

WSC 14: Abstract for Section 12: History of Religion – Thematic Panel

Hermeneutical Methods and Techniques of Sanskrit Commentators on the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*

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In this Paper I present some hermeneutical principles and techniques of around twenty commentators, most of them Vaiṣṇavites, on select passages of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* (BhP).

The commentators do apply certain hermeneutical principles. For example, even within the BhP, certain important passages supersede other passages; an individual contextual statement (*prakaraṇa*) or indication (*liṅga*) has less force than a universal statement; a later statement cancels a previous statement. However, these principles are not always applied in a universal and consistent manner. At times we could say that, even though the *abhidhā* or denotation does make sense, yet, from the point of view of the philosophical or theological presuppositions of a particular school, it would not make sense and so the commentators feel justified in giving a sort of indicatory (*lākṣaṇika*) meaning.

Although the commentators share much in common, still they belong to different schools and have different perspectives and approaches: e.g. some are more realistic, others more symbolic, giving psychological insights and mystical interpretations and suggesting a *dhvani* or *vyañjana* significance that brings out the deeper spiritual meaning of an episode; some emphasize the erotic, while others tone down the erotic aspects; the same passage is interpreted as a praise or as a criticism, etc. Sometimes they indulge in polemics, e.g., proposing that Śaṅkarācārya misled others through his erroneous commentary on the Vedānta.

They make use of exegetical arguments, quoting or referring to other passages in the BhP to shed light on a passage they are commenting on. Sometimes, however, they quote from other less important scriptures in order to reinterpret a BhP passage which is not in accord with their school's worldview.

Contrary to traditional poetics, some have given *bhakti* the status of a *rasa*. The Bengal Vaiṣṇavites, especially in independent works, have developed a whole *bhaktirasaśāstra*, giving illustrations from the BhP of various *sthāyibhāvas*, *vibhāvas*, etc., resulting in different *rasas*.

They often spell out the implications of a text, but sometimes they just silently ignore a problematic passage or even change the wording. At other times they make several attempts to explain away problems or misunderstandings. For this they resort to various techniques: distinguishing between what is *laukika* and *vyāvahārika* from that which is *alaukika* and *pāramārthika*; changing the meaning of the text by deriving a negative prefix (short *a*) or even a long *ā* from the preceding word which ends in a long *ā*; construing the words differently; proposing fanciful etymologies as is done in various religious traditions; cleverly analysing or breaking up a word or a compound into smaller components, giving each component a rather rare meaning and justifying this meaning by quoting different lexica and referring to grammatical works; supplying extra words, occasionally stating that these additional words are implied by the word “and” (*ca*) in the text; referring to *nyāyas* (maxims); giving alternative meanings of the use of a grammatical case (*vibhakti*); narrating a story from a previous life, and showing a connection with the present one: however, at times such explanations have no foundation in the text nor are they substantiated by reference to another scriptural text.

One cannot but marvel at the ingenious hermeneutical skills which some commentators display by arriving at a meaning that is completely different from the meaning that strikes one at first sight. At times it may appear to some that the commentators read later doctrines into the text or give interpretations that are far-fetched even to Vaiṣṇavites of another *sampradāya*. The paper concludes by pointing out that we should not be too quick to blame the commentators for twisting the meaning of the passages. Modern hermeneutics tells us that a text has a fuller meaning and can contain

meaning even beyond what the original author intended. Indeed the same text can mean different things to different people. There are no plain facts, but always facts with interpretation and this is true both in the religious as well as secular sphere: the interpretation of the same historical facts by a Britisher or an Indian is not the same and someone who is a terrorist for some is a martyr for others.