

“Then Bhāgavatas also Surrounded Him”: On the Target Audience of the *Vaiṣṇava-* *dharmaśāstra*¹

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Introduction

With the formation of sectarian Hindu communities that worshipped gods such as Viṣṇu, Śiva, or various forms of the Goddess in first-millennium South Asia, a new genre of texts began to be composed: Dharmaśāstras that laid down religious practices and observances devoted to a particular god and to be performed by a broad lay community. Examples of such works are the *Viṣṇudharma*, the *Vaiṣṇavadharmaśāstra*, and the Kashmirian *Viṣṇusmṛti*,² belonging to Vaiṣṇava traditions, and the *Niśvāsamukha*, *Śivadharmaśāstra*, and *Śivadharmottara*, belonging to Śaiva traditions.

This paper will deal with the so-called *Vaiṣṇavadharmaśāstra*, a work that presents itself as a part of the Sanskrit epic *Mahābhārata*. It is a treatise that was allegedly proclaimed by Lord Viṣṇu Himself to the pious King Yudhiṣṭhira, and expounds how people should live for a pleasant existence both here and in the hereafter. The work is oriented towards the classical Indian social system, at the top of which are the brahmins. But as brahmins cannot keep their position at the top of society without the cooperation of the other social strata, the text addresses all members of society by teaching religious practices that can be conducted by laypeople, who ultimately need no further qualification for such practices than devotion to Viṣṇu. Among the most important of these religious practices are observances (*vrata*) of various kinds and donations (*dāna*) to brahmins.

This paper is intended to be a first approach to this still little-studied work. The two main goals of this paper are, first, to provide a brief overview of its content and, secondly, to clarify whether we can identify the *Vaiṣṇavadharmaśāstra*

1 I would like to thank Kristen de Joseph for suggesting various stylistic corrections of the English manuscript.

2 This work, edited by Olivelle (2009) under the name *Vaiṣṇava-Dharmaśāstra*, should not be confused with the *Vaiṣṇavadharmaśāstra* of this paper.

as belonging to or addressing one or more specific Vaiṣṇava communities – or, approaching the subject from a different angle, whether we can we gain information about specific Vaiṣṇava communities from this work.

The Vaiṣṇavadharmaśāstra

The *Vaiṣṇavadharmaśāstra* is a text with a length of approximately 1700 verses, mainly in the *anuṣṭubh* metre. It is transmitted in the Southern recension of the *Mahābhārata*, at the end of the *Āśvamedhikaparvan*.³ In addition, as Reinhold Grünendahl (1984: 51–54) has ascertained, there is also a Northern testimony of this text, namely, in a Nepalese palm-leaf manuscript from the eleventh century.⁴ Its final colophon attributes it to the *Dānadharma* of the MBh, the *Dānadharma* being a subsection of the *Anuśāsanaparvan* (MBh 13).⁵

The designation *Vaiṣṇavadharmaśāstra* appears in some colophons of the Southern manuscripts as well as in the Nepalese manuscript. In some of the Southern manuscripts used for the critical edition of the MBh, we also find the titles *Vaiṣṇavadharma*, *Viṣṇudharma*, and *Dharmaśāstra*.⁶

3 MBh 14, app. I, No. 4. All but one of the nine manuscripts of the Southern recension used for the critical edition of the MBh are undated. Manuscript M₂ is dated 1841; see the edition of MBh 14, pp. XI f. Most manuscripts used for the critical edition of the MBh are not very old, with many from the seventeenth or eighteenth century; see Dunham 1985.

4 This manuscript is preserved by the Nepal-German Manuscript Preservation Project (NG-MPP) under the number A 27/02. Its colophon gives the date *samvat* 173 (the number appears in the form of the letter numerals *a cū* 3; for an overview of letter numerals, see the plate at the end of Bendall 1883). Taken to refer to *nepāla samvat*, this date corresponds to 1052–1053 CE. The manuscript is thus much earlier than those used for the critical edition of the MBh.

5 *mahābhārate śatasāhasryāṃ saṃhitāyāṃ dānadharṃṣu vaiṣṇave dharmasāstre ...* On *Dānadharma* as the designation of a subsection of MBh 13, see Grünendahl 1984: 53. The *New Catalogus Catalogorum* (NCC 32: 83) mentions a couple of manuscripts with texts of a *Vaiṣṇavadharmaśāstra*. On the basis of the scant information in the NCC, in some manuscripts, the *Vaiṣṇavadharmaśāstra* is presented as an independent text; in others, it is related to the *Āśvamedhikaparvan* or the *Anuśāsanaparvan* of the MBh. Some of the items found under the heading *Vaiṣṇavadharmaśāstra*, however, clearly pertain to the *Viṣṇusmṛti*, not the *Vaiṣṇavadharmaśāstra* under discussion in this paper. Thus it is not clear how many manuscripts of this *Vaiṣṇavadharmaśāstra* are actually listed in the NCC.

6 For the designation (Śrī)*Vaiṣṇavadharmaśāstra* see, for example, the colophons of chapter 14 in manuscripts T, M₂, 4; for *Vaiṣṇavadharma* see, for example, the colophons of chapter 2 in manuscripts T, G1, and M₂–4; for *Viṣṇudharma* see, for example, the colophon of chapter 13 in manuscript M3; for *Dharmaśāstra* see, for example, the colophon of chapter 14 in manuscript G3.

The complex relations and differences between the Southern and Nepalese versions are still to be fully investigated, as I have so far been able to undertake only preliminary examinations of the Nepalese manuscript. The comparative table below shows that, with a few exceptions, the content and length of the two versions are more or less the same, although their division into chapters is different. The text itself is sometimes identical, but often contains variations of different degrees, from variants that concern as little as one or a few syllables of a verse line to new formulations of the same content. Apart from this, additional passages of varying lengths may be inserted, or other passages left out.⁷

Table 1: Content of the two versions of the *Vaiṣṇavadharmaśāstra*

VDhŚ _{CE}	VDhŚ _{ms}
1. <i>bhagavattattvakathana</i> (lines ⁸ 1–147): frame narrative; account of the nature of God	1. <i>vibhūti</i> (1v–4r, ⁹ ca. 140 half-verses; contains parallel lines from VDhŚ _{CE} 1–147): frame narrative; account of the nature of God
2. <i>cāturvarṇyavidhi</i> (148–245): duties of people belonging to the four <i>varṇas</i>	2. <i>pātraviśeṣa</i> (4r–9v, ca. 270 half-verses; contains parallel lines from VDhŚ _{CE} 150–449, 584–589 [4v]): duties of people belonging to the four <i>varṇas</i> ; vain acts, donations, and lives; how and to whom donations should be made; praise of brahmins
3. <i>brāhmaṇaprasāṃsā</i> (246–450): vain acts, donations, and lives; how and to whom donations should be made; consequences of bad behaviour towards brahmins; praise of brahmins	

7 See also Grünendahl's short remarks on the differences between the versions in 1984: 53, n. 4.

8 In the critical edition of the MBh, this text is not enumerated by śloka, but by line. For easier reference, I adopt this numbering. The titles of the chapters of both versions are taken from the colophons.

9 The references to the manuscript indicate folios (recto, verso) and, if applicable, lines.

VDhŚ _{CE}	VDhŚ _{ms}
<p>4. <i>kṛtyākṛtyavidhi</i> (451–578): which kinds of people have good offspring; praise of the state of chastity (<i>brahmacarya</i>); praise of the <i>sandhyā</i> ritual and of reciting the <i>gāyatrī</i>; how satisfying brahmins is more important than ritually worshipping Kṛṣṇa; consequences of bad behaviour towards brahmins (hells)</p>	
<p>5. <i>yamapurādhvānavarṇana</i> (579–839): description of Yama’s world; how one arrives there; how the way to Yama is smoothed by giving various gifts to brahmins and other meritorious actions</p>	<p>3. <i>narakagativarṇa</i> (9v–17r, ca. 365 half-verses; contains parallel lines from VDhŚ_{CE} 451–453, 579–837): description of Yama’s world; how one arrives there; how the way to Yama is smoothed by giving various gifts to brahmins and other meritorious actions; the eating of meat</p>
<p>6. <i>sarvadānasamuccaya</i> (840–1206): various kinds of donations, especially to brahmins, and their auspicious results; description of brahmins that can rescue one from transmigration</p>	<p>4. <i>tilamāhātmya</i> (17r–25v, ca. 400 half-verses; contains parallel lines from VDhŚ_{CE} 840–1204): various kinds of donations, especially to brahmins, and their auspicious results; description of brahmins that can rescue one from transmigration</p>

VDhŚ _{CE}	VDhŚ _{ms}
<p>7. <i>nānādānavidhi</i> (1207–1477): further kinds of donations and their auspicious results; auspicious results of fasting at different periods; auspicious results of various kinds of suicide with God in mind</p>	<p>5. <i>jalamāhātmya</i> (25v–30v, ca. 240 half-verses; contains parallel lines from VDhŚ_{CE} 1207–1350): further kinds of donations and their auspicious results</p> <p>6. <i>anāśakamāhātmya</i> (30v–35v, ca. 270 half-verses; contains parallel lines from VDhŚ_{CE} 1354–1476): various other kinds of donations and their auspicious results; auspicious results of fasting at different periods; auspicious results of various kinds of suicide with God in mind</p>
<p>8. <i>grhasthadharmavidhi</i> (1478–1719): <i>pañca yajñas</i>, morning bath, recitation (<i>svādhyāya</i>); flowers that should be used or avoided in worship; characteristics of Pāñcarātrikas and Vaikhānasas; characteristics of <i>bhaktas</i></p>	
<p>9. <i>kapilaprasāmsā</i> (1720–1907): information about and praise of brown cows (<i>kapilā</i>)</p>	<p>7. <i>kapilāpradāna</i> (35v–40r, ca. 205 half-verses; contains parallel lines from VDhŚ_{CE} 1720–1902, 1927–1934): information about and praise of brown cows (<i>kapilā</i>)</p>
<p>10. <i>sarvadharmavidhi</i> (1908–2133): further information about brown cows (<i>kapilā</i>); brahmins who do or do not deserve to be honoured; descriptions of people who go to heaven or hell</p>	<p>8. <i>kapilāmāhātmya</i> (40r–43v, ca. 155 half-verses; contains parallel lines from VDhŚ_{CE} 1908–1917, 1935–2053): further information about brown cows (<i>kapilā</i>)</p>

