Chapter 1

The Origin and Transmission of the Two *Bhāgavata* Purāṇas: A Canonical and Theological Dilemma

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I alone was, in the beginning; there was nothing else at all, manifest or non-manifest.
What exists now as the universe is I myself; what will remain in the end is also simply myself. (From the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*)

All this universe indeed is just I myself; there is nothing else eternal. (From the *Devī-Bhāgavata Purāṇa*)

In these words the Great Lord (Bhagavan) and the Great Goddess (Devī) respectively declare their supreme and ultimate nature. In these same words lie, according to the texts themselves, the primordial seeds of the two celebrated *Bhāgavata Purāṇas*, the one exalting Bhagavan or Viṣṇu,[1] the other Devī.[2] The extant texts of the two *Bhāgavatas* both contain several thousand verses,[3] but each claims ultimately to be derived from a quintessential revelation spoken by the supreme reality him- or herself. Viṣṇu's germinal proclamation, in four verses (only the first of which is quoted above), describes himself as the ground of all being, whose nature has been obscured by *māyā* (the mystical power of creation and illusion), and whose reality must be discovered and understood by one seeking to know the truth of Ātman (Self). The lengthy work now known as the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* is merely a detailed elaboration, explanation, and illustration of this "Four-Verse *Bhāgavata*." The *Devī-Bhāgavata*'s seed form is even briefer: The Devī speaks just half a verse (quoted above in its entirety) propounding herself as none other than that same ground of all being.

The theological controversy reflected in Viṣṇu's and Devī's seemingly exclusive claims is parallel to, and intertwined with, the canonical debate regarding which of the two *Bhāgavata*s is the Great or Mahā-Purāṇa,[4] listed usually as the fifth among the traditional eighteen. Modern scholars like R. C. Hazra have addressed themselves to the canonical question, but often from a text-critical standpoint that avoids the theological aspects of the problem.[5] The important and intriguing issue of what constitutes canonicity from the point of view of the religious community is largely ignored, the whole problem becoming rendered in purely historical terms. Such an approach, while admirable for its desire to be nonsectarian and objective, at the same time runs the danger of trivializing the texts themselves, of not comprehending them as serious interpretations of ultimate reality and humankind's relation to it. Implicit in the text-critical approach, frequently, is the assumption that the texts are merely compositions that one or another group of Purāṇic authors/editors has unscrupulously manipulated to advance purely sectarian interests. This assumption seemingly denies any "revelatory" nature to the Purāṇic texts, and in effect it would dismiss the two quotations at the beginning of this chapter as poetic fabrications at best.

I do not wish, any more than most other modern scholars, to try to arbitrate the theological issues involved. Yet as a historian of religion trained to read "sacred texts" with at least a sympathetic (though not necessarily a believing) eye, I am uncomfortable with a complete separation of the theological from the historical/text-critical studies. While the latter have tended to be reductionistic, they can be quite helpful in establishing the historical relation between the two *Bhāgavata*s. We simply must not be misled by historical considerations into making unconscious and unwarranted theological judgments about the texts. After considering the canonical question, we shall be better prepared to examine some of the implications of the theological differences between the two Purāṇas.

The Problem of Canonicity

As indicated in the Introduction, I agree with Hazra and Lalye that the Vaiṣṇava *Bhāgavata* is the older by a century or two and is almost certainly the one traditionally designated as belonging to the canonical eighteen.[6] I shall not go into all the evidence here for the earlier date of the *Bhāgavata* but will simply mention two rather compelling arguments. First, the *Bhāgavata* is largely innocent of any self-conscious attempt to

establish itself as a Mahā-Purāṇa and is unaware even of the existence of the *Devī-Bhāgavata*, while the latter text devotes considerable effort to affirming its own claim to be among the canonical eighteen and explicitly states that the *Bhāgavata* belongs to the lesser class of minor or Upa-Purāṇas.[7] Indeed, the *Devī-Bhāgavata* asserts that it is the fifth Purāṇa[8] and refers to itself as the *Śrīmad* (famous or glorious) *Bhāgavatam*, an old, popular appellation for the Vaiṣṇava *Bhāgavata*.[9] Second, the *Devī-Bhāgavata* models the account of its own origin and transmission upon the *Bhāgavata*'s, and in various other ways has apparently fitted itself out to meet the traditional descriptions of the earlier work.[10]

The question of relative age is of some importance to us, for text-critics often cite it as a significant factor in determining the canonicity of a text. That is, the earlier a Purāṇic text, the greater its claim to being a Mahā-Purāṇa. There are serious problems in such a view, however, both historically and theologically. The extreme fluidity of the Purāṇic corpus means that the very earliest texts often contain sizable interpolations from a much later date, and fairly recent works may contain ancient materials. Also, some of the older Purāṇas have been largely or wholly replaced by later compositions that retain the original title. This may well be the case with the *Bhāgavata*, for as Hazra points out, the extant text of this title seems to have replaced an earlier prototype.[11] Accordingly, with regards to the two *Bhāgavata*s, the greater age of the Vaiṣṇava text does not mean that it is the "real *Bhāgavata*"[12] or genuine Mahā-Purāṇa, if this implies that the *Devī-Bhāgavata* is false, spurious, and a corruption or perversion of the earlier text. If the *Devī-Bhāgavata* is not genuine because it is not the original, then probably the *Bhāgavata* is not genuine either, for the same reason.

