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## *Introduction*

Some fifteen hundred years ago, under circumstances largely unknown to us, somewhere in northwest India, several thousand words were arranged into a more or less unified composition. The language of these words was Sanskrit, and they were arranged in versified form. Over the ensuing centuries, these words attracted to themselves a number of designations, the most popular being *Devī-Māhātmya* and *Durgā-Saptaśatī*. The former designation may be translated “The Specific Greatness (or Virtue) of (the) Goddess,” while the second means “Seven Hundred (Verses) to Durgā.” Through the years these words have been elaborated upon in a variety of ways, in both word and deed, in commentary and liturgy. They have been inscribed on individual hearts, that is, they have been memorized. They have been written down in more graphic form, in manuscripts. Eventually they appeared in printed editions. Judging from the volume of the manuscript evidence, these particular words have been enormously popular through the centuries, and they remain among the best known devotional words in contemporary India. If we were to conceptualize this kind of phenomenon by saying that virtually all cultural and religious traditions generate and preserve artifacts of various sorts, then clearly the *Devī-Māhātmya* has been one of the major verbal artifacts that has been left in the Indian subcontinent.

What shall we make of this fact? How shall we do justice to these particular words, composed in a specific time and place, leaving an enormous legacy within India proper, beckoning contemporary

Westerners who would understand a culture other than their own, and—we should particularly note in a global environment that has recently been paying increased attention to matters of gender—presenting an intrinsically arresting view of ultimate reality as feminine?

A great deal clearly depends on who is meant by the “we” that is asking these questions.

In presenting the matter in this way, I should indicate immediately that this book is not primarily concerned with the complex and fascinating matter of “point of view” that has so claimed the attention of artists and humanists, and humanistic scholarship, in recent years. It is not a venture into literary criticism. It is neither intended as an inquiry into philosophical theology, nor is it meant to contribute directly to that area of scholarly discourse known as hermeneutics. There has been a great deal of interest lately in how one ought to interpret texts, particularly religious texts. This discussion is perhaps most readily associated with the names of Martin Heidegger, Paul Ricoeur, and Hans-Georg Gadamer, joined now by many others, and the debate will, no doubt, continue for some time. I have listened to these discussions with interest, and it may be that those who are engaged in them will find something worthy of attention in the current volume. But by training and inclination I am neither philosopher nor literary critic. The interests that have led me to the current study lie elsewhere.

There are, in fact, three such interests.

Foremost among them has been a desire to contribute in some way to what is surely one of the massive revolutions of our day, that is, the way in which we think and behave with regard to matters of gender. While there remain those who would think of recent developments in the study and experience of women as a fad, I am of the persuasion that something of great historical moment is afoot here. I have followed the various intellectual and social dimensions of this revolution with great interest and concern, though I recognize that I am not necessarily the best person to press the case here, or elsewhere, for the importance of feminist concerns. What I can admit to, however, is the sense that on this matter, as elsewhere, careful scholarship has important contributions to make, both intellectually and humanistically. And so I have done some research, part of which has already appeared as a book, directed largely at scholars in Indian studies, examining the crystallization of the Hindu Goddess tradition.<sup>1</sup> The sense has persisted, however, that there are issues running through this research that would be of broader interest. This sense has been reinforced by my students, especially the women, with whom I have shared excerpts of my own translation of the *Devī-Māhātmya*. Their reports of what it did for them—particularly

its tremendous enrichment of their dream-life—have encouraged me in the current undertaking. That undertaking is to make available an English translation of the *Devī-Māhātmya* that for the first time pays careful attention to historical factors in the composition, translation, and interpretation of the text. It is also the first translation in nearly a century by someone who is a native speaker of English.<sup>2</sup> In this undertaking, I shall not attempt to identify implications for the gender revolution beyond offering an occasional suggestion. To do more would require a competence I cannot claim. I am content here to lay a foundation with this translation, and invite others to draw out the further ramifications for our thinking about matters of gender.

There is a second revolution that is also now on the horizon, and it constitutes my second interest. This revolution deals with the way in which we think about the place of books in religious life. It therefore has a very direct bearing on what is involved in the translation of a written document. It is hazardous to attempt description of a movement that is barely under way, but the basic issue might be put as follows.

