

The *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* as a *Mahābhārata* Reflection¹

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Scholars have recognized that the epic period in northern India was characterized by considerable social change, reflected significantly in religious ideas expressed in the *Mahābhārata*. While the Āryan Vedic worldview is by no means abandoned in the MBh, it entertains and indeed advocates new thought trends, including the ‘systems’ eventually designated Sāṃkhya, Yoga, and Bhakti (Sutton 2000: 4-5). That these new thought currents receive further amplification in the major Purāṇas is one of their characteristic features, where especially the ‘semantics of bhakti’ (Bailey 1989) predominate as the mode of advocacy for particular traditions of affiliation.² Within such Purāṇic amplification of theistic bhakti, what may loosely be called brāhmaṇical conservatism persists, serving to anchor the new with the old while charting fresh religious territory and viewing the (epic) past in terms of the (purāṇic) present (van Buitenen 1978: 154). While locating themselves with increasing firmness in the universe of bhakti that had been already more tentatively explored in the MBh, Purāṇas (to greater or lesser degrees) drew and reflected on the story, persons, and teachings of the MBh as a venerable source of authority while simultaneously promoting themselves as surpassing that work in their capacities to speak to the needs of their specific audiences with appropriate ideologies (Chakrabarti 2001: 8-11).

The *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* in particular is noteworthy for its very deliberate and explicit association with—or reflection of—the MBh, evident especially in the BhāgP’s frame-narrative and the transition-marking figure, Parīkṣit (Doniger 1993; Matchett 2002; Malinar 2005). There are further links to the epic, some quite explicit and others less so, in the body of the BhāgP. In light of the most explicit links to the MBh story of fratricidal war and its chief characters, including but not restricted to the frame-narrative, in this paper I will further these considerations of the BhāgP as a reflection on the epic, focusing not on narrative reworkings so much as on the *Bhāgavata*’s representations of bhakti and its central object of bhakti, Vāsudeva-Kṛṣṇa. This will serve to better grasp the text’s understanding of relationship(s) between bhakti and dharma, reflecting as it does central concerns in the *Mahābhārata* in its present redaction(s). While the MBh had become a receptacle for growing interest in bhakti, its major discursive concern arguably remained dharma, articulable quite simply by the question, ‘What is dharma?’ (Sutton 2000: 294). The question persists throughout the epic in light of dharma’s *sukṣmatā* or ‘subtle nature of dharma that mixes good and evil in every act, the impossible labyrinth of the moral life’ (Ramanujan 1989: 205). The BhāgP, on the other hand, acts as a converse counterpart to the MBh, with its bhakti discourse offered as the ‘answer’ to all dharmic ambiguities of the MBh. Yet the BhāgP is not simply aspiring to upstage the MBh. The fact that the BhāgP reflects so extensively on the MBh is one way that it shows interest to contour its bhakti ideology with the ordering and regulating shapes of dharma (Davis 2007). My aim here is not simply to highlight the BhāgP’s differences from the epic with respect to its understanding of devotionism,³ rather, I aim to show further how this Purāṇa complements as it departs from the MBh—alternately (and

² I prefer the phrase ‘tradition of affiliation’ to the terms ‘sect’ and ‘sectarian’, as it avoids the western and negative connotations of the latter terms.

³ One could, for example, investigate Friedhelm Hardy’s categories of ‘intellectual’ versus ‘emotional’ bhakti as they are applicable to the BhāgP as a whole and with respect to its reworking of the MBh (Hardy 1983).

sometimes simultaneously) denigrating, resignifying, and incorporating the MBh—to affirm its absolute valuation of bhakti dedicated to Kṛṣṇa. For the *Bhāgavata*, the object of bhakti is surely a charming, clever, and powerful divinity, but he is also the personal absolute emphatically identified as the embodiment of dharma, with its several meanings.⁴

Donald Davis Jr. (2007) argues that if we take the notion of dharma in its manifold meanings, it is right to view the *Bhāgavata* as an effort to invoke brāhmaṇical legitimation by casting bhakti in dharmic terms, effectively ‘legalizing’ a certain bhakti tradition presumably to the exclusion of others, or to the exclusion of particular behaviors. More fundamentally, Davis argues, this legitimizing effort can be seen as the establishment of meaning: ‘[D]harma as law provides a baseline for the construction of religious meaning in *bhakti*’, a notion that ‘highlights the importance of *dharma* as law in the creation of boundaries that must exist for transcendence of any kind to occur’ (8/27). Further, he argues, bhakti *depends* on dharma, especially its legal aspect, ‘to generate a different sort of religious meaning and practice, but one that does not, indeed cannot, leave the law behind’ (9, n7/27). From this perspective, the MBh may be seen as providing the ‘baseline’ of this-worldly (*pravṛtti*) and other-worldly (*nivṛtti*) concerns to determine what is dharma for the BhāgP’s departure into its devotional world. The BhāgP is quite explicit about what sort of religious meaning and practice it aims to articulate and institute, namely, that devotional attitudes and acts with respect to Viṣṇu (or more specifically Kṛṣṇa) fostered by the hearing of *Bhāgavata* recitations in assemblies of bhaktas, is the proper and best way to perform dharma. Such hearing fosters bhakti because listeners *participate* in the dharmically ideal acts of exemplary bhaktas or *mahābhāgavatas* described in the text while they also hear explicit instruction on dharma from such bhaktas or from Kṛṣṇa or Viṣṇu. This aim is the BhāgP’s persistent and notably consistent ‘answer’ to the endlessly unresolved questions regarding dharma in the MBh.

To consider the BhāgP as a reflection on (and of) the MBh, it will be useful to keep attention on two recurring and important interrelated themes in the BhāgP, namely divine absence and human loss. As Ramanujan notes (1989: 196), absence and loss are key themes in love poetry and war poetry respectively. As a post-war reflection on human loss the *Bhāgavata* turns to the problem of absence—especially the absence of Kṛṣṇa—to rework the past into a never-ending present of remembrance. The BhāgP’s recitation by Śuka to Parīkṣit is that remembrance, seen to arise as a direct consequence of both conditions, and the Naimiṣa ṛṣis are impelled by these two troubling conditions and the consequent commencement of the *kaliyuga* to embark on an extended remembrance of that absent divinity who had sanctioned the chain of destructive events (human loss) comprising the epic story. It is also their concern to learn ‘to whom dharma has gone for shelter’ since Yogeśvara Kṛṣṇa has departed from the world (1,1.23). Sūta’s answer to this question—that the *Bhāgavata* is the ‘risen sun’ to dispel the darkness of this age (1,3.43)—also indicates the solution to the dual problem of divine absence and human loss, namely listening to the *Bhāgavata*, consisting as it does in sustained remembrance of Kṛṣṇa. These two interconnected themes surface repeatedly in the BhāgP, charging events and persons with devotional significance; similarly, the MBh’s main story ending in the mass annihilation after which the Purāṇa’s framestory opens constitutes a collective memory of loss and absence that infuses the BhāgP with a strong sense of pathos

⁴ Here I follow Fitzgerald (2004: 81-82 and Appendix 4) in his threefold cluster of meanings for the word *dharma*, as ‘(1) Meritorious, Lawful Deeds, Merit, Law; (2) Right, Justice; and (3) Virtue’.

that ushers in a time of hope through the time-transcending remembrance of the time-transcending Viṣṇu or Kṛṣṇa. In the tenth and eleventh *skandhas* experiences of divine absence—of Kṛṣṇa from the *rāsa* dance, later from Vraja, and finally from the world—evoke the most powerful and felicitous devotional emotions in Kṛṣṇa’s companions. And yet, while the substance of these emotions contrasts sharply with that of the self-destructive emotions unleashed in the MBh, such devotional emotions remain within and finally affirm the dharmic foundation that the BhāgP seeks to recover from the ashes of the MBh war in its pursuit of a unitive vision of reality.