The discussion of age so far has been from the viewpoint of the academic, not religious, community. For the Paurāṇikas and their audiences, these historical considerations may be largely irrelevant. Both *Bhāgavata*s claim primordial origins, as we have seen, and both accept that they have been edited, expanded, and contracted by human hands (as well as divine). Human alteration of Purāṇic texts is an acceptable practice, provided that the humans involved are well versed in Vedic truth. To be sure, the Purāṇic text histories would differ from an academic history of the Purāṇas, but there is not necessarily a conflict in general principles. In any case, the Paurāṇikas would insist that the date of expansion or final editing of a text is far less important than the significance of the ancient events recorded in each.

If the early or original historical character of a text is not

absolutely determinative for its canonical status from an academic viewpoint, and is somewhat irrelevant from the religious viewpoint, then what does constitute a genuine Mahā-Purāṇa? Text-critical historians have provided some further guidelines, in addition to age: (1) relative freedom from major alterations or destructive recasts; (2) nature of the contents, that is, the topics included, or not included; (3) traditional acceptance and respect; (4) general significance. The last two are of special importance, as they may help to bridge the gap between the academic and religious views of canonicity. Nevertheless, all four guidelines need interpretation and refinement.

One difficulty regarding freedom from major alterations is that a fairly early text may make significant changes in telling an older story, while a much later text may go back to the more original version. One example, of some interest for our present concerns, relates to the circumstances in which the two *Bhāgavata*s are recited, and specifically the events surrounding the death of King Parīkṣit.

According to the *Bhāgavata*,[13] when Parīkṣit receives word that he has been cursed to die by snakebite in a week's time, he immediately is penitent for his misdeeds, renounces wordly interests, and goes to the banks of the Ganges. There he listens to Śuka recite the whole of the *Bhāgavata* before he dies. This story is derived from the *Mahābhārata*,[14] but there, when Parīkṣit learns of the curse, he does not contemplate renunciation but rather makes every effort to save his own skin, taking refuge in an isolation chamber he has built high off the ground where even the wind, let alone a snake, cannot enter. Needless to say, through the magical powers of the snake Takṣaka, the curse is fulfilled, and the king ascends to heaven. Parīkṣit's son, Janamejaya, seeking revenge, performs a great snake-sacrifice. At the end of the sacrifice, prematurely closed, Janamejaya listens to the *Mahābhārata* recited by Vaiśampāyana.

The *Devī-Bhāgavata*[15] follows the *Mahābhārata* in describing Parīkṣit's attempt to avoid his own death. But the *Devī-Bhāgavata* then adds a few details of its own: Janamejaya is unconsoled by the interrupted snake-sacrifice, and he is still depressed even after hearing the *Mahābhārata* from Vaiśampāyana, for his father dwells in hell (not heaven!). Accordingly, Vyāsa recites the *Devī-Bhāgavata* to Janamejaya and advises him to perform Devī-Yajña (worship of the Goddess) after which Parīkṣit will attain to the highest heaven of Maṇi-Dvīpa (the Devī's abode).[16]

Granted that both *Bhāgavata*s have modified the *Mahābhārata*'s story of Parīkṣit's death, it can be easily argued that the *Bhāgavata*'s alterations

are far more extensive and irreconcilable. Indeed, the *Devī-Bhāgavata* makes relatively few changes, avoiding as far as possible direct contradictions with the *Mahābhārata* (except in Parīkṣit's immediate after-death fate), simply supplementing the earlier account. It seems likely, in fact, that the *Devī-Bhāgavata* was fully aware of the *Bhāgavata*'s "tampering" and quite purposely went back to the more ancient standard to bolster its own authority. Which *Bhāgavata*, then, is more genuine?

Regarding the second guideline, the contents of an authentic Mahā-Purāṇa, there is an old definition of a Purāṇa as consisting of five topics or characteristics, the famous *pañca-lakṣaṇa*s: creation, recreation, genealogies, Manu-cycles, and dynastic histories.[17] In reality, the extant Purāṇas conform rather loosely or not at all to this definition. Some scholars have argued that the closer a Purāṇa adheres to the definition, the more likely it is to be old, and thus more likely to be a Mahā-Purāṇa. Such reasoning, of course, is simply a variation on the age argument.

