06

WOULD IT STILL BE A GARUDA PURANA?: READING PARATEXTUALITY IN THE HINDU BOOK OF THE DEAD

Nandini Dogra
M. A. in English
New Delhi, India

===============***===============

Abstract:
This essay is an enquiry into the paratextual and socio-political features of the summarized and/or abridged versions of Garuda Purana. It focuses on three versions of Garuda Purana in Hindi: Garuda Purana – Saarodhaar by Gitapress, Shri Garuda Purana by Manas Prakashan, and Sampurn Garuda Purana by Nath Pustak Bandhar. They all cost under 100 INR and claim presentation of the text with an easier language and informational accessibility. Secondly, it studies the versions that stand distinct from the more 'scholarly' ones of the same. Lastly assessing the nature of readership that they try to propagate.
Keywords: *Puranas, Garud Puranas, Paratextuality, Different Narratives, Versions, etc.*

Puranas and The Garud Purana:

Also known as the *Suhrit-Samhitas,* Puranas eulogize various deities of the Hindu pantheon in the form of narrative tales and are considered one of the oldest examples of Hindu literature. They popularize the thoughts contained in the Vedas by using a simpler vocabulary or vernacular languages, as the Puranas made the complex philosophies of the Vedas more approachable for the masses. They could listen to these precepts being enunciated by the priests in temples or on the banks of various holy rivers.

Out of the approximately sixty-four Puranas, Garuda Purana stands as a Satvic Vaishnav Maha Purana, containing Vishnu's sermon to Garuda. The text contains nineteen thousand Shlokas and three sectional divisions - *Acara-Kanda, Preta-Kanda* and *Brahma-Kanda,* and is replete with the knowledge of cosmogeny, philosophy, history, especially dealing with a discourse on the soul's journey after death. Garuda Purana stands as the only 'sacred' text which works around the ideas of afterlife, reincarnation, journey of one's soul, et al via a 'Hindu' lens. Its major significance and utility resides in its perusal in traditional Hindu households for thirteen days after the death of a family member, in an effort to guide the deceased's soul through the travails of the Hindu underworld.

Paratextuality:

Robert Darnton, in *What is The History of Books? Revisited*, throws light on the increasing consciousness with regards to paratextuality, initiated by bibliographers and passed on to literary theorists, as a means to elevate the critical engagement with a given text. While stating that "*After roaming through this literature, I found myself paying far more attention to the way title pages, frontispieces, prefaces, footnotes, illustrations, and appendices work on the*

perceptions of the reader" (Darnton, 506). Darnton shades his deductions in tones of a certain reader response-based analysis. So, while the main content of the text remains pivotal, these attributes of the text elevate its status through the impressions they make on the respective interpretive community engaging with it. Hence granting the author, publisher or presenter a separate space to communicate directly with the reader through these tropes. At the same time, maintaining the integrity of the narrative of the main content under study.

The vocabulary of paratextuality was first formulated by Gerard Genette in his work *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation* (1997) where he defines paratexts as "the means by which a text makes a book of itself and proposes itself as such to its readers, and more generally to the public" (Genette, 261). Hence, emphasizing the function of being projected towards a specific target audience. Further stating that "there does not exist, and there never has existed, a text without paratext" (Genette, 263). This points to a certain essentialism to this cause. Thus, making the argument counter intuitive as it would point to the entity being stuck in time despite the presence of a recipient which is ever changing and evolving. Hence, Genette further argues that "the ways and means of the paratext are modified unceasingly according to periods, cultures, genres, authors, works, editions of the same work, with sometimes considerable differences of pressure" (Genette, 262). The pressure attributed to the reader is inconstant in nature, yet a constant variable in this equation. Emphasizing the idea that the text itself can be an independent entity in terms of its content. While paratextuality specifically exists as an element, catering and adhering to the perceived consumer specific demands and needs.