After listing the explicit BhāgP connections to the MBh story and characters, I will consider in turn some of these links with respect to functions of denigration, resignification, and incorporation as these serve the Purāṇa’s purposes in reflecting on and recreating the MBh.

The *Mahābhārata* in the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*

To see the scope of explicit linking to the MBh found in the BhāgP, we can first view a summary listing of these links sequentially, following the order of the BhāgP text.

(1) 1,1-6: The first six chapters of the first book establish links to the MBh through (in the first three chapters) questions by the Naimiṣa ṛṣis to Sūta (Ugraśravas), both understood to be the same interlocutors opening the Ādiparvan of the MBh. Ugraśravas initial answers are followed by an account of Vyāsa’s post-epic authorial life as a newly inspired composer of the BhāgP.

(2) 1,7-19: The most prominent linking is through the BhāgP’s framestory, wherein Parīkṣit’s miraculous survival of Aśvatthaman’s attempted pre-natal assassination and eventual curse of Parīkṣit eventuates Śuka’s meeting and recitation to Parīkṣit. This framestory includes an abridgement of the MBh post-war account, recalling Aśvatthaman’s attack on Parīkṣit, his brahmaśiras ‘dual’ with Arjuna, and his banishment (1,7); Kṛṣṇa’s preparation to depart for Dvārakā following the war, and his meeting with the dying Bhīṣma (1,8-9); Dhṛtarāṣṭra’s departure for the forest (1,13); and Kṛṣṇa’s demise and the Pāṇḍavas’ final departure from home (1,15). Kṛṣṇa’s demise will be recounted in greater detail toward the end of the text along with the destruction of the Yadus (11,30-31).

(3) 3,1-3: Commencing in the third *skandha*, in a third level of interlocution (after Parīkṣit-Śuka and Śaunaka-Ugraśravas), Vidura and Uddhava remember Kṛṣṇa and his activities, including those related to events and other persons featured in the MBh.

(4) 7,1-15: Yudhiṣṭhira appears as an interlocutor with Nārada in the seventh *skandha*, an exchange represented as having taken place during Yudhiṣṭhira’s performance of the *mahā-kratu* or Rājasūya sacrifice (which will evoke Duryodhana’s envy, leading to the dice game that eventually leads to the Kurukṣetra war).

(5) 10,72-75: The Rājasūya sacrifice and related events, especially the killing of Śiśupāla by Kṛṣṇa, are recounted.

(6) 10,82-84: Several leading figures of the MBh (Yadus, Kurus, and several others, as well as important sages) are listed as meeting with Kṛṣṇa and with the residents of Vrindavan at Samanta-pāñcaka, the place of the MBh battle.

(7) 10,89: Arjuna, with Kṛṣṇa's help, proves his heroism as a protector of brāhmaṇas and sees Viṣṇu in his transcendent abode.

(8) 11,7-29: Kṛṣṇa meets and instructs Uddhava.

(9) 12,5-6: Śuka gives final instruction to Parīkṣit, and Parīkṣit dies.

It is clear from this list that the BhāgP is explicitly linked to the MBh at several points in the text. One might identify further, less explicit, links if various sub-stories found in the MBh rendered also in the BhāgP were traced, but for our purposes the explicit links are more relevant. We will also find, not surprisingly, that Kṛṣṇa or Viṣṇu⁵ is either involved or remembered in each of these links and that in all cases, the focus on Kṛṣṇa or Viṣṇu is in devotional terms—the divine relating with or remembered by his *bhaktas* in such a way that some kind of devotional maturation process that involves a concern with dharma is expressed.⁶

(1) Questioning and commenting: The *Mahābhārata* as bad memories

The *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* declares exalted purposes in its opening verses (1,1.1-3),⁷ with a polemical tone marking the first line of the second verse: 'False dharma being rejected, here in the blessed *Bhāgavata* the supreme dharma of selfless saints is to be known'. Although not immediately specifying what the text considers to be false or deceitful (*kaitava*), the implication develops through the first *skandha*'s frame-narrations that it is largely the *Mahābhārata*, representing a marred or at least incomplete view of dharma, that needs correction or completion by the *Bhāgavata*.⁸ The story of Vyāsa brooding over the shortcomings of his authorial and editorial accomplishments develops this implication (1,4). Although Vyāsa had dutifully compiled the MBh (referred to as *bhāratam*, 1,4.25) for women, Śūdras, 'friends of the twice-born' and the 'dull-witted' (*mūḍhānām*), Vyāsa feels himself 'as if

⁵ A word search in the electronic 'Bhaktivedanta Vedabase' edition of the BhāgP text (verses only searched) (Prabhupada 2003) yields 712 occurrences of the word 'kṛṣṇa' and its derivatives (kṛsn*); similarly there are 378 occurrences of 'hari', 235 occurrences of 'viṣṇu' and 152 occurrences of 'nārāyaṇa'. Other names searched were 'vasudeva' (which includes both Vasudeva and Vāsudeva) (226x), 'keśava' (50x), 'govinda' (68x), and 'madhava' (38x). Allowing for words found in the search other than the intended names, the predominance of the name Kṛṣṇa in the BhāgP indicates that he is the text's main object of devotion, although nowhere is 'kṛṣṇa' found directly in compound with 'bhakti' (which occurs, with its derivatives, 422 times).

⁶ Further reflection on these links invites one to look for a logic of *exclusion*: why have important events and persons in the MBh *not* been mentioned in the BhāgP? Aside from the obvious reason that such events and persons are considered peripheral to the 'new' vision of Kṛṣṇa-centered bhakti, the question remains, for example, why Karna receives only the briefest mention in the BhāgP, even though Dhṛtarāṣṭra is featured.

⁷ The opening six verses constitute the outermost frame of the BhāgP, which 'appears as a *creatio ex nihilo* and is told by a "disembodied, omniscient third person voice" (Malinar 2005: 470, quoting Fitzgerald 2002: 99), who introduces the next frame, in which the interlocutors are Ugrasravas-Śaunaka/Sages.

⁸ The allusion to gambling in the word *kaitava* suggests that, from the outset, the BhāgP wants to spurn the sort of 'dharma'—based in the adversarial mentality of *pṛthag dṛṣṭi*—that resulted in the MBh dice game and its subsequent dire consequences.

lacking' (*asampanna iva*) (4.28-30). Nārada then counsels Vyāsa, referring to his *Mahābhārata* composition (perhaps tauntingly) as *mahad-adbhutam*, a great wonder, before urging him to get on with the proper work of composing the *Bhāgavata* (1,5.3; 5.8).

To underscore his point, Nārada condemns all discourse other than what serves to praise Hari, the Lord, as *vāyasam tīrtham*, a 'pilgrimage place for crows', that is, so much refuse (1,5.10; cf 12,12.51). Not only is such discourse unprofitable, based as it is on a mundane understanding of selfhood (5.2) and hence constrained to bear a limited perspective on reality (*darśanam khilam*), it is also misleading to the populace (5.15), instilling it with degrading and self-destructive values. Setting a vigorous pace for its one-pointed pursuit of Kṛṣṇa-centered bhakti, the BhāgP sums up in the term 'separate vision' or 'non-integrated vision' (1,5.14: *pṛthag dṛśaḥ*) what it aims to reject as unworthy to its purpose.