I do not see the *pañca-lakṣaṇa*s as offering much help in the canonical controversy, whether they are taken in an inclusive or exclusive sense.[18] That is, many late Purāṇas, including the *Devī-Bhāgavata*, deal with all the five topics, along with much other material on rituals, fruits of karma, and so forth; if taken in an exclusive sense, then many earlier Purāṇas would have to be deleted from the canonical eighteen, including the *Bḥāgavata*, as they, too, exceed the five topics. Accordingly, I disagree with Hazra's contention that the "contents of the *Bhāgavata* are more befitting a principal Purāṇa than those of the *Devī-Bhāgavata*."[19] Moreover, the *Bhāgavata* itself is audacious enough to expand the old definition to include ten topics,[20] and even the original five can be construed in rather broad terms to cover many subjects beyond what a narrow and strict interpretation might allow.[21]

The bulk of the materials in the *Devī-Bhāgavata*, in any case, is similar to that in other Purāṇas generally accorded the status of Great. Lalye concludes that the *Devī-Bhāgavata* "abides by almost all the characteristics [*lakṣaṇa*s], which are mentioned in various Purāṇas. Therefore, its claim to the title of Mahāpurāṇa, stands incontrovertible."[22] Lalye does not reject the *Bhāgavata*, but rather accepts both *Bhāgavata*s as Mahā-Purāṇas, making the *Devī-Bhāgavata* the nineteenth.[23] While I am not so bold as to expand the canon, I concur with Lalye that it is difficult to see a distinction in subject matter between the *Devī-Bhāgavata* and many of the commonly accepted Mahā-Purāṇas.

Turning to the third factor, traditional acceptance and respect, we can easily see how older Purāṇic texts are more likely to gain

authoritative status than recent works. At the same time, the most popular and reverenced of all the Purāṇas is the *Bhāgavata*, which is far from being the earliest. Moreover, many of the most ancient have fallen into relative obscurity, even oblivion. Thus, the *Devī-Bhāgavata* is more popular, especially among the large number of Śāktas, than, say, the *Brahmavaivarta*, even among its own Kṛṣṇaite sectaries.[24] One may point out that the extant *Brahmavaivarta* is not the original Mahā-Purāṇa of that name, but that only further indicates the lack of "respect" which could allow such a fate to befall the prototype.

The fourth guideline, general significance, is usually meant to convey the historical importance and influence of a Purāṇa. It correlates closely with the previous factor and shares many of the same problems. However, general significance at times seems also to imply something about the worthiness or greatness of the philosophical/religious ideas themselves contained within the texts. Accordingly, we may regard this last aspect as a fifth guideline: theological and philosophical insightfulness. This fifth factor, for the Paurāṇikas themselves as well as for their audience, is the most crucial of all.

As indicated earlier, I would not wish to judge the ultimate validity, truth or falsity, of theological perceptions. At the same time, I am willing, with a critical yet empathetic approach, to see whether the various insights constitute a coherent, persuasive, even compelling, view of reality and humankind's place in it. One must further recognize that theological perceptivity is twofold, involving not only keenness of insight into the ultimate, but also understanding as to how such insight can be communicated to others, in diverse times and places. The Purāṇic corpus itself is a constantly ongoing attempt to interpret ancient yet eternal truths in ways accessible and comprehensible to changing generations. Perhaps what we need to acknowledge, then, is that the idea of a Mahā-Purāṇa, including the notion of the canon of eighteen, is a dynamic, not a static concept.

Paul Ricoeur has written, with reference to Christianity, "Preaching is the permanent reinterpretation of the text [the Bible] which is regarded as grounding the community."[25] In the Hindu tradition there is little or no preaching as such, but the Purāṇas have played an analogous role, ever reinterpreting the Vedic text that is the grounding of the Hindu community. Ricoeur also shies away from the notion of revelation as something static or "frozen in any ultimate or immutable text."[26] He argues, rather, that "the process of revelation is a permanent process of opening something that is closed, or making manifest something which was hidden. Revelation is a historical

process, but the notion of sacred text is something antihistorical."[27] Ricoeur's comments about the notion of sacred text apply very well to the idea of sacred canon as well, at least in the Purāṇic instance, for the Purāṇic canon of eighteen is perhaps best seen as a *revealing process*, rather than as a fixed, unchanging ideal.

At this point we, as well as the tradition, may do well to remember that *purāṇa* originally meant not a book, but rather something ancient, specifically, the ancient events of history and prehistory[28] that have the power of disclosing the nature of the human predicament vis-à-vis divine reality. A Mahā-Purāṇa, then, might best be regarded not so much as a "great ancient text" as some text-critics would have it, but more as a record and interpretation of "great ancient events." Is it entirely unreasonable, in this light, to view the canon of eighteen as an ever-changing set of texts that contain the most perceptive interpretations and insights for any given age within a particular religious community? In any case, does not this viewpoint, implicitly at least, underlie the attitude of the composer of the *Devī-Bhāgavata*, who so boldly and earnestly pressed forward the claim of his Purāṇa to be "the fifth"?