Genette divides paratexts into two basic categories based on their spatial distance from the book at hand; *peritexts* and *epitexts*. While epitexts include those elements which remain as entities not directly attached to the book but in correspondence to it, i.e., interviews, letters, diaries, articles, and so on. On the other hand, peritexts involve those integral and tangible parts of the whole that form a book. It includes the cover, title, genre indication, preface, foreword, epilogue, illustrations, page number placements, et al. It is these peritexts which are the focus of study in this essay. By the integration of these factors, Genette's analysis harkens to its socio-economic dimension as their placement supports and is backed, at the same time, by the influence on readership, marketing, sales and reception of the book.

Many Versions, Many Narratives:

Translated into various Indian vernaculars, Garuda Purana has been published and re-published abundantly, with volumes emphasizing the accessibility of their summarized versions. This harkens to the idea of the birth of Puranas as texts targeted at the dissemination and easy comprehension of Vedic thoughts and philosophies for the masses. Hence, it can be argued that these newer publications are still trying to fulfil the agenda. Thus, the focus on the idea that the text is meant for popular perusal, remains constant.

The first traceable English translation of Garuda Purana was done by M. N. Dutt in 1908, namely *The Garuda Puranam*, published by Elysium Press, Calcutta. While this kick started a new stream in the narrative, the English versions still stand out from the versions in other languages. Be it in terms of the presentation, categorization or even the tonality. However, versions in major Indian languages like Hindi, Marathi, Tamil or Telugu have a

religious bend to the framework of their presentation of the Purana; the English versions seem more scholarly and objective. This can be attributed to a postcolonial bias, where English is the language of the 'other.' Thus, it renders the feeling of a certain divorce from subjectivity and a sense of alienated distance from the same.

Yet the variations are too pronounced to be subjected to such a superficial and simplistic analysis. Even the price of the publications in English varies from that of other versions. While these range from 500 to 100 INR, the Hindi translations of a similar or one with more content range from 200 to 40 INR. These dichotomies get more pronounced with respect to the availability of these versions. The versions in English can be found anywhere from online portals like Amazon and Flipkart to local bookstores, even Kindle editions are available for a handful of versions. Whereas the Hindi versions are usually only found in the bookstores attached to temples or on a few online portals. Even so, the Hindi versions found online were either the translations of the English translation of Garuda Puranas or the ones offered by Gitapress Gorakhpur. This implies a certain politics of availability and accessibility of the text. It is tweaked with on the basis of the readership. Hence, only a certain type of this literature is available in certain domains or spaces and not in the others.

Taking up the case of Gitapress Gorakhpur, they offer the costliest Hindi version of Garuda Purana, alluded to earlier. Yet the cost (200 INR) appears meagre considering the content offered. This points to an intention of making the text affordable to the masses. Thus, reiterating their domineering position for the print and publishing of this religious text. It is ironically titled *Sankshipt Garuda Purana,* even though it is a hefty book spanning 624 pages with the size 28cms by 19cms, with double columned pages filled with the text on both sides of the book. Sprinkled with pages covered with brightly-colored illustrations of various scenes in correspondence to the content, this book stands as the closest reproduced translation of the main text, especially in terms of the content and chapter divisions. While the three *Kanda*-based categorization is adopted here as well, the number of chapters in each *Kanda* is reduced a bit. In the original text, while the *Acara-Kanda* contains 240 chapters, this version by Gitapress contains only 215 chapters. Similarly, the number goes down from 49 to 47 in the *Preta-Kanda* and from 29 to 23 in the *Brahma-Kanda*. Therefore, keeping the word about the translation being a *sankshipt* version to a certain extent.
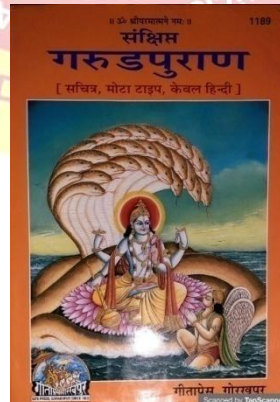

