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Argument and Persuasion: A Brief Study of Kṛtana in the Bhāgavata Purāṇa

Jonathan B. Edelmann

Abbreviations

Bhāgavata Purāṇa
Bhāgavata-tātparya, Ānandaṭhātha Madhvācārya  
Bhāvārtha-dīpikā of Śridhara Svāmin
Krama-sandarbha of Jiva Gosvāmin
Sāraṇtha-darśini of Viṣvanātha Cakravarti
Bhagavad-gītā

Kṛtana, or the recitation of sacred names, texts, poetry and songs, is the focus of religious devotion and religious practice in the Bhāgavata Purāṇa, a text that serves as the theological foundation of Vaishnava traditions, and which is a major literary and cultural foundation for Hinduism in general. It is the basis of Caitanya Vaishnavism and has greatly influenced the Paṣṭa Marga of Vallabha, and even Advaitins draw from it (Ranganathananda 1991; Krishna 1991: 168). In later traditions, such as Gauḍiya Vaishnavism, Kṛtana has the sense of “a congregational song that magnifies a deity by mentioning his honorific names or praiseworthy deeds” (Hein 1981: 18) and which uses hand-cymbals and drums. In the
Bhāgavata itself it has a more general sense of reciting the sacred tradition of philosophy, theology, history and story that has been passed down from great yogins, munis and devas such as Vyāsa, Brahma, Sūka, but which ultimately comes from Vishnu and Krishna.²

The first, last and perhaps most repeated instruction throughout the text is that one should hear, recite and remember the Lord’s divine names, activities and qualities that are encoded in sacred literature that had been derived from the experience of great persons. The Bhāgavata is, in its own estimation, the final and most essential collection of that literature and experience (e.g. 1.3.41).

Given that the Bhāgavata wants to distill so many branches of Indian learning (it recognizes for instance Śānkhya, Yoga, Tantra, Veda, Epic), it follows that the central theological preoccupation of the entire text is the most beneficial topics within these texts to be heard about, to be spoken about and to hold in one’s mind. These are, as I show below, the sorts of questions that the text opens with. The question of “what are the most beneficial topics to hear about” is part of a much larger issue about the value of various sorts of information, which in academic language is often characterized as a distinction between “trivial” and “non-trivial” truths.

In other words, it is recognized that X might be true, but of little or no consequence. Historians, for example, must decide which events in a given historical period are of enough value to warrant inclusion in a history book. Parallel concerns are found in the Bhāgavata. For example, Sūka, a bard, or a man who hears and recites texts, in Book One is complimented for knowing all the important books (e.g., Purāṇas, Vedas, Itiḥāsas, Dharmasāstras, etc.).

Thus it is requested that he provide the gathered sages with the essence (śāra) of all these books since it is, after all, Kalī-yuga and men have little time and intelligence to wade through vast literature. The Bhāgavata wanted to hone in on the most important aspects of a large amount of text that members of a literary culture of India had access to at that time. While claiming to be part of the “Vedic” family of literature, the Bhāgavata enters repeated polemics against the Vedas, which it argues ultimately do not provide one with the most important topics to be heard, recited and remembered (e.g., Krishna’s argument with his father during the Govardhana lilā). So the critical work in the Bhāgavata is to separate out the beneficial from the non-beneficial, or worthy from unworthy topics. It is within this critical discussion that instructions about kīrtana appear.

The Bhāgavata not only provides a theory of value, but it is composed of the very stories, philosophies, theologies and scientific descriptions of nature that it claims are the only worthy topics of audition, speech and memory. Although I focus here on kīrtana, it is not possible to separate it from other practices such as hearing the text, remembering its contents, meditating on the images and stories provided by the text, and surrendering one’s self to the Lord by agreeing to hear and recite the text (as opposed to other topics).

In other words, kīrtana implies hearing, as it does recalling the names and stories that are recited, meditation, etc. Tony Stewart (2005) has argued in his article “Reading for Krishna’s Pleasure,” which appeared in this journal, that the concept of meditation and religious experience is intimately tied to reading in the Gauḍiya-Vaishnava tradition. In his lucid analysis of “experience,” he argues that reading sacred literature, especially the Bhāgavata, is the devotees’ way of incorporating into memory every detail of Krishna, his stories and his divine realm. So reading is itself a form of kīrtana.

Many of the persons singled out as exemplars, like Dhrupa, Prahlāda, Parīkṣit, Sūka and the Gopīs are exemplars because of their absolute dedication to hearing, reciting and remembering the names of Vishnu, Krishna or one of his infinite number of descent (avatāras) forms. The influence of these characters continues to shape Hinduism today.