At first glance, it appears obvious that the religious traditions of the world have scriptures. Virtually all of the major traditions, and many of the minor, have left literary deposits, produced written documents, and the mere fact of their “writteness” invites comparison between one tradition and another. The logic behind F. Max Müller’s massive editorial undertaking at the end of the last century—the publication in English translation of the fifty volumes of the Sacred Books of the East—is a compelling one. A similar logic runs through much contemporary thinking, both popular and scholarly. In recent years, a style of religious life has emerged, on a very broad scale, in which the defining feature is commitment to the content of a particular book as ultimate truth, as “God’s Word” in a quite literal sense. The most vivid instances, perhaps, are found in the Christian tradition, but they have their parallels elsewhere: the phenomenon is a global one. In academic circles, too, fascination with the written word persists. Not only do we focus upon written materials in our teaching and research, but we also carry this fascination over into our own conviction about the very nature of truth, by identifying “publication,” appearance in print, as the criterion of worthwhile knowledge.

The roots of this ready association of “religions” with “scriptures,” and of this virtual obsession with the written word, are complex. They include the Renaissance, with its emphasis on classical texts, the Reformation, with its elevation of the Bible as the locus of God’s ongoing revelation, and Gutenberg’s development of a printing press with moveable type, with its consequences for the spread of literacy. To trace

these roots is not my purpose here.<sup>3</sup> It is enough to note that this association of “religions” with “scriptures” is so obvious as scarcely to merit comment.

Recently, however, there has begun to emerge a self-consciousness about the ease with which we assume this connection between religions and books, a recognition that things are otherwise in nonliterate cultures, and that they have been otherwise in literate cultures. We are coming to see that our assumptions about books, their nature, and their relation to religion are scarcely universal. James Barr, one of the leaders of this new awareness in the study of the Christian tradition, has put the matter vividly with his observation that, in biblical times, a “Bible” was not a volume. Rather, it was “a cupboard or chest with pigeon-holes, or a room or cave with a lot of individual scrolls.”<sup>4</sup> Not only are such antecedents of our “books” being noted, but we are also becoming increasingly aware that there are alternative evaluations of the place of books and written documents in human life, particularly in religious life. The evidence from India is especially challenging in this regard. Some 2,500 years ago, we find expressed a sentiment that has been dominant throughout the later history of the subcontinent: “A pupil should not recite [the sacred oral composition that is] the Veda after he has eaten meat, seen blood or a dead body, had intercourse or engaged in writing.”<sup>5</sup> In other words, the act of writing is on a par with the most polluting and inauspicious of acts. To engage in it disqualifies one from the heart of the religious life. In the face of such a sentiment, what could possibly be the significance of translating a written text, originating in India, from one language to another? Are there not a host of prior questions that clamor for attention? Would there not be a profound irony, even absurdity, in presenting for contemporary Western appreciation a text that embodies a powerful vision of the Goddess, without also paying attention to what Hindus have done with this artifact? Since there appears to be great variety both *within* any one religious tradition in the assessment of a given religious document and *across* cultures in the way written documents are regarded, is it not incumbent upon us to take note of this variety?

These are difficult questions. To them there is at present no simple answer. So novel is our self-consciousness about scripture as a global phenomenon, so diverse are the evaluations of the data, and so woven into our own cultural assumptions is the value of literacy that the revolution cannot be said to have more than barely begun. Although movement is apparent on many fronts, no fully satisfactory solution to these searching dilemmas is currently apparent.<sup>6</sup>

