

# Bhagavata Purana

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The *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* ([Devanagari](#): भागवतपुराण; also *Śrīmad Bhāgavata Mahā Purāṇa*, *Śrīmad Bhāgavatam* or *Bhāgavata*) is one of [Hinduism](#)'s eighteen great [Puranas](#) (*Mahapuranas*, great histories).<sup>[1][2]</sup> Composed in Sanskrit and available in almost all Indian languages,<sup>[3]</sup> it promotes *bhakti* (devotion) to [Krishna](#)<sup>[4][5][6]</sup> integrating themes from the [Advaita](#) (monism) philosophy of [Adi Shankara](#).<sup>[5][7][8]</sup>

The *Bhagavata Purana*, like other puranas, discusses a wide range of topics including cosmology, genealogy, geography, mythology, legend, music, dance, yoga and culture.<sup>[5][9]</sup> As it begins, the forces of evil have won a war between the benevolent *devas* (deities) and evil *asuras* (demons) and now rule the universe. Truth re-emerges as Krishna, (called "[Hari](#)" and "[Vasudeva](#)" in the text) – first makes peace with the demons, understands them and then creatively defeats them, bringing back hope, justice, freedom and good – a cyclic theme that appears in many legends.<sup>[10]</sup>

The *Bhagavata Purana* is a revered text in [Vaishnavism](#), a Hindu tradition that reveres Vishnu.<sup>[11]</sup> The text presents a form of religion (*dharma*) that competes with that of the [Vedas](#), wherein *bhakti* ultimately leads to self-knowledge, liberation (*moksha*) and bliss.<sup>[12]</sup> However the *Bhagavata Purana* asserts that the inner nature and outer form of Krishna is identical to the Vedas and that this is what rescues the world from the forces of evil.<sup>[13]</sup> An oft-quoted verse is used by some Krishna sects to assert that the text itself is Krishna in literary form.<sup>[14]</sup>

The date of composition is probably between the eighth and the tenth century CE, but may be as early as the 6th century CE.<sup>[6][15][16]</sup> Manuscripts survive in numerous inconsistent versions revised through the 18th century creating various recensions both in the same languages and across different Indian languages.<sup>[17]</sup> The text consists of twelve books (*skandhas*) totalling 332 chapters (*adhyayas*) and between 16,000 and 18,000 verses depending on the recension.<sup>[14][18]</sup> The tenth book, with about 4,000 verses, has been the most popular and widely studied.<sup>[3]</sup> It was the first *Purana* to be translated into a European language as a French translation of a Tamil version appeared in 1788 and introduced many Europeans to Hinduism and 18th-century Hindu culture during the colonial era.

## Etymology]

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"Purana" means "ancient, old".<sup>[20]</sup> *Bhagavata* means "devoted to, follower of [Bhagavat](#) – the "sacred, divine (God, Lord)".<sup>[21]</sup> An alternative interpretation of *Bhagavata* is "devotees of the Adorable One".<sup>[22]</sup> *Bhagavata Purana* therefore means "Ancient Tales of Followers of the Lord".

## Significance

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The Bhagavata Purana was a significant text in the [bhakti movement](#) and the culture of India.<sup>[23]</sup> Dance and theatre arts such as [Kathakali](#) (left), [Kuchipudi](#) (middle) and [Odissi](#) (right) portray legends from the Purana.<sup>[24][25]</sup>

The Bhagavata is widely recognized as the best-known and most influential of the [Puranas](#) and, along with the Itihasa and other puranas, is sometimes referred to as the "[Fifth Veda](#)".<sup>[26][27][28]</sup> It is important in Indian religious literature for its emphasis on the practice of devotion as compared to the more theoretical approach of the Bhagavad Gita; for a definition of religion that competes with the Vedas and for its extended description of a God in human form.<sup>[5]</sup> It is the source of many popular stories of Krishna's childhood told for centuries on the [Indian subcontinent](#)<sup>[6]</sup> and of legends explaining Hindu festivals such as [Holi](#) and [Diwali](#). The Bhagavata declares itself the essence of all the [Upanishads](#) and derivative [Smritis](#);

The Srimad Bhagavatam is the very essence of all the [Vedanta](#) literature. One who has enjoyed the nectar of its [rasa](#) never has any desire for anything else.

— *Bhagavata Purana 12.13.15*, Translated by David Haberman<sup>[29]</sup>

The text has played a significant role in [Chaitanya](#)'s Krishna-bhakti in Bengal,<sup>[30]</sup> and in the 15th–16th century [Ekasarana Dharma](#) in [Assam](#), a [panentheistic](#) tradition whose proponents, [Sankardeva](#) and [Madhavdeva](#), acknowledge that their theological positions are rooted in the *Bhagavata Purana*,<sup>[31]</sup> purged of doctrines that find no place in Assamese Vaishnavism<sup>[32]</sup> and adding a monist commentary instead.<sup>[33]</sup>

In northern and western India the *Bhagavata Purana* has influenced the *Hari Bhakti Vilasa* and *Haveli*-style Krishna temples found in [Braj](#) region near Mathura-Vrindavan.<sup>[34]</sup> The text complements the Pancharatra [Agama](#) texts of Vaishnavism.<sup>[34]</sup> While the text focuses on Krishna "Lord Narayana (Vishnu) himself appears and explains how [Brahma](#) and [Shiva](#) should never be seen as independent and different from him".<sup>[35]</sup> The sixth book includes the feminine principle as *Shakti*, or goddess Devi, conceptualizing her as the "energy and creative power" of the masculine yet a manifestation of a sexless Brahman, presented in a language suffused with [Hindu monism](#).<sup>[36]</sup>