Yet largely because of the Bhāgavata’s influence coming through Sri Caitanya (b. 1486), kīrtana, or more properly nāgar-kīrtana (singing and dancing in the streets) has become one of the most visible and memorable forms of Hindu religious practice in India and in the Western world too (Hein 1981: 15). It is therefore fitting to examine the usage of the word kīrtana in a text so influential in the modern and contemporary Hindu world, to outline the functions it served within the text’s theology, practice and its narrative structure.

Recitation of sacred text and repetition of mantras, of course, was discussed in earlier works such as the Vedas, Upaniṣads, Bhagavad-gītā and Tantras, and song and poetry about Krishna and Vishnu were developed as a fine art by the twelfth-century South-Indian Vaishnava known as Vedānta Deśika and the eleventh century Āḷvār (Hopkins 2002), among others. It is well-known that the Vedas, from ancient times, were memorized and then melodiously recited by Brahmans. The Vedic sounds were even more important than their meanings because it is said there is a power to the words beyond their cognitive meanings; the Vedic sages saw into another
realm, and then composed hymns on the basis of that insight. When those hymns are recited, the experience is recreated (Gonda 1975). The recitation of Vedic sounds is the essential part of any sacrifice.

When King Sudyumna and his wife Śraddhā wanted a child, a Brahmin told them to say the word “vāṣā” during a sacrifice (9.1.15). Spoken words can transform reality. The power of word and mantra recitation also did not escape Indra, who was attacked by Vṛtra, a powerful person created out of a fire sacrifice by Tvāstṛ who recited the words indra-bätra vīvārdhahsava, “increase the enemies of Indra” (6.9.11).

Here the Bhāgavata appears to be expressing its ambivalence towards Vedic gods and ritual processes; yet this also shows how linguistic expressions had real-world consequences in the minds of Purānic thinkers. The Brhadāranyaka Upaniṣad (2.4.5 and 4.5.6) says: “You see Maitreyī—it is one’s self (ātman) which one should see and hear and on which one should reflect and concentrate. For by seeing and hearing one’s self, and by reflection and concentrating on one’s self, one gains the knowledge of the whole world.” Chandogya Upaniṣad (1.1.1): “Oṁ—one should venerate the High Chant as this syllable, for one begins the High Chant with Oṁ” (Olivelle 1998).

Lastly, the Gītā (9.14) describes a great soul as one who is always glorifying (kīrtayanāḥ) Krishna, and in the Gītā (10.25) Krishna identifies himself with jīva (soft chanting) among all the yajñas. Vaishnava Tantras (also called Sākhīs or Pāñcarātra), such as the Jñānodaya-Sākhī, Ahirbudhnya-Sākhī and Lakṣmī-Tantra, present a developed theology of sacred sound (nāda-brahma), in which mantra meditation and recitation are the most important means of salvation.4

My purpose in providing this brief overview is to show that there is precedent for the Bhāgavata’s emphasis on recitation of sacred words and text as a means of transforming one’s mind or consciousness. But in the Bhāgavata one finds the first systematic and developed argument for kīrtana, including many attendant practices, such as jīva, nāma-apāśana, pātha, gīyana, gīvaha, uciśrī. I have used many of these words as synonyms but not identical with kīrtana, for they all have the sense of sing, praising or reciting a sacred text or name. Within the historical narrative of the text itself there is belief that the kīrtana of Krishna had been neglected in earlier texts such as the Vedas and Mahābhārata, texts Vāsya is said to have composed before the Bhāgavata (e.g. 1.5.8.15).

The Bhāgavata sought to rectify this defect of the older literature by showing that Krishna-kīrtana and Vishnu-kīrtana is the real essence (sāra) of the Vedas and the dharma of our age (12.3.51). What Vyāsa had kept hidden in his earliest works, he brought to light in the Bhāgavata. While this is not a unique strategy in the history of Indian thought, it is one that allows for a dynamic interplay of tradition and innovation because newer texts can present new ideas without having to reject the validity and authority of old ones. It allows for traditions to change and evolve, yet retain their commitment to their past. I hope this essay can speak to the larger issue of the argumentative nature of Purānic literature by showing how the Bhāgavata sought to persuade its readers that old concepts could be re-thought in new, devotionally oriented ways.

What role does kīrtana have in the Bhāgavata Purāṇa? How did the author(s) envision kīrtana in the life of a Bhāgavata, a practitioner of its teachings? How did the Bhāgavata envision the practice of kīrtana? What might it have looked like and sounded like at the time of its composition? On one level it serves the role of identity transformation—kīrtana is a means (sādhanā) of removing the false belief that self-identity is based on the material body-mind complex. As such, kīrtana can free one of the pain and suffering caused by mind-body identification. It can “cut the knot” of ignorance that binds the self to the cycle of birth and death, and it can purify—hence the familiar compound punya-travāna-kīrtana.

