

Perfumed by golden lotuses: Literary place and textual authority in the *Brahma-* and *Bhāgavatapurāṇas*

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The creators of the Hindu scriptures known as the Brahma- and Bhāgavatapurāṇas lavished a great amount of descriptive detail on mythical and 'mythologised' places where important discourses were enunciated: the Naimiṣa forest, Mt Meru, Kurukṣetra, and Ānanda on the banks of the Ganges. At first glance this might appear to be idle expression of literary virtuosity, but I suggest that this careful creation of literary place has an impact, intentional or not, on the reception of the text. Drawing on the idea of the construction of authoritative discourse and reader-response criticism, I suggest that the perfect, transcendent literary spaces created by the narratives' authors exert a specific effect on their reception by the purāṇic interpretive community. The discourse enunciated in such space appears to be perfect and transcendental. The power of literary place imbues and valorises the discourse and assists it to function as authoritative.

Introduction

Why have Sanskrit texts have been so influential for so long? What gives them their power and authority? This line of enquiry was originally stimulated by Pollock's pioneering work on normative Indic literature, and the positing of what he termed the 'shastric paradigm'. This paradigm incorporates a set of common features, including claims of cosmogonic origins, divine authorship, and vast scope, which serve to empower and valorize śāstric texts (Pollock 1985). The idea of the textual power also underpins his concept of the 'Sanskrit cosmopolis' and also informs much of Pollock's most recent work on language, culture and power in pre-modern South Asia (Pollock 2006). On this basis I interrogated the famous 12th century collection of fables, the *Pañcatantra*, and suggested how the imbedded discourse of caste was empowered and enabled to function as authoritative (Taylor 2007). The task at hand is now to

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