What is *not* separate vision is ultimate truth (1,1.1: *satyaṁ param*), which the BhāgP will elaborate upon throughout as *hari-* or *kṛṣṇa-kathā*, narrations with reference to Hari or Kṛṣṇa (e.g. 1,6.32; 1,7.12), and the practices that evoke realization and participation in ultimate truth. But from the outset there is a problem: Kṛṣṇa has departed from the world. He with respect to whom all discourse should be engaged in has withdrawn to his own atemporal realm (1,3.43: *sva-dhāma*), having completed his world-ordering purpose of arranging for the wholesale destruction during and after the Kurukṣetra war. From the *Bhāgavata's* perspective, that war (which comprises much of the MBh's central narrative) is an account of unspeakable horror that has served ultimately to remove Kṛṣṇa from the sight of the world; yet it is Kṛṣṇa, now invisible, who is to be recollected for any sort of verbal communication to have meaning.⁹ The *Bhāgavata's* task is, therefore, to constitute and facilitate the process of recollecting Kṛṣṇa (1,2.8: *viśvaksena-kathā*) by engaging in the discipline of devotion (1,2.7: *bhakti-yogaḥ prayojitaḥ*) as an act of the highest dharma (1,2.6: *paraḥ dharmah*), by which the self is well-pleased (*ibid: yayātmā suprasīdati*).

To commence its project of showing how '*bhakti-yoga*' is the highest dharma, the BhāgP first remembers its own beginnings in King Parīkṣit's life-long search for that Lord, Kṛṣṇa, who had protected him from Aśvatthaman's attack. As frame-narrative, the remainder of the first book serves both to 'open' the narrative which will focus on Kṛṣṇa or Viṣṇu and his *bhaktas*, and to 'enclose' it with the MBh story, which becomes *peripheral* to the central story of encountering and remembering Kṛṣṇa and his teachings or the teachings of those exemplars of encountering and remembering him.

(2) Kṛṣṇa's transcendence and bhakti functions in the main frame-narrative

As noted by Matchett (2002: 293), it is odd that Kṛṣṇa is so prominently featured where one would not think he belongs, namely in the frame-narrative to a text that announces Kṛṣṇa as its main subject. That he is so prominent in the BhāgP's abridgement of the MBh post-war events can be understood to signal Kṛṣṇa's transcendent presence as that divinity who is uncontainable by any boundaries (*ibid.* 94). Integral to the BhāgP's resignification of the MBh is its emphasis on Kṛṣṇa's transcendent identity, underscored by numerous explicit

⁹ Freda Matchett notes that reference to Kṛṣṇa's death already in the *Bhāgavata's* beginning serves a positive purpose, namely to 'arouse and to satisfy a need for that Kṛṣṇa who appears to have abandoned the world to the *kaliyuga*, but is really both within it and beyond it' (Matchett 2002: 294).

statements. These assertions begin prior to the frame-narrative proper (in Nārada's exchange with Vyāsa, e.g. 1,5.6), are expressed within the frame-narrative in praises by Kuntī and Bhīṣma (e.g. 1,8.27; 1,9.10), and occur repeatedly throughout the body of the text.¹⁰ Similar assertions of Kṛṣṇa's and Viṣṇu's divine transcendence are of course also present in the MBh, famously in Kṛṣṇa's own words in the *Bhagavad-gītā* portion of the Bhīṣmaparvan, and also elsewhere.¹¹ But by insisting on Kṛṣṇa's transcendent identity from its opening chapters the BhāgP makes this idea pivotal to its purpose such that, in effect, the entire MBh is resignified in light of this central postulate. The BhāgP, in a sense, expands theologically on the BhG: Kṛṣṇa is not just a high divinity; rather, he is the supreme transcendent Lord of all and the 'nondual truth, known as *brahman*, *paramātman*, and *bhagavān*' (1,2.11).

Similarly, as noted already, tacitly following the MBh in its preoccupation with dharma, the discernment and sustaining of dharma is a priority for the BhāgP from its beginning (e.g. 1,1.2; 1,2.6). Significantly, the first narrative representation of this concern with dharma is in its account of Aśvatthāman's judgment and banishment that opens the BhāgP's post-Kurukṣetra-war summary. At the same time, this is a noteworthy example of MBh resignification blended with incorporation. Whereas in the MBh version of the story it is Kṛṣṇa who curses Aśvatthāman to wander alone for three thousand years for having murdered the Pāṇḍaveyas (MBh 10.16.8-15), in the BhāgP (1,7.34-39) Kṛṣṇa exhorts Arjuna to determine Aśvatthāman's fate while advising him with contradictory injunctions of dharmasāstric character. Much as Arjuna had hesitated to fight against his superiors in the Kurukṣetra war (BhG 2.5), Arjuna shrinks from killing Aśvatthāman, since he is the son of his (Arjuna's) guru Droṇa (1,7.40). Instead he brings the culprit before Draupadī to decide his fate, and she, despite her pain at the loss of her sons, offers respect to him as the guru's son and commands him to be released: 'Release, release this brāhmaṇa, who is after all our guru' (43). She then explains that if the brāhmaṇas are angered by kṣatriyas (*rājanyaiḥ*), that anger will destroy (incinerate: *pradahati*) the offending family.

Draupadī's swallowing her grief for the sake of dharmic propriety follows and expands the parallel MBh passage (10.16.33-34). But in the *Bhāgavata* context, her behavior is best understood as intended to portray her nobility as Kṛṣṇa's devotee.¹² At the same time, the MBh account is incorporated to underscore the notion that it is bhakti directed to Kṛṣṇa that finally establishes and preserves dharmic order, integral to which is the observance of *varṇa* hierarchy.

As noted by Malinar (2005: 481), in the BhāgP, 'True to the *bhakti* reinterpretation of the epic, [in the BhāgP] Ugraśravas stresses Kṛṣṇa's divine qualities and all the heroes are

¹⁰ Some further instances in later portions of direct assertions of Kṛṣṇa's or Viṣṇu's transcendent identity are: Identifying Kṛṣṇa as *brahman*: 7,10.48-49; Viṣṇu/Hari/Īśvara is Bhagavān: 2,1.5; Kṛṣṇa is beyond *prakṛti*: 11,22.4, 10,1.23, 10,3.13; Viṣṇu/Īśvara/Bhagavān is Paramapuruṣa: 5,14.2; the transcendent nature of Viṣṇu's abode: 2,2.18, 3,15.14ff.; Vāsudeva is the body of all the *devas*: 5,7.6. I am grateful to Jonathan Edelmann for supplying these references.

¹¹ E.g. BhG 7.7, 10.8, 10.12. Sutton (2000: 203-210) suggests the term 'epic monotheism' to describe the sort of generic theism presented in the MBh as a whole. The BhāgP seems committed to sharpen the theistic picture offered by the MBh, though, as already indicated in n. 5, several personal names for the Deity are used throughout the BhāgP somewhat interchangeably.

