

Introduction

Ezekiel saw the wheel, 'way up in the middle of the air,
Ezekiel saw the wheel, 'way up in the middle of the air.
And the little wheel ran by faith, and the big wheel ran by
the grace of God.
'Tis a wheel in a wheel, 'way up in the middle of the air.

Traditional African-American song

And when I looked, behold the four wheels by the cherubim,
one wheel by one cherub, and another wheel by another cher-
ub; and the appearance of the wheels was like the color of a
beryl stone. And as for their appearances, they four had one
likeness, as if a wheel had been in the midst of a wheel.

Ezekiel 10.9–10

The Hebrew Bible version of the vision of Ezekiel speaks of a wheel within a wheel; the African-American version speaks of two wheels, one of faith and the other of grace. These two texts might themselves be regarded as a wheel within a wheel, two interlocking interpretations, one written, one oral; one ancient, one modern; one Jewish, one Christian. The texts that are the subject of this volume also run on those two sets of wheels, written and oral, ancient and modern, and, in this case, Hindu and Jaina. The little wheel of faith (*śraddhā*) might stand for the so-called Great Tradition of India, to borrow Robert Redfield's seminal terminology for the pan-Indian Sanskritic tradition that self-consciously traces its lineage back to the Veda and the Epics. The big wheel of the grace of God (*bhakti*) might stand for the equally so-called Little Tradition of India, the village tradition of localized, vernacular, basically oral culture.

That the Little Tradition is the big wheel rather than the little wheel should not surprise us; the Redfield model has begun to turn upside down, or inside out. In the hands of Redfield (whom a colleague once described, unkindly, as a man who went around kicking in open doors), it began a fruitful conversation. But in later years, and in other hands, it was invoked, more often than not, to argue that vernacular myths and rituals were, in comparison with their Sanskrit counterparts, late and low (or, to use the phrase that F. Max Müller applied to myth in comparison with religion, “silly, senseless, and savage”). The paradigm was also used to draw too sharp a line between these presumably high and low cultures, ignoring the fact that a Brahmin who wrote a Sanskrit text with one hand (his right, one assumed) was also quite likely to be the author of a Tamil oral tale with the other hand (presumably the left). Or, to use A. K. Ramanujan’s terminology, every Indian who had Sanskrit as his father tongue had a vernacular as his mother tongue.

Finally, in the decades since Redfield’s work the most vibrant strain in Indology has concentrated on the Little Tradition, making it major in many important senses. Thus the concept of the “Great and Little Traditions” has proved to be a ladder that we used to get where we are now but must now kick out from under us, or at least modify in major ways. The wheel is within the wheel—but which is the center and which the periphery? Or would it be better to say that each is within the other?

The essays in this volume grew out of a conference on the Purāṇas at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, in August 1985, a conference organized by Velcheru Narayana Rao, generously supported by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, and attended by Purāṇa scholars from India and Europe as well as America. Among the participants was Ludo Rocher, whose work on the Purāṇas has culminated not in a paper for this volume but in a volume that has immediately become the standard work on the subject, encompassing and extending the previous base established by the work of R. C. Hazra.¹ Rocher’s work is cited by many of the authors in this volume and is the base from which we all implicitly proceed.²

The discussion at that conference ranged widely, as do the texts that inspired it, but time and again we found ourselves returning to one central theme: the relationship between the so-called Mahāpurāṇas, or “Great” Purāṇas, of the Sanskrit tradition (themselves texts that the Indologist, i.e., Sanskritic, Establishment largely ignored) and the many other sorts of Purāṇas. These latter were regarded (by those few Indologists who knew them at all) as

poor cousins of the already poor Mahāpurāṇas, and included the Upapurāṇas, or "Subpurāṇas," of the Sanskrit tradition (which do not, be it noted, correspond to the Little Tradition texts); the *sthalapurāṇas* of the Dravidian Hindu traditions; and the Purāṇas of other South Asian traditions, such as the Jainas. If Vedic texts were the Brahmins of Indology, the Purāṇas were the Untouchables. We all felt that a study of these neglected traditions was long overdue, as a kind of Purāṇic affirmative action. The essays in this book represent a first step in that direction.