There are certain implications for the task immediately at hand,

however, that would seem appropriate in light of this newly dawning awareness. While it will always be tempting for those who are literate to read translated texts for their *content*, this would appear to be fully justifiable, and sufficient, only when the culture of the reader and the culture where the text originated ascribe similar significance to writing, and to the products of written expression. This may seem like a bizarre statement, but it is not necessarily the case that what is most significant about a verbal composition is its content. It may well be that what is most noteworthy is its *form*. Poets, I suspect, have always known this. Certainly this awareness has been more in evidence when a verbal composition has been regarded as religious than when it has been viewed as a secular phenomenon. What is striking is the extent to which this emphasis has been carried in India. Louis Renou, giant among the last generation of Indologists, has suggested that this tendency, this emphasis on the formal qualities of verbal composition, has been pushed further in India than elsewhere.<sup>7</sup> He has also noted that this characteristically Indian preoccupation with form rather than meaning has meant that “at all times, recitation constituted the principal, if not the exclusive, object of Vedic teaching, the same as today . . . whilst the interpretation of the texts is treated as a poor relation.”<sup>8</sup> Renou is admittedly speaking here of the Indian attitude specifically toward the Veda, the primal verbal artifact in the Hindu tradition. Elsewhere, however, I have noted certain functional parallels between the *Rg Veda* and the *Devī-Māhātmya*,<sup>9</sup> the text that claims our attention in the present study. Not the least of the grounds for seeing such parallels is the way in which the tradition has “made sense” of these compositions. The *Devī-Māhātmya* has gathered around itself no fewer than sixty-seven commentaries, the most common concern of which is with how the verbal material, with its modest number of variants, should be properly divided so as to arrive at the required 700 verses for recitation. It is proper and precise recitation, not cognitive mastery nor substantive exegesis, that has been the primary concern of the Hindu tradition as it has embraced the verbal phenomenon that is the *Devī-Māhātmya*.<sup>10</sup> The specific nature of some of the commentaries is a matter that will claim our attention later on. For the moment, however, it is sufficient simply to notice the divergence between an emphasis upon the content of the text—to which we may be tempted precisely because of its striking portrayal of ultimate reality as feminine—and an emphasis on its form—which is more representative of how Hindus have approached the text.

Having noticed this divergence, we are then in a position to draw a tentative conclusion regarding the implications of our dawning awareness of “scripture” as a global phenomenon for our aspiration to

translate the *Devī-Māhātmya*. For all of its renown in India, the *Devī-Māhātmya* is neither a “classical text” in the sense known to Western humanists, nor is it a “scripture” in the sense known to Protestant Christians. Any translation that is done within the context of our emerging knowledge about the variety and complexity of the phenomenon of “writtleness” must pay attention to the way Hindus have encountered the Goddess, to the sense they have made of this text. For this reason, after translating the *Devī-Māhātmya* below in chapter 3, we turn in subsequent chapters to an examination of the interpretive apparatus that has gathered around the text through the centuries. My goal is thus first, to make the text available for contemporary readers, both Western and other, and second, to do so in a way that calls attention to what Hindus have done with this verbal phenomenon.<sup>11</sup> My hope is thus to provide here a model for the way in which any “scripture” might be studied.

I have, finally, a third interest that has determined the shape of this study. I mentioned earlier that the translation that I provide below is the first translation of the *Devī-Māhātmya* to pay close attention to *historical* factors. What does this mean, and why is it worthy of special consideration in a specifically Indian context?

Basically, I am concerned to distinguish an historical approach to the *Devī-Māhātmya* from two other ways of dealing with this and other texts in the so-called popular strand of Hinduism. One is associated with a dominant trend in recent Western scholarship on India. The other is apparent in earlier Indian translations of the *Devī-Māhātmya* into English. Both call for brief exploration.

For some years now, the intellectual movement known as structuralism has been applied to the analysis of Indian material with extraordinarily rich results. The structuralist movement as a whole ranges across many disciplines and is of great complexity, but its basic vision is simple. A structure, in the words of one of its most brilliant expositors, Jean Piaget, is “a system of transformations” that is “closed,” that is, self-contained and self-regulating.<sup>12</sup> What structuralism seeks to do is to identify the particular laws that govern the transformations within a given system. It is mythological material that in significant measure constitutes the fabric of popular Hinduism, so the structural study of India has often been inspired by the vision of Claude Lévi-Strauss, the structural anthropologist who has lavished such great attention on the study of myth.<sup>13</sup> Simply to cite the names of those who have been drawn to this kind of inquiry is to identify many of the dominant figures in the study of Hinduism over the past two decades:

Madeleine Biardeau, Veena Das, Alf Hildebeitel, Stella Kramrisch, Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, Hans Penner, and David Shulman, among others.<sup>14</sup> While the specific applications of structuralist thought to Indian culture vary considerably, there is no doubt they have enabled us to discern order in the face of nearly overwhelming complexity. At a quite practical level, anyone who has grappled with a particularly obscure and intransigent textual passage must admit with the structuralists that comparing it with similar passages in other texts can provide unsuspected insights into the original. There has been a relatively happy marriage, in other words, between the transtemporal world of the Hindu epics and Purāṇas,<sup>15</sup> and the ahistorical bent of structuralist thought. By virtue of the latter, we now understand a great deal more clearly the dynamics of the former. This understanding will surely grow further in the years ahead.

And yet there are limits, it would appear, to the kind of understanding that is produced by structuralist methods.<sup>16</sup> This is not the place for a full discussion of such limits, nor is such discussion essential to my purpose. I would, however, cite the remarks of the dean of contemporary Talmudic studies, for if we seek a religious literature that rivals the Purāṇas in complexity, the Talmud is surely a prime candidate. In assessing the merits of structuralism, Jacob Neusner writes:

Structuralism asks the right questions. But it does not stand to hear all the answers its questions precipitate. . . . Structure without context, that is, the social and economic, material context defined by concrete history, is insufficient either for description or for explanation. . . . We may amply describe a structure within the framework of religions and show how a system is constituted and how it functions. We may notice the fundamental concerns of the stories we have examined and show how the way in which the story is told highlights what the story wishes to tell us. But without careful attention to the historical context in which the story, as part of a system of values, actually functions, we still cannot explain what is important about it. That is, we do not know how to describe and make sense of the system, the world-view and way of life, of which the story is a part. What is still more important, through (mere) structuralism we cannot account for changes within the system itself. Literature is a part of society, and if we do not know what particular stimulus made it necessary or even inevitable that a story such as the one before us should be told, we cannot make sense of it.<sup>17</sup>

Given India's proverbial aversion of attention from historical detail, the kind of knowledge to which Neusner aspires will be very hard to come by. Doubtless one of the reasons for the success of structuralism in dealing with Indian data, as noted above, is the convergence between the nontemporal quality of Indian culture and that of structuralist method. Providing an alternative leverage on the data, one that pays greater attention to matters of chronology, will not be easy. The necessary tools, such as critical editions of Purāṇic materials, are only gradually becoming available, their significance continues to be debated, and it will be a long while yet before they reveal the broader context that Neusner exhorts us to explore. We need not be daunted, however, simply because our aspirations cannot as yet be fully met. One must, after all, begin somewhere. Moreover, as I hope to show, any movement toward realizing those aspirations provides an historical counterpoint to the structuralist spectacular that is both instructive and salutary.<sup>18</sup>

There is also a particular rationale for departing from a structural mode of analysis in the specific case of the *Devī-Māhātmya*. Although this text is woven quite naturally into the fabric of the *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa*, it cannot be considered a "typical" Purāṇic text. I have considered this matter at some length elsewhere,<sup>19</sup> but the critical facts at this juncture are these. Unlike most Purāṇic texts, the *Devī-Māhātmya* has a high degree of textual integrity: the additional verses and variant readings that are so characteristic of the Purāṇas are far fewer in our text. The *Devī-Māhātmya* has also had a tremendously vital independent life, apart from its appearance in the *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa*. While there are several dozen manuscripts of the entire *Purāṇa*, those of the *Devī-Māhātmya* as an autonomous text are virtually "innumerable."<sup>20</sup> Finally, very few commentaries have been written on the Purāṇas. The exceptions are the *Bhāgavata*, *Viṣṇu*, and *Liṅga Purāṇas*, the Kāśī Khaṇḍa of the *Skanda Purāṇa*, and chapters 81-93 of the *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa*.<sup>21</sup> It is these chapters of the *Mārkaṇḍeya* that constitute the *Devī-Māhātmya* and, as we noted earlier, this text has attracted to itself a minimum of sixty-seven commentaries. Only one other Purāṇic text has more than a fraction of this number, and that is the magnificent testament to the divine cowherd Krishna in the tenth book of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*.<sup>22</sup> In other words, while the Purāṇic tendency has been toward fluidity, the *Devī-Māhātmya* has shown striking stability. In the midst of Purāṇic flux, it has been fixed. Although we have seen that there are major differences between classical India and the modern West in the evaluation of written documents, it would appear that the *Devī-Māhātmya* has been more like scripture in the Protestant sense than are the Purāṇas