Figure 1Gitapressr'sSankshipt Garuda Purana with claims of "mota type" (bold print) and "keval Hindi"(only Hindi)

Figure 2 Two illustrations from the text

Figure 3 Image of a page from the book with double columns, bold font ("mota type") and, Sanskrit and Hindi content

Despite this humungous publication by Gitapress, a majority of the Hindi versions are available in a summarized and portable size. Additionally, such versions are exclusive to Hindi and are not as prevalent in English to a large extent. One cannot categorize them as chapbooks considering the religious theme, besides the style and presentation vary extremely too. In fact, while chapbooks are usually under 40 pages, these Hindi versions, can range from 128 (*Garuda Purana* by Diamond Books, 2003) to 272 pages (*Garuda Purana Sarodhaar* by Gitapress Gorakhpur, 2019) depending on the font size, structuring, content and beautification of the book. Another strand of categorization for these versions can be as pocket books, since they can be defined as - *"A paperback or other small or cheap edition of a book. // a small especially paperback book that can be carried in the pocket."* (Merriam-Webster)

Even if the content of pocket books includes all popular genres, the intent of being easily accessible and affordable to the masses is that what stands out and relates it to these smaller versions of Garuda Purana. These abridged versions aim to provide the dictates in a simplistic manner while being pocket-friendly and pocket-sized. Thus, reiterating and reinforcing the main aim of the Puranas, as stated earlier.

Comparing Versions:

The focus of this study are three pocket-sized books; *Garuda Purana Saarodhaar* by Gitapress, 2019 (32nd reprint), *Shri Garuda Purana* by Manas Prakashan, and *Sampurn Garuda Purana* by Nath Pustak Bandhar, 2012.
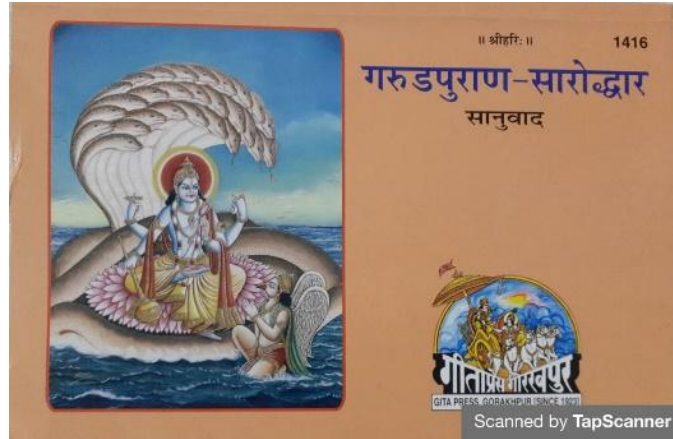

Figure 4 Cover Page of the GP version
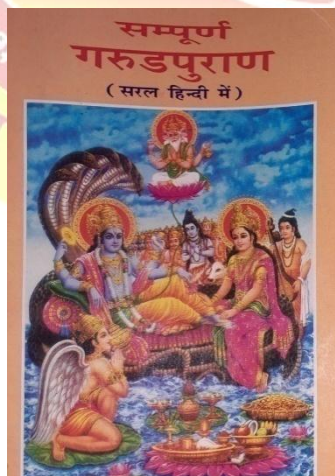

Figure 5 Cover Page of the MP version

Figure 6 Cover Page of the NP version

The three books are abridged versions of the Purana, costing 50 INR for the GP version, 40 INR for the MP version and 25 INR for the NP version, and vary in thickness with 272 pages (20cm in size), 175 pages (21cm in size) and 232 pages (18cm in size), in the respective order. However, the thickness of the books is well affected by the printing style, which is horizontal for the GP and MP versions but vertical for the NP version. Also, the language of the GP and MP versions varies from a Sanskrit-ized, complex Hindi for the earlier to a medium-easy Hindi for the latter. Whereas that for the NP version is a highly simplified Hindi.

