

Review

Seven Days of Nectar: Contemporary Oral Performances of the Bhāgavatapurāṇa, by McComas Taylor. New York: Oxford University Press, 2016. 248 pp., \$105.00. ISBN 978-0-190-61191-0.

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As scholars and students, we often consider the purāṇas traditionally as written texts, first and foremost. Those of us with performance-sensitive tendencies may additionally study the living aspects of the tradition from an ethnographic- or performance-based perspective. Philological studies may go into the depths of the Sanskrit focusing on the form and history of a text, while performance-based ethnographies may look at the contemporary, emergent traditions related to a particular textual repertoire. Often these genres do not meet in one work.

McComas Taylor's *Seven Days of Nectar: Contemporary Oral Performances of the Bhāgavatapurāṇa* is a bridge from the in-depth work of textual scholarship to the world of ethnographic thick description through a study of the contemporary context of the first millennium, Vaiṣṇava-focused text, the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* and its seven-day performance, the *saptāha*. In interviews and textual analysis, Taylor's unique language abilities are on display, bringing out the intricacies of conversations and texts in English, Hindi, and Sanskrit. Throughout the work, Taylor brings together this expertise in Sanskrit and textual scholarship with a 'trial-by-fire' experience of ethnographic fieldwork in a distinctly transnational ethnography of the life of the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*.

Situating his work between Hildebeitel's (1988) *The Cult of Draupadi*, Lutgendorf's (1991) *Life of a Text: Performing the Rāmcaritmānas of Tulsidas*, Gupta and Valpey's (2013) *The Bhāgavata Purāṇa: Sacred Text and Living Tradition* among many other ethnographic works on the performance traditions of Sanskrit epics, Taylor laments the lack of attention to this genre of scholarship: 'Despite these important leads, there has been only limited success in bridging the gap between anthropology and Sanskrit texts or in exploring the relationship between these texts and the contexts in which they are used' (p. 13).

According to Taylor, this work bridges that gap by a close attention to the text and its context in use.

The *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* and its *saptāhas* are not performances in a single context, but multiple. The contemporary focus of chapters and conversations about the *saptāhas* are balanced by historical context; any focus on institutional traditions (such as the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, ISKCON) is balanced by perspectives from those in other traditions and institutions. The opinions and definitions of performance and authenticity from advanced devotees and performers are put in conversation with those from audience members of all ages and levels of spiritual advancement. Finally, the work acknowledges the diasporic world of Indic performance traditions while showing that in many cases, transnational does not indicate diasporic characteristics, but a connectivity of traditions across nation states. The product is a work that is at once a primer on the *saptāhas* of the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*, their history, lifeworlds, performances, and future expansions and a comprehensive exploration of what the study of a textual world can be.

The purpose of Taylor's work is not to belabour theorists of power, society, and text, but performance theories do make explicit entrances into the text and frame much of the analysis. In this way, *Seven Days of Nectar* situates itself squarely among works on other Sanskrit epic performance traditions in the way it considers emergent performance, the power of texts, and audience perception and experience. Influenced by a number of theorists in these areas, Taylor explicitly works with Bauman, Briggs, and Gaenzle (chapter 6), and it is their theories that seem to shape the performance-based ethnography of the work as a whole.

In an effort to organize all of its contexts, *Seven Days of Nectar* is written through two scaffolding metaphors of the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* and its *saptāhas*. To bring together the thematic characteristics, both shared and disparate, between *saptāhas* conducted over multiple continents and by those in different traditions, Taylor uses the *yajña* and the *maṇḍala* as his organizational devices. The *yajña* and its main structural characteristics (*kṣetropadhāna*, *yajamāna*, *hotṛ*, *māhātmya*, *mantra*, *viś*, *phala*, and *pūrṇāhuti*) provide the scaffold for a study that weaves together multiple competing elements, while needing to provide an entry point for readers new to the text and its performance contexts.

The *maṇḍala* theme appears at the open and the close of the work and serves to organize its arguments, namely insights into questions on the power of texts in society at the outer edge of the *maṇḍala*, the power of texts in the Sanskrit tradition, and the growth and expansion of the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa saptāha* on the innermost ring. While the *yajña* device frames the outline of the text, Taylor returns to the themes of the *maṇḍala* throughout, asking questions of power and authenticity at different rungs of the *yajña* scaffold, highlighting these questions as they come up in the structure of the *saptāha*, the role of the audience in the performance, and the role and performativity of the *saptāha* performer.

The variety of features within the *yajña* and *maṇḍala* help Taylor organize a work that is difficult to categorize with is various methodologies working together to tell the story of the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa saptāha*. Not quite a work of textual historiography, not quite ethnography, Taylor succeeds in producing the kind of work that he hopes to see more of in the field of South Asian studies: works that connect anthropological work to textual work or 'exploring the relationship between [texts] and the contexts in which they are used' (p. 13). With the themes in mind and Taylor's goal of what this work should accomplish, the layout of the work and types of entry points (ethnographic interviews with exponents of the performance tradition, audience members, those who study the text, and summaries of the text as performed) may remind readers familiar with Roman Jakobson's model of communication often used in performance theory. Like Jakobson's model, Taylor seeks to understand the context of the performance of the *saptāha*, though Taylor seeks to understand the context of the tradition as a whole. He investigates the text that is sent from sender to receiver during the *saptāhas* he analyses, the message the text sends via the mode of the performance, and finally he is most interested in the context of the *saptāha* as it is found in India, Australia, and globally.

With its attention to contexts of different kinds, historical/contemporary, ethnographic/textual, Indic/transnational, *Seven Days of Nectar* can serve the interests of scholars and instructors at various levels. Chapters on their own could be used in undergraduate courses studying purāṇas and their performative contexts, while the work as a whole, at an easily digestible 200 pages, would be well situated in a graduate student content course focusing on an in-depth study of the purāṇas, Sanskrit epics, and devotional traditions or a course on methods of scholarship in South Asian studies or transnational religions.