṇī means, "having heard of your virtues O Beautiful One

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[268] *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, VII.5.23.

in [All Three] Worlds."[269] "*Bhuvanasundara*"—most beautiful one in [all three] worlds—is a common epithet for Kṛṣṇa, and is here used in the vocative case to indicate that Rukmiṇī is addressing Kṛṣṇa. Pandurang uses the line in order to reintroduce the term *bhuvanasundara* as a definitive description for a good man, ostensibly a virtuous man, as she dramatically proclaims, "A good man! A good man that is what is important—that is what is *bhuvanasundara!*" In other words, Prema Pandurang is declaring that the virtuous man is the most beautiful one in all three worlds, thereby asserting that beauty is derived from virtue and not simply physical attributes. Pandurang's retelling of the last five verses of Rukmiṇī's message to Kṛṣṇa then takes a theological turn, discussing how this transfer of virtues mirrors the way our relationship to God––i.e. Kṛṣṇa—should be and ultimately leads the devotee to submit completely to Kṛṣṇa:

> *tan me bhavān khalu vṛtaḥ patir aṅga jāyām*
> *ātmārpitaś ca bhavato 'tra vibho vidhehi |*
> *mā vīrabhāgam abhimarśatu caidya ārād*
> *gomāyuvan mṛga-pater balim ambujākṣa ||*[270]

> All Rukmiṇī had to do was call Kṛṣṇa's name and she knew he would come smiling.

Pandurang develops the theme of devotion through submission of the self from the start of the third verse. In the Sanskrit verse Rukmiṇī offers herself to Kṛṣṇa as his wife. Pandurang instead translates this verse to her audience as Rukmiṇī confidently calling Kṛṣṇa to take her away. As the rest of her commentary on these verses will demonstrate, this confidence comes from

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[269] According to Hindu cosmology, the three worlds are *svarga* (heaven), *pṛthvī* (earth), and *pātāla* (the underworld).

[270] *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, X.52.39. Translation:
Thus, I have indeed chosen you as my husband. O Dear One, I have already offered myself to Thee here. O Lord, make me your wife. The prince of the Cedis [Śiśupāla] may not touch the share of the valiant one, like a jackal touching the offering given to the lion, O Lotus-Eyed One [Kṛṣṇa].

Rukmiṇī's supreme faith in Kṛṣṇa and in the value of her own virtue. Rukmiṇī refuses to be with

anyone else and has faith that Kṛṣṇa, will come for her if she cries out for him:

> *pūrteṣṭadattaniyamavratadevavipra |*
> *gurvarcanādibhir alaṃ bhagavān pareśaḥ ||*
> *ārādhito yadi gadāgraja etya pāṇiṃ |*
> *gṛhṇātu me na damaghoṣasutādayo 'nye ||*[271]

'Please come and take me Acyuta!'
She is the combination of all the great qualities on earth. She called to him.
[*Pandurang's voice now, is appropriately yearning*]

'If I am born ten times, I will not marry anyone else other than you. Take
me away Swāmi!'

In the original Sanskrit verse above, Rukmiṇī lists her numerous virtuous deeds and

accomplishments, offering them up for Kṛṣṇa's consideration as evidence of her worthiness to be

his wife. The verse also expresses Rukmiṇī's confidence in the high value of her virtue, as she

does not think that any other man is worthy of taking her hand in marriage. As seen from

Pandurang's rendition of the above verse, Rukmiṇī is once again calling Kṛṣṇa to come take her,

insisting that she will not marry anyone else. Pandurang also quickly condenses Rukmiṇī's

myriad of virtuous qualities by simply stating that she is a combination of all great qualities on

earth, thereby still maintaining her virtuous nature.

Finally, in the last three of Rukmiṇī's seven auspicious verses, Pandurang shifts the

discourse to discuss the highest of all virtues according to her: devotion by submitting oneself to

Kṛṣṇa.

> *śvo bhāvini tvam ajitodvahane vidarbhān*
> *guptaḥ sametya pṛtanāpatibhiḥ parītaḥ |*

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[271] *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, X.52.40. Translation:
If the Highest God [Kṛṣṇa] has been sufficiently worshipped by me by meritorious work, sacrifices, philanthropy, observance of prescriptive restrictions, observance of vows, and honoring gods, brahmins, and teachers, etc., then the elder brother of Gada [Kṛṣṇa] having come may take my hand [in marriage], not any others, such as the son of Damaghoṣa [Śiśupāla].

nirmathya caidyamagadhendrabalaṃ prasahya
māṃ rākṣasena vidhinodvaha vīryaśulkām ||[272]

'Will you let me be married to this unworthy boy?' Rukmiṇī [says] 'Let the
lord decide for you.' S-U-B-M-I-T—you must submit!
'Come Swāmi.' . . . [*applause*] You can do that?

antaḥpurāntaracarīm anihatya bandhūn
tvām udvahe katham iti pravadāmy upāyam |
pūrvedyur asti mahatī kuladevayātrā
yasyāṃ bahir navavadhūr girijām upeyāt ||[273]

Rukmiṇī said, 'Swāmi, I will go to *pūjā* of Pārvatī, so please Swami take
me then.'

yasyāṅghripaṅkajarajaḥsnapanaṃ mahānto
vāñchanty umāpatir ivātmatamo 'pahatyai |
yarhy ambujākṣa na labheya bhavatprasādaṃ
jahyām asūn vratakṛśān śatajanmabhiḥ syāt ||[274]

'Swāmi if you don't come I will not marry anyone else. I'm only for Kṛṣṇa,
by Kṛṣṇa and not for anyone else.'

Ultimately, Pandurang's retelling of these verses translates into a message of how one must

submit faithfully to Kṛṣṇa, thereby showing complete devotion to him. Pandurang's commentary

after the fifth verse immediately frames Rukmiṇī's entire message to Kṛṣṇa as a humbling act of

submission on multiple levels. As Pandurang makes very clear, Rukmiṇī must submit to Kṛṣṇa

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[272] *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, X.52.41. Translation:
O Unconquered One [Kṛṣṇa], during the marriage, which is going to happen tomorrow, having come secretly to
Vidarbha surrounded by the leaders of your army, having defeated the armies of Caidya and the lord of Magadha
[Jarāsandha], carry me away forcibly as the prize of your valor [and] marry me according to the *Rākṣasa* procedure
(for marriage). The *Rākṣasa* procedure for marriage refers to one of eight types of marriage mentioned in texts such
as the *Manu-Smṛti* 3.21. A *Rākṣasa* marriage is executed by the groom forcibly abducting the bride from her family
or guardians (*Manu-Smṛti* 3.33).

[273] *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* X.52.42. Translation:
(If you wonder) 'How can I marry you who are moving inside the women's quarters without killing (your)
relatives,' I will tell you the strategy. On the day before there is a big procession to the family deity, in which the
new bride would go outside [the palace] to Girijā [Pārvatī].