¹² As in the MBh in several instances, Draupadī is referred to in these verses as Kṛṣṇā, to underscore her connection with him (1,7.42 & 58).

more or less turned into *bhaktas* of Kṛṣṇa'. Also, it is important to the BhāgP that these *bhaktas* do not *become* such so much as they either always have been or are *bhaktas* 'from the very beginning'. In this respect, to consider representations of MBh personages in the frame-narrative, Greg Bailey's delineation of nine bhakti 'functions' (in the *Vāmana-purāṇa*) as a semantic schema for understanding the purāṇic forms of bhakti myths will be helpful.¹³ These functions constitute a discernable pattern or sequence of typical events in the transformation of a non-*bhakta* to a *bhakta* and a divinity to an object of devotion (Bailey 1989: 27, 30-37). Notable for us with respect to the BhāgP is that in several cases of *bhakta*-divinity exchanges in the frame-narrative (and prior to it)¹⁴ this sequence is collapsed, or rather, the point of 'conversion' (function 5) may happen at the beginning of the *bhakta*'s life, or prior to the present life, or else it is implied or made explicit that a *bhakta* was always such. Parīkṣit is an example of the first case: Kṛṣṇa's intervention in Uttara's womb sets the devotional course of his life (function 3 and 4, arguably reversed), such that when in adulthood he is cursed (function 4, indirectly, and 5), his abruptly ending life becomes entirely focused on his search— by listening to Śuka's recitation—for the one who had appeared to him in the womb (functions 6-9). Similarly, though not by any explicit narrative accounts, Draupadī (as we have just seen), the Pāṇḍava brothers, Kuntī, and Bhīṣma are also resignified by implication as having been Kṛṣṇa's devotees 'all along' and as needing now, after the Kurukṣetra war, to come to terms with the imminent departure of their object of devotion. Especially noteworthy is the BhāgP's portrayal of Bhīṣma in his last hour: in his praises of Kṛṣṇa, who stands before him, the message is that Bhīṣma has always been first and foremost Kṛṣṇa's *bhakta*, and that hence his fight with Arjuna was a ruse to have the pleasure of seeing Kṛṣṇa succumb to protective anger for the sake of Arjuna at the cost of his promise to refrain from fighting (9.34-39).¹⁵ Thus protective loyalty to his devotee trumps Kṛṣṇa's observance of the 'dharma' of promise-keeping on the battlefield. In such representations, the unbounded transcendence of Kṛṣṇa is complemented by his *bhaktas*' time-transcending devotion and Kṛṣṇa's reciprocating such devotion as the superior dharmic principle.

(3) Nontemporal Kṛṣṇa in the temporal world

¹³ Bailey's nine functions (1989: 30) are (1) introduction; (2) spiritual ignorance of the future devotee; (3) beginning of spiritual realization for the future devotee; (4) demonstration of the god's grace; (5) "conversion" of the devotee; (6) demonstration of the devotee's devotion; (7) the god offers grace to his devotee; (8) the devotee re-affirms devotion by accepting the grace; (9) the devotee performs specific activities as an expression of devotion.

¹⁴ Nārada's 'autobiographical' account in 1,5.23-31 and 1,6.5-32.

¹⁵ After this remembrance of devotional chivalry the immediately subsequent verse (40) offers a surprise: Bhīṣma recalls Kṛṣṇa's youthful dalliance with the Vraja milkmaids and how they remember and imitate him out of intense feelings of separation during his absence from the *rāsa* dance! Even in his extreme condition on the verge of death, or perhaps because of it, the devotee-Bhīṣma can, in effect, cross a textual boundary to identify the quality of his own devotion with that displayed by the Vraja *gopīs*.

The first four chapters of the third *skandha* consist mainly in a discussion between two Kṛṣṇa-bhaktas, Vidura and Uddhava.¹⁶ Uddhava is another example of a devotee ‘from the beginning’, who already as a five-year-old showed indifference to mundane activities (3,2.2). Vidura has been wandering on pilgrimage (an activity of bhakti) since prior to the Kurukṣetra war, and it becomes Uddhava’s task (before leaving for the Himalayas on Kṛṣṇa’s final order) to inform him of all that has transpired since then, up to and including his own final meeting with Kṛṣṇa just prior to the latter’s demise. Uddhava’s *anukramaṇi* of Kṛṣṇa’s life is filled with praises of Kṛṣṇa’s divine power and heroism; his mildness, humility, and self-restraint;¹⁷ his equanimity; as well as his attractiveness to both devotees and non-devotees (*asuras*) (3,2.26-3,4.20). Despite, or indeed because of, his power, Kṛṣṇa is the transcendent non-actor (*akartr*) (3,1.44), who merely sanctions all that has transpired regarding the Kurukṣetra war, his mission having been to relieve the earth of its burden (3,2.18, 25). The cumulative effect of the eulogy is to present a nontemporal vision of Kṛṣṇa that is yet tied to the specific events of his life. Particularly noteworthy as a suggestion of such nontemporal vision in a temporal situation is Uddhava’s mention of Kṛṣṇa’s presence in Yudhiṣṭhira’s *rājasūya* sacrifice, where ‘the tripartite world, viewing his pleasing sight, considered, ‘Today the dexterity of Brahmā is surpassed’ (3,2.13).

The prevailing mood of the interlocutors in these chapters is intense grief (1,2.1-5), arising from Vidura’s and Uddhava’s mutual feelings of Kṛṣṇa’s absence (*viraha*, *āhlāda-viyogārti-yutaḥ*—3,4.20-21). But the sense of loss serves remembrance and recounting of Kṛṣṇa’s activities and qualities; hence this exchange exemplifies the text’s persistent didactic lesson, namely that hearing, reciting, and remembering about Kṛṣṇa (or Hari, or Viṣṇu, or Nārāyaṇa) is the best religious practice, as announced by Śuka in the beginning of his recitation to Parīkṣit (2,1.5). Both Vidura and Uddhava are further examples of *bhaktas* ‘all the while’ whose devotion to Kṛṣṇa is a continuous intensification—made all the more so by his absence—such that the two *bhaktas* now perform the ‘specific activity’ of remembering and talking about him with acute feeling of loss (Bailey’s function 9). As we continue to see, in its re-creation of the MBh, the BhāgP attributes an overarching devotional purpose to the horror of the internacine conflagration that had been brought about by destructive emotions. Vidura and Uddhava represent, in their dialogue, both the desired devotional opposite to destructive emotions, and the exemplars of hope that can emerge from destruction even in such magnitude as that described in the MBh. In this way the BhāgP incorporates by encompassment—subsuming even what might appear ungodly—in its devotional ‘universe of feelings’ (Klostermeier 1988).

(4) and (5) Kṛṣṇa’s equanimity, the slaying of Śiśupāla, and liberative emotion

¹⁶ Significantly for its positioning Uddhava as important, in what appears to be an echo of Parīkṣit’s own situation as a sole survivor of the Kuru clan, Śuka tells the former that Uddhava had been selected by Kṛṣṇa as *ātmavatām varaḥ* (3,4.30) “the best of those like me” and as *na ... ’nv api man-nyūnaḥ* (31) ‘not inferior to me’ to remain the only survivor of the Yadu clan in order to ‘broadcast knowledge of [Kṛṣṇa] in the world.’

¹⁷ Significantly, the example of Kṛṣṇa’s self-restraint is that he ‘endured the offenses of the Kurus’ (3,2.43).