It thus may be that the most relevant question to ask, with regards to the status of a Purāṇic text, is *to whom* has it appeared as a Mahā-Purāṇa? The *Bhāgavata* clearly has functioned as a Mahā-Purāṇa within the Vaiṣṇava community for a millennium. And given the Vaiṣṇava orientation of the majority of the traditionally accepted Mahā-Purāṇas, it may be that the very concept of a canon of eighteen came originally from Vaiṣṇava Paurāṇikas.[29] But the Vaiṣṇavas had no exclusive authority for determining what was included in the canon for other groups. While the Śāktas share a general Purāṇic heritage with the Vaiṣṇavas (and Śaivas), they have seen fit to define the exact character of that heritage in their own way. In view of the fluid, responsive nature of the Purāṇic tradition, such a redefinition does not seem, to this author, as inappropriate or inept.

If we are to accept both *Bhāgavata*s as Mahā-Purāṇas, thereby granting each a certain respect and authoritativeness, what are we to make of the historical contradictions between them? (I shall deal with the theological contradictions later.) We must accept that Purāṇic compilers are rather free in their "reconstruction of history." But part of the Purāṇic spirit is the constant attempt to update tradition and specifically to reveal more penetratingly truths that transcend mundane history. Actual concrete history, for the Purāṇic compilers, is not the primary locus of revelation as it has been for Western religions. This

does not mean Purāṇic compilers did not take history as a whole seriously, for they show a tremendous respect for tradition, avoiding as far as possible direct contradiction in favor of reinterpretation of the "historical record." But in accord with Hindu tradition, history is seen as a playground, not a battlefield as often is the case in the West. More specifically, history is envisioned as the carrousel in the playground, whirling round and round. The actual details of any one cycle are regarded as less significant than the principles that govern the cycles as a whole. Accordingly, the outside hearer or reader needs to develop a playful, even humorous attitude toward the Purāṇic use of history (and prehistory), in order to appreciate the compilers' delight in "creative history" for the sake of salvific truth.

In harmony with the Purāṇic spirit, then, we may note without condemnation the *Bhāgavata*'s alteration of the story of King Parīkṣit's death and may genuinly admire its theological perceptiveness in advancing the ideal of humility, nonattachment, and acceptance in the face of death. Similarly, the *Devī-Bhāgavata* can be esteemed for building on the theological insights of the *Bhāgavata*, delving (from its own point of view) further into the mysterious nature of creation and specifically examining the feminine dimensions involved that are largely overlooked by the *Bhāgavata*, even if the *Devī-Bhāgavata* had to play around a bit with the received tradition.

We have already touched upon the "mundane" history of the transmission of the two *Bhāgavata*s as given by the texts themselves. What I wish to do now, however, is to concentrate on their divine or precreation histories, which brings us back to the quotations at the beginning of this chapter. In looking at these precreation histories, I wish not only to compare the basic outlines of the text-transmissions, but also to pay attention to some of the philosophical and theological ideas that are intertwined with the mythological accounts, to begin to see what different insights may be offered by each Purāṇa.

The Divine or Precreation History of the Two *Bhāgavata*s

The creator god Brahmā was floating alone on the primal waters of the dissolution, abiding on his lotus seat sprung from Viṣṇu's navel. Thus begins the *Bhāgavata*'s account of its own transcendent origin.[30] Brahmā, the story continues, was anxious to commence the work of creation but could not figure out how to proceed. A voice sounded out over the waters: *"tapa, tapa"* (practice creative asceticism). Brahmā,

though failing to see the speaker, found the command so compelling that he at once began the austerities. After a thousand divine years, the Lord Viṣṇu became pleased with Brahmā's performance and revealed himself, surrounded by his attendants and endowed with his twenty-five *śakti*s or creative potencies, to the anxious but obedient creator. Brahmā, filled with humility and devotion, and with tears in his eyes, bowed down to the supreme Lord, who in a comforting, friendly gesture, touched the creator with his hand. Viṣṇu then explained that it was he himself who had commanded the austerities in order to help Brahmā carry out the work of creation.

Brahmā, suddenly afraid of becoming puffed up with the pride of achievement when he should complete his creative tasks, implored Viṣṇu to save him from such delusion. Appealing to Viṣṇu as a close friend, he enquired after that ego-destroying knowledge of the higher and lower forms of Viṣṇu, who himself is formless. Brahmā also sought to understand how Viṣṇu, through his *māyā*, playfully spins out the universe from himself and eventually reabsorbs it, like a spider letting out and taking back its own web. The supreme Lord, showing his favor, then relieved Brahmā's fears, disclosing the "Four-Verse *Bhāgavata*," summarized earlier. By constantly meditating on this seed *Bhāgavata*, Brahmā would never succumb to delusion. Viṣṇu disappeared, and Brahmā proceeded to create the universe.