VDhŚ _{CE}	VDhŚ _{ms}
11. <i>bhojyābhojyavidhi</i> (2134–2210): description of bad treatment of brahmins; food that should not be eaten; results of various donations	
12. <i>bhojanavidhi</i> (2211–2389): characteristics of the <i>dharma</i> (how one should live); brahmins to whom donations should be made; the donation of food; how one should eat	
13. [no title] (2390–2538): <i>dharma</i> in the case of emergencies (<i>āpaddharma</i>); good and bad brahmins; <i>dharma</i> : means of knowledge (<i>pramāṇa</i>) to know the <i>dharma</i> , what belongs to the <i>dharma</i>	
14. <i>agnihotrpraśamsā</i> (2539–2748): the fire sacrifice (<i>agnihotra</i>)	9. <i>agnihotramāhātmya</i> (43v–50r, ca. 330 half-verses; contains parallel lines from VDhŚ _{CE} 2540–2748): the fire sacrifice (<i>agnihotra</i>)
	10. <i>dvādaśīkalpa</i> (50r–57r, ca. 350 half-verses): monthly observances related to <i>dvādaśī</i>
15. <i>cāndrāyaṇavidhi</i> (2749–2848): a fast in which food intake increases or decreases based on the moon’s waxing or waning	11. <i>cāndrāyaṇavidhi</i> (57r–58v, ca. 85 half-verses; contains parallel lines from VDhŚ _{CE} 2750–2846): a fast in which food intake increases or decreases based on the moon’s waxing or waning

VDhŚ _{CE}	VDhŚ _{ms}
16. <i>ekabhuktividhi</i> (2849–2962): the observance of eating only once a day for one month	12. <i>māsam ekabhukto nāma vrata</i> (58v–63r, ca. 235 half-verses; contains parallel lines from VDhŚ _{CE} 2853–2931 [?]): the observance of eating only once a day for one month
	13. ? (illegible) (63r–65v, ca. 125 half-verses): the rewards of various kinds of donations (?)
17. <i>upavāsavidhi</i> (2963–3068): the observance of eating only once a day for a full year	14. <i>dānadharma</i> (65v–68r, ca. 125 half-verses; contains parallel lines from VDhŚ _{CE} 2966–2988, 3069–3118): the observance of eating only once a day for a full year; donations on the equinoxes
18. <i>prāyaścittavidhi</i> (3069–3212): donations on the equinoxes; occasions for reciting the <i>gāyatrī</i> ; God’s manifestation as the <i>aśvattha</i> tree; description of a <i>prāyaścitta</i>	
19. <i>bhaktārcanavidhi</i> (3213–3277): how religious acts only yield good results if the person performing them has a good nature; five kinds of purity; <i>vidyāsthānas</i> ; impure beings such as <i>śūdras</i> ; Viṣṇu’s devotees should not be considered <i>śūdras</i>	15. no title ¹⁰ (68r–69r, ca. 45 half-verses; contains parallel lines from VDhŚ _{CE} 3217–3236, 3328–3329): how religious acts only yield good results if the one performing them has a good nature; five kinds of purity
20. [no title] (3278–3307): the <i>śūdras</i> whose worship God does not accept; how a brahmin becomes a <i>śūdra</i>	

¹⁰ Here only the final colophon of the entire work is given (see n. 4).

VDhŚ _{CE}	VDhŚ _{ms}
21. <i>bhagavaddvāarakāprayāṇa</i> (3308–3447): rituals that should be performed if a brahmin dies in another country; qualities that can be considered a <i>tīrtha</i> ; duties of a <i>śūdra</i> ; end of the frame narrative	

Thus, the *Vaiṣṇavadharmaśāstra* mainly deals with the religious and ritual duties of people belonging to the different *varṇas*. What is striking is its strong emphasis on the praise of brahmins, how they should be respectfully treated, and what kinds of donations should be made to them. While this may shed light on the text’s authorship and aims, it is not an aspect that will be foregrounded in this paper.

It should also be mentioned that, as Grünendahl has also found (1984: 51–54), the *Vaiṣṇavadharmaśāstra* contains a considerable number of passages with parallels in the *Viṣṇudharma*. Thus, these two works, or at least parts of them, are closely related to each other. We will see that the parallel passages in these two works and their slight variations are sometimes helpful in understanding the subtleties of the text.

The target audience of the *Vaiṣṇavadharmaśāstra*

The second main aim of this paper is to examine whether this work belongs to or addresses a specific Vaiṣṇava community. We want to know: who is the target audience of the *Vaiṣṇavadharmaśāstra*? Is it Vaiṣṇavas in general, one or more specific Vaiṣṇava groups, or does the work claim to be generally valid across sects?

A good start towards answering these questions would be to search for potential sectarian designations of persons. In the VDhŚ, the terms *vaiṣṇava*, *bhāgavata*, *pāñcarātrika*, and *vaikhānasa* are candidates for such designations.

We can immediately discard the term *vaiṣṇava*. In the VDhŚ, this is never used as a designation for persons, but mainly as an attribute of the terms *dharma*¹¹ or *dharmasāsana*, “instruction on the *dharma*”.¹² It is thus used in its literal meaning, “belonging to/deriving from Viṣṇu”, but not necessarily designating a community.

The other three possibilities are more promising. The term *bhāgavata* is found as a designation for persons in several passages of the VDhŚ. The other terms, *pāñcarātrika* and *vaikhānasa*, are found in a passage that explicitly describes the religious practice of the bearers of these names.

The role of Bhāgavatas in the frame narrative

We encounter Bhāgavatas as early as the VDhŚ frame narrative. The frame story takes up the situation described at the end of the *Mahābhārata*’s *Āśvamedhikaparvan*: Yudhiṣṭhira has successfully performed his horse sacrifice and, while still at the assembly of sages and other people, he asks the Venerable One (*bhagavat*), i.e. Viṣṇu, about the *vaiṣṇava dharma*.¹³ Among those, like Yudhiṣṭhira, also wishing to hear about this *dharma* is a group called “Bhāgavatas”. This suggests a certain importance for the group, which seems peculiar to the VDhŚ; in contrast, the *Viṣṇudharma* parallels of these sections do not mention Bhāgavatas.

11 The term *dharma*, which is used in the singular and plural in the VDhŚ, is not translated in this paper. The three main meanings that Fitzgerald (2004: 674) ascribes to *dharma* in the MBh can serve as a clue to understanding the term also in the VDhŚ: (1) “normative action that is beneficial to its agent after death”; (2) “abstract quality of correctness, rightness, goodness, or justice”; (3) “universally good character, attributes, habits, dispositions”.

12 For *vaiṣṇava* as a qualifier of *dharma* or *dharmasāsana*, see VDhŚ_{CE} 5 (ms. 1v2f.), 24, 163 (ms. 4v2f.), 3407, 3444. The only other occurrence of *vaiṣṇava* is found in VDhŚ_{CE} 1549, where hymns (*sūkta*) devoted to Viṣṇu, Varuṇa, Sāvitrī, and Indra are mentioned. The investigations discussed in this paper are based mainly on the text of the VDhŚ as presented in the critical edition of the MBh, an electronic text of which is available at the Göttingen Register of Electronic Texts in Indian Languages (GRETIL) (<<http://gretil.sub.uni-goettingen.de/gretil.html>>, accessed 18 March 2022). To the extent that it was possible, I compared this with the text of the Nepalese manuscript, of which I do not possess an electronic text. The absence of references to the manuscript means either that I did not find the passage in the manuscript, or that the term discussed (such as *vaiṣṇava* in this case) does not appear in the passage as found in the manuscript. As I have not yet examined the manuscript in all its details, it cannot be completely ruled out that a particular passage not located in the expected position does not occur elsewhere in the text.

13 VDhŚ_{CE} 1–8 (3–8 ≈ ms. 1v2f.). VDhŚ_{CE} 3–8 ≈ VDh 44.1–3.

Let us compare all the versions of these passages, starting with the VDhŚ_{CE} passage in which Bhāgavatas first occur (in the manuscript, they appear only later) and its parallel in the VDh. These two passages have several phrases in common, but slight variations give them different meanings. The context in which they appear is also slightly different. While the VDhŚ_{CE} passage occurs after Yudhiṣṭhira's initial questions, the VDh passage is still part of Yudhiṣṭhira's speech:

VDhŚ_{CE} 22–29

ity evaṃ kathite deve
dharmaputreṇa saṃsadi | 22
vasiṣṭhādyaś tapoyuktā
munayas tattvadarśinaḥ | 23
śrotukāmāḥ paraṃ guhyaṃ
vaiṣṇavaṃ dharmam uttamam | 24
tathā bhāgavatāś caiva
tatas taṃ paryavārayan | 25
yudhiṣṭhiraḥ
tattvatas tu bhavān eva
pādamūlam upāgatam | 26
yadi jānāsi mām bhaktaṃ
snigdhaṃ vā bhaktavatsala | 27
dharmaguhyāni sarvāṇi
vettum icchāmi tattvataḥ | 28
dharmān kathaya deveśa
yady anugrahabhāg aham | 29

VDh 44.6–7

etan me kathitaṃ sarvaṃ
sabhāmadhye `risūdana |¹⁴
vasiṣṭhādyair mahābhāgair
munibhir bhāvitātmaभिḥ || 6

tato `haṃ tava deveśa
pādamūlam upāgataḥ |

dharmān kathaya tān deva
yady ahaṃ bhavataḥ priyaḥ || 7

When, in the assembly, [this] was told in this way [to] God by the son of Dharma (i.e., Yudhiṣṭhira), Vasiṣṭha and the other sages, who

O Destroyer of Enemies, in the assembly hall all this was told to me by Vasiṣṭha and the other highly distinguished devout sages.¹⁵

14 Ms. B of the edition reads: *etat te kathitaṃ deva sabhāmadhye surottama |*.

15 Subsequently, in VDh 44.8–15b, VDhŚ_{CE} 30–52, VDhŚ_{ms} 2r3–2v1, Yudhiṣṭhira lists all the *dharmas* he had already learned, among others those of Manu and Vasiṣṭha. Thus, the version of the VDh (and the VDhŚ_{ms}, quoted below), in which Vasiṣṭha and others had already taught *dharmas*, fits the story better.

were endowed with the power of asceticism¹⁶ [and] perceived the truth, were eager to hear the supreme secret, the uppermost *dharma* of Viṣṇu.