[274] *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* X.52.43. Translation:
Great people, like the husband of Umā [Śiva], desire bathing in the dust of your lotus-like feet for destroying the
darkness of their [ignorance]. If I might not obtain your favor, O Lotus-Eyed One [Kṛṣṇa], I shall give up my life
breath being emaciated through austerities. After hundreds of lives [your favor] may be [there].

completely, by letting him decide her fate. For one thing, Rukmiṇī is already bearing her soul, through a messenger to Kṛṣṇa, whom she has never met. That is not enough, however, as Rukmiṇī must have faith that Kṛṣṇa will accept her hand in marriage and rescue her from the undesired marriage that has been prearranged for her. This is the most difficult part of this situation, as Rukmiṇī's fate hinges upon his reply. Nevertheless, Rukmiṇī does not waver in her decision and remains at Kṛṣṇa's complete mercy, as Pandurang's gloss of the final verse recounts. Pandurang has Rukmiṇī once again proclaim her complete submission to Kṛṣṇa, as Rukmiṇī declares she is "only for Kṛṣṇa, by Kṛṣṇa, and not for anyone else."

Therefore, this narrative once again expresses how devotion to Kṛṣṇa requires faith and surrender of the self. In return, Kṛṣṇa rescues the devotee, offering salvation. This surrender of the self is the ultimate devotional practice, and what marks both the greatest Kṛṣṇa *bhaktas*, as well as the position of the individual within a cosmopolitan society. Salvation comes for devotees in the most dramatic way, as seen in the previous examples of Prahlāda and here in the example of Rukmiṇī. In the case of Prahlāda, who never strayed from his belief in Viṣṇu, despite all the tortures heaped upon him, he was finally saved from his father's taunting and torture by Kṛṣṇa's incarnation as Nṛsiṃha. For Rukmiṇī, who has laid bare her soul to Kṛṣṇa and is waiting desperately for Kṛṣṇa to prevent her marriage to a lesser man by absconding with and marrying her, Kṛṣṇa *does* ride in to rescue and marry her. By demonstrating their complete submission to Kṛṣṇa, Rukmiṇī and Prahlāda actually earn the highest status amongst Kṛṣṇa *bhakta*s, as devotees par excellence. As supreme *bhakta*s, not only do they enjoy the privilege of direct and immediate access to Kṛṣṇa, but they also receive salvation through Kṛṣṇa. Moreover, Rukmiṇī and Prahlāda illustrate their ability to transcend the hierarchical oppression in their lives through submitting to Kṛṣṇa. In Prahlāda's case, though he was a member of the Daitya clan, and thus, an

enemy of the Devas or gods, as well as a powerless young child, by submitting to Kṛṣṇa, Prahlāda was not only saved from patriarchal and political oppression wielded by his own father, but was also eventually made King of the Daityas by Kṛṣṇa. Rukmiṇī is also able to transcend the patriarchal oppression she experiences as a woman whose marriage is fixed without her consent by her father and brother. Through her virtuous character and submission to Kṛṣṇa she is rescued by Kṛṣṇa and becomes his wife. Thus, through their complete submission to Kṛṣṇa, Prahlāda and Rukmiṇī demonstrate how virtue, and especially complete devotion to Kṛṣṇa, is the highest marker of status transcending Brahmanical hierarchies, patriarchies and other oppressive systems. This in turn suggests that one's virtuous character is more important than one's gender, caste or age, thereby generating a democratic and egalitarian Hinduism.

In addition to the example of Rukmiṇī and Prahlāda, Pandurang punctuates much of her discourse with more direct egalitarian messages the audience can identify with. For example, during her retelling of Kṛṣṇa's birth story, she spends a noticeable amount of time speaking of Yoga Māya, the female embodiment of illusion. Yoga Māya, as Pandurang notes, is the forgotten hero in Kṛṣṇa's birth story, as it is she who is reborn on earth in order to be switched at birth with baby Kṛṣṇa, and thus ultimately sacrificed by Kaṃsa instead of Kṛṣṇa:

> Śrī Rāma came to obey; Kṛṣṇa came to command. And as the Lord commands, Yoga Māya puts everyone to sleep, while Vasudeva leaves the prison with Kṛṣṇa in a basket. *Ādiśeṣa* protects [him] from the rain and thunder.
>
> *nandavrajaṃ śaurir upetya tatra tān*
> *gopān prasuptān upalabhya nidrayā |*
> *sutaṃ yaśodāśayane nidhāya tat-*
> *sutām upādāya punar gṛhān agāt ||*
> *devakyāḥ śayane nyasya vasudevo 'tha dārikām |*

pratimucya pador loham āste pūrvavad āvṛtaḥ ||[275]

> Having reached Yaśodā's cradle, he put the Lord in there and put Yoga Māya in the basket. It is Yoga Māya who makes the noble sacrifice.
>
> When a boy is born the grandmothers celebrate. When a girl is born they cluck loudly. And everyone says to the mother, 'Oh I'm sorry it's a girl.' How dare they say that? In Hyderabad, she can do something. How dare you say–HOW DARE you say that, if it's a girl? You don't know what she can do! She can be, she can be an expert in everything–whether it's deciding to go into sciences, whether she becomes a doctor, or whether it's deciding to read the *Bhāgavatam* and reading the *Bhāgavatam* to you! Don't forget that! [*applause*] Yes my dear listeners, today women can do many things. A woman can reach any heights anywhere.[276]
> [loud, vigorous applause from the audience]

Pandurang strikes a feminist, egalitarian note in this passage above. Utilizing Yoga Māya's incarnation on earth and subsequent sacrifice for Kṛṣṇa's safety as a springboard, Pandurang notes with great indignation the prevalent tendency amongst Hindu populations to prefer male offspring rather than female.[277] Among the educated middle and upper classes nowadays, daughters are starting to be valued as much as sons, and movements to get rid of dowries and educate women are on the rise.[278] Pandurang's vigorous insistence that women are capable of

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[275] *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, X.3.51-52. Translation:
Having reached the cowherd settlement of Nanda, having perceived there the cowherd girls sleeping by means of the illusion of Yoga Māya, having placed [his] son on the bed of Yaśodā, the Son of Śūra [Vasudeva] then having acquired her daughter came back to the palace. [51]
Vasudeva laid the daughter on Devakī's bed, then having fastened the iron chains on his feet, remained as before. [52]

[276] Prema Pandurang, "Highlights of the *Bhagavatham*: A *Srimad Bhagavatham* Discourse" (Spiritual discourse, Sathya Sai Nigamagamam, Hyderabad, AP, January 19, 2006).

[277] India has noticeable issues with female infanticide, gender discrimination and oppressive patriarchy, particularly among the more rural and lower, lesser-educated classes, though middle and upper classes do not remain immune to these issues by any means. For just a few examples, see: *Gender and Discrimination: Health, Nutritional Status and the Role of Women in India*, eds. Manoranjan Pal, Premananda Bharati, Bholanath Ghosh and T.S. Vasulu (London: Oxford University Press, 2011); Pranab K. Bardhan, "Sex Disparity in Child Survival in Rural India," in *Rural Poverty in South Asia*, eds. T.N. Śrīnivasan and Pranab K. Bardhan (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988).