Yet, in the Bhāgavata, kīrtana is not merely a means to an end. It is both the means and the end itself. This is an important point. The Bhāgavata opens with the statement “here all cheating-dharma is rejected.” Those cheating-dharmas are dharmas unrelated to bhakti. BD (1.1.2) says that “here the prefix pra, or ‘forth,’ [before ujjhita, rejected’] indicates that even mokṣa (liberation) is cast aside.” So there is a level of discourse in the Bhāgavata that looks at devotional activities as an end in themselves, even beyond their soteriological value. The self continues to express love for the Lord through kīrtana, even when that self is reposed in a liberated state. Devotees will even reject conceptions of liberation that do not allow for continued devotion to the Lord, often in the form of reciting his activities and qualities. Here singing and praising the Lord lose their associations with mokṣa and become associated with a joyful expression of love and affection for Krishna.

I have included “Table A” in which the different senses of kīrtana and saṅkīrtana are used in the Bhāgavata, dividing them into sādhanā bhakti (as a means to an end) and sādhyā bhakti (as an end in itself).
The first instruction in the Bhāgavata is that one should recite the names of Hari; the word kṛitiśaya is used, a gerundive from the root kirt, "to name," "call," "recite," "sing," "repeat," "declare," "praise," "glorify," etc. (1.2.14). The verse comes from the lips of Siṣṭa, who was asked a series of questions by a large group of sages gathered in a forest at Naimiṣa, which scholars believe is the present day Nimar forest located 45 miles northwest of Lucknow (Pandeyam 1964). In reply to these questions, Siṣṭa builds an argument—thus the words atāh ati and tasmād are used—that bhakti is the real goal of human life and it is expressed through kirtana and its attendant practices, namely, auditory reception (śrūya) and recollection (smārta), of theological instruction and stories about the Lord, great kings, devotees, noteworthy gods and the Manus. These are, he argues, legitimate religious practices performed by sages (munis) and indeed the fulfillment of all religious practice. As one might expect from a text so consciously framed in Vedic language and so purposively reflective on Vedic themes, it tries to show how bhakti (or the varṇa-dharma) relates with, critiques and fulfills the Brahminical concepts of dharma and social order spoken of in the Puruṣa-sūkta and codified in the Manu-sūtras, texts which were not only known to Purāṇa authors, but which formed an essential part their literature (2.10.1).

Siṣṭa neither accepts nor rejects the Brahminical systems of varṇa and dharma, but argues that through bhakti one’s dharma is truly fulfilled. They are not rejected because one can achieve all perfection by performing dharma to please the Lord (hari-saṅgya). Yet, if a man acts according to the dharma of his own established nature, but does not develop love (rāg) for Viśvaksena, the Lord, then his dharma is mere labor (with no fruit, BD). By acting out of dharma for the pleasure of Hari one can secure knowledge and dispassion (jñāna, vairāgya), as well as liberation (āpya), but it should not be for mere pleasure (kāma). Munis act out of devotion—coupled with knowledge and dispassion—and so they see the self within their self. By using words like jñāna, vairāgya, āpya and by invoking munis, the Bhāgavata is persuading the sort of reader who cares about the proper observance of dharma and arguing with persons who care about traditional authority structures and the soteriological perfections achieved in other religious practices. Since pleasing Hari is the complete perfection (saṁsiddhi) of acting according one’s dharma,

Therefore, with a singly focused mind, about Bhagavān, who is like the husband of the Satvatas, one should hear and recite (kṛitiśaya), and one should meditate upon and worship him, always.

Those who are armed with the sword of remembrance of him, the binding knot of karma, through they cut it, they who are learned. Who would not develop love for [his] katuś (1.2.14-15).5

I say this is the first instruction because it is the first “ought” statement given in the Bhāgavata; verses 1.1.1-3 outline much of the philosophy to be discussed, and 1.1.4-25 establish the primary questions the text will deal with and the basic narrative structure. Verses 1.2.1-13 establish the terminology with which Siṣṭa makes his conclusion, and then in 1.2.14-15 one gets the first instruction about what ought to be done by a human being, and in particular a human being who cares living within the bounds of dharmic activity. The fact that kirtana—along with its attendant practices—is the first instruction in the text establishes it as a central theme, which helps to
locate the other instructions and stories within the text's theology.

I have grouped this verse on kirtana in the "identity transformation" category because it is not prescribed merely as an end in itself. Although there are elements of kirtana for its own sake, for instance the idea that bhakti is meant to please Hari, the primary justification for kirtana is that it "cuts through" the binding knot of karma. This metaphor, according to BD, KS and SD, refers to removing the false sense of the body-mind complex as the actor, or the ahankara, kirtana is therefore intimately conjoined with identity transformation because through practice the self comes to understand it is not the mind-body complex, but it is the ātmā, which (as I show below) in the Bhāgavata has its own personal identity as an attendant of Vishnu, Krishna or any one of his unlimited forms. Given the emphasis on identity transformation, the argument for kirtana appears to have a strong psychological dimension to it. Since the self is tied to a false identity, one must construct a new identity based on the true nature of the self; aural reception provides the content for the aspirant's new world and personality, holding this information in mind solidifies it for the aspirant, and reciting it aloud affirms this identity for one's self and others in addition to supporting aural reception and remembrance.