Then Bhāgavatas also surrounded

Him. Yudhiṣṭhira [said]: “If Your Honour truly knows me who has approached the soles of [Your] feet as [Your] devotee, who is indeed attached to [You], o You who loves [His] devotees, I want to truly know all secrets of the *dharma*. Tell [me] about the *dharmas*, o Lord of Gods, if I partake of [Your] grace.”

Then I have approached the soles of Your feet, o Lord Of Gods.

Tell [me] about the *dharmas*, o God, if I am dear to You.

As in the VDh, we do not find Bhāgavatas mentioned in the VDh_{ms} version of this passage either. The passage here is altogether quite different from the above-quoted version in the VDh_{CE}; its first two lines have more in common with verse 6 of the VDh than with the version in the VDh_{CE}. Its context is again different, as it follows the Lord’s first reply to Yudhiṣṭhira, and if the following interpretation is correct, it is Yudhiṣṭhira who speaks:¹⁷

VDh_{ms} 2r1–3¹⁸
*ity etat kathitaṃ deva sabhāmadhye surottama*¹⁹ |
*vasiṣṭhādyaṣ*²⁰ *tapoyuktair munibhis tattvadarśibhiḥ* ||

16 For the concept of *tapas* as power that can be acquired through the practice of asceticism, see Hara 1970.

17 The ms. introduces these passages with *vaiśampāyana u[vāca]* (“Vaiśampāyana said”), but considering its content, it must be Yudhiṣṭhira who is speaking here, and not Vaiśampāyana, who belongs to another dialogue level of the MBh. A few South Indian manuscripts also insert *vaiśampāyanaḥ* before VDh_{CE} 22, but here the phrase fits the context.

18 The following orthographical features of the manuscript are silently normalised: homorganic nasals at the end of words are changed to *anusvāras*. Medial *anusvāras* are changed to homorganic nasals. Final *anusvāras* are changed to *m* at the ends of verses. Gemination of consonants after *r* is normalised.

19 The ms. reads *devaḥ sabhāmadhye surottamaḥ*, but the *visargas* seem to have been added later, as the respective spaces are very narrow. Note that the chosen reading also occurs in VDh 44.6ab as found in ms. B (see n. 13).

20 Em., ms. *vaiṣiṣṭhādyaṣ*.

siddhagandharvadevānām ṛṣīṅām yādavā nṛpāḥ |
anye ca bahavo vettum²¹ kāṅkṣanto²² dharmasaṅkathān²³ ||
śrutvā vācaṃ tatas tatra daityasaṅghānisūdane |
tadā yudhiṣṭhira²⁴ rājā prāñjalir vākyam abravīt ||
yudhiṣṭhira u[vāca] ||
dharmaṃ kathaya me deva anugrāhyo yadi hy aham |

“God, Best of Gods, in the assembly hall, this was [already] told to the Siddhas, Gandharvas, deities, and seers²⁵ by Vasiṣṭha and the other sages, who are endowed with the power of asceticism [and] perceive the truth.” The Yādavas, the kings (?),²⁶ and many others [were] desirous to know about [these] conversations about the *dharmā* once they had then heard [those] words there. Then King Yudhiṣṭhira, with folded hands, spoke to the Destroyer of the Hosts of Demons: “Tell me about the *dharmā*, o God, if I am worthy of [Your] grace.”

However, we do find Bhāgavatas also in the VDhŚ_{ms}, when the setting of the assembly is mentioned again at the beginning of the second chapter of both versions of the VDhŚ:

VDhŚ_{CE} 156–167

evam śrutvā vacaḥ puṇyaṃ
satyaṃ keśavabhāṣitam | 156
prahṛṣṭamanaso bhūtvā
cintayanto ’dbhutaṃ param | 157
devā brahmarṣayaḥ sarve
gandharvāpsarasas tathā | 158
bhūtā yakṣagrahās caiva
guhyakā bhujagās tathā | 159
vālikhilyā mahātmāno
yoginas tattvadarśinaḥ | 160

VDhŚ_{ms} 4v1–4

etac chrutvā tu vacanaṃ
puṇyaṃ keśavabhāṣitam |

devā brahmarṣayaḥ siddha-
gandharvāpsarasas tathā ||
bhūtayakṣagrahās caiva
guhyakā rakṣasas tathā |
vālikhilyā mahātmāno
yoginas tattvacintakāḥ ||

21 Conj., ms. *vidvān*.

22 Em., ms. *kāṅkṣantau*.

23 The correct reading would be *saṅkathāḥ*.

24 Em., ms. *yudhiṣṭhiraṃ*.

25 These are various kinds of divine and semi-divine beings. Limited space does not allow us to characterise them in detail here. Instead, see Raven 1988, DeCaroli 2004, and Sörensen 1904.

26 I am not sure if my translation renders the intended meaning. The entire passage seems to be corrupt.

*tathā bhāgavatās cāpi
pañcakālam upāsakāḥ | 161
kautūhalasamāyuktāḥ
prahr̥ṣṭendriyamānasāḥ | 162*

*śrotukāmāḥ paraṃ dharmam
vaiṣṇavam dharmasāsanāt | 163
hṛdi kartum ca tad vākyam
praṇemuh śirasā natāḥ | 164
tatas te vāsudevena
dṛṣṭāḥ saumyena cakṣuṣā | 165
vimuktapāpān ālokya
praṇamya śirasā harim | 166*

*papraccha keśavam dharmam
dharmaputrah pratāpavān | 167*

Thus having heard the auspicious true words spoken by Keśava (i.e., Viṣṇu), [they] had a pleased mind and reflected upon the supreme marvel, the gods, all brahmanical seers, Gandharvas and Apsaras, Bhūtas, Yakṣas, Grahas, Guhyakas and serpent demons, the noble Vālikhilyas, the Yogins³¹ who perceived the truth, **and also the Bhāgavatas who are engaged in the [rites during] the five periods of time**, full of curiosity,

*tathā bhāgavatās²⁷ caiva
pañcakālaviśārādāḥ |
kautūhalasamāviṣṭāḥ
prahr̥ṣṭamana-indriyāḥ²⁸ |
samāgatā mahātmānas
sabhānte²⁹ dharmakāṅkṣiṇaḥ |
śrotukāmāḥ paraṃ puṇyam
vaiṣṇavam dharmasāsanam³⁰ ||
kurvanto hṛdi tad vākyam
satyam satyasya bhāṣitam |
tatas te vāsudevena
dṛṣṭāḥ saumyena cakṣuṣā ||
vimuktapāpāḥ pūtās te
samantāt paryāyasthitāḥ |
dṛṣṭvā cāpy āgatān devān
ṛṣṭīn ca pitrbhiḥ saha ||
papraccha keśavam dharmam
dharmaputrah prayatnavān ||*

Having heard these auspicious words spoken by Keśava, the gods, the brahmanical seers, the Siddhas, Gandharvas and Apsaras, Bhūtas, Yakṣas, Grahas, Guhyakas and Rakṣases, the noble Vālikhilyas, the Yogins who reflected upon the truth, **and the Bhāgavatas who are conversant with the [rites during] the five periods of time**, filled with curiosity, with pleased minds and senses, the noble ones, desiring

27 Em., ms. *bhagavatās*.

28 Em., ms. *prahr̥ṣṭāmana-indriyāḥ*.

29 Em., ms. *sabhāntān*.

30 Em., ms. *dharmasāsanāḥ*.

31 See n. 24.

with pleased senses and minds, eager to hear the supreme *dharmā* of Viṣṇu through the medium of instruction on the *dharmā*, in order to take those words to heart. With bowed heads, they made obeisance. Then Vāsudeva beheld them with [His] auspicious glance.³² Having seen that [they were] free from their evil acts [due to God's glance], the majestic son of *dharmā* bowed his head to Hari (i.e., Viṣṇu) and asked Keśava for the *dharmā*.

the *dharmā*, came together in the assembly hall, eager to hear Viṣṇu's supreme auspicious instruction on the *dharmā*. When they were taking to heart those words, which were spoken as the truth of the truth,³³ then Vāsudeva beheld them with [His] auspicious glance. Free from their evil acts [and] purified [due to God's glance], they stood around [God and Yudhiṣṭhira] in due order. And having seen that the gods and seers along with the forefathers had come, the diligent son of *dharmā* asked Keśava for the *dharmā*.

The parallel passage of the Viṣṇudharma again does not mention Bhāgavatas, although it is closely related to the versions of the VDhŚ, as the words printed in bold show:

VDh 44.20–22

evam ukte tu kṛṣṇena ṛṣayo 'mitatejasah |
samājagmuḥ sabhāmadhye śrotukāmā harer giram || 20³⁴
devagandharvaṛṣayo guhyakāś ca mahāyaśāḥ³⁵ |
vālahilyā mahātmāno munayah saṃśitavratāḥ (em., ms. *saṃmitavratāḥ*) ||
vaiṣṇavān akhilān dharmān yah paṭhet pāpanāśanān |
bhaveyur akṣayās tasya lokāḥ satpuṇyabhāginah || 21
kṛṣṇadrṣṭihatam³⁶ cāsya kilbiṣam sampraṇāsyati |
vaiṣṇavasya ca yajñasya phalaṃ prāpnoti mānavah || 22

32 This means that Vāsudeva is bestowing grace on the audience. For the concept of bestowing grace by means of casting a glance, see TAK2 s.v. *kaṭākṣapāta* and TAK3 s.v. *drṣṭipāta*.

33 Cf. Oertel 1937 for this kind of expression.

34 This line corresponds to the line *samāgatā mahātmānas sabhānte* (em.) *dharmakāṅkṣiṇah |* in the VDhŚ_{ms} just quoted. This part does not appear in the version of the VDhŚ_{CE}.

35 This and the following line appear in this place only in the N mss. used for the edition of the VDh. In the D mss., these two lines appear after VDh 44.15.

36 Compare line 165 in VDhŚ_{CE} and the corresponding line in VDhŚ_{ms}, which also mention God's glance. While in those versions this motif is integrated into the narrative, here it does not belong to the story but to a general concluding remark about the rewards of reciting the *vaiṣṇava dharmas*, i.e., to a *phalaśruti*.

However, when Kṛṣṇa had spoken in this way, the seers with boundless glory, the gods, the Gandharvas, the seers, the very renowned Guhyakas, the noble Vāḷakhilyas, and the sages who have fulfilled their observances came together in the assembly hall, eager to hear Hari's voice.