The *Devī-Bhāgavata*'s account of its own transcendent origin also opens with a scene on the primordial ocean.[31] On the waters, we are told, there was standing a fig tree, on a leaf of which lay Viṣṇu in the form of an infant. He was pondering how he came into existence and who made him into a little babe, when suddenly he heard a voice declaring, "All this universe indeed is just I myself; there is nothing else eternal."[32] This was, in fact, the half verse revelation of the *Devī-Bhāgavata*, spoken by the Devī, but Viṣṇu failed to recognize the voice. Not being able even to determine whether the speaker was male, female, or neuter, Viṣṇu finally took up repeating the half verse in his heart. The Devī, pleased with his devotion, appeared before him in the auspicious form of Mahā-Lakṣmī (his own wife!), with all her attendant *śakti*s. Not recognizing Mahā-Lakṣmī, Viṣṇu wondered if she might be Māyā, or perhaps his own mother. While he was trying to make up his mind what to do or say, Mahā-Lakṣmī addressed the bewildered Lord. She asked him (somewhat disingenuously) why he was so disconcerted, and then explained to him that, through the enchantng power of Mahā-Śakti, he had forgotten who she (his own wife) was, even though he had come into existence time and again in each cosmic cycle, along with

her. She herself, Mahā-Lakṣmī declared, is simply the *sāttvikī* (good, nurturing) *śakti* of the supreme, *nirguṇā* (unqualified) Śakti. Viṣṇu's spouse further described how Brahmā would soon arise from his navel-lotus, and by practicing austerities, Brahmā would obtain the necessary *śakti* to create the world. Mahā-Lakṣmī concluded by assuring Viṣṇu that she would reside always on his breast. Somewhat consoled, Viṣṇu still remained puzzled about the identity of the speaker of the half verse. Mahā-Lakṣmī then disclosed to her rather slow-witted husband that the meritorious (*Devī-*)*Bhāgavata*, in the form of that half verse, had been revealed to him by *nirguṇā* Devī out of her great compassion for him. Viṣṇu at once began meditating constantly on that half-verse mantra.

The *Devī-Bhāgavata*'s account of its own precreation history continues with the transmission of the seed text from Viṣṇu to Brahmā, at this point loosely paralleling the *Bhāgavata*'s primordial history. The *Devī-Bhāgavata* jumps ahead a little in time, to when Brahmā was born from Viṣṇu's navel-lotus. Brahmā, fearful of the two demons Madhu and Kaiṭabha, took refuge with Viṣṇu, who after slaying the demons began *japa* (repeated chanting) of the half verse.[33] Brahmā was puzzled as to whom Viṣṇu could be adoring with *japa* and asked him if there were anyone higher than he.[34] Viṣṇu, considerably wiser now, undoubtedly due to his repetition of the Devī's mantra, enlightened Brahmā with the profound insight that all power (*śakti*) in the universe, including himself, is simply the power of the supreme Śakti, also known as Bhagavatī. It is she who is the cause of liberating knowledge as well as bondage to *saṃsāra* (the world cycle). All beings are born from that Śakti, who is consciousness (*cit*) itself. Viṣṇu finally informed Brahmā that the half-verse mantra he was reciting had originally been proclaimed by the supreme Śakti and was the seed of the (*Devī-*)*Bhāgavata*. Thus, by hearing Viṣṇu's *japa*, Brahmā had received the divinely uttered, quintessential Purāṇa.

What are we to make of these two seemingly contradictory accounts? On further analysis of the mythological events themselves, one finds that in general the *Devī-Bhāgavata* has carefully avoided any absolute contradiction with the *Bhāgavata*. (This is not true of the post-creation history, where the *Devī-Bhāgavata* appeals as it were to a more ancient authority, the *Mahābhārata*.) One must remember that the *Devī-Bhāgavata*, after all, recognizes the existence of two *Bhāgavata*s, and thus the origins and transmissions of each would naturally be different. Indeed, the *Devī-Bhāgavata* leaves room for the *Bhāgavata*, most clearly in a secondary account of the precreation history.[35] Brahmā himself tells

us how, after his birth from the lotus, he sought his origins, diving under the primal waters and searching for the ground in which the lotus grew. Unable to discover it even after a thousand years, he heard a disembodied voice commanding him to perform ascesis (*tapas tapa*), which he did for another thousand years on his lotus seat. Next, he heard the command to create (*sṛja*), but was confused as to how to proceed. Up to this point, the *Devī-Bhāgavata* has closely followed the *Bhāgavata*, with only minor alterations. To be sure, the *Devī-Bhāgavata* does not explicitly mention Viṣṇu's revelation of the "Four-Verse *Bhāgavata*," and in fact seems intentionally to ignore it, but anyone familiar with the *Bhāgavata* account would recognize that it fits in somewhere at this juncture.

When we turn from the mythological events surrounding the original disclosures of the *Bhāgavata*s to the actual contents of those revelations, the differences are less easily resolved. It is here that the two Purāṇas seem to contradict each other most critically, each claiming Viṣṇu or Devī respectively to be the ground of all being. Yet the *Devī-Bhāgavata* has a well-worked-out answer to account for such a contradiction: Viṣṇu's proclamation of supremacy is based on a self-delusion due to the *māyā* (deluding power) of the supreme Devī. At times, this *māyā* causes him to forget that he is a god, as during his various human and animal incarnations on earth.[36] At other times, *māyā* causes him to forget the true source of his power, misleading him into thinking he is the supreme.