## Jainism, Buddhism and Yoga as Bhakti

The fifth book of the *Bhagavata Purana* is significant in its inclusion of homage and many chapters of legends about the [Tirthankaras](#) of [Jainism](#) particularly [Rishabha](#),<sup>[37]</sup> while homage to [Buddha](#) is included in various chapters by declaring him as one of avatars of Vishnu.<sup>[38]</sup> However, the interpretation of Buddhism-related stories in the Purana range from honor to ambivalence to polemics wherein prophecies predict some will distort and misrepresent the teachings of the Vedas, and attempt to sow confusion.<sup>[39][40][41]</sup> The Bhagavata Purana is also significant in asserting that [Yoga](#) practice is a form of Bhakti.<sup>[42]</sup>

## Origin, chronology and inconsistent manuscripts



An illustration of an episode from the *Bhagavata* (IV.17), in which Vishnu avatar [Prithu](#) chases the earth goddess [Prithvi](#) in the form of a cow, to end a famine in his kingdom.<sup>[43]</sup>

## Traditional account

The Bhagavata Purana, in verse 2.9.32, asserts its primordial origins.<sup>[7]</sup> The text and the Hindu tradition also hagiographically credits the authorship of all 18 Maha Puranas to [Veda Vyasa](#), who is revered for authoring the [Mahabharata](#) as well,<sup>[44][45][46]</sup> and other ancient classics of India.<sup>[47]</sup>

## Modern scholarship

Modern scholarship dates its composition to between 500 CE to 1000 CE, but most likely between 800 and 1000 CE.<sup>[16]</sup> A version of the text existed no later than 1030 CE, when it is mentioned by [al](#)

[Biruni](#)<sup>[16]</sup> and quoted by [Abhinavagupta](#). The Bhagavata Purana abounds in references to verses of the [Vedas](#), the primary [Upanishads](#), the [Brahma Sutra](#) of [Vedanta](#) school of Hindu philosophy, and the Bhagavad Gita, suggesting that it was composed after these texts.<sup>[48]</sup> The text contains more details of Krishna's biography than the 3rd- 4th-century *Harivamsha* and *Vishnu Purana*, and is therefore likely to have been composed after these texts, suggesting a chronological range of 500–1000 CE.<sup>[16][49]</sup> Within this range, scholars such as R. C. Hazra date it to the first half of the 6th century CE, Bryant as well as Gupta and Valpey citing epigraphical and archaeological evidence suggest much of the text could be from the 4th to 7th century,<sup>[50][51]</sup> while most others place it in the post-[Alvar](#) period around the 9th century.<sup>[16][52][53]</sup> Parts of the text use an archaic [Vedic](#) flavour of Sanskrit, which may either suggest that its authors sought to preserve or express reverence for the Vedic tradition, or that some text has an earlier origin.<sup>[48]</sup> There are two flavors of Krishna stories, one of warrior prince and another of romantic lover, the former composed in more archaic Sanskrit and the later in a different linguistic style, suggesting that the texts may not have been composed by one author or over a short period, but rather grew over time as a compilation of accretions from different hands.<sup>[9][54]</sup>

The Bhagavata Purana contains apparent references to the South Indian [Alvar](#) saints and it makes a *post factum* prophecy of the spread of Vishnu worship in [Tamil](#) country (BP XI.5.38–40);<sup>[26][49]</sup> these facts, along with its emphasis on "emotional Bhakti to Krishna" and the "[Advaita](#) philosophy of [Sankara](#)", lead many scholars to trace its origins to South India.<sup>[5]</sup> However, [J. A. B. van Buitenen](#) points out that 10th–11th CE South Indian Vaishnava theologians [Yamuna](#) and [Ramanuja](#) do not refer to Bhagavata Purana in their writings, and this anomaly needs to be explained before the geographical origins and dating are regarded as definitive.<sup>[26][49]</sup>

Since the 19th-century, most scholars believe that the Bhagavata Purana was written by a group of learned Brahmin ascetics, probably in South India, who were well versed in Vedic and ancient Indian literature and influenced by the [Alvars](#).<sup>[55]</sup> Postmodern scholars have suggested alternate theories.<sup>[56]</sup>

## Inconsistent manuscripts

The [Puranas](#) are a type of traditional Hindu texts that took form during the medieval period, often both informed by earlier material and undergoing later interpolations.<sup>[7]</sup> It is therefore problematic to assign a precise date to any Purana text.<sup>[6][52][57]</sup>

Modern scholarship on Puranas manuscripts, including those of Bhagavata Purana, has been challenging because each Purana exists in numerous versions which are highly inconsistent.<sup>[58][59]</sup> Most editions of Puranas, in use particularly by Western scholars, are "based on one manuscript or on a few manuscripts selected at random", even though divergent manuscripts with the same title exist. Scholars have long acknowledged the existence of Purana manuscripts that "seem to differ much from printed edition", and it is unclear which one is accurate, and whether conclusions drawn from the randomly or cherry-picked printed version were universal over geography or time.<sup>[58]</sup> This problem is most severe with Purana manuscripts of the same title, including the Bhagavata Purana, that are in regional languages such as Tamil, Telugu, Bengali and others which have largely been ignored.<sup>[58]</sup>