For [a man] who recites all the *dharmas* of Viṣṇu, which destroy evil acts, the worlds will be undecaying and partaking of good and auspicious [objects], and his faults vanish, because they are struck off by Kṛṣṇa's glance, and [that] man will attain a reward [equal to that] of a sacrifice for Viṣṇu.

Finally, at the very end, the VDhŚ_{CE} again describes the assembly, reusing the passage with only minor adaptations. The VDhŚ_{ms} does not contain this passage, as it lacks the entire two final chapters of the VDhŚ_{CE}. In the VDh, this passage is not found either.

VDhŚ_{CE} 3398–3412

śrutvā bhāgavatān dharmān sākṣād viṣṇor jagadguroḥ | 3398
prahr̥ṣṭamanaso bhūtvā cintayanto 'dbhutāḥ kathāḥ | 3399
r̥ṣayaḥ pāṇḍavās caiva praṇemus taṃ janārdanam | 3400
pūjayām āsa govindam dharmaputraḥ punaḥ punaḥ | 3401
devā brahmar̥ṣayaḥ siddhā gandharvāpsarasas tathā | 3402
bhūtā yakṣā grahās caiva guhyakā bhujagās tathā | 3403
vāḷakhilyā mahātmāno yoginas tattvadarśinaḥ | 3404
tathā bhāgavatās cāpi pañcakālam upāsakāḥ | 3405
kautūhalasamāyuktā bhagavanbhaktim āgatāḥ | 3406
śrutvā tu paramaṃ puṇyam vaiṣṇavaṃ dharmasāsanam | 3407
vimuktapāpāḥ pūtās te saṃvṛttās tatksaṇena tu | 3408
praṇamya śirasā viṣṇuṃ pratinandya ca tāṃ kathām | 3409
draṣṭāro dvārakāyāṃ vai vayaṃ sarve jagadgurum | 3410
iti prahr̥ṣṭamanaso yayur devagaṇaiḥ saha | 3411
sarve r̥ṣigaṇā rājan yayuḥ svaṃ svaṃ niveśanam | 3412

Having heard the **Bhāgavata** *dharmas* from Viṣṇu Himself, He who is the Teacher of the Worlds, [they] had pleased minds and reflected upon the marvellous stories. The seers and the Pāṇḍavas bowed down to Janārdana (i.e., Viṣṇu). The son of *dharma* worshipped Govinda (i.e., Viṣṇu) again and again. The gods, the brahmanical seers, Siddhas, Gandharvas and Apsaras, Bhūtas, Yakṣas, Grahas, Guhyakas and the serpent demons, the noble Vāḷakhilyas, the Yogins who perceived the truth, **and also the Bhāgavatas who are engaged in the [rites during] the five periods of time**, full of curiosity,

having developed devotion to the Venerable One, having heard Viṣṇu’s supreme auspicious instruction on the *dharma*, immediately became composed, as they were freed from their evil acts and purified. They bowed their head to Viṣṇu, applauded that story, and went with pleased minds, [thinking]: “We will all see the Teacher of the Worlds in Dvārakā.”³⁷ All the groups of seers along with the groups of gods, o king, went to their respective homes.

Given the fact that King Yudhiṣṭhira’s assembly is described twice in the VDh and the VDhŚ_{ms} and even three times in the VDhŚ_{CE}, these passages must be considered essential constituents of the frame narrative. These passages recount how Viṣṇu taught his *dharma* not only to King Yudhiṣṭhira, but also to an exalted group of sages who themselves were renowned authors of *dharmas*, such as Vasiṣṭha (see n. 15); the pigmy seers called Vālakhilyas, well known also from other myths,³⁸ and several other semi-divine beings, such as the Gandharvas and the Apsaras. This illustrious audience that is eager to hear Viṣṇu’s teachings emphasises the great value of these teachings. It imparts how these teachings are worth being heard by this audience, although the emphasis on this notion wouldn’t actually be necessary, considering that the expounder of these teachings is the supreme Lord Himself. Seen from a different angle, these narrative passages underscore the competence and authority of the persons belonging to this audience. The readers or listeners of these passages learn that these persons were taught directly by Viṣṇu Himself, and due to this are especially competent and authorised to hand down these teachings.

The author, or rather redactor, of the VDhŚ added the Bhāgavatas to this eminent audience. In this way, the story conveys how the Bhāgavatas deserve to belong to this assembly, and also testifies that the Bhāgavatas received their teachings directly from Viṣṇu Himself – teachings that in the final passage, occurring only in the VDhŚ_{CE}, are no longer called *vaiṣṇava* (see n. 11), but *bhāgavata* (see line 3398, quoted above). We see that the author of the VDhŚ_{CE} had a pronounced interest in adding Bhāgavatas to the frame of this work. The first quoted passage from the Nepalese manuscript gives the impression that this is not so much the case in this version of the

37 Dvārakā is the hometown of Kṛṣṇa. This statement is an explicit identification of Viṣṇu with Kṛṣṇa and links the VDhŚ to the general plot of the *Mahābhārata*, in which Kṛṣṇa is one of the major characters. The same is true of the Pāṇḍavas, the five sons of Pāṇḍu, mentioned for the first time in line 3400 of the VDhŚ_{CE}.

38 See, e.g., Sörensen 1904 s.v. Vālakhilya.

work, but the second quoted passage reveals that here, too, Bhāgavatas are part of Yudhiṣṭhira's assembly.

The Bhāgavatas are described as practising or being conversant with “the [rites during] the five periods of time” (*pañcakāla*). These rites are mentioned also in other contexts of the VDhŚ (see below), but the work does not offer any details of what they are. The “[rites during] the five periods of time” are already known from the earliest extant literary text of the Pāñcarātra tradition, the so-called *Nārāyaṇīya* (MBh 12.321-339). There these rites are a means for worshipping God, but details of what they entail are not given either.³⁹ An early mention of the five constituents of the rites during the five periods of time, though not using the term *pañcakāla* itself, is found in Śāṅkara's *Brahma-sūtrabhāṣya*.⁴⁰ There, the rites are also described as the religious practice of Bhāgavatas:

With regard to that, Bhāgavatas think: (...) Having worshipped the Venerable Supreme Lord, who is of such nature, by means of approaching [Him], appropriating [material], ritually worshipping [Him], studying, and [practising] *yoga* for one hundred years, one, being free from pain, attains the Venerable One alone.⁴¹

These are the rites during the five periods of time that are also described in Pāñcarātra Saṃhitās: (1) mentally approaching God (*abhiḡamana*); (2) appropriating material necessary for ritual worship (*upādāna*); (3) ritual worship (*ijyā*); (4) studying (*svādhyāya*); and (5) *yoga*. They are a daily routine, from getting up in the morning to falling asleep at night. Their practice is a characteristic feature of certain Pāñcarātrikas in the earlier extant Saṃhitās, and ideally of all followers of Pañcarātra in the texts from the twelfth or thirteenth century onwards.⁴²

39 See MBh 12.323.42, 324.28, 325.4 (58) and Rastelli 2000: 101f.

40 Śāṅkara probably lived sometime between 650 and 800 CE (Vetter 1979: 11f.).

41 BSūBh 259,20–260,1: *tatra bhāgavatā manyante. [...] tam itthaṃbhūtaṃ parameśvaram bhagavantam abhiḡamanopādāneḡyāsvādhyāyayogair varṣaśatam iṣṭvā kṣiṇakleṣo bhagavantam eva pratipadyata iti.*

42 For detailed studies of these rites and their changing role in the tradition of Pañcarātra, see Rastelli 2000 and Rastelli 2006: 63–91.

Bhāgavatas as exemplary persons

The only other passage of the VDhŚ that mentions Bhāgavatas occurs solely in the version found in the critical edition of the MBh.⁴³ Here they are also associated with the rites during the five periods of time.

The wider context of this passage is as follows: first we find a few statements that disdain *śūdras* and express the view, also found in the classical Dharmaśāstras, that the *śūdras*' *dharma* is obedience to brahmins.⁴⁴ The concepts of *śūdra* and brahmin are then qualified: a *śūdra* or a brahmin is not defined by his birth in a particular *varṇa*, but by the devotion (*bhakti*) he has.⁴⁵ It is in this context that we again find the term *bhāgavata* and learn more about the Bhāgavatas' religious practice:

śūdras talk senseless [things]. Bhāgavatas are not *śūdras*. Bhāgavatas are known as brahmins who are devotees (*bhakta*) of the Venerable One. [A person] who knows the true nature of the twelve-syllable [*mantra*], who knows the

43 There is no parallel of this passage in the *Viṣṇudharma*; see Grünendahl 1984: 52, n. 4. Nor does this passage appear in the VDhŚ_{ms}; see the table above.

44 Compare, for example, MDhŚ 9.334.

45 See VDhŚ_{CE} 3332-3337 as an example of the “classic” view of *śūdras*: “O King, I do not fear gods, demons or Rakṣases. The *brahman* (i.e., the Veda) coming forth from the mouth of a *śūdra*, however, [causes] fear to me, o you who are strict in your observances. Therefore, a *śūdra* should not praise even My name alongside the *praṇava* (i.e., *om*), since those knowing the *brahman* know that the *praṇava* is the eternal supreme *brahman*. Obedience to brahmins with devotion (*bhakti*) to Me is the *dharma* of *śūdras*. By this they go to heaven, if they always think of Me.” (*na bhayaṃ devadaityebhyo rakṣobhyaś caiva me nṛpa* | 3332 *śūdravaktrāc cyutaṃ brahma bhayaṃ tu mama suvratā* | 3333 *tasmāt sapraṇavaṃ śūdro mannāmāpi na kīrtayet* | 3334 *praṇavaṃ hi paraṃ brahma nityaṃ brahmavido viduḥ* | 3335 *dvijaśuśrūṣaṇaṃ dharmam śūdrānām bhaktito mayi* | 3336 *tena gacchanti te svargaṃ cintayanto hi mām sadā* | 3337). See also VDhŚ 3350–3355 as an example of the notion that attitude is more important than birth in a particular *varṇa*: “A leaf, a flower, a fruit, [or] water that is offered to Me with devotion, this, brought near with devotion, I accept with [bowed] head from a *śūdra*. Or if a certain man from a low caste, who has committed all [kinds of] evil acts, permanently visualises Me, he is liberated from all evil acts. Brahmins who are perfect in knowledge as well as discipline and are skilled in the Veda, [but] do not have devotion to Me, those are like Caṇḍālas indeed.” (*patraṃ puṣpaṃ phalaṃ toyam yan* [em., ed. *yo*] *me bhaktyā prayacchati* | 3350 *tad ahaṃ bhaktyupahṛtaṃ mūrdhnā grhṇāmi śūdrataḥ* | 3351 *antyajo vāpi yaḥ kaś cit sarvapāpasamanvitaḥ* | 3352 *yadi mām satataṃ dhyāyet sarvapāpaiḥ pramucyate* | 3353 *vidyāvinayasampannā brāhmaṇā vedaparagāḥ* | 3354 *mayi bhaktim na kurvanti caṇḍālasadrśā hi te* | 3355). Similar views are found in VDhŚ_{CE} 1705–1707 and 3223–3228. They are reminiscent of the redefinition of what a brahmin is in early Buddhism; see, for example, Ellis 2019: 61.

division of the four Vyūhas, who knows the [rites during] the five periods of time [that are to be performed] uninterruptedly, this [person] is indeed known as a Bhāgavata.