The idea of Viṣṇu's forgetfulness appears throughout the *Devī-Bhāgavata*. We have already seen that he was unable to recognize his own wife while he rested as an infant on a fig leaf over the primal waters, having forgotten how this identical scene had occurred many times in the past. Similarly, the *Devī-Bhāgavata* records a somewhat later incident, referring back to those same waters.[37] Viṣṇu, along with the other members of the all-male trinity or cosmic triumvirate, Brahmā and Śiva, had gone to visit the Devī in her supreme abode. At first they did not know who the brilliant lady they encountered there was, but then Viṣṇu remembered: when he had been resting on his fig leaf on the primal ocean, playing like an ordinary babe, licking his big toe, it was she, this same lady, who had sung songs to him and rocked him gently, and who was the mother of all of them.

Viṣṇu's resting on the fig leaf in the form of an infant deserves further comment, for it adroitly introduces the Devī in her most important role—as mother. As is typical of the *Devī-Bhāgavata*, it did not come up with the Viṣṇu-as-infant motif on its own but has borrowed it, in this case from the *Bhāgavata* itself, from the story of the sage

Mārkaṇḍeya.[38] The sage praised the Lord Nārāyaṇa (Viṣṇu) as a friend of the soul (*ātma-bandhu*) and supreme creator who spins out and reabsorbs the universe like a spider. Mārkaṇḍeya, granted a boon by Viṣṇu, requested to see the *māyā* (cosmic illusion) by which the one reality appears as many. Viṣṇu consented, and sometime later while the sage was meditating on the Lord in his hermitage, a terrible wind arose followed by a deluge that swallowed up the whole universe, leaving only Mārkaṇḍeya alive. Drifting alone for what seemed to him millions of years, the sage at last espied a fig tree on a slight elevation in the midst of the ocean. On a leaf of the tree, he saw a babe curled up, sucking on its foot. Mārkaṇḍeya approached and was suddenly swept up like a gnat by the breath of the babe into its body. There in the belly he beheld the whole universe, with all its stars, oceans, gods, and so forth, including even his own hermitage. Soon he was exhaled from the body and again saw a babe, smiling on the fig leaf. As Mārkaṇḍeya attempted to embrace the infant—who was none other than Viṣṇu—the babe, tree, and ocean all disappeared, leaving the sage sitting as he had been back in his hermitage.

Mārkaṇḍeya certainly had an intimate and terrifying experience of *māyā*. But whose *māyā* is it? Who ultimately controls it? Does it belong to the baby, or to the baby's mother? The *Bhāgavata*, naturally, assumes the baby is self-existent, i.e., has no mother, and thus *māyā* is fully Viṣṇu's. The *Bhāgavata* refers to it as Viṣṇu-*māyā*,[39] and calls Viṣṇu himself Māyeśa (Lord of *māyā*).[40] Yet the same text refers to *māyā* as *yoga-māyā* (the mystical power attained through yoga),[41] and thus it would appear to belong to any adept yogi. Indeed, in the concluding part of the story of Mārkaṇḍeya, the god Śiva enters the sage's heart by his own *yoga-māyā*.[42] Is, then, Viṣṇu the ultimate master of *māyā*, or is he, along with other gods, merely able to use on occasion this power which actually stems from a higher source?

Before dealing with this question directly, it is worth noting in the *Bhāgavata* that *yoga-māyā*, though usually appearing as an impersonal power wielded by various gods or yogis, occasionally is personified as a goddess.[43] Further, this goddess is closely identified with the power of sleep (*nidrā*).[44] The association of *yoga-māyā* with *nidrā* is highly significant, for the answer to the question of whether or not Viṣṇu is the ultimate master of *māyā* depends in large part on the precise nature of sleep, specifically, the cosmic sleep of Viṣṇu while he rests on the serpent Śeṣa, floating on the primal waters during the *pralaya* (cosmic dissolution).

In both *Bhāgavatas*, Viṣṇu's cosmic sleep is referred to as *yoga-nidrā*, the "sleep of yoga," an entranced state that is readily connected with the

mystical, enchanting power of *yoga-māyā*. The *Bhāgavata* insists that this *yoga-nidrā* of Viṣṇu's is not like ordinary sleep but is a transcendent (*turya*) state of consciousness, also called *samādhi*.[45] The *Devī-Bhāgavata* gives a very different interpretation, which is most clearly seen in the Madhu-Kaiṭabha story mentioned above.

This myth has a complex history and appears in many variations.[46] In its earlier forms Viṣṇu is the hero and protagonist. In one typical version from the *Mahābhārata*,[47] Viṣṇu lies on the primal waters in his *samādhic* or yogic "sleep" during the period of dissolution. Prior to his awaking, Brahmā arises from his navel-lotus, shortly followed by the appearance of the two demons Madhu and Kaiṭabha, who steal the Vedas from Brahmā. The latter, terrified, takes refuge with Viṣṇu, who when aroused from his slumber, restores the Vedas and slays the demons.[48]

This basic story, briefly referred to in the *Bhāgavata*,[49] undergoes a remarkable reinterpretation in the *Devī-Māhātmya* of the *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa*. By an intriguingly simple reevaluation of Viṣṇu's cosmic sleep, the *Devī-Māhātmya* uses the notion of *yoga-nidrā* to attest not to Viṣṇu's yogic skill in attaining trance, but rather to his succumbence to the stupefying, benumbing power of the supreme Devī in her manifestation as sleep.[50] Brahmā is able to arouse Viṣṇu only after he has praised the Devī beseeching her to withdraw from the sleeping god.