The second instruction to perform kirtana comes from the other major speaker (aside from Śīta) in the Bhāgavata's narrative structure. That is Śūka, who is said to be the son of Vyāsa. Here kirtana is even more explicitly about personal identity, or "ātmā-tatva," the true nature (the "that-ness") of the self (2.1.2). The Bhāgavata is close to traditional Śaṅkhyā in its distinction between self and not-self. The self is the purusa, a pure spiritual entity that has no connection with matter. Matter is prakṛti, made of the physical elements (e.g., the human body) and the mental capacities (e.g., mind and intellect). Because of the ahankara the self identifies with world, considering the body, mind and its affects as "I" and "mine," when in fact they do not belong to the self.

It is far from traditional Śaṅkhyā in its understanding of what the self is like, as I show in the next section. Śūka was an accomplished yogin, but although firmly established in a realm beyond matter, he was still attracted to the stories of Vishnu and Krishna, thus suggesting that kirtana is not any sort of ordinary subject matter, but something to which even the unattached become attached (2.1.9). Śūka uses fear of death as a means of inspiring and justifying the practice of kirtana; he is, after all, speaking to the king Parīkṣit, a man cursed to die within seven days. As such, Parīkṣit asks what the Bhāgavata considers the essential questions, which Śūka spends the rest of the text answering:

- Therefore, I ask you about complete perfection (since) you are the supreme teacher among yogins.

- "What is to be done by a person in this world, who is dying in every respect?"
- What is to be heard and thus recited,
- What is to be done by a person, my Lord?
- What is to be remembered or worshipped?
- Please tell me what is the inverse? of these? (1.19.37-38).

As a rejoinder, Śūka enters a highly argumentative mode. The householder who spends his days making money and his nights in sexual intercourse "sees but does not see." He wastes his time talking about thousands of useless topics, Śūka tells us, but he has misconstrued his real identity, thinking himself to be a human man, with a wife, children, home, and so forth, none of which can afford protection:

- Therefore, Parīkṣit, the self of all, the Lord, the controller, Hari
- should be heard about, glorified
- and remembered by one who desires to be fearless (2.1.5, cf. 2.2.56).

Like the "seeing," "hearing" and "reflecting" on the self in Bhādaravasubhā Prāṇāyāma Upaniṣad (2.4.5), kirtana is a type of contemplation of the true self and it is set in opposition to the contemplation of objects not related to the self. The force of the Bhāgavata's argument is again that one should shed old conceptions of self and enter the world of Hari-bhakti through hearing and reciting the sacred text and divine names of Bhagavān. The fear of death, or the fear of knowing that those you love most cannot save you, and the fearful realization that your conventional identity as a man or woman is false—all act within the text as a way of persuading the reader to adopt kirtana. Schweig (2005: 390) has argued that, "All the stories, philosophical discourses and exquisite poetry of the famous Bhāgavata text are presented to address the question of how to prepare for death." The Bhāgavata is more than just an instruction book, for its very verses are themselves the stories, philosophies and literary environments that compose the new world the bhakta is persuaded to enter out of a fear—and a proper
understanding—of death. It is instruction and exemplification. The tales of Krishna’s devotees, the vivid descriptions of the cosmos as sacred and pervaded by God’s creative inspiration, and the stories of Krishna himself, provide a sacred landscape—an alternative landscape to the present—one which is entered through aural reception, recollection and kirtana. In his commentary, Śrīdhara Svāmīn (BD) attempts to show this verse’s connection with this divine landscape. He says the word “sāvarūpīta,” the self of all, means “one who is the most dear”; “bhagavān,” the Lord, means “the beautiful Lord”; “isvara,” the controller, means “the one who is not controlled”; “kari” means “the one who removes bondage.”

In the next section I will talk about Vaikuṇṭha, a divine world in which the devotees transformed by the practice of bhakti eternally live. There is a sense, however, in which the devotee must transform this world before entering the next, and this too is accomplished by kirtana. Book Five of the Bhāgavata contains a detailed description of the cosmos, with a flat disc, called Bhū-maradala, made of concentric islands and oceans formed in a target-like fashion, and with a huge mountain in the middle known as Meru. The planets and stars above Bhū-maradala and the circular islands on it are said to be inhabited by a wide variety of human-like and god-like species, all of whom worship Vishnu is different ways. Vishnu has appeared to them in different names and in different forms, yet maintains his singular identity. Unlike the lonely universe of modern science, the Bhāgavata’s universe teems with activity, variety, and yet is pervaded by the same religious sensibility that the text hopes to reveal. Unlike the way in which some contemporary scholars have tried to separate scientific descriptions from religious descriptions of the universe, the Bhāgavata sees its description of a sacred cosmos in the form of kīrtana:

In the beginning, [of the Bhāgavata, BD says, vs. 2.2.24] I spoke about the characteristics of the path of renunciation (svārāta). Within the Purāṇas the egg-shaped cosmos with many layers (avāro-hāta) is described (upāyata = lit., “is sung”). It is divided into fourteen sections. It is directly that Bhagavān, who is Nārāyaṇa, the great Purusa; it is described as his gross form, made of the three qualities of nature, which is his own power of illusion. With attention one should recite (pāṭha), hear, and remember he who is to be sung about, the Lord, the supreme self. Although incomprehensible, he is known by one with pure intelligence and faithful devotion (5.26.38).

Having heard about the gross and then the subtle forms of Bhagavān, an ascetic (yāt), who has controlled himself, can gradually be led from the gross to the subtle, by the intellect (5.26.39).

The signing and recitation of sacred texts, therefore, was intimately connected with soteriology and devotion, even with regard to the cosmology. While the specific word kīrtana is not used here, related words such as signing and recitation (pāṭha) are used, showing the same concept had a large set of applications towards the same goals; the reader is still being persuaded—this time by science—to engage in renunciatory activity and devotion expressed through recitation, remembrance and aural reception. Whereas today many would like to separate science from the humanistic disciplines such as poetry, art, music and theology, the Bhāgavata presents a system of thought in which quantitative and poetic language were unified.

Here the context is not so much personal identity transformation, but a transformation of the manner in which the practitioner understands and relates with the world. Commenting on these and related verses, the great scholar of the Bhāgavata, Siddhāsura Bhaṭṭācārya (1960: vii-ix) argued that the cosmological sections of the Bhāgavata were meant to expose the transitory nature of reality and show that the “staggering mass of physical planes is just a demonstration of the gross form of God, intended to serve as the first step of the progressively spiritual journey to His subtle essence.” So the transition is from an understanding of the world as mere gross phenomena, to an understanding that there is a subtle essence behind the phenomena, which in turn prepares the mind for an uninterrupted meditation on Vishnu or Krishna (Edelmann 2008: Chapter 3).

There are many great hearers and reciters in the Bhāgavata, one of whom the entire narrative structure of text revolves around—Parīkṣit. As an exemplar, Parīkṣit’s own life and his choices are an argument for the superiority of kīrtana: they persuade the reader not only of the superiority of kīrtana over other religious processes, but over the very thing all people fear most—death. When given the choice to either fight the curse of his own death or to meet death, he said: “Let the snake-bird bite me at once. I only desire that all of you continue reciting the glorious, divine acts of Lord Vishnu” (1.19.15, quoted in Schweig 2005: 391). By the end of the text, the reciter (Śuka) and bearer (Parīkṣit) are perfected because of hearing and reciting the glories and names of Krishna (12.6.2). One might say, then, that the Bhāgavata itself is one long kīrtana, one in which we (the readers)
are asked to “play” again and again, until we too have achieved the same perfection. This thus a good indication of what kirtana might have sounded like at the time of the Bhāgavata’s composition. With its many poetic meters and beautiful Sanskrit composition, the Bhāgavata is a delight to hear and recite (for an elaborate discussion of the poetic meters in the Bhāgavata, see Schweig 2005: Appendix 2).

We do know of many songs and mantras recited in the text. Perhaps the most famous is that of Dhruva, who left his home as a mere boy to chant the even more famous mantra om namo bhagavate vásudevaḥ in the Madhu forest (4.8.54), an act which (along with severe fasting) got him an audience with Vishnu (4.9.2). Here and elsewhere (e.g., 11.5.51) mantra meditation is advocated. A similar mantra (om namo bhagavate tasmaḥ) and impassioned prayers were recited by Gajendra to appeal to the Lord’s compassion; there are similar words of glorification extolled by Brahma, Śiva and the gods throughout the text, specifically to be recited in times of need. Others like Ajāmila also come to mind; he called the name of his son, “Nārāyaṇa,” at the time of death and was saved from the sins of his debauched life simply by the name, even though he knew not what he was doing by chanting it (6.2). The child-devotee Prahlāda seemed to have held little kirtana parties with his young schoolmates, something which later put him out of favor with his father. All of these devotees achieved massive transformations of themselves through the practice of kirtana. There is indeed nothing that cannot be accomplished by chanting and nothing the supersedes it:

Oh! How Amazing!
[Even] a dog-eater becomes the greatest
on whose tongue is your name.
The Aryans, who have performed austerities, sacrificed, bathed
and recited the Vedas—they accept your name!