A *hotṛ*⁴⁶ who praises Me by means of the Ṛgveda, an *adhvaryu* [who praises Me] by means of the Yajur[veda], an *udgātṛ* [who praises Me] by means of the auspicious Sāmaveda, brahmins belonging to the Atharva[veda] who continually praise Me by means of the Atharvaśiras[-Upaniṣad], these [people] are also known as Bhāgavatas.⁴⁷

In the first part of this passage, three specific features of Bhāgavatas are mentioned: knowledge of (and that implies the usage of) the *dvādaśākṣaramantra* – adherence to the teaching on the four Vyūhas, which are four specific manifestations of God – and knowledge (and thus performance) of the rites during the five periods of time (we will come back to these features below). In the subsequent lines, however, the concept of a *bhāgavata* is extended to persons who belong to and practise the rituals of Vedic traditions, but intend to worship Viṣṇu by means of these rituals. One gets the impression that these persons may not in fact possess the three features mentioned in the previous lines, but that the author of this passage nevertheless wanted to include them within the category of Bhāgavatas – “Bhāgavatas” as in the sense of “persons worshipping the *bhagavat*”, not necessarily in the sense of a sectarian group of Bhāgavatas.

In another passage of the VDhŚ_{CE}, we find the reverse situation. Here a verse brings up the three specific features, but does not mention the term *bhāgavata*. Interestingly, the passage that forms the context of this verse also appears in the Nepalese manuscript, but the verse itself does not occur there. In its place, we find a very different verse.

In both versions of the VDhŚ, the passage concludes a section that depicts the auspicious rewards of various precious gifts presented to brahmins. The passage itself describes those brahmins who deserve donations and will bring liberation to their patrons:

46 The *hotṛ*, *adhvaryu*, and *udgātṛ* are the sacrificial priests of the respective Vedas.

47 VDhŚ_{CE} 3372–3379: *apārthakam prabhāṣante śūdrā bhāgavatā iti | 3372 na śūdrā bhagavadbhaktā viprā bhāgavatāḥ smṛtāḥ | 3373 dvādaśākṣaratattvajñāś caturvyūhavibhāgavit | 3374 acchidrapañcakālajñāḥ* (em., ed. *acchidraḥ pañcakālajñāḥ*) *sa vai bhāgavataḥ smṛtāḥ | 3375 ṛgvedenaiva mām hotā yajuśādhvaryur eva ca | 3376 sāmavedena codgatā puṇyenābhiṣṭuvanti mām | 3377 atharvaśirasā caiva nityam ātharvaṇā dvijāḥ | 3378 stuvanti satatam ye mām te 'pi bhāgavatāḥ smṛtāḥ | 3379.*

A recipient who possesses [knowledge of] the Veda (ms.: of all Vedas), a recipient who possesses the power of asceticism (*tapas*), a recipient who is not impure – this recipient will rescue one. Those who are always pleased with recitation (ms.: Brahmins who are pleased with recitation), whose senses are not agitated, who are continually intent upon the five sacrifices⁴⁸ – those honoured [ones] rescue one. Those who are restrained by patience (ms.: Those who are patient and restrained), whose ears are filled with the Veda (*śruti*) (ms.: who are filled up to the ears with the Veda), whose senses are conquered, who abstain from killing living beings, householders who are humble when receiving gifts – those brahmins are capable of rescue. Always furnished with water, always furnished with the sacrificial thread, always reciting, avoiding food from low men (ms.: avoiding food from outcasts), approaching [his wife sexually] at the proper time, presenting oblations to the fire according to the regulations – this brahmin is capable of rescue (ms.: this brahmin does not fall from the world of Brahmā).⁴⁹

A brahmin, however, who is My devotee (*bhakta*), who worships Me, of whom I am the final aim, whose acts are entrusted to Me⁵⁰ – this brahmin (*vipra*) can certainly rescue (ms.: will rescue) one. A brahmin who knows the true nature of the twelve-syllable [*mantra*], knows the division of the four Vyūhas, knows the [rites during] the five periods of time [that are to be performed] uninterruptedly – [he] will rescue one. (Instead of this sentence, the ms. reads: Being straight, knowing the Imperishable One, worshipping the forefathers and the deities, being My devotee, and having a mind fixed on the life forces,⁵¹ he should worship this brahmin appropriately.)⁵²

48 The five sacrifices are the daily duties of a Vedic-orthodox householder. They are the “sacrifice to the gods” (*devayajña*), the “sacrifice to the forefathers” (*pitryajña*), the “sacrifice to the beings” (*bhūtayajña*), the “sacrifice to men” (*manuṣyayajña*), and the “sacrifice the brahman (i.e., the Veda)” (*brahmayajña*); for more details see, e.g., Kane 1941: 696ff.

49 Note that this reading (which is similar to that of MBh 5.40.23d, where a variant of this verse appears) does not make sense in the present context. The context here is to which brahmins donations should be given, as these brahmins are capable of rescuing the giver. It is not which activities typical of a brahmin rescue *himself*.

50 The concept of *karmasaṃnyāsa*, deriving from *Bhagavadgītā* 18.9, entails renouncement of the personal rewards that a ritual act effects; cf. Rastelli 2006: 209–211.

51 A yogic technique called “contemplation of the life forces” (*prāṇacintā*) is described in the *Yogavāsīṣṭha*; see Timalsina 2012: 310–316.

52 VDhŚ_{CE} 1191–1206 (VDhŚ_{ms} 25r4–25v1): **yac ca vedamayaṃ* (CE : *sarvavedamayaṃ* ms.) *pātraṃ yac ca pātraṃ tapomayaṃ* | 1191 *asamkīrṇaṃ ca yat pātraṃ tat pātraṃ tārayiṣyati* | 1192 **nityaṃ* (CE : *viprāḥ* ms.) *svādhyāyaniratās* **tv aprakīrṇendriyās* (CE : *svapra-kīrṇendriyās*) *ca ye* | 1193 *pañcayajñaratā nityaṃ pūjītās tārayanti te* | 1194 *ye *kṣāntidāntāḥ* (CE : *kṣāntadāntāḥ* ms.) **śrutipūrṇakarnā* (CE: *śrutikarṇapūrṇā* ms.) **jitendriyāḥ* (ms.:

The relevant verse is found at the very end of the quoted passage. In the first paragraph of the quoted passage, exemplary Vedic brahmins are described as persons to whom it is especially rewarding to donate. This description is very generic, and indeed, several of its verses are also found in other works (see n. 51). Then follows a sentence that narrows the definition of worthy brahmins down to those who are devotees of Viṣṇu, and finally, in the version of the VDhŚ_{CE}, the definition is narrowed even further, and the rescuing brahmin is described as possessing the three characteristic features that are associated with Bhāgavatas in lines VDhŚ_{CE} 3374–3375, quoted above. The term *bhāgavata* itself, however, is not mentioned.

The entire passage as found in the VDhŚ_{CE} gives the impression of a very generic description of brahmins, intended to culminate in the statement that persons with very particular features are especially worthy of giving them gifts. In the passage VDhŚ_{CE} 3372–3379, quoted above, the situation is the other way round. The concept of a *bhāgavata*, initially implying the three specific features, is extended to persons who belong to and practise the rituals of the Vedic traditions, who worship Viṣṇu, but who do not necessarily possess these characteristic features. We see that the statements oscillate, perhaps depending on their purpose: when – as in the passage just quoted – a person that should receive donations is defined, the target group is implicitly narrowed to those with very specific features. In the other passage, although Bhāgavatas are characterised by very particular features, Viṣṇu’s devotees are defined as broadly as possible. Here, the purpose might be to describe potential donors. To be fair, this is not said in the immediate context of the passage. But we should not forget that major parts of the VDhŚ are devoted to the topic of donations to brahmins, which informs us about the general aim of this text.

Interestingly, the passage under discussion looks quite different in the Nepalese version. This version does not contain the verse mentioning the three specific features. The passage reaches its culmination earlier. After the generic

jitendriyā CE) *prāṇivadhe nivṛttāḥ* | 1196 *pratigrahe saṃkucitā *gr̥hasthās* (CE : *grahastās* ms.) *te brāhmaṇās tārayitum samarthāḥ* | 1198 *nityodakī nityayajñopavitī nityasvādhyāyī *vṛṣalānnavarjī* (CE : *patitānnavarjī* ms.) | 1200 **ṛtau* (CE : *ṛtau ca* ms.) *gacchan vidhivac *cāpi* (CE : *ca* ms.) *juhvan *sa brāhmaṇas tārayitum samarthaḥ* (CE : *na brāhmaṇas cyavate brahmalokāt* ms.) | 1202 *brāhmaṇo *yas tu* (CE : *yaś ca* ms.) *madbhakto madyājī matparāyaṇaḥ* | 1203 *mayi saṃnyastakarmā ca sa vipras *tārayed dhruvam* (CE : *tārayiṣyati* ms.) | 1204 **dvādaśākṣaratattvajñās caturvyūhavihbhāgavit* | 1205 *acchidrapañcakālaḥ sa vipras tārayiṣyati* | 1206 (CE : *ṛjur akṣaravettā ca pitṛdevatapūjakah* | *madbhaktaḥ prāṇacittas ca taṃ dviḥ saṣṭhu pūjayed* ||). VDhŚ_{CE} 1191–1192 = VDh 53.17; VDhŚ_{CE} 1195–1197 ≈ SkandaP V.3.209.10; VDhŚ_{ms} 1199–1202 ≈ MBh 5.40.23.

description of Vedic brahmins who are able to rescue other humans, the text turns to brahmins who are devotees of Viṣṇu and thus are specifically able to rescue their donors. The very last verse of the passage, which we find instead of the VDhŚ_{CE} verse mentioning the three specific features, is already dedicated to another topic: the main message of the verse is that, being a true devotee of Viṣṇu with good qualities, one should worship the brahmins thus described in the appropriate manner.

