

Vaishnavism as Fine Literature

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Vaishnava Literature: Krishna's Play and Play of Words

In Indian philosophical and spiritual tradition there is a deep discussion about the valid means of knowledge (pramāṇa mīmāṃsā), what is known to be as authentic knowledge depends upon its way of knowing. In this regard, several means are enumerated like Perception (Pratyaksha), Inference (Anumanatah), Testimony (Sabda), Comparison (Upamana), Postulation (Arthapatti), and Non-perception (Anupalabdhi). Among all these pramanas, Sruti is the most respectfully and universally accepted in the Vedantic tradition, which includes the Vaishnav schools. There is an interesting history of growth of understanding regarding the nature of Sruti. The Mimamsakas accepts the four Vedas only to be the formal body of Sruti. Later, the Vedandins added Upanishad and Bhagavad Gita to this corpus. The Vaishnav schools of Vedanta, hesitatingly but for sure, added Bhagavata Purana to the list. The epiphany moment came in the early sixteen century when Caitanya Mahaprabhu declared it to be the Sruti par excellence. For him, Bhagavata was the verbal image of Bhagavan, the ultimate reality. In Caitanya's tradition we come across Gadadhar Bhatt (1515-1610) who as a religious leader, scholar, poet, and performer, drew upon Bhagavata as his primary textual source.

In this paper, I shall briefly introduce how Bhagavata Purana manifests in the scholarly, literary, ritualistic and artistic creativity of Gadadhar and his tradition, which is still alive and thriving. Particularly, I will focus upon the uninterrupted tradition of performing Bhagavata Katha, founded by Gadadhar Bhatt. He was the successor of Raghunath Bhatt, one of the legendary six Gosvami's of Vrindavan. There were a number of famous Katha Vachakas in Gadadhar Bhatt's family tradition, who are praised by other hagiographers for their unique and spellbound articulation of Bhagavata Purana.