It is fitting to conclude this section on kirtana as a “means to an end” with the verse that concludes the Bhāgavata itself, a verse that argues kirtana is the very best means of overcoming all the troubles of life:

By the congregational chanting of his names,
all sins are destroyed;
by the offering of respects to him, suffering is squelched.
To that person, the supreme, Hari I offer my obeisances (12.13.23).

Kirtana Among the Liberated

Almost in complete contradiction from the use of kirtana discussed above, Book Three talks of the inhabitants of Vaikuṇṭha (Vishnu’s own world in which saṁsāra does not occur), who engage in singing the Lord’s names. Here kirtana has nothing to do with achieving liberation, freedom from suffering or even transforming one’s false conception of self, for the singers in this case are already liberated, free and in full knowledge of their true self. So why should they engage in actions that are often deemed a pathway to liberation?

Answers are given in Book Three, Chapter Fifteen. This part of the Bhāgavata is remarkably synthetic, showing a concerted effort to subsume conceptions of liberation in Sāṁkhya, Yoga and Vedānta with its own personalistic theology, to show that within kātha (the isolation of matter from spirit) and within brahman is a world in which devotees sing for the Lord and enjoy heaven-like conditions forever. The Bhāgavata argues that the highest good (nībhṛtya) is not merely separation of matter from spirit as in other Indian schools, but a world in which one continues to engage in devotional activities for the Lord, in spiritual forms in a spiritual realm. It makes perfect sense that this section of the Bhāgavata should engage other schools of thought because the Bhāgavata is treating older conceptions of mokṣa and karma in new ways (just as it had done so with dharma in Book One), so it must forge an identity for itself within the linguistic context of its time. To do so, the author(s) ground discussions of bhakti in Vedic and Vedāntic authority, to show it is in keeping with them, yet that it adds to them conceptions of the liberation never thought of before. The commentaries are keen to demonstrate the same.

Once upon a time Śanaka, Śanātana, Sanandana and Sanat-kumāra were traveling throughout the whole world—a power they had acquired due to yogic practices—when they came upon Vaikuṇṭha. Immediately the people living in Vaikuṇṭha are described, and so is their motivation for serving Vishnu. Francis Clooney and Tony Steward (2004: 179) have noted that bhakti traditions inspired people look inwards, to carefully examine the motives by which they engage in yogic practices: “... a devotee’s seriousness and intention were constantly gauged and tested to determine the quality of devotion; in short, the devotee was increasingly expected to ‘mean it’ when worshipping. This, in turn, led to a kind of introspection of motive and close analysis of the individual’s personal devotional proclivities that
required a new kind of formalization..." The Bhāgavata is a foundational text in initiating this sort of introspection and careful examination of motives within the bhakti traditions. The problem the text and commentaries want to deal with is how can one act passionately in the Lord's service, and yet have no personal desire. How can the unattached become attached to the Lord? About the residents of Vaikuṇṭha, it is said in Bhāgavata:

Once upon a time, in the Vaikuṇṭha of Bhagavān
a place by nature free from impurities,
they went to the realm of Vaikuṇṭha,
which is worshipped by all the worlds (13).

Those persons who live therein,
al have Vaikuṇṭha bodies.
They, with a motive that is without a cause,
[set] according to dharma, adoring Hari (14).

Therein is the original person,
Bhagavān, who is within [knowable ९] canonical texts.
[He is] solidified, uncontaminated existence,
[who] pleases us, his own [devotees], [according to] dharma (15).

Therein is a forest called "Nīhāreyas."
with trees that yield one's desire.
It is resplendent, beautiful in all the seasons,
like kavaṇya, [yet] with form (16)

Therein the residents, in airplanes with their wives,
sing about the activities—which can destroy impurities—of the Lord.
The blossoming sweet Madhavi flower in the water
divides their attention by its fragrance, yet they scorn the breeze
[which carries it] (3.15.17).

If kirtana is a means of deconstructing one's material sense of identity, these verses show how the Bhāgavata characterizes a fully reconstructed identity. SD says that "free from impurities" (anāmalitam) in the first quoted verse refers to the purity (śiddhi) of the mental faculties (avato karana) of Sanaka, etc., who went to Vaikuṇṭha. This is an alarming statement because in traditional Śāṅkhya metaphysics, the self (purusa) leaves all of the mental faculties behind when it attains liberation, for the mental faculties are considered part of the material world itself and would therefore have no place within a liberated state. In the Bhāgavata's metaphysics, however,

the residents of Vaikuṇṭha are in a liberate state, yet also have minds and bodies of a sort—spiritual minds and bodies. The purusa, or "soul," by its very nature has body and mind, something which later Gaudiya Vaishnavas refer to as the siddha-rāja, or the perfected body, attained through proper use of the sādhaka-rāja, the practitioner body; it is with this siddha-rāja, which includes a purified mind, that the people of Vaikuṇṭha sing about the Lord's activities.