Thus, we can state that the effort to bring Bhāgavatas to the fore and to present them as exemplary persons is much stronger in the version of the VDhŚ_{CE} than in the version of the Nepalese manuscript.

Vaikhānasas and Pāñcarātrikas

Before we take a closer look at the characteristic features of Bhāgavatas, the only passage of the VDhŚ that mentions Vaikhānasas and Pāñcarātrikas should first be presented, as this also mentions some of these features. The passage is found only in the version of the critical edition of the MBh. The entire chapter to which this passage belongs does not occur in the Nepalese manuscript.

Yudhiṣṭhira said: “How should You be worshipped? Of what kind are Your manifestations (*mūrti*)? How do Vaikhānasas call [them], or how do Pāñcarātrikas?”

The Venerable One said: “Pāṇḍava, hear the entire procedure of My ritual worship. Having prepared a lotus with eight petals and a receptacle on a sacrificial ground (*sthaṇḍila*), a clever man should worship⁵³ Me, who has been installed on this [lotus], according to the prescription of the eight-syllable [mantra] or by means of twelve-syllable [mantras]⁵⁴ or by means of Vedic mantras or, in

53 Although the sentence does not conclude with a finite verb but consists only of absolutes, I have decided to render it in English with a finite verb, as this is the meaning that was probably intended here (although the passage may derive from another context in which the sentence concludes with a finite verb). Ms. M₂ changed the second half of line 1658 accordingly: *arcayīta samāhitah*, “he should attentively worship”.

54 The text uses the plural, but this probably does not mean that there are several different *dvādaśākṣaramantras*. In Pāñcarātra Saṃhitās, this plural is sometimes also found, meaning that the *dvādaśākṣaramantra* should be recited several times; see, for example, SanS *brahmarātra* 4.66ab: “Then he should sacrifice the cooked food offering into the fire while [reciting] the twelve syllable [mantra] twelve times.” (*caruhomaṃ tataḥ kuryād dvādaśadvādaśākṣaraiḥ* |).

turn, by means of My *sūkta*. Yudhiṣṭhira, then the people who are Vaikhānasa experts call me Puruṣa, Satya, Acyuta, and Aniruddha. Others, however, [namely,] Pāñcarātrikas, distinguish Me in the same way, o king, or they consider [Me] as having four manifestations, namely, Vāsudeva, Saṃkarṣaṇa, Pradyumna, and Aniruddha, o best of kings. Know, o best of kings, [that] despite the difference in [their] names, these and the other manifestations do not have different meanings. An intelligent man should worship Me in this way.”⁵⁵

The first part of this passage is devoted to religious practice and seems to refer to both Vaikhānasas and Pāñcarātrikas. Both groups ritually worship God after having installed him on a *maṇḍala* in the shape of a lotus. For this worship, four kinds of mantras are mentioned: the eight-syllable mantra (*aṣṭākṣaramantra*), the twelve-syllable mantra (*dvādaśākṣaramantra*), Vedic mantras, and the Viṣṇusūkta. One could interpret this in the sense that one part of these mantras is used by Pāñcarātrikas, the other part by Vaikhānasas. However, this is not the case. The eight-syllable and twelve-syllable mantras are widespread in Vaiṣṇava traditions in general, and they are used in both traditions, Vaikhānasa and Pāñcarātra.⁵⁶ Less clear is whether the other two kinds of mantras refer to both traditions, or only to Vaikhānasas. Although Vedic mantras and the Viṣṇusūkta (which is also a Vedic mantra) are also used in Pāñcarātra rituals,⁵⁷ they are much more often used in the Vaikhānasa tradition, which, in contradistinction to the early Pāñcarātra, considers itself a Vedic tradition.⁵⁸ We will come back to these mantras below.

A clearer distinction between the two traditions is made regarding the names of the four divine manifestations generally known as Vyūhas. Vaikhānasas call them Puruṣa, Satya, Acyuta, and Aniruddha.⁵⁹ Pāñcarātrikas also

55 VDhŚ_{CE} 1652–1665: *yudhiṣṭhira uvāca: kathaṃ tvam arcaṇīyo `si mūrtayah kīdṛśās tu te | 1652 vaikhānasāḥ kathaṃ brūyuh kathaṃ vā pāñcarātrikāḥ | 1653 bhagavān uvāca: śṛṇu pāñḍava tat sarvaṃ arcaṇākramam ātmanaḥ | 1654 sṭhaṇḍile padmakam kṛtvā cāṣṭapatram sakarṇikam | 1655 aṣṭākṣaravidhānena hy atha vā dvādaśākṣaraiḥ | 1656 vaidikair atha vā mantrair mama sūktena vā punaḥ | 1657 sthāpitam mām tatas tasmim arcaiyitvā vicakṣaṇaḥ | 1658 puruṣaṃ ca tataḥ satyam acyutaṃ ca yudhiṣṭhira | 1659 aniruddhaṃ ca mām prāhur vaikhānasavido janāḥ | 1660 anye tv evaṃ vijānanti mām rājan pāñcarātrikāḥ | 1661 vāsudevaṃ ca rājendra saṃkarṣaṇam athāpi vā | 1662 pradyumnaṃ cāniruddhaṃ ca caturmūrtiṃ pracakṣate | 1663 etās cānyās ca rājendra saṃjñābhedenā mūrtayah | 1664 viddhy anarthāntarā eva mām evaṃ cārcayed budhaḥ | 1665.*

56 See Colas 1996: 228, Rastelli 2023: 231–248.

57 See, e.g., PādS *kriyāpāda* 3.17–21.

58 Many mantras used in Vaikhānasa rituals are from the Vedas; see Colas 1996: 221f.

59 For Vaikhānasa sources on this concept, see Colas 1996: 110–112.

use these names, but more frequently the designations Vāsudeva, Saṃkarṣaṇa, Pradyumna, and Aniruddha.⁶⁰

If we compare this description of Pāñcarātrikas and Vaikhānasas with the description of Bhāgavatas in VDhŚ 3374f. (see p. 11), it is clear that Pāñcarātrikas and Vaikhānasas are to be considered Bhāgavatas, because all three groups use the *dvādaśākṣaramantra* and worship the four Vyūhas. However, it cannot be determined with certainty if there are yet other kinds of Bhāgavatas apart from Pāñcarātrikas and Vaikhānasas.⁶¹

Here a few general remarks on the term *bhāgavata* are appropriate. In South Asian history, this term was used in different contexts and over a long period, as we first see from early evidence in inscriptions, such as the famous inscription from the Bhāgavata Helidorus, ambassador of the Indo-Greek king Antialkidas (c. 130-110 BCE). We should not expect the term *bhāgavata* always to refer to a singular community or movement; it should rather be understood in its literal sense as “belonging to the Venerable One”, referring to a wide range of devotees of the Bhagavat and not necessarily denoting a single tradition.⁶²

In the present paper, the term *bhāgavata* is used in the very limited sense in which it appears and is defined in the texts examined. We must first properly understand the narrower senses the term has in various sources. Only then we can draw connecting lines between these sources and see if some refer to the same group of persons.

Such a connection with the VDhŚ can perhaps be successfully made for Śaṅkara’s *Brahmasūtrabhāṣya*. In the passage that was skipped in the above quotation (p. 10) from this work, Śaṅkara speaks of the Vyūhas as a specific feature of the Bhāgavatas’ teaching. Considering Śaṅkara’s probable lifetime between 650 and 800 CE (see n. 39), which could also be the date of composition of the VDhŚ, it is not impossible that both works refer to the same religious tradition.⁶³

60 For Pāñcarātra sources, see Rastelli 1999: 45–54.

61 A verse that is found in the Southern recension of the MBh, after verse 13.90.25, suggests that there were other Bhāgavatas apart from Pāñcarātrikas and Vaikhānasas. This verse appears in a description of a suitable assembly (*pañkti*) at a *śrāddha* ritual: “(...) the best experts of the Pañcarātra and other (or: the best?) Bhāgavatas, Vaikhānasas of the best families who follow Vedic rules of conduct (...)” (*pañcarātravido mukhyās tathā bhāgavatāḥ pare | vaikhānasāḥ kulaśreṣṭhā vaidikācārāriṇaḥ*).

62 See Colas 2003: 230–233.

63 See, however, Oberhammer 1977/78 and Suthren Hirst 2019, who both show that in *Brahmasūtrabhāṣya* 2.2.42–45 Śaṅkara describes various positions of Bhāgavatas. Thus, the actual situation was more complex.

Mantras

Let us now consider the mantras mentioned in more detail. Mantras often indicate sectarian affiliation. Thus, we may ask whether the four mantra options might refer to four different sub-traditions.

First of all, the VDhŚ does not mention many mantras. One of the reasons for this is that it does not describe many rituals; such descriptions are a major occasion to cite mantras. Apart from the *gāyatrī/sāvitrī*,⁶⁴ one of the most frequently mentioned mantras is *namo brahmaṇyadevāya*.⁶⁵ The phrase *brahmaṇyadeva*, “god fit for brahmins”, is an epithet of Viṣṇu. The use of this name emphasises Viṣṇu’s allegedly close relation to brahmins and gives us information about the work’s authors and target audience, but is not of interest in our present discussion.

Among the few rituals for which specific mantras are cited in the VDhŚ are twilight worship (*sandhyā*), the ritual bath (*snāna*) that is connected with twilight worship, and rituals purifying one from evil deeds. In these rituals, virtually only Vedic mantras are mentioned;⁶⁶ exceptions will be treated below. Thus, devotees using Vedic mantras are represented in these sections of the VDhŚ.

As noted previously, the *dvādaśākṣara-* and *aṣṭākṣaramantra* are widespread and used in both the Pāñcarātra and Vaikhānasa traditions. The *dvādaśākṣaramantra*, which is *oṃ namo bhagavate vāsudevāya*,⁶⁷ is mentioned only thrice in the VDhŚ_{CE}. All three passages have been quoted above;⁶⁸ thus we find no further information about this mantra in the VDhŚ.