The *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*'s next two explicit links to the MBh are closely interrelated, both developing further the notion of divine encompassment while considering the propriety of Kṛṣṇa's ways of relating to 'enemies' (who are not really enemies). One link (comprising much of the seventh *skandha*) supports an explanation (or defense) of Kṛṣṇa's equanimity, and the second link (10,72-75) concludes the story (begun in 3,16 and elaborated in 7,1-8), further illustrating Kṛṣṇa's equanimity while also arguing that inimical emotions are liberative when directed toward Kṛṣṇa. Both discussions turn attention to an early phase in MBh chronology, linking to each other through the occasion of Yudhiṣṭhira's *rājasūya* sacrifice which provides, in the seventh *skandha*, the opportunity for Nārada to answer Yudhiṣṭhira's doubt upon witnessing Śiśupāla entering Kṛṣṇa's body after his death (7,1.16).¹⁸ To illustrate Kṛṣṇa's equanimity, Nārada elaborates over several chapters the story of Prahlāda (a Viṣṇu-*bhakta* and *mahābhāgavata* from birth), his father Hiranyakaśipu (an *asura* from before birth who is 'really' a devotee), and the appearance of the man-lion form of Viṣṇu to kill Hiranyakaśipu. Śiśupāla is Hiranyakaśipu reincarnate, one of the two doorkeepers from Viṣṇu's abode, born as an *asura* to be killed for a third time by Viṣṇu, fulfilling a curse by the four 'mental sons' of Brahmā (7,10.35-38).

The more detailed story of Śiśupāla's confrontation with Kṛṣṇa at Indraprastha in Yudhiṣṭhira's *rājasūya* is delayed until late in the *Bhāgavata*'s tenth *skandha* (10,74), when Vāsudeva-Kṛṣṇa is seen putting aside domestic duties in Dvārakā (described in chapters 69 and 70)¹⁹ to become involved in the political concerns of his friends (and relatives, through Kuntī). As far as the *Bhāgavata* is concerned, at this point Kṛṣṇa's task on behalf of the Pāṇḍavas will be completed and (after remaining for 'a few months' 10,74.48) he will attend to new threats against the Vṛṣṇis (10,76-78). The *Bhāgavata*'s focus remains long enough in Indraprastha after the *rājasūya* to observe how Yudhiṣṭhira's hoped-for unification proves superficial when Duryodhana lingers after the event, only to be embarrassed by palace 'intrigue' in the form of delusive interior design (10,75). In the MBh Duryodhana's embarrassment and anger lead to the fateful dice game that reverses the Pāṇḍavas' fortunes and eventually spells fratricidal war. But the *Bhāgavata*, significantly, will follow Kṛṣṇa in his *absence* from the gambling *sabhā*.

Remaining briefly with the *śiśupāla-vadha* episode (10,74), having been proclaimed by Sahadeva (rather than by Bhīṣma, as in the MBh) as the most qualified person to receive the first *arghya* worship on the day for extracting *soma*, Kṛṣṇa hears out Śiśupāla's volley of

¹⁸ In the MBh, it is *tejas* from Śiśupāla's body that enters Kṛṣṇa after offering him obeisance (2.42.22-23); in the BhāgP it is *jyotiḥ* that rises from Śiśupāla's body and enters Vāsudeva, with no mention of obeisance (10,74.45).

¹⁹ Kṛṣṇa is portrayed in these chapters as the perfect householder performing domestic duties (in his 16,000 expansions with as many wives) as prescribed in Dharmaśāstras. As Davis (2007) points out, Kṛṣṇa is described as *sakala-dharma-bhṛtām varīṣṭhaḥ* (10,69.14), the 'best of those who maintain all the dharmas', and as such one can view the passage as providing 'a substitutional means for worshippers to reap the benefits of *dharma* through Kṛṣṇa'. In this light one may also see the commentarial function of the BhāgP in relation to the MBh at work: Though Bhīṣma and Yudhiṣṭhira are viewed as maintainers of *dharma* in the MBh, they both have well-known difficulties in this regard. By the BhāgP claiming that Kṛṣṇa outranks both in upholding *dharma*, the MBh's dharmic purposes are fulfilled in the BhāgP.

insults (much abbreviated in the BhāgP). In this version, Kṛṣṇa remains silent throughout the tirade prior to decapitating him with his Sudarśana disc.²⁰

Significant for the BhāgP's encompassing agenda is its expansion to cosmic dimensions of Śiśupāla's demise. According to Śuka, the light (*jyotiḥ*) from Śiśupāla's body entering Kṛṣṇa (Vāsudeva) is witnessed not only by the sacrificial assembly but also by 'all living beings' (*sarva-bhūtānām*, 74.45); and, as already mentioned, Śiśupāla's obsessional hatred for Kṛṣṇa sustained not just one but rather three lifetimes, of which the present one concludes his enmity (74.46). By thus identifying Śiśupāla in cosmic terms, it is not just that Kṛṣṇa is made to appear as a greater hero for killing him; rather, the unitive vision of the *Bhāgavata* is served by transforming a clan feud into a cosmic reunion. Śiśupāla's death is, according to the BhāgP, *really* about the well-earned reunion after long separation of Kṛṣṇa's devotee with the deity after three lifetimes of constant and intense—indeed, inimical—meditation on the singularly important object of meditation, namely Vāsudeva-Kṛṣṇa.²¹ That this episode serves to underscore the *Bhāgavata*'s unitive or integrative vision of reality is suggested in a reference to Kṛṣṇa as 'one whose vision is undistracted', or, alternatively, as 'one whose vision is unique' (*ananya-darśin*, 10,74.24)

That the Śiśupāla episode holds emblematic importance in the BhāgP is further indicated by an allusion to it earlier in the tenth book, as a didactic interlude in the narration of Kṛṣṇa's *rāsa* dance with the *gopīs* of Vraja (10,29-33). As if to anticipate listeners' theological doubts, Parīkṣit asks Śuka how it is that these devotees could possibly be freed from the 'current of (mundane) qualities' (*guṇa-pravāhoparamaḥ*) since they knew Kṛṣṇa as their exclusive lover, not as Brahman (10,29.12: *kṛṣṇam viduḥ param kāntam na tu brahmatayā mune*). Śuka's response has a tinge of teacherly impatience: 'This was explained to you previously. Even Śiśupāla, though hating Hṛṣīkeśa (Kṛṣṇa), gained perfection (*siddhim*), so what to speak of those dear to him' (29.13). The prior explanation referred to brings listeners back to the first chapter of book seven (discussed above), wherein Nārada justifies to Yudhiṣṭhira Śiśupāla's astonishing attainment following Śiśupāla's death and entrance into Kṛṣṇa's body. Nārada's conclusion in the seventh *skandha* becomes one of the *Bhāgavata*'s refrains to define bhakti in terms of re-directed emotion: 'Therefore by constant enmity, amicability, fear, affection, or passion, one should be engaged [with Vāsudeva-Kṛṣṇa] without seeing anything as separated [from him]' (7,1.26). Indeed, in Śuka's present answer (in the *rāsa* dance episode), he both echoes Nārada from earlier and says in similar words what he will insist again in his conclusion to the *śiśupālavadhā* episode (at 10,74.46): 'Surely those who always display passion, anger, fear, affection, oneness, or friendship for Hari attain his nature' (10,29.15: *yānti tan-mayatām hi te*). This linking of the *gopīs* with Śiśupāla is both a positive and negative comparison that serves to link the BhāgP with the MBh. Both the passionate *gopīs* and the hatefully obsessed Śiśupāla gain the desirable perfection of absorption in Kṛṣṇa, *and* (the BhāgP insists) it is better (being more directly conducive to attaining the unitive vision of bhakti) to pursue the *gopīs*' affectionate mood than Śiśupāla's hateful mood.

²⁰ In the MBh Kṛṣṇa is not silent, listing Śiśupāla's numerous crimes before killing him.