[278] Globalization in India has led middle class populations to increasingly reconsider the territories of gender, leading to more acceptance of girl's and women's rights. See, for example, Leela Fernandes, "Nationalizing 'the Global': Media Images, Cultural Politics and the Middle Class in India," *Media Culture Society* 22,5 (2000) 611-628. The Indian government, recognizing gender inequalities, has instituted new laws to increase women's

doing and being anything, as she cites particularly male-dominated occupations, culminates into a recognition of her own transcendence of male-dominated occupations, as she is one of few women who deliver discourses on the *Bhāgavata*.

Her egalitarian stance is further enhanced as Prema Pandurang discusses skin color prejudices in conjunction with Kṛṣṇa's birth. Her discourse makes a point of not discriminating against darker-skinned individuals, but in fact, of celebrating darker skin as being just as beautiful as any other shade, as she discusses Kṛṣṇa's own dark complexion at birth:

> *tam adbhutaṃ bālakam ambujekṣaṇaṃ*
> *caturbhujaṃ śaṅkhagadādyudāyudham |*
> *śrīvatsalakṣmaṃ galaśobhikaustubhaṃ*
> *pītāmbaraṃ sāndrapayodasaubhagam ||*
> *mahārhavaidūryakirīṭakuṇḍala-*
> *tviṣā pariṣvaktasahasrakuntalam |*
> *uddāmakāñcyaṅgadakaṅkaṇādibhir*
> *virocamānaṃ vasudeva aikṣata ||*[279]

If you are brown and dark don't wear brown and grey and black. Wear white and cream. Do you understand?

I ask myself, 'O dark one, where are you going?'
'To see the Darker One [Kṛṣṇa] to do *darśan*.'

'He's brown like the rain clouds' you think. He is dark like the rain clouds. . . .[indiscernible] People say that You [*looking up towards the ceiling to indicate Kṛṣṇa*] borrowed the color from the cloud, but it is the

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educational opportunities and to discourage dowries and the correspondingly frequent incidences of domestic violence that accompany them. In practice, however, these laws have been shown to be far less than effective. See B.R.Sharma, "Social Etiology of Violence against Women in India," *The Social Science Journal*, 42,3 (2005). The emergence of a class of Information-Technology (IT) professionals in Andhra Pradesh, for example, has contributed to an increase in the practice of dowry, and subsequently, the exploitation and social isolation of underprivileged women. Xiang Biao, "Gender, Dowry and the Migration System of Indian Information Technology Professionals," *Indian Journal of Gender Studies*, 12,2 (2005).

[279] *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, X.3.9-10. Translation:
Vasudeva then beheld that wondrous little boy, who had eyes like lotuses, four arms raised up with weapons [including] the conch and mace, the mark of Śrīvatsa, the lustrous *kaustubha* gem on his neck, who was dressed in yellow garb, had the beauty of a dense [rain] cloud, profuse (thousands of) hair encircled with the light of his earrings and diadem of precious *vaidurya* (cat's eye) gems, shining from the extraordinary girdle, armlets, bracelets and other ornaments.

other way around. It is the cloud that has borrowed the color from Śrī Kṛṣṇa. [*applause*] Yes, clap, clap! Dark people are lovely![280]

Quoting a verse from the *Bhāgavata* describing Kṛṣṇa during the moment of his birth, Pandurang uses it to launch into a discussion of skin color. Whereas the verse with great detail describes Kṛṣṇa in his full glory with his bejeweled four arms and detailed ornamentation, Pandurang skips over much of that description. Instead she focuses on his beauty and his skin color. In fact, before even discussing Kṛṣṇa's own dark complexion, Pandurang turns into a fashion consultant advising darker-skinned people to wear brighter colored clothing instead of dark colors. Her suggestion, which might seem odd at first glance, is actually one that asks persons of darker skin to celebrate their dark skin by wearing lighter clothing that contrasts and thereby, enhances the beauty of their darker skin. Wearing lighter, brighter clothing also means that dark-skinned persons will stand out more, and suggests taking more pride in their darker complexion, rather than trying to downplay or blend in with darker, more subdued colors such as black, grey and brown.

Pandurang then moves from suggestions of what to wear into citing her own pride in her darker complexion. While certainly not on the darkest end of the skin-color spectrum, Prema Pandurang is also not considered by Indian standards to have a light complexion either. Rather, Pandurang seems to belong somewhere in the middle of that wide spectrum, as her anecdote demonstrates with her addressing herself as the "dark one," going to visit the even "Darker One," Kṛṣṇa. Prema Pandurang's anecdote not only implies her solidarity with darker-skinned people, as she considers herself to be one such person, but it also serves to demonstrate that she celebrates her darker-skin and that of Kṛṣṇa's.

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[280] Prema Pandurang, "Highlights of the *Bhagavatham*: A *Srimad Bhagavatham* Discourse" (Spiritual discourse, Sathya Sai Nigamagamam, Hyderabad, AP, January 20, 2006).

Finally, Pandurang drives home the point that dark skin is beautiful and desirable by inverting the usual comparison of Kṛṣṇa with dark rain clouds. Kṛṣṇa is often compared to the dark rain clouds, which are considered to be beautiful. Pandurang takes that common trope and instead of having Kṛṣṇa looking like the rain clouds, she argues that the rain clouds have taken their color from Kṛṣṇa. In so doing, she once again illustrates the desirability of dark-skin, as even the rain clouds so enamored of Kṛṣṇa's dark skin, steal or emulate his dark skin-color. The audience really appreciates this turn as their applause indicates and Prema Pandurang once again reiterates her point by closing with the declaration, "Dark people are lovely."

The importance of Pandurang's discourse on the beauty of dark skin lies in the fact that skin color is a significant factor in discrimination in India, particularly when it is based on physical appearance. As lighter skin is considered the ideal of beauty, this discrimination occurs most noticeably in terms of marriage selection. Darker skinned women have a harder time arranging, attaining or personally finding marriage partners and are often required to pay more dowry than their lighter-skinned counterparts. This obsession with skin color does not seem to be abating any time soon; Indian streets, shops, homes and cinemas are bombarded with magazine, billboard and television ads for whitening creams for women and now even for men.[281] Recent print advertisements and television commercials feature extremely light-skinned, and increasingly, more often, Anglo-Indian women and children, with light skin, light brown hair and

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[281] Among the leading brands of skin whitening creams is *Fair and Lovely*. In 2006, during my time in India, I also began to notice the advent of *Fair and Handsome*, a new skin whitening cream for men. The television advertisement featured a young man of medium complexion auditioning for the part of the hero in a film. He is rejected and instead sent to consider stunt work. Then he discovers *Fair and Handsome* cream and after using the product for some time and becoming noticeable shades lighter, auditions for a role as the hero in another film, wins the part and rides off on his motorbike with a beautiful, light-skinned Indian woman. For further in-depth studies on discriminatory approaches to skin color in Indian society, see the following articles: Sonali Elizabeth Johnson, "The Pot Calling the Kettle Black? Gender Specific Health Dimensions of Colour Prejudice in India," *Journal of Health Management*, 4,2 (2002); Sonora Jha and Mara Adelman, "Looking for Love in All the White Places: A Study of Skin Color Preferences on Indian Matrimonial and Mate-Seeking Websites," *Studies in South Asian Film & Media*, 1,1 (2009); and Radhika Parameswaran and Kavitha Cardoza, "Melanin on the Margins: Advertising and the Cultural Politics of Fair/Light/White Beauty in India," *Journalism and Communication*, 11,3, (2009).

blue, green or hazel colored eyes (as opposed to the more commonly associated black and dark brown hair and brown eyes of the majority of South Asians). Additionally, the success of lighter skinned actors and actresses abounds, particularly in the north Indian Bollywood film industry.