in general precisely because it is compact, bounded and therefore capable of being “canonized.”<sup>23</sup> In order to do justice to the text, it is necessary to take account of its fixed, reified quality. We cannot simply assimilate it to other Purāṇic texts and proceed to identify their common structural properties. The text has functioned as a relatively autonomous phenomenon, and respect for the integrity of the text requires that we treat it as such.<sup>24</sup>

It is in this context that we should, finally, glance at the two English translations of the *Devī-Māhātmya* that have been made within the past generation, those of Agrawala and Jagadīśvarānanda, for while they have their merits, both are seriously flawed for any effort to arrive at an historical understanding of the *Devī-Māhātmya*. The problem in both cases is that the translators have brought to their work interpretative schema that are demonstrably later than the *Devī-Māhātmya* itself. This is not in itself surprising. Indeed, the way in which verbal artifacts or “scriptures” function in most traditions is by allowing, even enticing, later generations to bring *their* concerns to the text. It is precisely in this kind of dialogue that the great verbal artifacts live on. However, if we would understand analytically how a given text has functioned over time, then we must be prepared to drive a wedge, as it were, between the sense of a text at the time of its composition and the senses that later commentators and translators have drawn out of it. There will, presumably, be a measure of continuity between any text and its later interpreters, but, given the inevitable variations in circumstance, it is virtually impossible for this continuity to be utter.

To obtain this kind of historical leverage on a written document is also a tall order. Having obtained it, its significance remains much debated. This is, in fact, one of the reasons for the current ferment in Biblical studies: The precise bearing of the exquisitely detailed knowledge of original texts that Biblical scholars have been accumulating for over a century on later (including contemporary) generations is not obvious.<sup>25</sup>

However, it now appears possible to obtain this kind of leverage on the *Devī-Māhātmya* in at least a preliminary fashion. One of the purposes of my earlier study of the *Devī-Māhātmya* was to examine the Vedic and epic antecedents of the language that is used in this sixth-century text. What we are now in a position to do is to use this information to translate the text in a way that will approximate its sense at the time of its composition. We can translate the text in a way that avoids reading in more than is justified by demonstrably earlier usage of language and mythology. Then using this translation as a baseline, we may go on to see how later commentators and translators and ritual specialists have engaged with the text. We can come to see how the text has lived on,

in various ways, in the lives of some Hindus for these many centuries.<sup>26</sup> We can come to a more historical appreciation of the *Devī-Māhātmya*'s status in Indian life than has heretofore been obtained by either scholars or translators.

The agenda, then, for subsequent chapters is as follows. In the next chapter, I shall situate the *Devī-Māhātmya* in the Hindu tradition, sketching in broad strokes the background out of which the text emerges. In chapter 3 I shall translate the *Devī-Māhātmya*, using language and terminology that are appropriate to the time of its composition. Chapter 4 will orient us to the second half of our inquiry by exploring what it means to talk about the historical legacy of any given text, with special attention to the dynamics of Indian culture. Chapter 5 will then examine some of the interpretative devices, the *aṅgas* or "limbs," that have gathered around our particular text, primarily for ritual purposes. In chapter 6 we shall consider some of the issues that arise in commentaries on the text, focusing especially on two commentaries composed in the eighteenth century. Finally, chapter 7 will present a sampling of how some contemporary Hindus engage with the text, with attention to festival life, focusing on three individuals in particular, and concluding with some general reflections on the ongoing life of verbal compositions. Such an agenda integrates the three personal interests that have been introduced in this chapter around a single goal of presenting the *Devī-Māhātmya* as a living document, providing some sense of how it has lived in India over the past fifteen hundred years, and presenting a translation that will enable it to continue its life under the striking conditions that are presented now in the contemporary world.

# PART I

## *The Text in Its Context*