

Book Review I

The 'Fifth Veda' of Hinduism: Poetry, Philosophy and Devotion in the Bhāgavata Purāṇa. By Ithamar Theodor. London: I. B. Tauris, 2016. ISBN: 978-1-78453-199-7. pp. x + 229. £64.00.

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Ithamar Theodor's recent publication brilliantly explores the construction of divine personhood in the ancient and popular Indian scripture *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* (*BhP*), while highlighting its centrality within Hindu thought and praxis, particularly for Vaiṣṇava traditions. As Edwin Bryant succinctly notes in his epigraph,

Building on his work analyzing the narrative structure of the *Bhagavad Gītā*, Ithamar Theodor expertly argues that the combining of all the elements contained in the *Bhāgavata* was a conscious harmonizing of two distinct orthodox scholastic traditions: the philosophical one stemming from the *Upaniṣads*, and the literary aesthetic one drawing from the *rasa* [emotional experience, "taste"] theory of *Kāvya* poetics. This is a fascinating and groundbreaking work (ii).

Theodor commences his analysis by considering various notions of Personhood. The western term 'person,' he states, has a long history, dating back to the Greco-Roman period, with the Christian tradition adopting the term to designate the Trinity. This usage remained for centuries, but was later restricted to human individuals, and its application to the divine was taken to be anthropomorphic. A western imposition of the term on Indian culture has led early translators of

Sanskrit works to translate the terms *nirguṇa* and *saṅguṇa brahman* as ‘Impersonal Absolute’ and ‘Personal God’ respectively. Underlying this obscure usage, Theodor argues, was the assumption that the Hindu personal notions were not absolute.

Turning to Hindu orthodox schools of thought, Theodor articulates and characterizes three intrinsic notions of Personhood. These are the ‘Worldly Self of *Mīmāṃsā*’, the ‘Solitary Self of *Sāṅkhya*’, and the ‘Transcendental Self of *Vedānta*’. According to Theodor, the notion of personhood in *Mīmāṃsā* is humanistic, realistic, active and defined by adherence to *dharma*. Self-fulfilment is characterized in terms of sacrifice, and can be evaluated by worldly success. The *Sāṅkhya* system defines personhood in terms of isolation of the conscious subject (*puruṣa*) from unconscious matter (*prakṛti*), while the *Vedāntic* notion of personhood is based upon the process of self-realization, given the interpretations of various schools, such as the monistic (*Advaita*) school of Śaṅkara (788-820 CE), which propounds *vivarta vāda*, according to which the world is a false appearance (*vivārta*) of the ultimate reality, or the *Viśiṣṭādvaita* school of Rāmānuja (1017-1137), holding that the world is a transformation (*pariṇāma*) of the ultimate reality, *Brahman*.

The construction of the divine personhood underlying the *BhP* is the compelling question of Theodor’s work, and in his answer, I believe, lies its groundbreaking contribution to scholarly engagement with this central and popular scripture in the greater context of Hindu thought. Theodor articulates a forth notion, which he terms the ‘Aesthetic Self of the *BhP*’. According to this understanding, he explains, “personhood is defined through an aesthetic sensitivity and emotional depth, and, as such, the deeper one’s aesthetic sensitivity and emotional experience of the supreme are, the more one is able to express one’s personhood (17).” He proposes to see all four Hindu notions of personhood as integral elements coexisting within the *BhP*, which gradually emphasizes the forth notion most predominantly.

The suggested origin for the ‘Aesthetic Self of the *BhP*’ offers a revolutionary shift in existing paradigms, most notably that of Friedhelm Hardy (1983), according to whom:

The *BhP* is an attempt to harmonize the various complexes involved in this encounter and to resolve the tensions it had given rise to. Simplifying issues considerably, we can say: Northern culture orientated itself by a social system (the Brahmins as the foremost *varṇa*) and an ideology (the *Vedānta*, viz. the systematization of the teaching of the *Upaniṣads*), while Southern culture was characterized by an emotional religion (of the *Ālvārs*) and by great aesthetic sensibility (the old *caṅkam* poetry, and the *akattinai*). The *BhP* tries to integrate all four complexes, and uses the symbol of the *Vedas* to achieve this, while adopting the

purāṇic literary form. Thus, as the authors have time and again pointed out, the *BhP* stands quite apart from other purāṇas—it is an *opus universale* attempting to encompass everything (489).