²¹ Perhaps on the basis of this principle of singular focus of hateful emotion on Kṛṣṇa can be surmised why Karna is only marginally mentioned in the BhāgP, since his enmity is reserved almost exclusively for someone other than Kṛṣṇa, namely Arjuna.

Not unlike the BhāgP, the *Mahābhārata* is also frequently at pains to remind hearers of events' and persons' cosmic dimensions and identities. What makes the BhāgP different in its resignification of the MBh is that it re-positions *emotions* from being the source only of bondage, perpetuated through rivalries over power, as in the MBh, to becoming the central means of divine redemption through the purging power of the deity. Śiśupāla becomes, in the BhāgP, an exemplary transformer of that which the text views as both the disempowering cause of illusion and hence bondage in the world, and the most effective vehicle for liberation (cf. 1,5.32-33). Moreover, being intensely inimical to Viṣṇu or Kṛṣṇa is thoroughly under divine sanction (cf. 3,16.26, 31). In terms of bhakti functions, Śiśupāla has been on a three-lifetime detour from his permanent *bhakta* position in Viṣṇu's abode. So in that sense he is past 'conversion' (function 5) and receiving further offers of divine grace (function 7) by direct encounter and death at the hands of Kṛṣṇa.

(6) Meetings with Kṛṣṇa at Samanta-pañcaka

In an anachronistic story toward the end of the tenth book, beginning with 10,82 numerous kings from around Bhāratavarṣa assemble to observe purificatory rites on the occasion of a solar eclipse at Samanta-pañcaka (in Kurukṣetra, where the MBh battle takes place); in 10,83 Draupadī hears from Kṛṣṇa's principal wives the several accounts of their betrothal; and in 10,84 several well-known sages²² arrive and are shown good princely hospitality by Kṛṣṇa. In this account, amiable feelings prevail among the clans, and between the two sets of Kuru cousins, suggesting a time prior to Yudhiṣṭhira's *rājasūya* performance, but perhaps better described as a time out of the 'real' time of the MBh. The episode might best be characterized as an 'inversion' of the MBh, with its dreamy sense that no adversity has arisen among the clans beyond the experience of prolonged separation among family members and friends, especially Kṛṣṇa. Adding to this section's strangeness, even Kṛṣṇa's relations and friends from Vraja (leaving behind their herds of cows?) travel the long distance to see Kṛṣṇa once again after his departure for Mathurā.

Yet the meeting of Kṛṣṇa with Vraja residents is not without relevance to our discussion of MBh reflection. As Kṛṣṇa chats with the Vraja cowherdresses, he explains his long absence from Vraja on the basis of political necessity, namely to destroy unspecified 'inimical parties' (82.41), surely including the inimical cousins of the Pāṇḍavas. The implication here is that Kṛṣṇa's real home is Vraja, from which he has been drawn away unavoidably to fulfill (dharmic) obligations.

In contrast to those 'external' spheres of weighty political concerns, here Kṛṣṇa resumes the attitude of his 'private self' displayed in Vraja. Jokingly Kṛṣṇa asks the *gopīs* whether they remember him and then, ironically and paradoxically, blames '*bhagavān*', as the one who unites and separates beings, for causing his absence (42). The passage points back, again (as in the case of the *śiśupālavadhā* episode), to earlier passages of the tenth book that narrate Kṛṣṇa's intimate exchanges with the *gopīs* and their conjugal feelings of longing for him in his absence. Among these passages, the *rāsa* dance episode is central, in which Śuka highlights devotional intimacy and intensity of devotional emotion between Kṛṣṇa and the

²² The list of sages includes, significantly perhaps as an allusion to the Nārāyaṇīya, Ekata, Dvita, and Trita, the three non-bhaktas who had entered Śvetadvīpa but failed to see Nārāyaṇa.

cowherdresses while exploring questions of dharmic propriety and conjugal loyalty. Prior to the *rāsa* dance, in ironic tones Kṛṣṇa had lectured the *gopīs* on the duties of married women and the impropriety of their meeting with him. During the *rāsa* dance, detecting the fault of conceit tarnishing their devotion (*mānam*) ‘to subdue [their pride] and show favor’ (*praśamāya prasādāya*), Kṛṣṇa had suddenly disappeared from the *gopīs*’ midst, throwing them into a state of maddened longing remembrance as they search for their beloved (10,29.48; 10,30-31). Eventually, moved by the *gopīs*’ intense remembrance soon freed from pride, Kṛṣṇa had returned to their midst (10,32.2); the *gopīs* had then initiated a discussion with him about different types and qualities of lovers in terms of their motives and loyalty (10,32.16), and Kṛṣṇa had pleaded that his intention had been to impel an increase in the *gopīs* devotion to him (10,32.20).²³

More than any other portions, it is these tenth book passages portraying Kṛṣṇa’s and the *gopīs* intimate dealings for which the BhāgP becomes so well known, and it is these that have been characterized as ‘emotional bhakti’ in contrast to the more ‘intellectual’ bhakti of the BhG or *Viṣṇupurāṇa* (Hardy 1983).²⁴ While this typology of ‘intellectual’ and ‘emotional’ bhakti can be useful, from the Samanta-pañcaka episode (and later didactic passages) it becomes apparent that the BhāgP as a whole insists on *containing* devotional emotions even as it celebrates their purificatory power. In the present passage, Kṛṣṇa reiterates his lesson on bhakti-as-meditation that he had dispatched Uddhava to deliver to the Vraja residents (10,46-47); and in the final verse of this chapter (after Kṛṣṇa has given his consorts a quick dose of *adhyātma-śikṣā*, echoing himself in the BhG about devotional perfection and his own all-pervasiveness (10,82.44 / BhG 10.20) the *gopīs* modestly request Kṛṣṇa to bless them that they may always retain his lotus feet in their minds (10,82.48).

This Samanta-pañcaka episode is also noteworthy in the present context of MBh reflection in that the BhāgP here dwells on the value of being in the presence of and seeing Kṛṣṇa (10,82.29-30). It is a narration of meetings, in contrast to book one’s frame-narrative characterized by partings. Hence there is in these chapters (10,82-84) again a hint of Mbh denigration, in that the latter accounts for the partings with little indication how the resultant pain of separation is overcome by the intense remembrance facilitated by bhakti. Finally, in Kṛṣṇa’s brief exchange with the *gopīs*, the hint of devotional *development* as an ongoing exchange provides additional narrative substance to the suggestion represented in the *Bhagavad-gītā*, namely that Arjuna’s already existing bhakti (recalling again the bhakti functional pattern), will be enhanced by the overcoming of trials.

(7) Kṛṣṇa shows Vaikuṅṭha to Arjuna

The penultimate chapter of the tenth book teams up Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa to reaffirm the heroism of both and to identify them explicitly as the sagely twosome Nara-Nārāyaṇa, as they have

²³ Perhaps meant as an allusion to Yudhiṣṭhira’s loss in the dice game, Kṛṣṇa compares his devotees from whom he withholds reciprocation with a poor person who gains and then loses wealth.