BTP says that "causeless" (anāṁśita) means there is no intended result to the action, and this is the same as the worship of Vishnu—SD says there is the absence of a personal goal or end among the residents of Vaikuṇṭha (svatṛaya-janāthāvān). The commentators link this with the Bhagavad-Gītā's notion of niṣkāma-karma, or desireless action. The Gītā (3.5) rejects the idea that one can cease action, arguing instead that one should dedicate mind, body and deeds to Krishna, the Lord (9.34); this is the parama-dharma (a compound which in the Bhāgavata means bhakṣi) according to SD. Acting only out of love for the Lord, the men and women of Vaikuṇṭha sing (gīyanti) about Vishnu and so do the bees, birds and plant life. The Gītā may have provided a sophisticated theological examination of desireless action, but the Bhāgavata goes further, displaying a rich world, full of spiritual forms, scents, sights and sounds in which the devotee passionately loves the Lord, but for no other reason than the Lord's satisfaction.

Words like śabda-gocara, or "who is within [knowable] by canonical texts" mean this world is knowable through the Vedānta texts (BD); this is the highest good (niśravyas) and kaivalya, the pure world in which the pleasure of devotion is experienced (ES). Later: in the text, when Vishnu appears before Prthu, kaivalya is rejected as an undesirable form of liberation because Prthu wants to always hear about the activities of the Lord that emanate from the mouths of great devotees (4.20.24). So, clearly, the Bhāgavata is aware of various definitions of liberation—but it also plays with them.

If singing is something done in this world to attain the Lord, then hearing songs about topics other than the Lord is a sure way not to achieve this eternal paradise:

They do not go [to Vaikuṇṭha], which is the destroyer of impurities, because of repeatedly talking about [topics related to] the creation. They who hear other subjects, miserable stories that ruin the mind, topics that when heard make a man deprived [and] deplete his strength—such persons are thrown, shelterless, into ignorance. Alas!
There is one group of devotees in the Bhāgavata, the Gopis of Vṛndāvana, who spend all of their time talking about Krishna and do not hear “other subjects, miserable stories that ruin the mind.” They stand out in the Bhāgavata more than any other exemplars as the greatest practitioners of bhakti and indeed the greatest knowers of truth (10.47.58). Schweig (2005: 15) has argued “the Bhāgavata indeed elevates the Rāsa Līlā to an ultimate status within its vast text.” The love of the Gopis is praised above all others, so much that it actually amazes Krishna himself. Yet it is Krishna’s flute, a type of song and thus kirtana, that itself calls the Gopis to him. They say:

O dear one,
with the flood of nectar
coming from your lips,
Extinguish the fire
burning within our hearts
born of your sweet music.
For if you don’t,
we shall place
our bodies in the fire
born of separation from you.
Then, O friend,
by means of meditation
we shall go to the abode of your feet (Ad One 33, Schweig 2005: 35).

According to the Bhāgavata the Gopis have fully devoted their minds, bodies and hearts to Krishna; they sing about him, long for him, wait for him, dance with him and imitate him:

They again returned
to the banks of Kalindri,
immersed in their feelings for Krishna,
Sitting together,
singing about Krishna,
they ardently longed for his return (Ad Three 44, Schweig 2005: 51).

They have no choice in doing so. Their love itself compels them towards him, forcing them to always sing, talk, meditate and serve him in an ecstatic condition: “Singing out loud about him / like deranged persons” (Ad Two 3, Schweig 2005: 40). I have included them as exemplars of this section, “Kirtana Among the Liberated,” because they want nothing but to please the Lord. They have no end in mind other than his company.

While dancing,
they sang out loud
and the throats of those
so delighted by love
became reddened.
They were overjoyed
by the touch of Krishna,
and the whole universe
became filled
with their song (Ad Five 9, Schweig 2005: 67).

The Gopi’s songs about Krishna, Krishna’s songs that call the Gopis to him and the song they create together are the culmination of instructions given in Books One and Two that one should always hear, recite and remember the names of Hari. Here an obligation to fulfill dharma, a fear of death, the need to cut through ahankāra and a desire for freedom from suffering have all disappeared; there is only the intensity of love that inspires the devotee to sing about Krishna, and it is only the intensity of love that inspires Krishna to sing with his devotee. The only argument and the only form of persuasion is love itself.