Could it be, Theodor wonders, that the *BhP*, in its passion for association with orthodox *Vedism* and its attempt to encompass everything, assimilated not only the ideological contribution of the *Vedānta*, accompanied by a social system, but also the aesthetic contribution of the north, by which the ancient aesthetic *rasa* theory of Bharata became its building ingredient? Indeed, considering the *BhP*'s significant aesthetic and poetic sensibility, it would be unlikely to assume that the compiler(s) of the *BhP* had simply ignored the then available and esteemed aesthetic theory instead of integrating it.

Noting that the north represents not only Brahminical and *Vedāntic* ideology, but also aesthetic and poetic sensitivity, and that the south propounds not merely emotionalism, but also identification with *Vedānta*, Theodor proposes a shift from the coordinates of 'north' and 'south' to the qualitative categories of *Vedānta* and *rasa*, or 'philosophical knowledge' and 'aesthetic expression' respectively, to better understand the Aesthetic Self of the *BhP*, and the new literary genre it expresses, aesthetic *Vedānta*, a unique confluence of two substantial traditions.

The *BhP*'s initial connection to *Vedānta* philosophy is created at the very first line of the text, which reads '*om̐ namo bhagavate vāsudevāya*', offering salutations to Kṛṣṇa, the son of Vasudeva, who is *Bhagavān*, the supreme person. In accordance with *Vedāntic* discourse, Theodor terms it the *BhP*'s *mahāvākya*, key declaration, adding that "the entire *Purāṇa* represents an attempt to echo, expand and comment on this statement (vii)." Additional significant intertextual links can be found in this stanza, e.g. *janmādyasya yataḥ*, echoing the second aphorism of *Vedānta-sūtra*, and in the following chapter, *BhP* 1.2.11, wherein the personal identity of *Bhagavān* is equated with *Brahman*, the philosophical subject matter of *Vedānta* inquiry.

Brahman, Theodor explains, can be understood in two major ways – as impersonal or as personal. These two trends of thought, he asserts, are a continuous feature of the religious history of India, marked as it is by the conflict and the interaction of two main approaches: to conceive of the absolute, either in terms of a somewhat mystical, abstract and unified state of being or as the Supreme Person. The *BhP* relies on knowledge to establish the greatness of *Brahman* realization, and relies on aesthetics to lead one further into the personal realm of divinity. The movement from philosophy to aesthetics is hinted in the opening and concluding stanzas of the *BhP*:

*nigama-kalpa-taror galitarī phalaṁ śuka-mukhād amṛta-drava-saṁyutam
pibata bhāgavataṁ rasam ālayam muhur aho rasikā bhuvī bhāvukāḥ*

The ripe fruit of the Vedic desire tree, containing nectarous juice, has issued from Śuka's mouth. Oh connoisseurs of *rasa*, always relish this treatise of the Supreme Person, which is full of *rasa*—on this earth and in the final state. (*BhP* 1.1.3).

*sarva-vedānta-sāraṁ hi śrī-bhāgavatam iṣyate
tad-rasāmṛta-trptasya nānyatra syād ratiḥ kvacit*

The *Bhāgavata Purāna* is considered to be the essence of the entire *Vedānta* tradition; As such, for one who is satisfied by tasting its nectar-like *rasa*, there does not exist any other delight elsewhere. (*BhP* 12.13.15).

Certainly, the abovementioned emotive *rasa* implies devotion (*bhakti*) to Kṛṣṇa, a vital theme of the *BhP*. The interplay of knowledge and emotion continues throughout the *BhP*, with *bhakti* reaching its pinnacle in the tenth book, dedicated to the pastimes of Kṛṣṇa with his intimate devotees.

Next, by examining Sanskrit linguistic theory and poetics, Theodor finds a similar distinction between the philosopher's world—'the Universe of Reason' and that of the poet—'the Universe of Feelings'. Although each of these attempts to grasp the truth, there exists an irresolvable tension between them. While philosophical language favors abstraction, poetic language concentrates on and intensifies the specific and peculiar. Theodor deduces that "a philosophical system, which is leaning on logic, will necessarily lead to the articulation of abstract principles, whereas an aesthetical system, which, by definition, leans on aesthetic principles, will necessarily lead to the particular (43)."