Therefore, it is no small matter that Prema Pandurang chooses to address skin-color discrimination in her discourse. Her critique counteracts aesthetics that have been prevalent since the colonial era in India, when white skin was associated with the dominating classes, authority and worldliness. In the modern era, the issue of skin color is beginning to be contested in the public sphere.[282] In one respect, a modern, cosmopolitan, western-obsessed culture is increasingly exposed to images of light-skinned, privileged, upper-class individuals, portraying a high-class, luxury lifestyle in advertisements and film. Yet, at the same time, for the global, cosmopolitan, equality-enhanced future to transpire, these visible differences must go unrecognized. Thus, in celebrating the beauty of dark skin, Prema Pandurang is not only speaking out against skin color discrimination, but also trying to argue that dark skin is just as lovely as fair skin, though in a different way. By emphasizing her own dark-skinned complexion and especially that of Lord Kṛṣṇa's intensely dark complexion, Pandurang challenges the audience to consider virtue above skin color when judging a person. In this way, Prema Pandurang begins to map out the characteristics of a virtuous, model devotee.

In conclusion, by considering the enduring images sculpted from the metacommunicative moments outlined above, the emergent text reveals in which a modern, cosmopolitan, global Hinduism is exposed, along with its own corresponding model devotee, the "Hindu citizen of the

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[282] One public space in which skin color discrimination is being contested is in popular Hindi television soap opera serials, the most vocal being *Saat Phere*; *Saloni ka Safar*. More recently, these themes have appeared again in the popular serial of *Afsar Bitiya*. Both serials feature dark-skinned, intelligent, virtuous female leads, who encounter and fight various forms of discrimination because of their skin color. "Saat Phere: Saloni ka Safar," Zee TV. Television. 2005-2009. "Afsar Bitiya," Zee TV, Television. 2011-2012.

world.". The metacommunicative moments examined in Prema Pandurang's *Bhāgavata kathā* discourse involved the internalization and individualization of Hindu practice as seen in the examples of soulware; universalizing values from the *Bhāgavata* by frequently invoking comparisons between world religions and Hinduism; and delocalizing and descheduling religious practices like *pūjā* and *kathā* such that they become more convenient and portable for modern, global Hindus to practice. These metacommunicative moments point towards a more portable, internalized, individualized and yet nonetheless universal, global Hinduism.

Through the comparison of the Rāma *bhakta* versus the Kṛṣṇa *bhakta*, Prema Pandurang creates a delicate balance between wealth, affluence, consumption and power being acceptable, and even laudable, versus the austerity, asceticism, and humility generally associated with and praised in the *Bhāgavata*. The metacommunicative moments culminating into this accepting attitude towards wealth and consumption are Pandurang's celebration of the bossy, managerial, consumptive Kṛṣṇa *bhakta* (as opposed to the obedient, austere, humble Rāma *bhakta*); Pandurang's reasoning that Kṛṣṇa was born with his own jewelry indicating the god-given right of all Kṛṣṇa *bhakta*s to always have the security provided by material wealth; and Pandurang's redefinition of *tapasyā* as the simple act of practicing self-discipline from over-consumption and negative emotions (such as anger, jealousy, etc.). Cued by both the image of the Kṛṣṇa *bhakta*, as well as Pandurang's sophisticated treatment of consumerism amongst devotees, an acceptance of wealth, affluence and the commanding status of the upper classes thus increasingly become accepted and even deemed important values in the modern Hinduism envisioned in this emergent text.

And finally with the treatment of virtue within the Rukmiṇī narrative, in conjunction with the metacommentaries Pandurang delivers against gender and skin-color discrimination,

emphasize that the most important criterion for judging person is their character, particularly if they cultivate a virtuous character. As virtue—measured with particular reference to complete surrender to Kṛṣṇa devotion—becomes the value trumping all other values and thus tearing down other hierarchies, egalitarian and democratic ideals thereby rise to the fore in this modern, global, cosmopolitan Hinduism.

Who then would be the *model devotee* for such a modern, global, cosmopolitan Hinduism generated based on this reading of narrative cues by the model reader? The model devotee of this modern, cosmopolitan Hinduism is the "Hindu citizen of the world," who displays a fine balance of values, derived from the *bhakti* elements of the *Bhāgavata*, incorporating these with modern, egalitarian, cosmopolitan values. Focusing on the equalizing characteristics of the *bhakti* elements of the *Bhāgavata*, the model devotee has no problem living within the world, but not being tethered to it. In other words, the model devotee, the model Kṛṣṇa *bhakta*, is able to consume the luxuries of the world without being consumed by them. The modern Kṛṣṇa *bhakta* is also educated, managerial and a leader, who despite her busy schedule makes time for daily devotional practices, albeit, more simplified and modified ones. And finally, the modern Kṛṣṇa *bhakta* is more egalitarian, not discriminating against gender, skin color or caste. Instead, the modern *bhakta* is a cosmopolitan individual whose remaking of hierarchy places virtuous behavior on top—above caste, gender or skin color—and recognizes the merit of other religious traditions. The model *bhakta*, is in essence, Prema Pandurang, the epitome of the qualities admired by her audience, and made in their own image, through their shared discourse.

Conclusion

Broadly speaking, this thesis has been concerned with the study of contemporary Hinduism within the context of performances of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*. More specifically, this thesis demonstrates through two case studies of *Bhāgavata* performances—the ninetieth annual *Bhāgavata saptāha* of Kolapalli exposited by Chandramurthy Shastry and Professor Prema Pandurang's modern, urban, cosmopolitan *Bhāgavata kathā*—how participants use the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* to inform, shape, and (re)create their own contemporary visions of Hinduism. By employing a performance-centered approach, the metacommunicative processes—those moments in which participants are communicating about the discourse and performance itself— in each performance are examined, thus revealing the negotiations taking place amongst participants during the discourse. These negotiations signal both the agency of the participants, as well as, how they make meaning from the *Bhāgavata*. Moreover, including the metacommunicative processes in the analysis of the text exposes an emergent *Bhāgavata,* a *Bhāgavata* specific to the performance, the text, and the participants. The emergent *Bhāgavata* further reveals the participants' values, aspirations, beliefs and lifestyles, which in turn, reflects the way the participants envision the Hinduism that they practice. The negotiated meanings of the participants, thus, not only reinforce (and thereby recreate) the Hinduism they believe themselves to be upholding, but also expand and reshape their Hinduisms, such that their visions of Hinduism further reinforce their own lifestyles and beliefs.

