

## *Heresy and Heretics in the Bhāgavata-Purāṇa*

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### Abstract

Joseph Lipner has famously compared Hinduism to a banyan-tree, the branches of which send down aerial roots that on contact with the ground become new trunks. Since the new trunks grow new branches with more aerial roots, the one banyan tree can in time become a whole jungle. So Hinduism, Lipner argues, is a maze of different but interconnected centres, all of which can claim being the centre of all.

The same simile can well be used for the Bhāgavata-Purāṇa (9<sup>th</sup> century CE?). It has three or four beginnings, operates with up to six narrative levels at a time, concerns itself with no less than ten main topics, and in general contains an amount of personae and dramatic events to make anyone's head spin. It is easy to lose the thread of the book in all its meanderings, but there is always a connection between its seemingly independent topics. Many of the main topics of the text are concerned with the votaries of the Bhagavat or supreme Lord. In this paper, I will look at one way how the Bhāgavata-Purāṇa defines these true worshippers: by contrasting them with heretics, *pākhaṇḍas*.

Though being the Vaiṣṇava purāṇa *par excellence*, the Bhāgavata-Purāṇa is rather non-sectarian. The text has great regard for Śiva, even letting him and his devotees once triumph over those of Viṣṇu. The line between the good and the bad does not, therefore, strictly follow the divide between Vaiṣṇavas and Śaivas. Rather, the “others” of the text are the heretics. In my paper, I will take a close look at what the Bhāgavata-Purāṇa has to say about *pākhaṇḍas*, identifying three groups: heretical Śaivas, Jains and Buddhists. The descriptions of these groups will reveal much about the religio-social situation at the time of the writing of the Bhāgavata-Purāṇa.

Further, I will discuss the personality of Śuka, the main narrator of the Bhāgavata-Purāṇa, and other similar *avadhūtas*, enigmatic and frightening persons who look like heretics, but who in reality represent the real heroes of the text. By examining what it is that makes for a heretic, I aim to shed a strong albeit indirect light on what the Bhāgavata-Purāṇa considers a true votary of the Bhagavat. In this way, the types of rhetoric that the text employs in defining and reshaping the religious landscape of its times will be brought out both directly and indirectly.