²⁴ Hardy’s well-known discussion of this distinction, central to his entire study of early Kṛṣṇa devotion, is introduced in his General Introduction (4-48). While ‘emotionalism’ as understood by Hardy is surely an important feature of some passages of the BhāgP, the text as a whole (which ties itself to a greater textual ‘whole’ which is the MBh) must be seen to incorporate into its landscape of bhakti a broad spectrum of emotional intensity and yogic neutrality, sensuality and anti-sensuality.

also been identified in the MBh.²⁵ Whether or not intentionally so, this episode resonates with the Nārāyaṇīya chapters of the Śāntiparvan, in that a bhakta (in this case Arjuna rather than Nārada as in the MBh) is allowed to see the supreme divinity, referred to here as Puruṣottama (10,89.54). More importantly, Arjuna's otherwise failed show of heroism in protecting a brahmin's children is salvaged when Kṛṣṇa takes Arjuna to see Viṣṇu in Vaikuṅṭha. The latter had abducted each child as a ruse to bring Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa before him to urge them to complete their earthly mission of removing the earth's burden by destroying the *asuras*, and to resume their identities (Nara-Nārāyaṇa) as exemplars of dharmic behavior (58-59).

As a comment on the MBh, this chapter affirms Arjuna's perpetual relationship to Kṛṣṇa as indicated in the BhG (4.4-5) and hence his status as one who is 'always' Kṛṣṇa's bhakta in a collapsed scheme of bhakti functions. Given such an ongoing relationship, this episode serves as a narrative illustration of the *Bhāgavata*'s notion that bhakti is characterized by ongoing development and deepening of devotional feeling. The episode also highlights 'heroic devotion' (Katz 1989: 225-35), whereby Kṛṣṇa's bhakta vows to give up his life if he cannot protect the brahmin's children and thereby uphold *kṣatriya-dharma*. Finally, it serves to justify Kṛṣṇa's departure from the world as the necessary result of completing his earthly dharma-preserving mission, and tells listeners once again that the entire MBh story was essentially staged by Kṛṣṇa to fulfill that mission.

(8) Kṛṣṇa meets and instructs Uddhava

The *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*'s next explicit link to the *Mahābhārata* is in book eleven. Approaching completion of the epic story, this section's narrative largely revisits in abridged form the *Mausalaparvan* of the MBh. But after describing the annihilation of the Yadus and departure of Kṛṣṇa already reported briefly in book one (1,15.5-6) and book three (3,3.24-28, 3,4.1-2), there is here included a lengthy didactic section with an emphasis on philosophical content (or on 'knowledge leading out of history' [Soenen-Thieme 2005: 442]) consisting of instructions by Kṛṣṇa to his friend and advisor, Uddhava, significantly just prior to Kṛṣṇa's demise.

In the MBh, Uddhava, seeing the imminent destruction of the Yadavas, without a word to anyone, simply places himself in yogic trance and departs the world (16.4.10-12). The BhāgP, in contrast, has Uddhava beseeching Kṛṣṇa to allow him to accompany his master to his abode (11,6.43), and then over a full twenty-three chapters (11,7-29) Kṛṣṇa instructs Uddhava in order to prepare him both to endure his absence and to represent him to the world.²⁶ Since our aim here is not to simply compare the BhāgP with the MBh, to consider how this didactic interlude might compare with didactic sections within the MBh is beyond the scope of this paper. But for our purpose of considering the *Bhāgavata* as *Mahābhārata* reflection, we may note three passages, namely Uddhava's speech opening the section (in

²⁵ Particularly in the Khāṇḍava Forest burning episode in the Ādiparvan the identification of Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa as Nara-Nārāyaṇa is crucial, bringing Indra to submission and transforming the heroic character of the story into one focused on devotion and divinity (Katz 1989: 213-17).

²⁶ In fact there is some ambiguity here: In book three Uddhava recalls Kṛṣṇa instructing him to remain at Badarī (3,4.5), whereas here he advises Uddhava (11,7.5) that there is no reason to remain in the world.

11,6); the beginning of Kṛṣṇa's extended response (in 11,7); and a further passage in chapter twelve (11,12.10-15). These passages represent how the BhāgP pursues a unitary vision centered on devotion to Kṛṣṇa as the ultimate reality, thus 'commenting' on the MBh (with possible intentions to specifically reiterate and expand *Bhagavad-gītā* teachings) by re-situating the latter's narrative of Kṛṣṇa's imminent departure as the frame for the BhāgP's nearly-final teachings, appropriately spoken by Kṛṣṇa himself.

In his speech to Kṛṣṇa, Uddhava first reiterates a persistent sub-theme in the BhāgP—the liberative value of devotion to the Deity, sustained by hearing about his activities (10,6.44). Such devotion, he goes on, is characterized by exclusivity of object and constant dedication to that object, which is not separate from oneself. Possibly echoing and yet inverting Arjuna's lament on seeing Kṛṣṇa's *virāt-rūpa* in the *Gītā* (11.42) Uddhava rhetorically asks, 'How can we *bhaktas* give up you, the very *ātman*, during any of our daily activities of lying down, sitting, walking, standing, eating, or playing?' (45). Recalling BhG 9.26 and 7.14, the next verse suggests that such devotion is attainable by means of a cult of Kṛṣṇa worship in images: by receiving the remnants of items offered to Kṛṣṇa (in his image), his *māyā* may be overcome (46). Finally, in the next three verses (47-49) Uddhava proclaims the superiority of performing devotional acts, especially remembering and praising Kṛṣṇa's deeds (all within function 9 of Bailey's bhakti-function scheme), over the difficult practices of ascetics (*śramaṇāḥ*, representing the *nivṛtti* ideal of the MBh). As the BhāgP has several times stressed, here Uddhava represents bhakti in gradualist terms, as sustained practice of devotional acts, all serving to bring the practitioner into increasingly intense devotional participation with the Deity.

In the beginning of his response to Uddhava Kṛṣṇa reminds listeners of the 'historical' and 'super-historical' contexts of the MBh narrative: confirming his intention to leave the world, he can do so having completed his mission on behalf of the gods (11,7.1-4). He then advises Uddhava in what might be called 'śramaṇical bhakti', namely to leave the world once Kṛṣṇa has departed and meanwhile (echoing BhG 18.66, 13.10, and 12.2) to abandon affection for relatives and friends and to wander the earth while absorbing himself in Kṛṣṇa and practicing sameness of vision (5-6).²⁷ Kṛṣṇa then elaborates: such vision combines recognition of the temporal nature of the world with a quasi-Upaniṣadic practice of identification—first, to identify all things as being within the self, and then to contemplate the self as being within Kṛṣṇa, the Supreme Lord (*adhīśvara*) (7-9).

Five chapters later Kṛṣṇa points to exemplary sustainers of such devotional vision and practice—bringing the Vraja residents, especially the *gopīs*, once again to the attention of listeners—recalling the intensity of the Vraja *bhaktas*' affectionate feelings for him, feelings nurtured by his absence from the *rāsa* dance and then from Vraja upon his being summoned to Mathurā by Kāṁsa (11,12.10-13). The Vraja residents are unlikely exemplars of śramaṇical bhakti in that they are anything but ascetics, thus underscoring the *Bhāgavata*'s aim to elevate bhakti as 'right' attitude over the forms of renunciation. Thus in Verses 14 and 15 Kṛṣṇa once more echoes his own conclusion of the *Gītā* (18.66), telling Uddhava how he can succeed in the bhakti process: to abandon injunctions of the Vedas and their supplements, both *pravṛtti* and *nivṛtti* ideals, and 'what is heard and what is to be heard', in favor of seeking Kṛṣṇa as the singular shelter (15a: *mām ekam eva śaraṇam*). And yet this should be done with due caution:

²⁷ Verse 6 echoes BhG 18.66 and 12.2.

in the previous chapter (11.11.24) Kṛṣṇa advises his devotee to pursue the *puruṣārthas*—*artha*, *dharma*, and *kāma*, while keeping Kṛṣṇa as one’s shelter.