## Philosophy

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The Bhagavata is primarily a bhakti text, with an emphasis on achieving [moksha](#) through cultivating a personal relationship with Vishnu in the form of Krishna.<sup>[60]note 1</sup> The philosophy and teachings of the Bhagavata include several traditions, and an absence of a "narrow, sectarian spirit". While Bhakti Yoga is the prominent teaching, various passages show a synthesis that also includes Samkhya, Yoga, Vedanta, and Advaita Vedanta.<sup>[47]</sup>

## Bhakti



[Mirabai](#) and other 15th- to 17th-century [Bhakti movement](#) poets drew their inspiration, in part, from the legends and ideas in Bhagavata Purana.<sup>[61]</sup>

The Bhagavata is among the most important texts on bhakti, presenting a fully developed teaching on [bhakti](#) that originated with the [Bhagavad Gita](#).<sup>[62]</sup> Bhakti is presented as a path of yoga, or "union with the divine". Many of the bhakti teachings in the Bhagavata are presented as yogic activities—meditating on the [lila of Krishna](#); hearing and singing about Vishnu as Krishna; remembering, serving, and worshiping him; dedicating all of one's actions to him—all are among nine activities of Bhakti Yoga taught in the Bhagavata. While classical yoga attempts to shut down the mind and senses, the Bhakti Yoga in the Bhagavata teaches that the focus of the mind is transformed by filling the mind with thoughts of Krishna.<sup>[63]</sup>

There are many didactic philosophical passages, but the lengthy narrative stories are also a teaching; the book describes one of the activities that lead to liberation ([moksha](#)) as listening to, reflecting on the stories of Krishna and sharing their feelings for Krishna with others.<sup>[64]</sup> Bhakti is depicted in the Purana, states Matchett, as both an overpowering emotion as well as a way of life that is rational and deliberately cultivated.<sup>[65]</sup>

The Purana presents seven teachers and their [hagiographic](#) stories, describing for example [Kapila](#), the Samkhya philosopher, as someone who was born as a full grown adult, who teaches his mother that in order to reach liberation, she must have bhakti, [jnana](#) (wisdom), and [vairagya](#) (dispassion), with bhakti being the most important.<sup>[66]</sup> Other teachers such as Narada and Suka described in the Purana, however, present Bhakti with less prominence, and emphasize Advaita philosophy and *Jnana* yoga instead but then add that adoring *Hari* (Krishna) has the same liberating benefits.<sup>[67]</sup>

## Samkhya

[Surendranath Dasgupta](#) describes the theistic Samkhya taught by [Kapila](#) in the Bhagavata as the dominant philosophy in the text.<sup>[68]</sup> In the Bhagavata, Kapila is described as an avatar of Vishnu, born into the house of Kardama in order to share the knowledge of self-realization and liberation. Kapila's Samkhya is taught by him to his mother Devahuti in Book Three, and by Krishna to Uddhava in Book Eleven.<sup>[69]</sup> Samkhya in the Bhagavata is presented somewhat differently from in other classical

Samkhya texts.<sup>[70]</sup> It describes Brahman, or Bhagavan, as creating all beings within his Self in latent form—then, on its own initiative, bringing itself into *Maya* and falling "under the influence of its own power". This is in contrast to classical Samkhya, where the impulse for creation is "inherent in primal nature", or *prakriti*.<sup>[69]</sup>

The treatment of Samkhya in the Bhagavata is changed by the text's emphasis on devotion.<sup>[69]</sup> In Chapter Eleven, Krishna describes the world as an illusion, and the individual as dreaming, even while in the waking state. He gives Samkhya and Yoga as the way of overcoming the dream, with the goal of Samkhya as Bhagavan himself in the aspect of Krishna.<sup>[69]</sup>

## Advaita

The Bhagavata frequently discusses the merging of the individual soul with the Absolute *Brahman*, or "the return of Brahman into His own true nature", a distinctly *advaitic* or non-dualistic philosophy of *Shankara*.<sup>[51][71]</sup> The concept of *moksha* is explained as *Ekatva* (Oneness) and *Sayujya* (Absorption, intimate union), wherein one is completely lost in Brahman (Self, Supreme Being, one's true nature).<sup>[47]</sup> This, states Rukmini, is proclamation of "return of the individual soul to the Absolute and its merging into the Absolute", which is unmistakably *advaitic* in its trend.<sup>[47]</sup> In the same passages, the Bhagavata includes a mention of *Bhagavan* as the object of concentration, thereby preserving its character of being a *Bhakti* book.<sup>[47]</sup>

The Bhagavata Purana, in many passages parallels the ideas of Nirguna Brahman and non-duality of Adi Shankara.<sup>[8]</sup> For example,

The aim of life is inquiry into the Truth, and not the desire for enjoyment in heaven by performing religious rites,

Those who possess the knowledge of the Truth, call the knowledge of non-duality as the Truth, It is called *Brahman*, the Highest *Self*, and *Bhagavan*.