The dual application of language is present in the *BhP*, and has not only literary implications, but also theological ones. In the context of theology, it may well be that philosophy will favor impersonal divinity, whereas poetics will favor personal divinity. If so, Theodor asks, in what way is the theology of the *BhP* related to Sanskrit poetics? In order to answer that, he discusses at length the deep relationship between *Vaiṣṇavism* and Indian dramaturgy, observing a close connection between them from the formative years of *Vaiṣṇavism*, some two millennia ago or more.

Tracing the history and theory of *rasa*, with its roots in the *Upaniṣads* and its earliest aesthetic formulation in the canonical text *Nāṭyaśāstra* attributed to Bharata Muni (2nd cent. C.E.), Theodor expounds on *rasa* theory's division in the

Middle Ages between impersonal and personal trends. He does so by juxtaposing the celebrated poetical theory of Kashmiri philosopher and mystic Abhinavagupta (950-1015 C.E.) with that of King Bhoja (reigned 1000-1055 C.E.), who lived and ruled in present day Rajasthan, focusing on three key issues: 1) the location of *rasa*; 2) the ontological status of emotions; and 3) the supreme *rasa*. Theodor concludes that Abhinavagupta's emphasis on tranquility (*śānta-rasa*) clearly supports the impersonal position, while the prominence of amorous emotions (*śṛṅgāra-rasa*) in Bhoja's doctrine supports the personal one. Ingeniously, Theodor completes his exposition of *Vedāntic* and aesthetic polarization by comparing the two, stating that Abhinavagupta and Bhoja held opposite views on the very same question that troubled Śaṅkara and Rāmānuja, i.e. whether the absolute is personal or impersonal. The unique structure of the *BhP*, he reinforces, emerges from the convergence of the *Vedānta* and *rasa* schools. He concludes:

Thus the Supreme *Brahman* becomes not only known, but tasted as well, through various personal relationships. As a *rasa* theory similar to Bhoja's underlies these tasting experiences, the notions of personal divinity are systematically arranged from those evoking *śānta-rasa* to those *śṛṅgāra-rasa*. Therefore the famous *rāsa-līlā* chapters [portraying Kṛṣṇa's dance of divine love] are considered the *BhP*'s peak (97).

Theodor's analysis of the *BhP*, and his ability to formulate an academic theory that reconciles the non-dual and personal aspects of the absolute *within* the religious framework of Hinduism are innovative and noteworthy. He suggests that the *BhP* tries "to further a change of heart which wouldn't necessarily be considered a religious conversion in the Judeo-Christian sense of the word, of sinners repenting and relinquishing their former non-religious or immoral way of life (vii). In this connection, Theodor addresses Daniel Sheridan's (1986) uncertain proposition of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity as a homologue for and a possible influence on the *Bhāgavata*'s devotional conception of the Supreme Deity (99,148), by wondering "How can non-dual knowledge be personal? Or phrasing it differently: How can the reality of *Bhagavān* be non-dual? (47)."

The remainder of Theodor's work provides a detailed gradation of *rasa*-s, from *śānta* to *śṛṅgāra*. Following the interpretation of the *BhP* by the traditional school of Bengali Vaiṣṇavism founded by Caitanya (1486-1534), it provides some clues as to how the structure and doctrine of the *BhP* have been traditionally understood. Progressing from theory to textual encounter, Theodor outlines the development of the *BhP*'s notions of divinity, starting with Impersonal *Brahman* and the serene experience of *śānta-rasa*; continuing to the Universal Person (*virāja-puruṣa*), a

mental construction of the entire universe as the divine body of a cosmic giant (more complex and personalized than Impersonal *Brahman*); *Antaryāmin*, the internalized person in the heart, attracting one's serene yogic or mystic attention inwards; Viṣṇu and his various emanations evoking emotions of servitude (*dāsya*); and Kṛṣṇa, evoking feelings of friendship (*sakhya*), parental affection (*vātsalya*), and intense conjugal love (*śṛiṅāra*), as expressed in the aesthetic climax of the *BhP*, the *rāsa-līlā*, or the love dance of Kṛṣṇa with the village damsels.

In conclusion, Theodor's is a magnificent work, an evident culmination of laborious research, that masterfully sheds new light and introduces the *BhP* to accomplished Indologists and the unacquainted alike. To end in the sagacious observation of Julius Lipner:

In his carefully researched work, Ithamar Theodor takes us along a new path of interpretation, arguing systematically for an aesthetic understanding of the text as key, and showing in the process how apparent incompatibilities of its teaching can be reconciled by this approach. In future, no meaningful comment about or study of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* can afford to neglect the illuminating argument of this book (ii).

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