These deductions imply that despite the throwaway prices, the linguistic complexity and presentation style cater to certain categories of readers. While someone from the 21st Century would be more comfortable reading a book with a vertical print and plainer Hindi, whereas people from an earlier time would be more at ease reading such texts in a horizontal format and won't have much trouble tackling a convoluted vocabulary with Sanskrit shlokas scattered all over. Hence the GP and MP versions expect a particular type of readership to engage with their publications and produce in accordance to that requirement.

However, this argument turns a bit haywire when the language used for denoting the page numbers in these books are noted. The GP version denotes page numbers in Devanagari script as does the NP version but the MP version denotes it in Roman characters. So, while the NP version tries to gives off an impression of comprehension ease with its language and alignment, the use of Devanagari numerals alienates a major chunk of readers who may not be familiar to it. Similarly, in the case of the MP version, the readership can be expected to be aware of Devanagari script, yet Roman characters are used. This can point towards the idea that the publisher may have intended to take a middle path with this text, where they aspired to make the text comprehensive and appealing to all.

However, tracing back to the essence of Puranas, which aimed at popularizing Vedic thought via the use of vernacular languages, the use of Sanskrit in these versions makes the whole process futile as it again alienates the target audience. In fact, it can be pursued as to who exactly are these versions directed at. So, while the very essence of the text is to popularize, is adding Sanskrit to the equation a method to exotify it? Hence creating categories even in the popular readership by preying on the mass appeal.

Based on a handful visits to a few temples and bookstores adjacent to them, in a small area of Rohini, New Delhi, it was found that the versions such as the ones under study, were the ones preferred by the priests for ceremonies and are the ones perused by people during funeral rites. So, while the GP version is perceived as the holder of the authority, the other versions are referred to only as replacements to the same, despite the use of a complex linguistic medium. However, such versions are tailor made for the masses as they also trim the contents of the main Purana, reducing it to a handbook to be referred to only for the part about death, after life, journey of the soul and reincarnation. This materializes in the form that, even in these three versions, the divisions are not on the basis of Kandas and the sections dealing with the Karma theory and religion are done away with. Hence the content of these versions is simply divided into numbered chapters or *Adhyaay* (as in the MP version). The number of chapters dealing with the main content remains the same in all three versions i.e., seventeen. However, the NP and MP version include the 108 names of Vishnu and an invocative Aarti at

the end. While the NP version includes these as a part of chapters in its index at the beginning, the MP version doesn't grant it a number. Whereas the GP version ends at the Garuda Purana Shravan Phal (a part of the seventeen chapters) and excludes any prayer. Does this imply another expectation from the publisher, that the reader be aware of the appropriate *mantras*, *aartis* and *stutis* to be recited after the completion of this text? However, the MP and NP versions keep no such expectations. This reinforces the argument made earlier about Gitapress' intent at creating a stratification among the masses.

Figure 7 The vishay-suchi/contents page for GP version

Figure 8 The vishay-suchi/content's page for the MP version

Figure 9 The vishay-suchi/content's page for the NP version

In fact, while the GP version begins with a *Namr Nivedan*, adopting a subdued and consolatory tone, implying a certain sympathy with the reader. [19] The MP version jumps straight to business with no prefatory attempt. Whereas the NP version instead incorporates a