The *aṣṭākṣaramantra*, which is *oṃ namo nārāyaṇāya*,⁶⁹ is mentioned five times in the VDhŚ_{CE}.⁷⁰ Four of the five passages that refer to this mantra are absent from the Nepalese manuscript at the point where they would be expected. The fifth passage, i.e., the passage around line 2928, is indeed

64 RV III 62.10: *tāt savitūr vāreṇyam bhārgo devāsya dhīmahi | dhīyo yó naḥ pracodáyāt ||*. On the *gāyatrī* see also below, p. 18.

65 VDhŚ_{CE} 792 (ms. 14v4), 1438 (ms. 32r3f.), 1450 (ms. 33v5), 2896 (ms. 60r5), 2911 (ms. 61r2), 2919, 2936, 2947, 2972 (ms. 66r4), 3172.

66 *sandhyā*: VDhŚ_{CE} 492–524; bath: VDhŚ_{CE} 1515–1622; purifying rituals: VDhŚ_{CE} 2751–2778 (ms. 57r2–57v3, *cāndrāyaṇavidhi*), 3199–3212 (*prāyaścitta*).

67 See, e.g., PādS cp 25.

68 VDhŚ_{CE} 1205 (see p. 7), 1656 (see p. 7), and 3374 (see p. 6). These passages do not seem to appear in the Nepalese manuscript.

69 See, e.g., PādS cp 24.

70 VDhŚ_{CE} 386, 1656 (quoted above), 2928, 3126, 3173.

found in the Nepalese manuscript, but here the *aṣṭākṣaramantra* is not referenced.⁷¹

Two of the five occurrences convey the impression that the *aṣṭākṣaramantra* was intentionally added to passages that actually deal with another mantra, namely, the *gāyatrī*.

We find a parallel version of the first of these passages in the *Viṣṇudharma*.⁷² This follows a section that praises reciting the *gāyatrīmantra* at twilight worship (*sandhyā*). The text continues:⁷³

VDh 51.5–9

yāvantaś ca pṛthivyām hi cīrṇavedavratā dvijāḥ |
acīrṇavratavedā vā vikarmapatham āśritāḥ | 5
teṣāṃ tu pāvanārthaṃ hi nityam eva yudhiṣṭhira |
dve saṃdhye hy upatiṣṭheta tad askannaṃ mahāvratam | 6
nāsti kiṃcin naravyāghra duṣkṛtaṃ brāhmaṇasya tu |
yatra sthitaḥ sadādhyaṭme dve saṃdhye hy upatiṣṭhati | 7
pūrṇāhutiṃ vā prāpnoti juhute ca trayo 'gnayah |
dahanti duṣkṛtaṃ tasya agnayo nātra saṃśayah | 8
evaṃ sarvasya viprasya kilbiṣaṇṇ nirdahāmy aham |
ubhe saṃdhye hy upāsinas tasmāt sarvaśucir dvijaḥ | 9

However many brahmins there are on earth – whether they have observed the observances related to the study of the Veda or be they without an observed observance or the Veda because they have resorted to the path of unlawful acts –, for the purpose of their purification, Yudhiṣṭhira, one⁷⁴ should perform worship daily at both twilights. This is the great observance that does not fail.

71 In VDhŚ_{ms} 61v2–3, lines corresponding to VDhŚ_{CE} 2925–2929 are found, but instead of 2928, a line with different content appears.

72 See Grünendahl 1984: 51.

73 Expressions that have equivalents in the VDhŚ_{CE} are printed in bold. The passages quoted here continue with parallel lines: VDh 51.10–52.2 ≈ VDhŚ_{CE} 390–395. A parallel of VDh 51.1–5 also occurs in VDhŚ_{CE} 492–502 (see Grünendahl 1984: 51), but not in the VDhŚ_{ms}.

74 This passage probably intends to convey that all brahmins, whether they fulfill their duties or not, should worship at twilight in order to purify themselves. The subject of this clause is in the singular, while the subject of the preceding clause is in the plural, but the sentence cannot mean that any person should perform twilight worship in order to purify all brahmins on earth. The reason for the incongruence in number is probably that this sentence was compiled by using verse lines from different sources. Compare the parallel verse in SkandaP VII.1.106.13, which is grammatically correct: “However many brahmins there are

O tiger among men, there are no misdeeds for a brahmin when [he] worships at both twilights, always intent upon the inner self (*adhyātma*),⁷⁵ or [when] he receives (?) and offers a full oblation. The three fires⁷⁶ burn his misdeeds, the fires (?) – there is no doubt.⁷⁷ In this way, I (i.e., God) burn the faults of every brahmin. Therefore, a brahmin who worships at both twilights is entirely pure.

We see that in this version, the *aṣṭākṣaramantra* is not mentioned.⁷⁸ In contrast, it is mentioned in the version of the VDhŚ_{CE}. This version also deals with twilight worship, and uses some of the expressions that occur in the passage just quoted, but puts them in a different context:

VDhŚ_{CE} 382–389

madbhaktā ye naraśreṣṭha madgatā matparāyaṇāḥ | 382

madyājino manniyamās tān prayatnena pūjayet | 383

teṣāṃ tu pāvanāyāhaṃ nityam eva yudhiṣṭhira | 384

ubhe saṃdhye 'pi tiṣṭhāmi hy askannaṃ tad vratam mama | 385

tasmād aṣṭākṣaram mantram madbhaktair vītakalmaṣaiḥ | 386

saṃdhyaḥkāleṣu japtavyaṃ satataṃ cātmaśuddhaye | 387

anyeṣāṃ api viprāṇāṃ kilbiṣaṃ hi praṇasyati | 388

ubhe saṃdhye 'py upāsīta tasmād vipro viśuddhaye | 389

O best of men, one should zealously worship those who are My devotees, who have approached Me, of whom I am the final aim, who worship Me, who have Me as a restriction. In order to purify them, Yudhiṣṭhira, I am always present at both twilights. This is My observance that does not fail. Therefore, at twilight hour, My devotees who are free from faults should always recite the eight-syllable mantra to purify themselves. For other brahmins, too, faults are destroyed [by this]. Therefore, a brahmin should worship for the purpose of purification at both twilights.

on earth – whether they have observed the observances related to the study of the Veda or be they without an observed observance or the Veda, all these brahmins have to be worshipped, my dear.” (*yāvaṃtaḥ pṛthivīmadhye cīrṇavedavratā dvijāḥ | acīrṇavratavedā vā te 'pi pūjyā dvijāḥ priye* ||).

75 For this meaning of the term *adhyātman*, see VDh 40.46–47. The term also occurs in VDh 52.15 and 102.31.

76 According to Grünendahl (1984: 16), these are the three fires of the *agnihotra*. The *agnihotra* ritual follows the *sandhyā*; see Srinivasan 1973: 167.

77 This sentence, too, seems to be corrupt.

78 It is not mentioned in any other passage of the VDh either.

This passage differs from that in the VDh in several respects. First of all, it does not start with brahmins in general, as the VDh passage does, but with Viṣṇu's devotees, who are purified during twilight worship. Only at the end does the passage extend its statement also to brahmins in general (a strategy we have already observed above; see p. 11). Then Viṣṇu, who speaks in this passage, gives a reason why twilight worship is purifying: it is because He is present at this time. And because of this presence of God, the *aṣṭākṣaramantra*, which is a manifestation of Him, should be recited during the *sandhyā* ritual.⁷⁹

This is remarkable because the mantra that is traditionally recited during this widespread ritual is the *gāyatrī*.⁸⁰ In other passages of the VDhŚ, too, the *gāyatrī* is often prescribed for *sandhyā* worship, even if it is often a specific *gāyatrī*, namely, Viṣṇu's *gāyatrī*.⁸¹ As noted above, the VDh passage appears in the context of a praise of the *gāyatrī*. In the VDhŚ, however, the *aṣṭākṣaramantra* is deliberately mentioned instead of the *gāyatrīmantra*. This results in quite a peculiar form of twilight worship, which perhaps was practised by a particular group of Bhāgavatas instead of reciting the *gāyatrī* or the *viṣṇugāyatrī*.

We find a comparable situation in a second passage mentioning the *aṣṭākṣaramantra*. The topic of this passage is again the *gāyatrī*. Yudhiṣṭhira asks how the *gāyatrī* can be known and what its reward is. In His reply, however, God mentions not only the *gāyatrī*, but also the *aṣṭākṣaramantra*. This seems inappropriate considering Yudhiṣṭhira's question, but clearly serves to present the additional option of using the *aṣṭākṣaramantra* for purposes for which the *gāyatrī* is usually employed.

79 There is a similar notion in connection with the *gāyatrī* in the *Atharvavedapariśiṣṭas*: "When the sun has half sunk, when the sun has half risen – there the Gāyatrī is present, that is called the time of the juncture(/twilight)." AVPar XLI 4.1: *ardhāstamita ādītye ardhodite divākare | gāyatrīyās tatra sāmṇidhyam samdhyākālāḥ sa ucyate ||* (quoted and translated in Haas 2023: 246 n. 1037). Compare also AVPar XLI 3.10 with the above-quoted passages.

80 Cf., e.g., Kane 1941: 313f.

81 VDhŚ_{CE} 492–495, 1515–1604, 2751–2779 (2778: *gāyatrīm mama*; ms. 57r2–57v3: *gāyatrīm vā japet ...*), 2954–2958 (2955: *madgāyatrī*), 2971 (*madgāyatrī*; ms. 66r4: *gāyatrīm vaiṣṇavīm ...*). The *viṣṇugāyatrī* is a Vaiṣṇava version of the Vedic *gāyatrī*. The VDhŚ does not disclose the wording of this mantra. There are several versions of the *viṣṇugāyatrī*. The *Jayākhyasamhitā* (JS 7.104–106), for example, teaches the *viṣṇugāyatrī* as follows: *om viśvarūpāya vidmahe viśvātītāya dhīmahi tan no viṣṇuḥ pracodayāt*. According to Srinivasa Chari (1994: 132 and 151, n. 3), it is the following verse from the *Mahānārāyaṇopaniṣad*: *nārāyaṇāya vidmahe vāsudevāya dhīmahi tan no viṣṇuḥ pracodayāt* (MNU 78).

Yudhiṣṭhira spoke: “Tell me, o Lord of The Gods, how can men understand the *gāyatrī*, o Venerable One? Or what is its reward, o God?”