Again, the narrative context is relevant to the teaching, even as the teaching aims to elevate listeners beyond context. Since Kṛṣṇa himself is about to leave the world, his instruction for Uddhava to abandon all else to find refuge in Kṛṣṇa alone is poignant, all the more so because it had been Uddhava whom Kṛṣṇa had sent from Mathurā to Vraja as a messenger to convey his consoling teaching to the Vraja residents, but equally for Uddhava to witness the high calibre of their devotion to Kṛṣṇa nurtured in his absence (10,46-47). That the Vraja *bhaktas* are exemplars of absorption in Kṛṣṇa is somewhat paradoxical not only because they are householders rather than ascetics for whom absorption in transcendence is the presumed aim, but also because it is precisely their experiences of separateness from him that impel their devotion, rather than experiences of union. Yet the implication is that their very ordinariness as cowherd villagers combined with their quite plausible experiences of Kṛṣṇa’s absence, make for a devotional modality that is the best means for gaining perfection in bhakti.

(9) A devotional hero transcends death

The *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*’s final explicit link to the *Mahābhārata* is really a return to and completion of its key link in the frame-narrative opened in book one.²⁸ Parīkṣit’s seven days of hearing the *Bhāgavata* recitation of Śuka must end in accordance with the brahmin boy’s curse, but unlike in the MBh, wherein the king does his best to foil the curse, in the BhāgP he faces and even embraces it from the very beginning (1,19.15). Thus when Śuka gives Parīkṣit final reassuring instructions in anticipation of his predicted death (12,5) his words serve largely as a refrain on the oft-repeated theme that the self’s existence is eternal and distinct from the temporal body. This teaching, prominent in the BhG, is elaborated several times throughout the BhāgP and, one senses from his ready detachment from the world upon hearing of the curse, is already understood by Parīkṣit ‘from the beginning’. And yet Parīkṣit, appropriately thankful to Śuka for his recitation at its conclusion, credits Śuka with freeing him from ignorance by showing him the ‘supreme position of Bhagavān’ (*param bhagavataḥ padam*: 12,6.7), enabling him to place his senses, freed from desire, in the Lord (*adhokṣaja*) and to cast off (*visṛjāmi*) his body having become absorbed (*praveśya*) in him (12,6.6). Thus although his pre-natal encounter with Kṛṣṇa now joyfully culminates in a glorious death after becoming fully absorbed in Kṛṣṇa (Malinar 2005: 484), evidently important to the BhāgP is that this final release occurs only after a maturing process of devotedly hearing the *Bhāgavata*.

After describing Parīkṣit placing himself in yogic trance and then receiving Takṣaka’s fateful bite, Ugrasravas continues with an account of Janamejaya’s attempt at revenge by means of the snake sacrifice (12,6.8-27), abridged (and somewhat altered) from the MBh story in the Ādiparvan. Now that Parīkṣit has died, the *kalīyuga* proper will begin (Malinar 2005: 482), and therefore, according to Ugrasravas, the recitation of the *Bhāgavata* is to be

²⁸ Conversely, it might be said that the main body of the BhāgP acts as a suspension of the story of Parīkṣit’s curse and subsequent death, in which Śuka’s task is to suspend time permanently with narration of Kṛṣṇa’s life, a life which is ‘without beginning or end’ (*anādi-nidhano hariḥ*: 12,6.2).

taken up in earnest, it being the ‘Purāṇa-sun for those whose vision has been destroyed in the Kali age’ (1,3.43). The end of Parīkṣit’s life and of Śuka’s recitation brings listeners, in effect, back again to the text’s beginning, where recitation commences anew, a beginning without end in which the destructive character of time gives way to the perpetual practice of bhakti.

Conclusion

This final link with the MBh turns Parīkṣit’s death into an account of devotional heroism—the fearless facing and conquering of unavoidable death by strength of the bhakti vision propounded throughout the BhāgP. By focusing on Parīkṣit in this manner, the BhāgP anchors its message in (MBh) ‘history’ even as it weaves its multiple narratives into a fabric of trans-temporal reality. To the *Bhāgavata*, that history contains a wealth of dharmic discourse, albeit discourse beset with *prthag-dṛṣṭi*, dis-integrated vision. But though considered to fall short of the devotional purpose conceived by the *Bhāgavata*, the MBh would provide the ‘historical’ baseline on which questions of dharmic order could be set out and resolved through its unitive bhakti vision. Thus the MBh would continue to be valued, even cherished, as a source of memories and longing for dharmic order. For the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*’s extra-textual reciters and listeners, the *Mahābhārata* would surely provide the memorial reference point of loss from which they could recover and enact remembrance while looking to a brighter future (even in the midst of the *kaliyuga*) by participating in *kṛṣṇa-kathā*, and the point to which they might return again and again in memory for the *Mahābhārata*’s lessons, made more comprehensible and applicable by *Bhāgavata* devotionism, concerning loss, absence, and death. Thus the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* would have functioned as a commentary on the *Mahābhārata*, seeing itself as supplying an essential key for the MBh’s proper and enriched interpretation.

As Virpi Hameen-Anttila (2001: 210) quips with respect to the development of Indian Sanskrit texts as ‘recyclings’ of earlier texts, ‘When you have a good old text, don’t throw it away. The older the better. The more authoritative, the better . . . Recycle, enclose, frame it with a commentary’. The *Bhāgavata*, as reflective ‘commentary’, performs all these functions. Perhaps most important of all for later communities of listeners,²⁹ the recycling process

²⁹ The *Bhāgavata*’s claim to be a new *Mahābhārata* is not a plea to forget the latter, since the emerging community of *Bhāgavata* hearers were also part of the greater community of *Mahābhārata* hearers. Whatever was being rejected to accommodate the emerging cult centered in Viṣṇu or Kṛṣṇa, the practice of remembrance advocated in the *Bhāgavata* assumed an already existing extensive resource of fluid literary memory. Still, the *Bhāgavata*’s reworking is distinct, suggesting a modest surmise that devotionally inclined ascetics, whom the *Bhāgavata* applauds repeatedly, beginning with the second verse of book one, cooperated with Vaiṣṇavite-oriented householders (also applauded, beginning with Parīkṣit, but perhaps most notably Ambarīṣa, 9,4) to define a community that assembled for worship and *Bhāgavata* recitation at growing Vāsudeva-Kṛṣṇa shrines. This accords with Daniel Sheridan’s surmise that, emerging in a context of Tamil devotion, ‘a group of ascetical devotees composed or redacted the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* in Sanskrit, infusing the dynamic elements of emotional and ecstatic devotion into the inherited matrix of the quiet, peaceful devotion stemming from the *Bhagavad-gītā*’ (Sheridan 1986: 99).

engenders hope born from travail, which may serve to explain the text's enduring popularity into the present day. In her prayers to Kṛṣṇa, Kuntī expresses a surprising hope, namely, that she may continue to face adversity (such as she and her sons faced throughout their lives, as recounted in the *Mahābhārata*), for 'thus the sight of you (Kṛṣṇa) will occur, ending the repetition of worldly existence' (1,8.25). Kuntī's sentiment may be indicative of the spirit of heroically resolute and intensified devotion the *Bhāgavata* redactors wished to bring forth from *Mahābhārata* collective memory as a defining aim for a developing community of Kṛṣṇa-*bhaktas*.

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