The *Devī-Bhāgavata* follows the *Devī-Māhātmya*, personifying *yoga-nidrā* as a manifestation of the supreme Devī who brings about Viṣṇu's helpless stupor. Thus Brahmā concludes, upon failing to awaken Viṣṇu, "It is not sleep who is under Viṣṇu's control, but Viṣṇu who is under sleep's control . . . . He sleeps helpless, like an ordinary man."[51] The *Bhāgavata*, in already personifying *yoga-māyā/nidrā*, prepared the way for the *Devī-Bhāgavata*, making the latter's interpretation of Viṣṇu's sleep seem like a natural and obvious step.[52]

In accord with my theological neutrality, I do not wish to decide which *Bhāgavata*'s interpretation of *yoga-nidrā* is the correct or superior one (rather both are valid in their own ways). But I do wish to point out some of the new insights made possible by the *Devī-Bhāgavata*'s particular perspective. The interpretation of Viṣṇu's cosmic sleep is integrally involved in the problem of the nature of consciousness in general. An important aspect of this problem, as perceived by the Purāṇic philosophers, is whether consciousness is a purely spiritual entity, or whether it is also closely related to, even identified with, material force. Another way of stating the problem is whether or not matter is entirely void of consciousness. One major point of departure for the Purāṇic thinkers in dealing with these questions was the ancient Sāṃkhya school,

according to which spirit (*puruṣa*) alone was conscious, though inactive, while matter or nature (*prakṛti*), though active, was insentient and unconscious.

This dualism was taken over by the Purāṇas and adapted to various theistic frameworks from an early period. Such adaptation was facilitated and complicated by non-Sāṃkhyan, Vedic images of *puruṣa*, such as that of the "Puruṣa Sūkta" in the *Ṛg Veda*, where *puruṣa* is the sacrificial cosmic person whose diverse parts constitute the elements of the universe. The Vedic *puruṣa* thus includes both material and spiritual aspects. In the *Bhāgavata*, where several notions of *puruṣa* have become inextricably intertwined and coalesced, we find the relation of Viṣṇu to *puruṣa* variously depicted, according to whether Sāṃkhyan or Vedic imagery prevails.[53] Sometimes Viṣṇu is referred to as the supreme or great Puruṣa (*puruṣottama, mahā-puruṣa*) in apparent contrast to the lesser (Sāṃkhyan) *puruṣa*.[54] At other times, he is identified with *puruṣa* (with or without such modifiers as *ādi* [primal], *purāṇa* [ancient], or *para* [supreme]) in contrast to *prakṛti*.[55]

The matter is further complicated by the frequent Advaitic (non-dualistic) perspective of the *Bhāgavata*, so that occasionally Viṣṇu is said to be beyond *puruṣa* and *prakṛti*[56] or to include both.[57] Nonetheless, there is a general feeling that emerges from the text that on the cosmic, created level at least, Viṣṇu is to be closely identified with spirit (*puruṣa, mahā-puruṣa*, etc.) alone. Though he enters into material creation, and the material world in some sense is none other than he, still he is often regarded as distinct from and above *prakṛti*.[58] The Advaitic impulse of the *Bhāgavata* does lead to a transcendence of the *puruṣa/prakṛti* dualism, but only on the ultimate level, and at the expense of *prakṛti*, which becomes largely illusory. Though occasionally called "divine,"[59] *prakṛti* on the wordly level is seen as distinctly inferior, full of faults,[60] and merely the material cause of the universe. In any case, *prakṛti*, like *māyā* and *śakti*, in the *Bhāgavata*, is something Viṣṇu possesses and controls. There thus remains a dualism, somewhat modified but reminiscent of the Sāṃkhya, between the possessor of matter and what is possessed, or between spirit/consciousness on the one hand and material nature on the other.

We find the breakdown of this dualism on the cosmic level beginning with the personification of the notion of *śakti*, feminine in gender, whereby a god's active power (*śakti*) became represented by, or identified with, his spouse. The Śākta school perceived even more in the idea of *śakti*, making the female force dominant over the male counterpart. In the process, a series of feminine concepts, including *māyā* and *prakṛti*,

came to be seen as fully conscious, living forces.[61] With *prakṛti* becoming a goddess, or even identified with *the* Goddess, Devī, the old Sāṃkhyan dualism between a conscious spirit-person and an active but insentient material force was basically transcended "from the ground up."