— *Sūta, Bhagavata Purana 1.2.10-11, Translated by Daniel Sheridan*<sup>[71]</sup>

Scholars describe this philosophy as built on the foundation of non-dualism speculations in Upanishads, and term it as "Advaitic Theism".<sup>[8][72]</sup> The term combines the seemingly contradictory beliefs of a personal God that can be worshiped with a God that is immanent in creation and in one's own self. God in this philosophy is within, is not different from the individual self, states Daniel Sheridan, and transcends the limitations of specificity and temporality. He describes Advaitic Theism as a "both/and" solution for the question of whether God is *transcendent* or *immanent* in relation to creation, where God is identical with Self and the Universe, and credits the Bhāgavata with a "truly creative religious moment" for introducing this philosophy.<sup>[8]</sup> The text suggests that God Vishnu and the soul (Atman) in all beings is one.<sup>[7]</sup>

Bryant states that the monism discussed in Bhagavata Purana is certainly built on the Vedanta foundations, but not exactly the same as the monism of Adi Shankara.<sup>[73]</sup> The Bhagavata asserts, according to Bryant, that the empirical and the spiritual universe are both metaphysical realities, and manifestations of the same Oneness, just like heat and light are "real but different" manifestations of sunlight.<sup>[73]</sup>

## Social equality

### Gopis and Krishna on Love

The Gopis (milkmaids) said to Krishna:  
Some love back those loving, some do the contrary of this,  
and some love neither, Oh! please explain this to us truly.

Krishna replied:  
Mutual love is essentially about mutual gain,  
thus is neither [dharmic](#) nor genuinely friendly.  
Truly compassionate and dharmic lovers are those,  
who love without being loved in return.

—*Bhagavata Purana* 10.32.16 - 10.32.18<sup>[74][75]</sup>

In the sociology of the Bhagavata Purana, writes Edwin Bryant, those with malicious and evil intent are first destroyed, but even they are involuntarily liberated because they constantly think of Krishna and devote their life to destroying him.<sup>[76]</sup> The implicit message thus is, states Bryant, that Krishna is forgiving regardless of "one's past actions and sins", and "anyone and everyone is eligible to engage voluntarily in the process of bhakti yoga and attain the goal of pure devotion, irrespective of caste, social status, race or gender".<sup>[76][77]</sup> In several chapters, the text states that the Bhagavata is a means for women to seek spiritual liberation, with some verses suggesting that expressing their sensual desires is one path to such devotion.<sup>[78]</sup>

Some scholars disagree that the Bhagavata Purana was a socially and sexually revolutionary text, states Coleman, rather it may reflect a conservative ideology where women in the form of *Gopis* amorously chase the divine Krishna who is represented as a man, the liberation of *Gopis* is actually fleeting despite their praise in the text as the most blessed of devotees for love.<sup>[74]</sup> Many scholars, however, view the Bhagavata as a remarkably early literary work that questions and discusses social and gender norms in the 5th to 10th-century India.<sup>[74]</sup>

The Bhagavata Purana is "strongly heterodox" in its philosophy, states Sheridan, but this is unlikely to have been because of the last author of presently surviving manuscripts.<sup>[55]</sup> The language, the theme and the legends are consistently inclusive socially and extravagant in the text, suggesting that all its authors must have accepted this premise, a theme of social equality that is found in the entire [Puranas](#) genre of texts.<sup>[55]</sup> The text teaches bhakti is available and effective for everyone regardless of their gender, caste or race.<sup>[79]</sup> The Bhagavata also suggests that the poorest can do bhakti, with Krishna saying to [Rukmini](#) in chapter 10.60, "we are poor and we are always the favourites of poor persons."<sup>[80]</sup>

The text, in Book 7, describes the legend of a *bhagavata* (devotee) named [Prahlada](#).<sup>[9][81]</sup> He is described as a boy full of virtues, but who is born to a demon king who is persecuting people for their independent and different religious beliefs in favor of Vishnu. Prahlada disagrees with his father, resists him, and pursues what he feels is right. In this legend, and many others, the text challenges presumption and stereotypes about a person based on birth and heredity, as well as encourages the readers through the character of Prahlada to resist threats, harassment and indoctrination from anyone.<sup>[81]</sup> The Purana, state Gupta and Valpey, implies that virtues and vices are an individual's attribute and a person must be seen for who he is, rather than assumed to be following his parents because of hereditary circumstances.<sup>[81]</sup>

## Dharma

A relief showing Krishna with flute, at the 16th-century temple in Hampi, [Karnataka](#). This is an iconic representation of Krishna in the Bhagavata and other Puranas.

The Purana conceptualizes a form of [Dharma](#) that competes with that in the [Vedas](#), suggesting that Bhakti ultimately leads to Self-knowledge, [Moksha](#) (salvation) and bliss.<sup>[12]</sup> Before the Bhagavata

text, the earliest mention of Bhakti are found in the [Shvetashvatara Upanishad](#) verse 6.23,<sup>[82][83]</sup> but scholars such as [Max Muller](#) state that the word *Bhakti* appears only once in this Upanishad, that too in one last verse of the epilogue, could have been a later addition, and that the context suggests that it is a panentheistic idea and not theistic.<sup>[84][85]</sup> Scholarly consensus sees *bhakti* as a post-Vedic movement that developed primarily during the Epics and Puranas era of Indian history.<sup>[86]</sup> The Bhagavata Purana develops the Bhakti concept more elaborately,<sup>[87]</sup> proposing "worship without ulterior motive and with kind disposition towards all" as Dharma.<sup>[88][89]</sup> The text calls it *bhagavata-dharma*, including in its scope intellectual and emotional devotion as well as Advaita Vedanta ideas.<sup>[90]</sup>