Conclusion

Kirtana is now a global phenomenon, a genre of music and art in its own right. Due to the hard work and skills of expert chanters like Krishna Dasa, Ragani and Jai Utal, among others, Kirtana is now enjoyed by many thousands of people regardless of religious affiliation, just as it has been enjoyed by devotees in ISKCON, Swaminarayan and various yoga ashrams and temples for many years in the West (Rosen 2008). This brief analysis of Kirtana in the Bhāgavata shows that it is a central religious practice of one of India’s greatest devotional works. I believe the depth and richness of the text’s examination of Kirtana can be a source of theological and philosophical information in which contemporary Kirtana practitioners can dive, helping them to find new ways of thinking about Kirtana. Indeed, it can inspire one and all to have more Kirtana.
Endnotes

1. I am indebted to Jan Brzezinski’s transcriptions of these texts, which can be found at http://www.granthamandira.com/

2. Tagore (1976: xxxvii) outlined the primary narratives within the Bhāgavata, which tradition claims are the sources of the text:
   A. Viṣṇu → Brahmā → Nārada → Vyāsa → Suka (2.4.25; 2.9.5-7; 3.4.13)
   B. Nārāyaṇa → Nārada → Vyāsa → Suka (10.87.8; 47-8)
   C. Nārāyaṇa → Nārada → Prahlāda (7.6.27-8)
   D. Saṅkarṣana → Saṅkṣekha → Saṅkhyayāna → Parasurāma → Maitreya → Vicitra (3.8.2-9).

3. Bhaktivinodita Swami (Śrīla Prabhupāda) translates avatāra as “incarnation,” which literally means “enfleshed” or “in meat” (Latin: carne). The Oxford English Dictionary uses this definition of avatāra too. This goes against the theology of the Bhāgavata and is not what is actually meant by the term avatāra. Bhaktivinodita Swami, like the Bhāgavata, wanted to argue that Viṣṇu, Krishna, etc., do not have bodies made of flesh, but bodies made of pure, spiritual energy, siddha-sattva. The word incarnation is therefore unintentionally misleading.

4. For a very detailed and textually rich study of sacred sound in virtually many areas of Hindu literature, see Guy Beck (1995). Sonic Theology. See Chapter 6, “Vaisnavism: Sacred Sound as the Energy of Viṣṇu” for an excellent study of sound in Vaishnava sastra and the Bhāgavata. Beck’s book is also a masterly attack on those Western approaches to the study of Indian thought that overly focus on the written text, or scripture (that which is written), when in fact the Indian tradition itself has placed far more emphasis on “sonic” theology—or the spoken and heard word—as opposed to written text.

5. I have translated verses inspired by Schweig (2007), wherein one attempts to keep the word order and metric flow of the original text.

6. The Sādhana-kāraka (verse 17-19 of Śivarātri, for example, uses some of the same terminology as the Bhāgavata in its definition of the puraśa, e.g., that it is bhūlā (the enjoyer), bhūluttam (there are multiple selves), sākhāvam (observer) and àsāka (seer) (see Bhāgavata 4.20.11, 11.10.8, 11.22.50) (translation of SK based on Larson 2001).

7. SD says the word “inverse” used in the verse (vibhava, a word use in Yoga-Sūtra 1.6 and 1.8 to mean a misconception or false knowledge), means what is not to be heard, what is not to be recited, etc. Also, that this verse is asking who or what is worthy (artha) to be heard about, chanted about, etc.

8. I have not made this translation in a verse formation because the text in the Bhāgavata is itself in prose.

9. For a masterly study of the relationship between the sādhana rūpa and the siddha rūpa in Gauḍīya-Vaiṣṇava thinkers, see Haberman (2001).

Bibliography


The Vrindāvana Gosvāmins on Kṛtana

Mans Broo

Introduction

Whether on the streets of a Western metropolis or in the courtyard of a temple in rural Bengal, there is nothing more typical for Gaudiya Vaishnavism than kṛtana. This Sanskrit word has general meanings such as “mentioning, repeating, saying, telling” (Monier-Williams 1995: 285), but here kṛtana or sankṛtana means the congregational singing of the names or exploits of God (in Gaudiya Vaishnavism generally identified with Krishna) to the accompaniment of musical instruments. Such kṛtana is often seen either as a means towards awakening loving emotions (bhāva) towards the Lord or as an overflow of such feelings, and it is not unusual to see participants break out in dance, laughter or tears.

Gaudiya Vaishnavism is the sankrātana or religio-philosophical tradition established by the Bengali mystic and reformer Śrī Chaitanya (1486–1533), who instigated the practice of kṛtana by his own example. Even a cursory reading of any of the several available hagiographies of Śrī Chaitanya reveals ecstatic sankṛtana of Krishna’s names to have been his favored mode of worship (for a particularly dramatic and graphic description, see Chaitanya Bhāgavata 2.23.149-357). Indeed, his first Bengali hagiographer Vṛndāvana Dāsa (ca. 1518–1551) writes in the Chaitanya Bhāgavata (1.2.11) that Chaitanya was Krishna himself, descended into this unfortunate age of Kali to teach the path of sankṛtana.

While Śrī Chaitanya had studied as a young man, he did not act as a theologian after he had begun his religious career. He wrote next to nothing