

Preface

Viṣṇu is a central deity in the Hindu pantheon, especially in his manifestation as the seductive cattleherding youth, Kṛṣṇa. The purāṇas are a genre of sacred texts, which, as the Sanskrit name implies, are collections of narratives from ‘long ago’. The *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* is thus an ancient account of the universe and a guide to life, which places Viṣṇu–Kṛṣṇa at the centre of creation, theology and reality itself.

This text, composed about 1,500 years ago, provides a comprehensive and accessible introduction to the most important themes and narratives that constitute the Hindu imagination: the cyclical creation and destruction of the universe, the origin of gods and mortals, the peopling of the world and the structure and conduct of ideal brahminical society.

The *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* describes the trials of exemplary devotees, the existential struggles between gods and demons and the exploits of legendary cultural heroes. It also contains many ecstatic songs of praise for the deity. The ever-popular accounts of Kṛṣṇa’s love games with the cattle-herding girls of Vṛṇḍāvana—which have proliferated in literature, dance, song and visual arts over the millennia—are found here in authoritative form.

This introduction provides background information to help non-specialist readers understand, appreciate and, most importantly, enjoy the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa*. It begins by describing the purāṇas as a genre, noting the difficulty of assigning specific dates and authors to individual texts. This is followed by an outline of the relationship between the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* and other master texts of the Sanskrit archive.

I then outline the theology of the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa*, describing the place of the deity in the Hindu pantheon, along with his *avatāras*—his physical manifestations who have ‘crossed down’ into the world—including Kṛṣṇa.

To assist readers in navigating the purāṇic thought-world, the various classes of divine, semi-divine and mortal beings that inhabit these accounts are described.

I will briefly discuss the different elements that make up the text, beginning with the overall framing narrative, the verse and prose sections, the embedded subnarratives, the extensive genealogical lists and the all-important songs of praise.

The *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* is divided into six parts (*aṃśa*) or books, which I have labelled for convenience: ‘Creation’, ‘The World’, ‘Society’, ‘The Dynasties’, ‘Kṛṣṇa’ and ‘Dissolution’. Each book is summarised to provide the reader with a convenient overview of the entire work. I conclude this introduction with a few notes on the various Sanskrit versions of the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa*, earlier translations and an explanation of how I approached some of the dilemmas faced by every translator, especially those working with Sanskrit texts.

Specialist readers, and indeed non-specialists who do not like reading introductions, may prefer to jump straight into the translation itself. For those encountering this style of narrative for the first time, there are several easy entry points. These include the story of the demon prince Prahlāda, who wins liberation (1.16–20); the story of Saubhari, a sage who lived underwater and used his magic powers to marry 50 sisters but ended up with more problems than he could handle (4.2); and the story of how Kṛṣṇa subdued the serpent Kāliya, who lived in the Yamunā River (5.7).¹

1 References to the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* are given in the form of book and chapter numbers or book, chapter and verse numbers.

This text is taken from *The Viṣṇu Purāṇa: Ancient Annals of the God with Lotus Eyes*, translated from the Sanskrit by McComas Taylor, published 2021 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.