Intertwined with the above inquiries are issues related to South Asian textuality. This dissertation adds to the literature examining South Asian textuality and performance. By examining fluid readings of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa.* As exemplified by the *Bhāgavata saptāha* and *Bhāgavata kathā* performances I observed, this thesis discusses how those fluid readings

influence the ways in which participants actively make meaning from the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*. In addition, through employing the performance-centered approach outlined above, this dissertation considers how these fluid readings re-shape the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, which in turn, ultimately re-shapes participants' visions of Hinduism. Ultimately, the two case studies detail the ways in which the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* is used, both as the abundant source of content and as the adaptable frame of the performance.

In the first case study, the ninetieth annual *Bhāgavata saptāha* of Kolapalli, the emergent *Bhāgavata* generated through the *saptāha* performance reflected the rural, traditional, Brahmanical Hinduism residents of Kolapalli made in practice. As demonstrated primarily in the second chapter, through the interpolation and deference given to their own local history, lineages and traditions, and keen efforts made to maintain continuity between their lineages and traditions and those outlined in the *Bhāgavata,* the emergent *Bhāgavata* of the Kolapalli *saptāha* reflects a distinctly traditional, Brahmanical, local Kolapalli *Bhāgavata*. This emergent *Bhāgavata* in turn, reveals the Hinduism envisioned by the participants of the Kolapalli *saptāha* to be considered by them as *the* authentic, traditional Hinduism.

In Chapter Two, the following metacommunicative aspects were analyzed: participants and setting of the *saptāha*; the practice of austerities during the *saptāha*, in accordance with the prescription and narratives of the *Bhāgavata Māhātmya;* the practices of those austerities within the context of Chandramurthy Shastry's metanarrative regarding Kṛṣṇa-devotee King Parikṣit in conjunction with the commemorative date of the annual Kolapalli *Bhāgavata saptāha*; and the interpolation of two local Kolapalli *saptāha* rituals—the *Rukmiṇī Kalyāṇa* and the *Rāma abhiṣeka snāna*—that are not found in the *Bhāgavata Māhātmya*.

Analysis of the participants of the *saptāha*—the sponsors, the organizers, the participants and the *paurāṇika*—as well as the rural, tucked-away Brahmin *agrahāra* that comprises the village of Kolapalli proper, demonstrated the insular, Brahmanical characteristics of the *saptāha*. Caste purity is of great importance to the largely local, Brahmin-based audience. Moreover, as the *saptāha* is organized by local Kolapalli Brahmins and sponsored by Brahmins living in or originally descended from Kolapalli, the *saptāha* already begins by being rooted in and heavily influenced by the interests, rules and traditions of Kolapalli Brahmins. This local input was especially evident regarding the interpolation of local rituals into the *saptāha* and influencing the interpolation of local history and lineages into the *saptāha* discourse itself. To that effect, the Kolapalli Brahmins retain a great deal of agency and input into the structure of the *saptāha* and to some degree the content as well, especially as they choose the *paurāṇika*.

The committee's choice for *paurāṇika* that year, Chandramurthy Shastry, a conservative Smārta Brahmin like themselves, who was also quite familiar with Kolapalli, their *saptāha* and its traditions, as well as, having been trained by Kolapalli's own founding *paurāṇika*s, could not have been a better choice to uphold their values, history and traditions. Chandramurthy Shastry, moreover, frequently included references to the Kolapalli's local history, tradition and lineage of *paurāṇika*s in the metanarrative of his exposition, and made efforts to connect those local histories and lineages with those found in the *Bhāgavata* itself. This was evident in his exposition of the narrative frames of the *Bhāgavata Māhātmya*, as he connected Kolapalli's lineage of *paurāṇika*s with the celestial transmission cycle depicted in the *Bhāgavata Māhātmya*. Rather than having a fully Kṛṣṇa-*bhakti* centered discourse proclaiming Viṣṇu or Kṛṣṇa the supreme deity (as Vaiṣṇavites or Kṛṣṇaites might do, respectively), moreover, Chandramurthy Shastry also managed to keep the *saptāha* peppered with references to Śiva and Pārvatī,

expressing the Smārta view of equal deference to Śaivite and Vaiṣṇavite deities. Finally, Chandramurthy Shastry's conservative, traditional demeanor, protectiveness of the discourse to outsiders like myself (and potentially those whom I might share his discourse with) further demonstrates his strict adherence to how the *Bhāgavata* should (or in this case should not) be transmitted, while also adding to the air of authenticity and exclusivity of his *saptāha* discourse.

Chandramurthy Shastry's exposition of the discourse met the strict expectations of his audience in other regards as well. His metanarratives surrounding the narrative frames of the *Bhāgavata Māhātmya* and the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* reinforced the practice of austerities as practices necessary in order to be the ideal listener and thereby gain the full fruits of the *Bhāgavata*. With regards to the *Māhātmya*, Chandramurthy Shastry's metanarrative of Nārada's quest for a cure for Bhakti's deteriorating sons, emphasized the *saptāha* as a ritual practice, a *saptāha jñānayajña* (sacrifice of knowledge). By reinforcing the ritual nature of a *saptāha* along with the importance of practicing austerities, Chandramurthy Shastry solidifies the Kolapalli *saptāha* as a rigorous devotional practice that hails back to ancient times.

The practice of austerities are further connected to King Parikṣit as Chandramurthy Shastry draws parallels to King Parikṣit's austere conduct (no eating, drinking, or sleeping, and ever-attentive listening) observed during sage Śuka's narration of the *Bhāgavata* to him during his last seven days of life. By constantly holding the example of King Parikṣit as the ideal listener of the *Bhāgavata*, Shastry indirectly suggests that the audience model themselves after King Parikṣit. This, in conjunction with Kolapalli's tradition of scheduling their annual *saptāha* on the dates commemorating the anniversary of Śuka's exposition of the *Bhāgavata* to King Parikṣit, moreover suggest that the audience is reenacting the original purport of the sage to the king. This in turn, further reinforces the sense of the Kolapalli *saptāha* as a rigorous devotional

practice in continuity with the original and ancient history of the *Bhāgavata*, thereby designating their *saptāha* as being all the more authentic.