The *Devī-Bhāgavata*, expounding the Śākta perspective, explicitly rejects the Sāṃkhyan view of matter, *prakṛti*. Brahmā, in praising the Devī after failing to rouse Viṣṇu from sleep, declares: "The Sāṃkhya philosophers say that of the two principles, Puruṣa and Prakṛti, it is Prakṛti, the creatrix of the world, that is devoid of consciousness (*caitanya*). But can you (Devī, identified with Prakṛti) really be of such nature, for (if this were so,) how could the abode of the world (Viṣṇu) be made unconscious by you today?"[62]

Though the composer of the *Devī-Bhāgavata* was certainly not "scientific" in his approach to discovering the nature of reality, his preliminary insight into the unitary relation between consciousness and matter on the cosmic level has an interesting parallel to the view of certain modern physicists who have begun to argue "that the explicit inclusion of human consciousness may be an essential aspect of future theories of matter."[63] Given the Hindu cultural situation and its presuppositions about the nature of masculinity and femininity, the *Devī-Bhāgavata* was able to arrive at its insight about consciousness-matter by emphasizing the feminine aspects of reality on the divine level.

The use of feminine and specifically maternal imagery in suggesting the nature of the supreme power in the universe has led to many other insights with far-reaching implications, psychological, sociological, soteriological, as well as ontological. For example, the maternal metaphor for the Goddess emphasizes the intimate relationship between her and her devotees, a bond transcending but not necessarily negating the social and moral structures of *varṇāśrama-dharma* (the order of society based on class and stage of life). Viṣṇu or Kṛṣṇa in the *Bhāgavata*, however, is rarely referred to as father,[64] possibly because the paternal metaphor, in contrast to the maternal, would suggest a greater distance between God and his children. Accordingly, the most intense and intimate relationship with Kṛṣṇa is that of lover and beloved, especially outside the marital tie. Loving Kṛṣṇa often entails forsaking society and its laws. Loving the Devī, as portrayed in the *Devī-Bhāgavata*, does not.

Not surprisingly, then, the model of a devotee frequently set forth by the *Bhāgavata* is the *saṃnyāsin* (renouncer), and the *Bhāgavata* allows a young man to pass directly from the student stage to that of the anchorite.[65] The *Bhāgavata* is wary of the householder stage for fear of

attachments to wife and family.[66] The *Devī-Bhāgavata*, however, insists that a man must pass through all four traditional *āśrama*s (stages of life) in due order and gives a generally positive assessment of the householder.[67] This more positive assessment is due in part, I suggest, to the *Devī-Bhāgavata*'s greater appreciation of the maternal role not only in the divine but also in the human realm.[68] Both *Bhāgavata*s share the same ultimate goal of transcending the limitations of the finite world, yet often the *Devī-Bhāgavata* author seems a bit more comfortable being in the world, a little more able to appreciate, or to be amused by, the mother's play with her children. And he is able to savor with greater relish the pleasures and enjoyments of our finite existence, as we shall see.[69]

In looking at the two *Bhāgavata*'s precreation histories of themselves, I think a historian of religion can accept both *Bhāgavata*s as containing significant and genuine insights into the nature of reality, though not necessarily total and comprehensive views of truth. In my understanding, there is not a real *Bhāgavata* and a false one, but rather two different perspectives on the great (*mahā*) ancient (*purāṇa*) events of the universe, each developed in response to the perceptions of devotees of different times and cultural settings.

The two perspectives, though different, are complementary in many ways. Indeed, the two Purāṇas share many basic assumptions about the nature of the universe and its relation to ultimate reality. Each sees a fundamental ontological unity between the absolute and the finite, as the beginning quotations attest, and as the spider analogy of the *Bhāgavata* shows, an analogy repeated in the *Devī-Bhāgavata*.[70] Both *Bhāgavata*s also view creation as the sport or play of the supreme, confirming the perfection of reality as it is, without any need to become perfect.[71] The human inability to perceive that perfection is merely part of the illusion that constitutes an essential element of the divine play. A central question posed by these two Purāṇas, then, is who is playing with whom? Is the Devī playing with Viṣṇu as she sings lullabies to him in his fig-leaf cradle, or is Viṣṇu merely playing with his own powers, his own *māyā*? Who can answer this, for as the *Bhāgavata* itself says, even Viṣṇu knows not the extent of his *māyā*![72]

The interrelated themes of play (*līlā*) and *māyā* (illusion, delusion) are central to both *Bhāgavata*s not only in a cosmogonic context, but also in terms of the ongoing activity of the God or Goddess within the created universe. Both texts stress the gracious incarnations or *avatāra*s of the supreme in this world to punish the wicked and protect the righteous. Both further insist that ultimately such appearances are not a matter

of divine necessity but of self-directed play.

Given the similarity of their incarnational perspectives, it is not surprising that the *Devī-Bhāgavata* wishes to differentiate the Devī's *avatāra*s from those of Viṣṇu. In fact, a key strategy in the *Devī-Bhāgavata*'s rejection of Viṣṇu's supremacy is its revisionist interpretation of the *Bhāgavata*'s doctrine of Viṣṇu's incarnations. This reinterpretation is the subject of the next chapter, where the situation becomes more serious as the child's play of Viṣṇu and Devī at creation turns into violent horseplay.