The readers of the manuscript (C. Mackenzie Brown, Ludo Rocher, Herman Tull, and two who preferred, like Paurāṇikas, to remain anonymous) offered many useful suggestions for improvements but basically agreed with us that such a study was badly needed. One anonymous reader rather grudgingly acknowledged:

The literature . . . covered in this volume has attracted few Western scholars; the book covers an area of research in which there are few published monographs in English. The original texts are not found in most University libraries. The journals (mostly Indian) which contain some information on this topic are equally inaccessible. Thus the present volume fulfills a need . . . As Indian Studies progresses, scholars are giving more attention to texts which are little discussed in the standard manuals and books in the field. Indianists now are more concerned to sort out the mutual influences of the well-known pan-Indian texts and more localized or "sectarian" traditions. The book makes a contribution here . . . All the articles attempt, in different ways, to advance knowledge in the field and in some instances to re-orient scholarly thinking on this extensive body of knowledge.

And another reader said, with a bit more enthusiasm, "This is a collection of articles by leading scholars in their fields. Such a collection naturally demands our attention. Without exception the articles are intellectually stimulating, demanding, and instructive . . . The topic is very important."

C. Mackenzie Brown particularly liked "the attempt on the part of some of the authors to grapple with the problem of what the 'Purāṇic process' is, using a wide variety of examples drawn from important but relatively less well known texts, [and] the richness of insights in many of the individual essays. As a whole, they give the reader who is already somewhat familiar with Purāṇic literature a much more intimate feel of what it is like to live in a Purāṇicized

world, and of what is involved in constructing and/or transforming that world from within." And Herman Tull commented, "The Purāṇas, despite all their peculiarities and pretensions, are essentially collections of stories. And the authors of the essays collected in *Purāṇa Perennis* are all superb story-tellers. They are also top-notch scholars. [The volume] is emblematic of the most important current in Indological studies in the last twenty years."

Since most of us have been one another's friends, colleagues, teachers, and students for decades, editing the papers felt to me more like attending a family party than chairing an academic gathering. Indeed, were it not for the presence of our two Jaina cousins, the Hindu-wallahs would have constituted an almost incestuously insular group. The authors, as well as their texts, suffer (or benefit, depending upon your point of view) from a very real sort of intertextuality. This being so, I was pleased to find that we did in fact disagree in several of our approaches to the central problems of definition and interpretation. Since most of the authors have agendas that relate to reading the Purāṇas as a whole, over and above their particular foci, they deal, often quite differently, with many of the same central issues. Thus, for example, the classical list of the "five distinguishing marks" (*pañcalakṣaṇa*) is utilized in rather different ways by Narayana Rao, Shulman, Hardy, Cort, and Jaini. The *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* also proved to be the key to several different sorts of arguments, as it was discussed in relationship to the *Devibhāgavata Purāṇa* (Doniger and Hardy), the *Mahābhāgavata Purāṇa* (Shulman), and the Jaina version of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* (Jaini). The *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* also served as a bridge between other issues, forming as it does a link between the Sanskrit North and the Dravidian South and between Vedic and Purāṇic Sanskrit. There are also more specific resonances between the papers: thus, for example, in addition to the more detailed resonances (even arguments) between Cort and Jaini, Ramanujan and Doniger speak of the "scrap Purāṇa" (the *Skanda*), Patton and Doniger cite different versions of the myths of Urvaṣī and Utathya, Patton and Shulman discuss very different aspects of *bhakti*, and Hardy and Doniger bring out different aspects of the myths of the *liṅga* and of the sinner saved from hell. The essays in this collection constitute a kind of Venn diagram of intersecting concerns of authors attempting to trace general patterns within a set of most unruly texts.