Gita Saar which incorporates a strand of rhetorical questions and statements on the discourse of mortality and immortality. This implies the kind of engagement that these texts want or expect their reader to possess. Hence the GP version aims at providing the mourner a solace via religious dictates, the NP version takes a critical tone and wants the reader to critique what they are reading. However, the absence of any such attempt in the MP version implies the fact that the publisher doesn't want to preempt the reader's mind with any particular detail and leave it for subjective analysis.
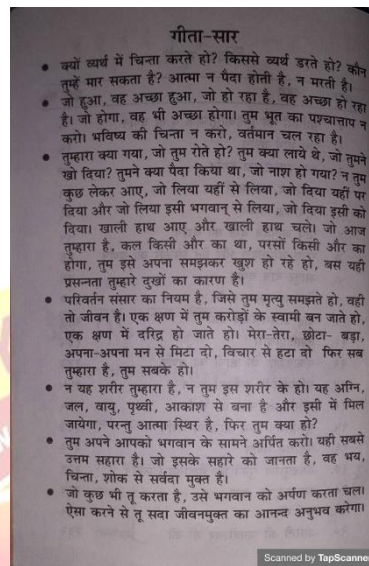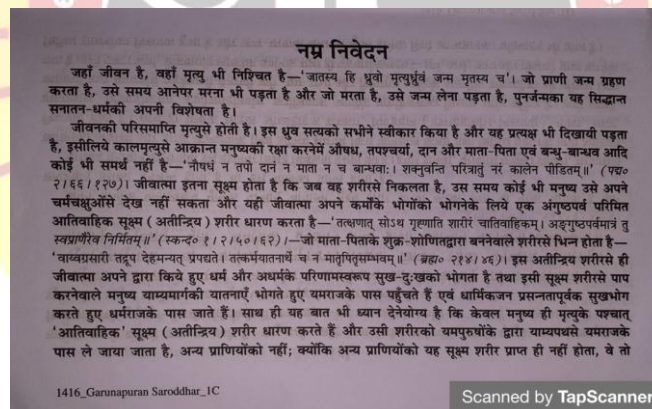

Figure 10 Gita Saar from the NP version

Figure 11 First page of the Namr Nivedan from the GP version

With respect to perceptive appeal, the three versions are filled with illustrations in varied formats. While the GP version incorporates illustrations in-sync with the content of the particular section, the MP version possesses generic illustrations signifying the Vaishnavite background of the text. In the NP version, the illustrations seem to be incorporated at the end of each chapter as a tactic to fill up the blank spaces between sections. However, the quality of illustrations varies from best, good to worst, with the GP version being the one with the most neat and clear illustrations to NP with a decent print quality of the images presented. The

quality deteriorates dramatically with the MP version where it may get hard to fathom who or what is being depicted because of the low quality of the print. Quality of the paper can be interpreted as a reason for the said effect of illustration. The versions by GP and NP use fresh, white paper of a considerable thickness whereas that of the MP version is darkened, flimsy and could be recycled paper. Hence explaining the nature of the illustrations.
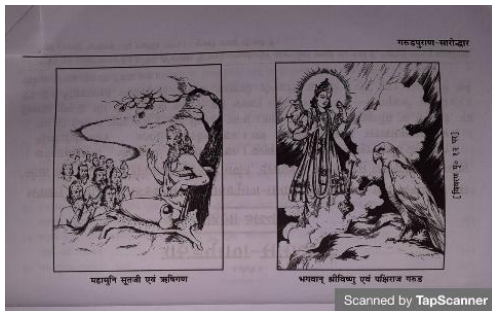

Figure 12 An example of the illustrations from the GP version   -Figure 13 An illustration of Vishnu riding Garuda from the MP version.
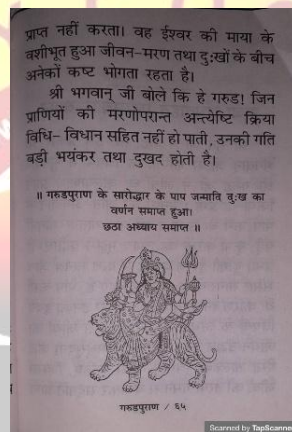

Figure 14 An illustration from the NP version

The front covers of these books can be analyzed by the representation of the Hindu pantheon. While the focus remains on Vishnu, only the GP version stays committed to just him and Garuda. The MP version features Vishnu along with his wife Lakshmi, while they are riding Garuda. Lastly, the NP version can be deemed as the most inclusive, yet celebrating the Vaishnavite identity the most. While all the major Gods are depicted, the only Goddess present is Lakshmi, rubbing his feet with a very meek Garuda seated in the bottom left corner. His stance as the seeker of wisdom and all others profiting from Garuda's request. Interestingly, for the back cover, while the GP and NP versions have a list of advertisements about the publication house, the MP version depicts an image of multi-limbed Vishnu with multiple Godheads of all the deities in the pantheon. Thus, reiterating this Purana's *Satvic* origins.