The Venerable One spoke: “O King, having recited My *gāyatrī* or the eight-syllable [mantra] on a twelfth lunar day, on an equinoctial day, at a lunar or solar eclipse, on a solstitial day, under the *śravaṇa* constellation, at the *vyatīpāta*[*yoga*],⁸² when one sees an *aśvattha* tree, and also when one sees Me, one doubtless removes the misdeeds one has acquired.⁸³

The remaining two of the five occurrences of the *aṣṭākṣaramantra* are in the context of ablutions at dawn, noon, and sunset (*triṣavaṇa*) and of an expiation ritual (*prāyaścitta*) (VDhŚ_{CE} 2928, 3173). Both are purifying rituals for which the *gāyatrī* would also have been a suitable option.⁸⁴

It is interesting that when we search for the Viṣṇusūkta⁸⁵ – the last kind of mantra named in the passage describing the worship of Vaikhānasas and Pāñcarātrikas – we also find it in contexts in which the *gāyatrī* appears.

Apart from the passage describing the Vaikhānasas’ and Pāñcarātrikas’ practices, the VDhŚ_{CE} mentions the Viṣṇusūkta twice.⁸⁶ The first of these passages again occurs in regulations for *sandhyā* worship. In contrast to the passages mentioning the *aṣṭākṣaramantra*, the Viṣṇusūkta is here not an alternative to the *gāyatrī*, but it should be recited in addition to it and along with several other Vedic mantras:

82 The *vyatīpāta* occurs when sun and moon are in parallel declinations, but in opposite courses; see Böhtlingk/Roth 1871 s.v.

83 VDhŚ_{CE} 3121–3127: *yudhiṣṭhira uvāca: bhagavaṃs tava gāyatrī budhyate tu katham nṛbhiḥ | 3121 kiṃ vā tasyāḥ phalaṃ deva mamācakṣva sureśvara | 3122 bhagavān uvāca: dvādaśyām viṣuve caiva candrasūryagrahe tathā | 3123 ayane śravaṇe caiva vyatīpāte tathaiva ca | 3124 aśvatthadarśane caiva tathā maddarśane ’pi ca | 3125 japtvā tu mama gāyatrīm atha vāṣṭākṣaram nṛpa | 3126 āṛjitam duṣkṛtam tasya nāśayen nātra samśayaḥ | 3127*. This passage does not seem to appear in the Nepalese manuscript.

84 See Haas 2023: 165.

85 It is not completely clear what the Viṣṇusūkta is. According to Gonda (1979), the Viṣṇusūkta is hymn RV I 154, one of the few Ṛgvedic hymns dedicated to Viṣṇu. However, it is sometimes a combination of several Ṛgvedic verses dedicated to Viṣṇu. Olivelle (1987: 15, n. 14) mentions a version of the Viṣṇusūkta consisting of RV I 154.1–4, I 22.19–20, and I 22.18–19 (?), and says that another version is found in the *Nityanaimittikakarmasamuccayaḥ*. According to Hüsken (2009: 87, n. 241), the Viṣṇusūkta consists of RV I 154.1; I 154.5.1–2; I 154.2; VII 99.1; VII 100.4; and VII 100.3.

86 A third passage (VDhŚ_{CE} 1549) mentions hymns (*sūkta*) devoted to Viṣṇu, Varuṇa, Savitṛ, and Indra in general, but not the Viṣṇusūkta in particular. None of these passages is found in the Nepalese manuscript.

(...) Then he should raise his arms and look attentively at the sun. He should visualise Me in the [sun's] disc, with a four-armed fiery manifestation. He should recite the *mantra ud u tyam*⁸⁷ in addition to *citraṃ*⁸⁸ [and] *taccakṣuḥ*.⁸⁹ Having recited the *sāvitrī* to the best of one's ability as well as My *sūkta*, the *sāma* verses devoted to Me, and the *puruṣavrata*,⁹⁰ he should then look at the sun while [reciting] the *ṛc* verse *hamsaḥ śuciśad*.⁹¹ (...)⁹²

The second passage follows the prescriptions for an expiation ritual (*prāyaścitta*). In this ritual, the *gāyatrī* and several other Vedic mantras are recited. After concluding this passage, at the very end of the chapter, a final verse is added:

One who directs his mind towards Me and constantly recites My *sūkta* is not stained by any evil act, just as a lotus leaf is not stained by water.⁹³

Here, too, the last two lines seem to have been added as an alternative to the *gāyatrī* recitation.

Overall, the evidence of the various kinds of mantras in the VDhŚ is too scarce to decide whether these references indicate the existence of various traditions that each used one of these specific mantras. A few passages, however, show that on occasions when the *gāyatrīmantra* was more typically recited,

87 RV I 50.1: *úd u tyám jātávedasaṃ devám vahanti ketávaḥ | dṛśé víśvāya sūryam* ||, a hymn devoted to Sūrya, the sun.

88 RV I 115.1: *citrám devānám úd agād ánīkaṃ cákṣur mitráśya váruṇasyāgnéḥ | cákṣur mitráśya váruṇasyāgnéḥ | āprā dyāvāpṛthivī antárikṣaṃ sūrya átmá jágatas tasthúśa ca* ||, another verse devoted to Sūrya.

89 RV VII 66.16: *tác cákṣur deváhitaṃ śukráṃ uccárat | páśyema śarádaḥ śatám jívema śarádaḥ śatám* ||, again a verse devoted to Sūrya.

90 Two Vedic passages are designated as *puruṣavrata*: RV IV 31.1 and RV X 90.1–5 (Quillet 2015: 271). The first verse belongs to a hymn devoted to Indra; the second passage is the beginning of the famous *Puruṣasūkta*. The cosmic man (*puruṣa*) described there is often identified with Nārāyaṇa (Preciado-Solis 1984: 6f.), who in turn is identified with Viṣṇu. As the other mantras mentioned in this sentence of the VDhŚ_{CE} are devoted to Viṣṇu, it is probably the beginning of the *Puruṣasūkta* that is meant here.

91 RV IV 40.5: *hamsáḥ śuciśád vásur antárikṣasád dhótá vediśád átithir duroṇasát | nṛśád varasád ṛtasád vyomasád abjā gojá ṛtajá adrijá ṛtám* ||, again a verse devoted to Sūrya.

92 VDhŚ_{CE} 1574–1579: *ūrdhvaḥus tato bhūtvā sūryam ikṣet samāhitaḥ | 1574 tanmaṇḍalasthaṃ māṃ dhyāyet tejomūrtiliṃ caturbhujam | 1575 ud u tyam ca japen mantram citram taccakṣur ity api | 1576 sāvitriṃ ca yathāśakti japtvā sūktaṃ ca māmakam | 1577 manmayāni ca sāmāni puruṣavratam eva ca | 1578 tatas cālokayed arkaṃ hamsaḥ śuciśad ity ṛcā | 1579.*

93 VDhŚ_{CE} 3211–3212: *mama sūktaṃ japed yas tu nityam madgatamānasaḥ | 3211 na pāpena tu lipyeta padmapatram ivāmbhasā | 3212.*

such as *sandhyā* worship, *prāyaścittas*, or other purifying rituals, Vaiṣṇava mantras are considered valid options on the same par. In this way, too, the text seems to try to extend its validity as far as possible, to a wide variety of Vaiṣṇava traditions.

Conclusion

Apart from giving a general overview of the content of the VDhŚ, the aim of this paper was to investigate the religious environment in which the VDhŚ was composed and the audience it targeted. We asked whether the VDhŚ addresses one or more specific Vaiṣṇava communities or Vaiṣṇavas in general, and we wanted to know about the specific religious practices of such group(s).

Although the term *vaiṣṇava* appears in the title of the VDhŚ, it does not designate a specific group of people in the work itself. Instead, we encounter a group called “Bhāgavatas” already in the frame narrative of the work.

Comparing the frame story with the parallel version in the *Viṣṇudharma* has helped us to realise the significance of the term *bhāgavata* for the VDhŚ. In the version of the VDhŚ found in the critical edition of the MBh, the term appears at crucial points in the narrative, whereas it does not appear at all in the parallel passages of the VDh.⁹⁴

Few of the passages relevant to the investigation undertaken in this paper have been transmitted in the Nepalese manuscript of the VDhŚ. We might therefore conclude that the emphasis on Bhāgavatas is a peculiarity of the South Indian manuscripts, resulting from a revision of the VDhŚ by a Bhāgavata redactor who was either a South Indian himself, or who reworked the manuscript that found its way to South India and there became the prototype for further transmission. However, the only passage in the Nepalese manuscript in which Bhāgavatas are very clearly part of Yudhiṣṭhira’s assembly shows that the matter is not that simple. Bhāgavatas are not completely absent from the Nepalese manuscript. Could it be the other way round, namely, that attempts were made in Nepal to erase the traces of the Bhāgavatas? At the present state of knowledge, we cannot ascertain the historical processes at hand. Comparing late South Indian manuscripts with a single Nepalese manuscript

94 The term *bhāgavata* in the VDh would deserve its own study. Interestingly, here it appears only in very few chapters, and the main point here is to become a Bhāgavata; see VDh3.14–38, 79.22–25, 80.31, 82.76.

from the eleventh century is like comparing apples with oranges, so to speak. More evidence is needed in order to draw valid conclusions.

A further search for Bhāgavatas in the VDhŚ unearthed divergent strategies. On the one hand, the definition of a Bhāgavata is broadened to include also those who practise Vedic rituals instead of the *pañcakāla* rites characteristic of Bhāgavatas, if they are devoted solely to Viṣṇu. On the other hand, the persons worthy of receiving donations are narrowed down to those having the features of Bhāgavatas. This strategy of widening and narrowing down definitions is observed also in other contexts in the VDhŚ, such as in the passage prescribing the *aṣṭākṣaramantra* for twilight worship, but also when the terms brahmin and *śūdra* are redefined.

The passage describing the characteristic features of Vaikhānasas and Pāñcarātrikas introduces us to distinct groups of Bhāgavatas who use various mantras for their ritual worship of God. The VDhŚ is limited in the information it provides about these mantras, and the Nepalese manuscript again lacks these passages. We can, however, observe the VDhŚ_{CE}'s attempt to integrate several kinds of religious practices, and thus probably several kinds of Vaiṣṇava communities, by proclaiming the use of various typically Vaiṣṇava mantras for purposes for which usually the Vedic *gāyatrīmantra* is used, while the *gāyatrīmantra* itself can also be employed as a matter of course.

The VDhŚ_{CE} thus, on the one hand, addresses very specific Vaiṣṇava communities but, on the other, also attempts to expand its intended audience and to present itself as being valid also for a broader public.

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