It might at first appear that some of these essays are about ideology (political)—a contemporary (or, if you don't like it, trendy) subject, while others are about theology (religious)—a traditional (or, if you don't like it, reactionary) subject. But, as Laurie L. Patton

reminds us from the start, theology is an ideology, and our authors explore various sorts of ideologies, Brahminic, subversive, feminist, and so forth. Patton explores the theology of the *r̥ṣis*, while Narayana Rao writes about the self-definition and Brahminic ideology of the Purāṇas. Doniger and Ramanujan, through mythological and literary/semiotic analysis, respectively, draw out certain counter-cultural and feminist ideologies from their texts, while Shulman's text might, in other hands, be used in the service of colonial and subaltern discourse, for Rudyard Kipling's "How the Elephant Got His Nose," in his *Just-So Stories*, is surely a satire on the myth of Gajendra. Hardy charts a number of rational and rationalizing ideological strategies working within the constraints of localism. And Hardy, Jaini, and Cort trace the lineage of an agonistic interaction between Hindus and Jainas, each group encompassing the ideology of the other by laying claim to the same Purāṇic subjects. A wheel within a wheel.

The Hindu-Jaina exchange is not the only reciprocal one, however. For this whole book is about reciprocal transformations, the two-way stretch (what we call "chicken-and-egg" and Indians call "seed-and-tree") of the Great and Little Traditions, with constant cybernetic feedback between pan-Indian culture and localized culture, rather than subordination of one to the other, as has often been reductionistically supposed. These reciprocal transformations operate between Veda and Purāṇa (Patton) and among Epic, Mahāpurāṇa, and Upapurāṇa (Doniger); between North and South, in several branches: Sanskrit and Telugu (Narayana Rao), Sanskrit and Kannada (Ramanujan), Sanskrit and Tamil (Shulman), and Sanskrit, Tamil, and Prakrit (Hardy); and, finally, between Hindu and Jaina (Hardy, Jaini, and Cort).

In the hope of making the book accessible to a nonspecialist audience, I have tried to de-Sanskritize it as far as possible. This editing is the reverse of the process that M. N. Srinivas called "Sanskritization." For where castes rise in both status and power by Sanskritizing, texts fall in status but rise in (readership) power by de-Sanskritizing. (The chapter by John E. Cort, being in part a bibliographical essay, necessarily contains more Sanskrit than the other essays.) Nevertheless, there is a bare minimum of Sanskrit terminology shared by these essays that even the non-Indologist reader might be expected to learn or to ignore, as the case might be: *asura* (an anti-god), *apsaras* (a celestial nymph or courtesan), *bhakta* (a devotee), *bhakti* (devotion, passionate love of God for worshipper and worshipper for God), *brahman* (ultimate reality), *dharma* (religious law), *gandharva* (a demigod, celestial musician), *Kali Age*

(the last, and worst, of the four ages), *karma* (the effects of past actions on future lives), *kāvya* (ornate poetry), *kinnara* (a mythical beast, half horse and half demigod), *līlā* (play, divine sport), *liṅga* (the erect phallus of the god Śiva), *mantra* (a hymn, particularly a Vedic hymn), *māyā* (illusion), *mokṣa* (release or liberation, especially from the wheel of rebirth), *pañcalakṣaṇa* (the five distinguishing marks of a Purāṇa), *phalaśruti* (the fruit gained by hearing a Purāṇa), *rākṣasa* (minor demon), *rṣi* (a seer, or sage), *samsāra* (the wheel of rebirth, involvement in ordinary life), *sāstra* (a science or an authoritative scientific text), *smṛti* (texts, such as the Epics, Purāṇas, and *dharmaśāstras*, created and “remembered” by humans), *śruti* (texts, such as the Vedas, created by gods and “heard” by humans), *sthalapurāṇa* (local Purāṇa), *stotra* (hymn of praise), *tapas* (inner heat produced by asceticism), and *yakṣa* (a demigod associated with magic and fertility). Further information about Sanskrit terms is provided in the Index, which Matthew Schmalz fastidiously prepared. I invite the reader, armed with this arsenal of Sanskrit terminology, to sally forth into the living jungle of texts known as Purāṇas.