Finally, the interpolation of the *Rukmiṇī Kalyāṇa* (reenactment of the wedding of Kṛṣṇa to Rukmiṇī) and the *Rāma abhiṣeka snāna* (ritual ablution to conclude the *saptāha*), two key rituals practiced at the annual Kolapalli *saptāha*, but not found in the *Bhāgavata Māhātmya* prescription, demonstrate another instance in which Kolapalli inserts its own tradition and history into the *Bhāgavata saptāha*. Chandramurthy Shastry's metanarrative commentary surrounding the narrative of Kṛṣṇa and Rukmiṇī's wedding in the *Bhāgavata*, further cites former practices of Kolapalli ancestors performing the *Rukmiṇī Kalyāṇa* during *Bhāgavata saptāha*s. This serves to link the *Rukmiṇī Kalyāṇa* ceremony performed at Kolapalli's ninetieth annual *Bhāgavata saptāha* to the long-standing history of Kolapalli's ritual reenactment of the *Rukmiṇī Kalyāṇa*, as well as, to the text through its inclusion in the emergent *Bhāgavata* being produced in the performance. While ritual reenactments of the wedding rites of Kṛṣṇa and Rukmiṇī are not completely unique to Kolapalli, the included local wedding traditions, as well as ritual paraphernalia (the idols, the decorated palanquin) all serve to make their *Rukmiṇī Kalyāṇa* a uniquely Kolapalli wedding. The *Rāma abhiṣeka snanam*, on the other hand, to my knowledge was a uniquely Kolapalli ritual practice demarcating the conclusion of austerities for participants as well as the end of the *saptāha*. The interpolation of these two uniquely Kolapalli rituals into their annual *saptāha* serves to further mark the *saptāha* as a uniquely Kolapalli *saptāha*, and in turn, the emergent *Bhāgavata,* as a uniquely Kolapalli *Bhāgavata.*

The emergent text in Kolapalli developed out of a particular case wherein values of authenticity and tradition were repeatedly emphasized by performer, sponsors and audience. The Kolapalli *saptāha* reinforces the local village's historical authenticity and stability, marking

participants in the village in a timeless space decreed in both the *Bhāgavata* narrative, as well as with the lineages of *paurāṇika*s. Even as the outside world, transportation and global industries increasingly permeate Kolapalli, by actively connecting their story to an original, authentic time, and especially by enacting their *saptāha* precisely upon the anniversary of Śuka's narration of the *Bhāgavata* to Parikṣit, the participants of the *saptāha* in Kolapalli come to engage in a dynamic process of negotiating and recreating a living, breathing Hinduism in their day to day lives. This second chapter thus shows how the performance of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* generates and actively maintains the local and traditional—in concepts repeatedly mentioned by both the audience and the *paurāṇika*.

Analyzing the performance's metacommunicative processes shows that negotiations are constantly underway between the participants of the performance—Chandramurthy Shastry and his audience, particularly those audience members from Kolapalli—and that this performance and its concomitant traditions and rituals are not as fixed as they might seem at first glance. Instead, these metacommunicative processes expose how the negotiations between participants fashion an emergent text that is localized, ritualized, and Brahminical, even as it also regenerates the very traditions the Kolapalli participants claim to be upholding during the performance itself.

In contrast to the intimate, local, traditional, Brahmanical, rigidly structured *Bhāgavata saptāha* of Kolapalli, Chapters Three and Four consider the larger, urban, cosmopolitan *Bhāgavata kathā* performed by Professor Prema Pandurang in a posh air-conditioned auditorium in Hyderabad. Prema Pandurang's *Bhāgavata kathā* not only provided a case in which to examine the forms that *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* narratives may take in a cosmopolitan, urban community, but also amongst a community experiencing processes of globalization more directly. In Chapter Three, the metacommunicative processes analyzed focused primarily upon

various cues occurring before the discourse—including assessments of the setting for the discourse, advertisement for the discourse, and Prema Pandurang's own appearance—as well as two prominent narratives Prema Pandurang weaves into her discourse, that of her own self-narrative and the narrative of devotee par excellence, Prahlāda. By placing billboard advertisements in English in busy commercial shopping areas, holding the discourse in a posh auditorium in a upper middle class neighborhood, exuding her own regal appearance and maintaining an elegant, simple, sanitized aesthetic to her discourse, Prema Pandurang attracted (and thus negotiated for,) the upper middle class, educated modern audiences she wanted to attract and retain.

As a female, and thus, a non-conventional performer of *Bhāgavata* discourse, Professor Prema Pandurang further provided ample credentials of various sorts—academic, spiritual, political, global, etc.—of her authority and competence to not only give discourses on the *Bhāgavata*, but also to give discourses on the *Bhāgavata* to her specific audience, the 'modern, educated man.' Further analyzing the metacommunications found in her exposition of the Prahlāda narrative, exposes her metanarratives regarding the necessity for modern, secular-educated Hindus to also obtain spiritual educations. This metanarrative, promoting the need for spiritual educations is embedded in her concepts of soulware, or spiritual programming, and the College of Values, as well as in her comparison between the audience and others (diasporic youth, westerners, Prahlāda). Despite the modern idiom of soulware, Prema Pandurang connects it to the traditional practice of oral transmission, ultimately arguing that oral transmission of Hindu scripture is at the heart of soulware. With her concepts of soulware and the College of Values, Professor Prema Pandurang effectively positions her audience within a Hindu way of life

that is eminently compatible with rapid technological change, economic expansion, commercial consumption and a globally accessible, universally rationalized way of life.

Chapter Four further examines the modern, global, cosmopolitan *Bhāgavata* emerging from Prema Pandurang's cosmopolitan *Bhāgavata kathā*, by delineating the model devotee being shaped by this emergent *Bhāgavata*. The emergent *Bhāgavata* reveals model, global, cosmopolitan Hinduism, which holds the "Hindu citizen of the world" as its model devotee. Metacommunications occuring during Prema Pandurang's performance included redefining Hindu ritual practices as eminently accessible in an internally individualized realm, invoking comparisons between Hindu spirituality and other world religions, and promoting religious practices such as *pūjā* and *kathā* as convenient and portable: part and parcel of a global work force's busy schedule. Just as the performance's discourse was formed around these notions, an active type of global Hinduism was simultaneously shaped.

In Prema Pandurang's choice of narratives—for example, her comparison of the Rāma *bhakta* versus the Kṛṣṇa *bhakta*—wealth, affluence and aspirations for universal truth, power and commercial consumption are made commensurate with notions of austerity, asceticism and humility generally promoted through the narrative. Pandurang's celebration of figures within the narrative, such as the take-charge, consumptive, excessive Kṛṣṇa *bhakta*—including her highlighting of his material wealth—serve to promulgate acceptance of a possession-laden, affluent, upperclass Hindu with commanding status. With all these notions shared in the emergent text of the performance, Prema Pandurang is further able to emphasize the priority of great virtue, a move which attaches to each individual the greatest value, subsequently meeting her audience in a discourse where other hierarchies—caste, gender or skin color—fall to the wayside behind egalitarian and democratic ideals which condition the present, globalizing

moment in India; a moment now thoroughly colored by the participants of *kathā*, who make their contemporary community through each performance. The model "Hindu citizen of the world," thus incorporates *bhakti* elements of the *Bhāgavata* with modern, cosmopolitan, democratic political values. The model devotee made in Prema Pandurang's performance then, is able to enjoy a world of consumer goods while solidifying their status as globally conscious, educated, leading individuals. Devotion now fits into their schedules, and indeed, in meeting the audience's personal time, helps to redefine the work-a-day schedule of a contemporary life possessing universal aspirations.