The legends of Bhagavata Purana discuss and describe Dharma through examples. The text does not subscribe, state Gupta and Valpey, to contextless "categorical notions of justice or morality", but suggests that "Dharma depends on context".<sup>[91]</sup> The text considers the reality of the world to be one which is divided, continuously challenged by the struggle between the good and the evil, threatened by some despite better intentions of others. In Chapter 15 of Book 7, the Bhagavata identifies different forms of these destructive, negative and chaotic contexts, naming *Upa-dharma* (heretical polemics, misrepresentation), *Vi-dharma* (obstruction, disruption), *Abhasa-dharma* (semblance, pretension), *Chala-dharma* (deceit) as examples of *Adharma*. In a positive or neutral context, states the Bhagavata, ethics and moral behavior must be adhered to; when persistently persecuted by evil, anything that reduces the strength of the "evil and poisonous circumstances" is good.<sup>[91]</sup> That which is motivated by Bhakti, that which furthers Bhakti, that which enables Bhakti is Dharma in the text – Bhakti is the golden standard of Dharma.<sup>[91]</sup>

## Yoga

The Bhagavata Purana describes all steps of the Yoga practice, characterizes Yoga as Bhakti, states Sharma, with the most important aspect of the Yoga asserted to be the spiritual goal.<sup>[92]</sup> The text dedicates numerous chapters to it, in various books. The 10th chapter of Book 11 begins with a declaration that Siddhi results from concentrating one's mind on Bhagavan Krishna, which thus resonates but substitutes the concept of "personal god" in Yogasutras of Patanjali, yet also contrasts with Patanjali's view where Siddhi is considered powerful but an obstacle to Samadhi and towards the goal of Self-knowledge, inner peace and [moksha](#).<sup>[92][93]</sup>

In other chapters of the text, Śuka describes different meditations on the gross and subtle aspects of Krishna, in a way that is similar to the [Yoga Sutras of Patanjali](#).<sup>[47]</sup> Several passages describe the merging of the individual soul with the Absolute [Brahman](#), the yoga approach for Self-knowledge and discovery of divine-Oneness-within in Advaita and other schools of Hindu philosophy. However, the Bhagavata Purana, in explaining the method of reaching that goal, recommends the object of concentration as Krishna, thus folding in Yoga as a form of bhakti and the "union with the divine".<sup>[47][94]</sup> Bryant describes the synthesis of ideas in Bhagavata Purana as,

The philosophy of the Bhagavata is a mixture of Vedanta terminology, Samkhyan metaphysics and devotionalized Yoga praxis. (...) The tenth book promotes Krishna as the highest absolute personal aspect of godhead – the personality behind the term [Ishvara](#) and the ultimate aspect of [Brahman](#).

— *Edwin Bryant, Krishna: A Sourcebook*<sup>[95]</sup>

Sheridan as well as Pintchman affirm Bryant's view, with the added remark that the Vedantic view emphasized in the Bhagavata is [non-dualist](#) described within a reality of plural forms.<sup>[36][96]</sup>

## Contents and plot

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The Bhagavata includes numerous stories about Krishna's childhood playfulness and pranks – A painting by [Raja Ravi Varma](#)

## Narrators and setting

The Purana includes an introduction in Book 1 that describes its own creation. The Bhagavata describes itself as a recounting of events by the storyteller [Ugrasrava Sauti \(Sūta\)](#) to [Shaunaka](#) and other sages assembled in the [Naimisha Forest](#). Sūta asserts, in this preface that [Veda Vyasa](#) was feeling unsatisfied, even after he had distilled the knowledge of the [Vedas](#) into the Epic [Mahabharata](#). The sage [Narada](#) advises Vyasa that his unease was because he had not yet described the highest goal of knowledge.<sup>[6][97]</sup> Vyasa thereafter writes the twelve books for the text, and teaches it to his teenage son [Shuka](#). The text describes Shuka to be a precocious Advaita Vedantin who, rather than becoming a Krishna devotee, entered [sannyasa](#) and renounced the world as a child.<sup>[98]</sup>

Sūta recounts the first recital of Vyasa's work, given by Vyasa's son Shuka to King [Parikshit](#), the grandson of [Arjuna](#), who is dying. After hearing the recital, Parikshit dies.<sup>[97]</sup> The first nine books are mostly associated with Vishnu and classical form of bhakti-yoga, wherein various ancient tales of *bhagavata* (devotees of Vishnu) are enumerated.<sup>[6]</sup> These *bhagavata* include Prahlad, Gajendra, Dhruva, Bali, Uddhava, Vidura, Maitreya, Parikshit, Priyavrata, Akrura, Ajamila and others.<sup>[99]</sup> It is the tenth book that unfolds the largest chapter and the masterpiece poetic work of the text, through and on Krishna.<sup>[6]</sup> The Bhagavata in verse 1.1.3 describes itself as the "ripened fruit of the Vedic tree", as the "essence of all the Vedas and Epic" in verses 1.2.3 and 1.3.42.<sup>[6]</sup>

## Interconnected plot

Many of the legends are interconnected in the Bhagavata.<sup>[100]</sup> The text asserts that gods ([Deva](#)), demons ([Asuras](#)) and human beings do things, and behave in good or evil ways, in part, because of their past experiences and their innate evolving natures ([Guna](#)). The evil behavior of demon king Hiranyakasipu in Book 7, for example, against his own son Prahlada for his Bhakti for Vishnu, is not simply because of demonic *Tamasic Guṇa* but also because Vishnu in his Varaha avatar had killed Hiranyakasipu's brother *Hiranyaksa* in Book 2.<sup>[100]</sup> Hiranyakasipu turned vengeful against Vishnu ever since then, and had refused to consider whether Hiranyaksa deserved to die.<sup>[100]</sup>