Figure 15 Back Cover of the MP version

Another important paratextual feature is the presence/absence of the author's name. Since the nature of the text is folklore-ish, despite that Sage Vyas is identified as the author. Though neither of the three versions mentions that. In fact, the MP and NP do mention the names of their editors Sharad Garg and Jagannath Vashisht respectively. However, such is not the case for the GP version, which doesn't grant any editorial rights, yet does mention the name of Shri Radheyshyam Khemka under the *Namr Nivedan*. Hence is the reader to infer him as the editor of the whole text as well or just the provider of a certain subjective solace before the 'objective' truths of the text begins? Or do they want the reader to not associate this text to any other individual for editing or translation and just think of Vyas when they read the text? Hence making one question GP's intent once again.

To conclude, this article analyses three versions of Garuda Purana to probe their claims about mass appeal and accessibility. Through the paratextual analysis insights were gained on various publishing tactics and readership expectations, which contribute to a discourse surrounding the creation of stratifications in popular politics. Hence despite the essence of the Puranas to eradicate the boundaries the analysis showed that publications like Gitapress Gorakhpur were creating more bifurcations. Thus, turning the aspirations topsy turvy.

References

- Darnton, Robert. "What is the history of books?" *Revisited*. Modern Intellectual History 4(3); 2007. Pp. 495-508. Print.
- Dutt, Manmatha Nath. *The Garuda Puranam*. Elysium Press, Calcutta. 1908. Print.
- Garg, Sharad. *Shri Garuda Purana*. Manas Prakashan. Print.
- *Garuda Purana Sarodhaar*. Gitapress Gorakhpur, 2019. Print.
- Hyde Park Books (archive.org)(Last accessed – 9 December 2021). Web.
- Jacobsen, Knut A. *Three Functions of Hell in the Hindu Tradition*. Brill, 2009. Print.
- Nath, Shiv. *Sampurn Garuda Purana*. Nath Pustak Bhandar, 2011. Print.
- *New Literary History*, Vol. 22, No. 2, Probings: Art, Criticism, Genre (Spring, 1991). Pp. 261-272. Print.
- O'Flaherty, Wendy Doniger. "Karma and Rebirth in the Vedas and Puranas" *Karma and Rebirth in Classical Indian Traditions*. University of California Press. 1992. Print.
- Pocket Books | Memory Alpha | Fandom (Last accessed – 9 December 2021). Web.

- Pocketbook | Definition of Pocketbook by Merriam-Webster(Last accessed – 25 April 2023). Web.
- Publishing History (Last accessed – 9 December 2021) Web.
- Puranas - Friendly Hindu Treatises From Ancient India (learnreligions.com) (Last accessed - 9 December 2021). Web.
- *Sankshipt Garuda Purana*. Gitapress Gorakhpur, 2003. Print.
- Skarpeid, Jon. *Gitamahatmya! Paratexts in Miniature Bhagavad Gitas with Special Reference to Pictures and Gender.* Equinox Publishing Ltd. 2019. Print.
- What is Puranas & How Many Puranas are There? HindUtsav (Last accessed – 9 December 2021). Web.

To Cite the Article: Dogra, Nandini. "*Would it Still Be a Garud Purana?: Reading Paratextuality in the Hindu Book of the Dead*". Literary Cognizance, V - 1 (June, 2024): 45-55. Web.