A quick comparison of the emergent texts of these two performances reveals extremely diverse readings leading to diverse visions of Hinduism. In the case of the Kolapalli *saptāha*'s emergent text, the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, as a generative medium, provided a common ground through which participants could reaffirm particular local relationships and hierarchies, stabilizing senses of both personal and communal timelessness, repeating ritual actions of those *saptāha* participants in previous years. The outside world, for those in Kolapalli, provided an external boundary to be redefined in relation to local efforts to establish temporal continuity and reinforced identities. In the case of Prema Pandurang, the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* provided a medium through which the outside world could be assessed, organized and controlled in relation to the rapid changes modern life wrought within her community of modern, educated Hindus. For those in Hyderabad however, the external world was something to be mastered and subsequently incorporated, if not consumed, into their own worldview. Prema Pandurang's audience in Hyderabad was vested in reconciling their modern, cosmopolitan, consumptive middle class lifestyles with the traditions of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*. Similarly, the audience in Kolapalli was

interested in upholding their annual *saptāha* tradition as an extension of the narratives of the *Bhāgavata*.

To further compare and contrast Kolapalli's *saptāha* and Prema Pandurang's respective *kathā*, the Kolapalli *saptāha* was sponsored, organized and thus, structured by a group from the town itself. There was a great deal of agency exercised in terms of how the *saptāha* was conducted, especially in the selection of the *paurāṇika*. By the same token, this effected how the discourse was given. Given the inescapable structure of the *saptāha* and obvious presence of local traditions in Kolapalli, including their own lineage of founding *paurāṇika*s with their chain of transmission, the *paurāṇika* was limited by his responsibilities to the Kolapalli audience and sponsors. The performance was thus patently a Kolapalli production.

In the cosmopolitan case of Prema Pandurang however, the individual herself, appropriately, expressed a great deal of agency and freedom in interpreting the urban sphere through *Bhāgavata* narratives. The sponsor of Pandurang's *Bhāgavata kathā* was the local Hyderabad chapter of Kshetropasna Trust, the organization for which she is one of the founding members. This is not to say, however, that this individual freedom was completely unchecked. For one thing, her audience was not exclusively members of Kshetropasna Trust, but rather 'the modern educated Hindu' at large. Therefore, Prema Pandurang still constantly negotiated the parameters of her discourse, both in reference to her audience's lives, and also in reference to the affluence displayed around her. Prema Pandurang's ideas of modernity and Hinduism took shape in direct reference to the individually possessive audience she aimed to appeal to: this being the 'modern, educated man.'

Another key difference between the two main performances documented in this research concerns the type of performance developed around the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*. Ultimately, a

saptāha, as it follows to a greater or lesser degree the prescription found in the *Bhāgavata Māhātmya*, is a more structured and ritualized type of performance. Though there is still flexibility within that structure, it is definitely not as flexibly altered as a *Bhāgavata kathā*. In the case of a *Bhāgavata kathā*, the insistence on adhering to ritual procedure is not as strict as it is with the *saptāha*. *Bhāgavata kathā* do, however, always include the minimum of ritual prescriptions of performance, such as *ārati*, worship of the book, and an offering of *prasād*. The *Bhāgavata kathā* also does not include any given timeframe for what the length the performance need be. As we saw with Prema Pandurang, her *Bhāgavata kathā* in Hyderabad consisted of two-hour lectures for six days, whereas the *Bhāgavata kathā* Pandurang performed at Parashakti Temple in Pontiac Michigan consisted of roughly two-hour sessions for only three days.

With the *Bhāgavata saptāha*, however, the performance of the discourse must be carried out over a period of seven days. Particular rituals must be carried out. These may vary depending on the sponsors and organizers of the *saptāha*, who have more say over the venue, the chosen rituals and the schedule of the discourse. More elaborate rituals for worship of the book and preparation for the *Bhāgavata saptāha* must also be undertaken. Invitations and advertisements for the *Bhāgavata saptāha* are to be made and distributed. The venue must be appropriately selected and accordingly prepared. Also, often, in the case of Telugu *Bhāgavata saptāha* the *Rukmiṇī Kalyāṇa* reenactment must be carried out sometime near the exposition of the *Rukmiṇī Kalyāṇa* narrative. Participants are also generally encouraged to do more devotional practices during *saptāha*s, such as keeping austerities during the course of the seven days. In particular, vows of fasting, celibacy and refraining from impure foods and drinks (meat, alcohol, tobacco, etc.) are commonly observed. This of course effects to some extent, what discourse the

performer of the *saptāha* stresses, as often the discourse will encourage and reflect the observances of austerities by the participants.

Another significant difference between Chandramurthy Shastry's discourse at the Kolapalli *saptāha* and Prema Pandurang's urban *kathā* discourse in Hyderabad are the backgrounds of the audience. The performers must, of course, take the backgrounds of their audience into account. This concern is particularly pronounced in the smaller, more intimate performances and settings, such as the Kolapalli *saptāha*, where face-to-face acknowledgement becomes more difficult to avoid. Ironically, a larger setting, such as an auditorium as in Prema Pandurang's *Bhāgavata kathā*, or even a stadium of thousands, as in the case of Bhaishri's *Bhāgavata saptāha*, forces the performer to delocalize and to rely more generally on their individual rapport. The larger the audience, the more general the message needs to be. In the case of a smaller, focused audience, the dialogue between performer and audience is implicit within the metacommunicative processes. Even in situations where audience members seldom speak, as with Prema Pandarung's *kathā*, their undeniable presence, as countable individual persons, requires that the performer acknowledge, pause, break or administer discourse specifically for the type of community gathered in front of them. Thus, we find that it is not just possible, but necessary for Kolapalli's *saptāha* to be localized, whereas, Prema Pandurang's *Bhāgavata kathā* discourse was necessarily more global.

Finally, in terms of its substantive contributions, this thesis documents performances of the *Bhāgavata* in Andhra Pradesh, adding both to the body of work on performances of the *Bhāgavata* conducted in Andhra Pradesh, as well as, adding to the body of work regarding the particular *Bhāgavata* performance, the *Bhāgavata saptāha*. The five *Bhāgavata saptāha* and the *Bhāgavata kathā* performances, respectively are: Rameshbhai Oza's "*Srimad Bhagawat* Katha

Gyan Yagna" held in Goshamahal Police Stadium, Hyderabad from February 18-24, 2006 in

Hindi; Kolapalli's ninetieth annual "*Śrīmad Bhāgavata* Saptāha Jñānayajña Mahōtsavamulu,"

expounded by Chandramurthy Shastry in Kolapalli from Sept. 1 through September 8, 2006 in

Telugu; Mahendra Shastry's "*Śrī Bhāgavata* Saptāhamu" conducted in an ashram in Andhra

Pradesh from October 8 through October 14, 2006 in Telugu; Hariprasad Sharma's "*Śrīmad*

Bhāgavata Saptāha" conducted at the Satyanārāyāṇa Temple in Guntur from November 23

through November 30, 2006 in Telugu; Nandakumaracharya Shastry's "*Śrīmad Bhāgavata*

Saptāhamu" conducted at the Veṅkaṭeśvara Temple in Guntur from January 22 through Januaray

29, 2007 in Telugu; and Professor Prema Pandurang's "Highlights of the *Bhagavatam*" exposited

at Sathya Sai Nigamagamam in Hyderabad from Jan 16 through January 21, 2006 in English.