The Varaha story in Book 2 is in turn linked to the story of *Jaya* and *Vijaya*, who had inadvertently annoyed four child sages in another legend of Book 3.<sup>[100]</sup> These stories are further linked to legends of Ravana, Kumbhakarna, Sisuphala and Dantavakra elsewhere. Evil has temporal reasons that feeds it, good has spiritual reasons that sustains it, and the cosmic tension between the two, with cycles of conflict, weaves through the chapters in twelve books of the Bhagavata Purana.<sup>[100]</sup> The underlying metamessage of the text to the devotees of Vishnu, state Gupta and Valpey, is that "one must refuse to see others as enemies, instead understand others, resist the wrong by resorting to a life of spirituality and that reading the text has the power to transform".<sup>[101]</sup>

## Books

### Book 1

The [first book](#) introduces the Bhagavata, with a dialogue between sages Vyasa and Narada.<sup>[102][103]</sup> They discuss the weaknesses in [Bhagavad Gita](#), calling it the philosophical treatise of the Mahabharata, thereafter declare that the monism and oneness taught in Upanishads is too abstract. They assert that there is a need for a practical document that distills the means to a spiritual life. Sage Narada then states, "when he meditated on Self in Self through Self", he realized that he was doing Bhakti.<sup>[104]</sup> Inspired by the statements of Narada, claims the text in Book 1 chapter 18, Vyasa wrote Bhagavata Purana. He taught the entire Purana to [Shuka](#), his young son. Shuka leaves to roam the world, and meets King Parikshit, who is dying on the bank of the river [Ganges](#).



Several sages gather around him, including teenage Shuka. Parikshit asks Shuka what he should do to prepare for death. Shuka's reply constitutes the Book 1 and 2 of the Bhāgavata.<sup>[9][105]</sup> The Book 1 is notable for the following pivotal statement of Krishna sects' theology,

कृष्णस्तु भगवान्स्वयम्

Krishna is [Bhagavan](#), himself

— *Bhagavata Purana*, 1.3.28<sup>[105]</sup>

## Book 2

In [Book 2](#), Shuka tells Parikshit that when one is in terminal condition and expecting death, one should become free of the fear of death by letting go of all attachments to likes and dislikes, home and family.<sup>[106]</sup> They should do Yoga, by controlling the breath and mind and concentrating on the sacred [Aum](#). Shuka explains the theory of [Yoga](#), of bhakti, different types of [dharana](#), the nature of [Bhagavan](#), and the [liberation](#) for a yogi. Book 2 also presents a theory of cosmology, a theory on human anatomy, how human body has all the Vedic gods in it (Sattvic), ten sensory organs and abilities (Rajasic), five material elements (Tamasic), as well as the universal Purusha.<sup>[107]</sup> A definition of Dharma and pleasant fruits of a moral-ethical life are listed in Chapter 7 and 8 of Book 2. In response to Parikshit's questions, Shuka describes creation and the avatars of Vishnu, concluding with a description of the ten characteristics of a [Purana](#).<sup>[9]</sup> The relationship of Vishnu to the Atman (soul, self) in every living being is summarized as follows,

Vishnu is [Atman](#) in each being, manifests Himself in action consciousness and will.

Brahma is the propelling power in the involution of beings, which gives them their physical body.

Vishnu is the propelling force in the evolution of beings through Prana (life), sensation, intellect and lastly the spiritual faculties.

— *Bhagavata Purana*, 2.9<sup>[108]</sup>



The [ten avatars](#) of [Vishnu](#), (Clockwise, from top left) Matsya, Kurma, Varaha, Vamana, Krishna, Kalki, Buddha, Parshurama, Rama and Narasimha, (in centre) Krishna

## Book 3

[Vidura](#)'s pilgrimage to various holy places provides the backdrop for the stories and spiritual teachings in [Book 3](#). Near the [Yamuna River](#) Vidura meets [Uddhava](#), who gives him the news of

the [Kurukshetra War](#) and about [Krishna's](#) death in chapter 1 of Book 3 (this is described in greater detail in chapters 30 and 31 of Book 11 as well).<sup>[109]</sup> Vidura then meets the sage Maitreya, and learns how the world came into being, the divisions of time, and other subjects of [cosmology](#). The story of the birth of [Hiranyakasipu](#) and [Hiranyaksa](#) is told, including the latter's death at the hands of [Varaha](#), the boar avatar of Vishnu. An important story is the tale of Devahuti and her son [Kapila](#), thus folding in one version of the teachings of the [Samkhya](#) school of Hindu philosophy. Kapila's Samkhya teachings help lead her to final liberation.<sup>[9]</sup>

The third book also includes Maitreya's theory on the qualities of Supreme Truth and of the individual self (atman, soul).<sup>[110]</sup>

#### **Book 4**

The story of [Daksha](#) and his sacrifice is told, in which he mocks [Shiva](#) in front of [Dakshayani](#)—his own daughter and Shiva's consort—resulting in Dakshayani's self-immolation, which later came to be known by one of her names, *Sati*. The legend of [Dhruva's](#) penance and devotion to Vishnu is also recounted, along with the related story of king [Prithu](#). The book ends with the recounting of the renunciation and liberation of the Pracetas brothers.<sup>[9]</sup>

#### **Book 5**

This is the story of [Manu's](#) sons and their children leads eventually to [Bharat](#) and a description of the world, the sun and its course, the moon and the planets, the regions below the earth, and the twenty-eight hells ([naraka](#)).<sup>[9]</sup>

#### **Book 6**

Book 6 includes the story of [Ajāmila](#), who reached the supreme abode [Vaikuntha](#) as a reward for uttering the syllables "Na-ra-ya-na" on his deathbed, even though he was only intending to call his son. The story of the son of the Praceta brothers is also recounted, along with the victory of [Indra](#) over [Viśvarūpa](#). Book 6 ends with the birth of the [Maruts](#).<sup>[9]</sup> Like all books, the chapters of Book 6 are suffused with mythology, cosmology and philosophical themes, such as the nature of existence before the origin of universe,

In the beginning, I alone existed. There was nothing else as internal or external. I was pure consciousness and unmanifested. There was deep sleep everywhere.