In the first chapter, I describe in detail the five *Bhāgavata saptāha* performances, further

analyzing the Kolapalli *saptāha* in Chapter Two. These *saptāha* performances demonstrated the

great variety existing in the performance of *saptāha*, as they ranged from urban to rural,

metropolitan city to insular village, local to remote ashrama, with mass public audiences to small

intimate groups. The *saptāha*s were held in various venues, including a mass public stadium,

temples, a *vedapāṭhaśālā* and an ashrama. The *saptāha*s themselves could further be

distinguished by the degree to which they followed the prescription found in the *Bhāgavata*

Māhātmya, as well as the degree of rigor to which participants observed austerities. That is to say

that some *saptāha*s, like the ninetieth annual *Bhāgavata saptāha* of Kolapalli, were extremely

rigorous in terms of the full discourse schedule, austere setting, practice of austerities mentioned

in the *Bhāgavata Māhātmya* and interpolation of additional rituals (the elaborate *Rukmiṇī*

Kalyāṇa and the *Rāma abhiṣeka snāna*). On the other hand, some discourses were more casual

and less ritually rigorous, such as the Nandakumaracharya Shastry's *Bhāgavata saptāha* held in

the Veṅkaṭeśvara Temple in Guntur, which only met for two hours each evening. Nandakumaracharya Shastry's discourse, though less ritually rigorous, could arguably be considered much more intellectually rigorous, as he spent the entire seven days covering exclusively and in great detail, his exposition of the *Bhāgavata Māhātmya* and the first canto of the *Bhāgavata*.

By further charting the narratives covered by Chandramurthy Shastry on a day by day basis, this thesis gave an example of the fluidity with which expositors move through the *Bhāgavata*, not constricted by any requirement to go in linear order, giving equal import to each page or narrative. Likewise, Nandakumaracharya's *saptāha*, which only covered the *Bhāgavata Māhātmya* and the *Bhāgavata* 's first canto, also demonstrates the great flexibility expositors enjoy in performance.

These *saptāha*s also demonstrate important regional variances among *saptāha* performances. In the case of *saptāha*s performed in Telugu, a whole new aspect of the *Bhāgavata* corpus is accessible, as performers of these Telugu *saptāha*s are able and often opt to use selections from Potana's Telugu *Bhāgavatamu*. In particular, *Gajendra Mokṣamu*, Potana's moving version of the narrative of the elephant Gajendra's rescue from the jaws of a crocodile by Viṣṇu, was cited by all of the Telugu *paurāṇika*s in their performances of that narrative. In some cases, as in Kolapalli, some of the participants recited memorized verses of *Gajendra Mokṣamu* along with the *paurāṇika*. Of course, in Bhaishri's *saptāha*, exposited in Hindi, no references to Potana's *Bhāgavatamu* were made, but instead, references to famous Gujarati and Hindi *bhakti* poets were used.

Another regional variation witnessed in the Telugu *saptāha* was the very detailed re-enactments of the *Rukmiṇī Kalyāṇa* to coincide with the narrative exposition of the *Rukmiṇī*

Kalyāṇa from the tenth canto of the *Bhāgavata*. Three of the four Telugu *Bhāgavata saptāha*s included this particular ritual. The *saptāha* that did not include the ritual, Nandakumaracharya Shastry's *saptāha*, also did not exposit the *Rukmiṇī Kalyāṇa* narrative, as Nandakumaracharya Shastry never went past the *Bhāgavata*'s First Canto. Nor did Bhaishri's *saptāha* include a *Rukmiṇī Kalyāṇa* reenactment, nor can I find any evidence from the works of other scholars of *saptāha*s, notably McComas Taylor, of this wedding ritual in any Northern *saptāha*s.

These ritual reenactments of the *Rukmiṇī Kalyāṇa* were generally quite elaborate, and in the cases of the Kolapalli *saptāha* and Hariprasad Sharma's *saptāha* at the Satyanārāyaṇa Temple in Guntur, involved sponsors separate from the *saptāha*'s sponsors to fund the ritual. The *Rukmiṇī Kalyāṇa* ritual always attracted more attendees than the rest of the *saptāha* performance, indicating its prominence and popularity amongst the community of devotees. When and where this ritual was first incorporated into *Bhāgavata saptāha*, and why it holds such a prominent place amongst devotees would make for another viable research project of its own.

Finally, it is worth noting that all four of the Telugu *saptāha*s observed during fieldwork were sponsored by Smārta Brahmins. Thus, while they still promoted Kṛṣṇa and Viṣṇu *bhakti*, they never promoted exclusive allegiance to either deity as the Supreme God. Instead, they promoted devotion to Kṛṣṇa and Viṣṇu, as well as to Śaivite deities such as Śiva, Pārvatī and Gaṇeśa. In contrast, the *saptāha*s in Vrindavan as described by McComas Taylor are far more Vaiṣṇavite and Kṛṣṇaite as they in fact tend to center upon Rādha. The particular *saptāha* Taylor describes, in which devotees sing and dance, and build up to a feverish pitch of devotion with each "Rādhe! Rādhe!" invoked by the *paurāṇika* also seem far more lively and emotionally evocative than the Telugu *saptāha*s I witnessed.[283] Even northerner Bhaishri's *saptāha* managed

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[283] Taylor, "Radhe! Radhe," 97.

to elicit some spontaneous dancing from a few members of his mass audience and invoked Radha periodically throughout the discourse. The Telugu *saptāha*s, on the other hand, seemed more ritually rigorous in comparison. Additionally, though participants of the Telugu *saptāha*s also sang devotional songs with great feeling, and thoroughly enjoyed the narratives as evidenced by their laughter or rapt attention during discourse, overall, these *saptāha*s were fairly sober and disciplined affairs.

While notions of contemporary Hinduism, and aspirations, or hesitations toward encounters with global progress or universal truth serve as a backdrop to this research, frequently while relating its content, this research has been especially concerned with the overflowing of reflexive moments which arrive through the contradictory imperatives of metacommunication imparted in text-centered performances. This research has been most concerned with how practitioners make Hinduism, where multiple interpretive possibilities arrive through the text of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa,* itself. During times when audience members and performers, in working through the narrative, must place themselves simultaneously both within the timeline of the stories imparted, as well as within their material worlds—a metacommunicative mode which is frequently undertaken in *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* performances—new definitions of Hinduism, new group associations, and new notions of time are fostered through the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*. I have included evidence of performers' personal anecdotes, communication styles and each performance's social and economic settings throughout my thesis, as all of these particulars are relevant in demonstrating the ways in which narratives of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* provide a fertile narrative ground for new histories and interpretations. The processes of reading, and the audience-performer relations caught up within them—processes that have made up the substance

of my investigation—thereby demonstrate both the malleability and resilience of a living, vibrant

Bhāgavata Purāṇa.

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