— *Bhagavata Purana* 6.4.46-6.4.47, Translated by Daniel Sheridan<sup>[111]</sup>

#### **Book 7**



A [relief](#) at 12th-century Chennakesava Temple, [Karnataka](#) depicting the Purana story of Narasimha destroying a demon king who persecutes his subjects and son for their religious beliefs.

The main portion of the seventh book is dedicated to the well known story of [Hiranyakaśipu](#), his son [Prahlada](#), and the death of Hiranyakaśipu at the hands of [Narasimha](#), an avatar of Vishnu. This version expands on the story of Prahlada as told in the [Vishnu Purana](#), and is the form that is most commonly told in Hinduism. Prahlada is considered a great devotee of Vishnu, and describes the process of bhakti toward Bhagavan.<sup>[9]</sup>

In Book 7, the text states that, "Bhagavan is one without a second".<sup>[112]</sup> This view resonates the nondualism in other Books of the text, such as the Book 3 which declares [Brahma](#) to be "immutable Self" in all beings, all pervading and synonymous with the Supreme Deity (Vishnu).<sup>[112]</sup> This same reverence for the non-dual perspective is restated in Chapter 15 of Book 7 as,

The sage shaking off the three dream states (waking, dreaming, dreamless sleeping) through understanding himself meditates on the non-duality of thought (*bhavadvaitam*), the non-duality of action (*kriyadvaitam*), and the non-duality of substance (*dravyadvaitam*).

— *Bhagavata Purana* 7.15.62-7.15.63, Translated by Daniel Sheridan<sup>[113]</sup>

## Book 8

The description of the six past [Manvantaras](#) (ages or time periods of Manu) and the seven future ages of Manu includes several stories, many involving the avatars of Vishnu. Nine chapters are dedicated to the oft told story of Vishnu's [Vamana](#) (dwarf) avatar and his defeat of [Bali](#). The story of the [churning of the ocean of milk](#)<sup>[114]</sup> is also recounted, which is done with the help of the [Kurma](#) avatar of Vishnu.<sup>[9]</sup>

## Book 9

The current age of Manu is described at length, including the traditional history of the Solar Dynasty founded by [Ikshvaku](#) and the Lunar Dynasty of [Pururavas](#). A long history of dynasties is described—[Panchala](#), [Magadha](#), [Kuru](#), Anu, [Druhyus](#), Turvasu, and others—leading up to the [Yadu](#) dynasty and the birth of [Krishna](#) to his parents [Vasudeva](#) and [Devaki](#).<sup>[9]</sup>



Krishna and the gopis, from a Bhagavata Purana manuscript c. 1760.

## Book 10

The tenth book, dedicated to Krishna, is responsible for the widespread popularity of the Bhagavata Purana. Book Ten includes the most enduring images and stories of Krishna: the mischievous child who steals butter; the God as a child who holds the entire universe within himself; the boy who can slay demons and move an entire mountain with one finger; the cowherd who is the love of all the [gopis](#), making them leave all their duties to follow him.<sup>[115]</sup>



The Bhagavata has inspired numerous Vaishnava temples across India. In [Assam](#), these include hundreds of Hindu monasteries named *Satra* (shown above). These include a hall called *Nam Ghar* where prayer singing, dancing and village meetings are held.<sup>[116]</sup>

The tenth book is by far the lengthiest, taking up almost one quarter of the entire *Bhagavata*. While the *Mahabharata* and the *Bhagavad Gita* show Krishna in various roles as teacher and diplomat, book 10 shows Krishna simply engaging in *lila*, or divine and intimate play with his devotees. It presents this intimate relationship with God as the highest goal of human existence.<sup>[117]</sup>

### Book 11

The Book describes how after a long period of peace and prosperity, carelessness and excesses within the society make people forget self responsibility, and the need to follow or protect [dharma](#).<sup>[9]</sup> Infighting between good people begins, ultimately leading to the destruction of the Yadava dynasty. The end comes through a senseless but brutal internecine war, described as a drunken fight, which kills all the Yadavas along with Krishna's human form. The last chapter describes Krishna's ascent to [Vaikuntha](#). Book eleven also includes the so-called *Uddhava Gita*, the last discourse of Krishna which he addresses to [Uddhava](#).<sup>[9]</sup> Canto or Book 11 section 7-9 discusses the pastimes and realizations of an [Avadhuta](#).

### Book 12

The last book of the text includes various prophecies, such as the future rulers of [Magadha](#), along with the evils of [Kali Yuga](#) and how Kali Yuga cycle will end with the destruction of the world (*pralaya*) to give birth to new Yuga cycle. The main story ends with the death of King Parikshit. The book includes a summary of the entire Bhagavata, a standard description of the ten characteristics of a Purana that is found in every [Puranic](#) text, three chapters about the life of [Markandeya](#), and the assurance that it is the greatest among puranas.<sup>[9]</sup>

From the beginning to the end, with its [Bhagavata] stories of detachment, it delights the saintly and the virtuous with the nectar of its many Lila of Hari. The essence of all the Upanishads this is, the sign that the Brahman [God] is one's Atman [Soul within], it illuminates the One Reality without a second, it is the means of attaining [Kaivalya](#) [liberation].

— *Bhagavata Purana*, 12.13.11 - 12.13.12<sup>[118]</sup>

## Theatre, dance and festivals

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The legendary tales of the Bhagavata Purana have inspired many dance, theatre and festivals in India. Anjum Bharti (above) choreographing in [Kathak](#) style, while a group performs [Rasa Lila](#) in [Manipuri](#) style.

The Bhagavata Purana played a key role in the history of Indian theatre, music and dance, particularly through the tradition of [Ras and Leela](#). These are dramatic enactments about Krishna's childhood, teenage and adult life. The themes range from his innocent frolics as a child, to his expressing his confusion and doubts about approaching girls, to him wooing and romancing [gopis](#) (girls in the cow herding community) who meet him secretly thus getting in trouble with their parents, to his intimacy with beloved Radha, to his playing flute while saving the world from all sorts of troubles and thus preserving the [dharma](#).<sup>[25]</sup> Some of the text's legends have inspired secondary theatre literature such as the eroticism in [Gita Govinda](#).<sup>[119]</sup> While Indian dance and music theatre traces its origins to the ancient [Sama Veda](#) and [Natyasastra](#) texts,<sup>[120][121]</sup> the *Bhagavata Purana* and other Krishna-related texts such as [Harivamsa](#) and [Vishnu](#) have inspired numerous choreographic themes.<sup>[122]</sup>

Many *Ras* plays dramatise episodes related in the *Rasa Panchadhyayi* ("Five chapters of the Celestial Dance"; Book 10, chapters 29–33) of *Bhagavatam*.<sup>[123]</sup> The *purana* accords a metaphysical significance to the performances and treats them as religious ritual, fusing the daily life with spiritual meaning, thus representing a good honest happy life or Krishna-inspired drama depicting the same as a form of cleansing the hearts of faithful actors and listeners. The Bhagavata Purana grants the singing and dancing and performance of any part of it, as an act of remembering the dharma in the text, as a form of *para bhakti* (supreme devotion) towards the Lord. To remember Krishna at any time and in any art, asserts the text, is to worship the good and the divine. *Bhagavatam* also encouraged theatrical performance as a means to propagate the faith (BP 11.11.23 and 36, 11.27.35 and 44, etc.), and this led to the emergence of several theatrical forms centred on Krishna all across India.<sup>[124]</sup>

The Book 10 of *Bhagavatam* is regarded as the inspiration for many classical dance styles such as [Kathak](#), [Odissi](#), [Manipuri](#) and [Bharatnatyam](#).<sup>[125]</sup> Bryant summarizes the influence as follows,

The Bhagavata ranks as an outstanding product of Sanskrit literature. Perhaps more significantly, the Bhagavata has inspired more derivative literature, poetry, drama, dance, theatre and art than any other text in the history of Sanskrit literature, with the possible exception of the [Ramayana](#).

— *Edwin Bryant, Krishna: A Sourcebook*<sup>[126]</sup>

The stories in the Bhagavata Purana are also the legends quoted by one generation to the next, in Vaishnavism, during annual festivals such as [Holi](#) and [Diwali](#).<sup>[127][128]</sup>

## Commentaries

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The Bhagavata Purana is one of the most commented texts in Indian literature. Over eighty medieval era *Bhasya* (scholarly reviews and commentaries) in Sanskrit alone are known, and many more commentaries exist in various Indian languages.<sup>[9]</sup>

The oldest exegetical commentary presently known is *Tantra-Bhagavata* from the [Pancaratra](#) school. From the modern age there is the commentary by [Madhvacharya](#) (c. 13th century CE) titled *Bhagavata Tatparya Nirnaya*, then later Sridhara Swami's *Sridharyam* written in the 15th century CE.<sup>[129]</sup>

Other commentaries are: *Hanumad-Bhasya*, *Vasana-bhasya*, *Sambandhoki*, *Vidvat-kamadhenu*, *Tattva-dipika*, *Paramahansa-priya*, *Suka-hridaya*. Vopadeva wrote the *Mukta-phala* and the *Hari-lilamrita*. Vijayadhvaja composed the *Pada-ratnavali*. Viraraghava also edited The *Bhāgavata-Candrika* (from Ramanuja's school). Other works are the *Subodhini* by [Vallabha](#) and *Bhakti-ratnavali* by Visnupuri. Among the [Gaudiya Vaishnava](#) commentaries there are Jiva Goswami's *Tattva-sandarbha* (16th century CE), the *Sarartha Darsini* by [Vishvanatha Chakravarti](#) (17th century), the *Dipikadipani* by Radharamana, [Bhaktisiddhanta Saraswati's](#) *Gaudiya-bhasya* (20th century).

The *Tattva Sandarbha* commentary of the 16th-century Vaishnava scholar [Jiva Goswami](#) analyzes the text, with the remark that the Bhagavata is written in a popular story style, which is easy to read and simpler to understand, than other important ancient Indian philosophical literature.<sup>[130]</sup> The text is a *Cakravartin* (sovereign) of all Puranas, states Goswami, not only because of its poetic excellence, simple language and direct style, but also because it "contains the essential meaning of all the Vedas, Itihasas and other Puranas, because it rests on the [Brahma Sutras](#), and because it is complete".<sup>[130]</sup>