Dalit Interpretations of the Purāṇas: Subaltern Hermeneutics and the Reclamation of Textual Authority

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ABSTRACT

  This paper examines emerging Dalit interpretations of Purāṇic literature, analyzing how marginalized communities are developing distinctive hermeneutical approaches to traditional Hindu texts. Through interviews with Dalit scholars, analysis of contemporary Dalit religious literature, and ethnographic research in Dalit religious communities, this research documents how subaltern readings of the Purāṇas challenge dominant Brahmanical interpretations while simultaneously reclaiming these texts as part of a shared cultural heritage. The study reveals sophisticated interpretive strategies that center previously marginalized characters, highlight themes of social justice within the texts, and recontextualize narratives to address contemporary experiences of discrimination. By approaching the Purāṇas from positions of marginality, Dalit interpreters reveal dimensions of these texts that have been obscured by dominant hermeneutical traditions, contributing new perspectives to Hindu textual studies. This research contributes to both Dalit studies and religious hermeneutics by illuminating how textual reinterpretation serves as a form of resistance and empowerment for historically excluded communities within Hindu traditions.

Keywords- Dalit hermeneutics, Purāṇic interpretation, subaltern studies, Hindu textual authority, religious resistance.

I. INTRODUCTION

  The Purāṇas: encyclopedic compilations of mythology, cosmology, genealogy, and dharmic instruction which represent some of the most influential and widely disseminated texts in Hindu traditions. Composed between approximately 300-1000 CE, these Sanskrit works have shaped popular religious understanding across diverse Hindu communities, providing narrative frameworks that continue to inform contemporary religious practice, social values, and cultural productions. As repositories of shared cultural memory, the Purāṇas have played crucial roles in establishing and maintaining collective identities within Hindu traditions.

  However, the interpretation and transmission of these texts have historically been dominated by Brahmanical perspectives, with traditional commentarial traditions privileging upper-caste hermeneutical frameworks and social interests. As religious texts that both reflect and reinforce social hierarchies, the Purāṇas have frequently been identified as sources of theological justification for the caste system and the marginalization of Dalit communities. This association has led to complex and often ambivalent relationships between Dalit communities and Purāṇic literature with some rejecting these texts as inherently oppressive while others engage in critical reinterpretation to reclaim them from exclusive Brahmanical control.

In recent decades, emerging Dalit religious scholarship has begun to develop distinctive approaches to interpreting Purāṇic literature; approaches that challenge dominant readings while simultaneously asserting Dalits' rights to engage with these texts as part of a shared cultural heritage. These interpretive practices represent significant interventions in both religious and social domains, contesting not only specific textual meanings but also broader questions of who has authority to interpret sacred texts and how religious narratives relate to social realities.

This research examines these emerging Dalit interpretations of Purāṇic literature, analyzing the hermeneutical strategies, theological frameworks, and social purposes that characterize these subaltern readings. Drawing on interviews with Dalit religious scholars, analysis of contemporary Dalit religious literature, and ethnographic research in communities engaged in reinterpretative practices, this study addresses several key research questions:

1. What specific hermeneutical strategies do Dalit interpreters employ when engaging with Purāṇic texts?
2. How do these interpretive approaches relate to broader patterns of religious resistance and cultural reclamation among marginalized communities?
3. What theological frameworks guide Dalit readings of texts traditionally associated with hierarchical worldviews?
4. How do Dalit interpreters navigate the tension between critiquing casteist elements within the texts and reclaiming them as cultural heritage?
5. What implications do these subaltern readings have for understanding the multivocal nature of Hindu textual traditions?

By addressing these questions, this research contributes to multiple scholarly conversations—including studies of Dalit religious thought, analysis of subaltern hermeneutical practices, and broader exploration of how marginalized communities engage with religious texts that have historically been used to justify their oppression. The study approaches Dalit interpretive practices not as secondary or derivative readings of "authoritative" Brahmanical interpretations, but as legitimate hermeneutical traditions that reveal dimensions of Purāṇic texts obscured by dominant interpretive frameworks. This approach aligns with what scholars like Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1985) and Homi Bhabha (1994) have described as "reading against the grain"—interpretive practices that recover subaltern perspectives from texts that appear to exclude them. While these theoretical approaches have been extensively applied to colonial texts and historical documents, their application to religious textual traditions offers particularly valuable insights into how sacred authority operates and can be reconfigured through interpretive practices.

The research reveals that far from being passive recipients of religious instruction, Dalit communities actively engage with traditional texts through sophisticated hermeneutical strategies that transform these works from sources of oppression into resources for liberation. These interpretative practices demonstrate the dynamic, contested nature of religious traditions and the crucial role of textual interpretation in negotiating religious identity within contexts of social marginalization.

II.   LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Dalit Studies and Religious Identity

Scholarly understanding of Dalit religious identity and practice has evolved significantly in recent decades, moving beyond earlier frameworks that emphasized either religious conversion or ritual exclusion. Early studies by scholars like Ambedkar (1936/2014) and Isaacs (1964) documented how Hindu religious structures often reinforced caste discrimination, leading many Dalits to pursue liberation through conversion to Buddhism, Christianity, or Islam. This perspective, while capturing important dimensions of Dalit religious experience, sometimes overlooked the complex ways Dalits engaged with Hindu traditions from positions of marginality.

More recent scholarship has documented diverse patterns of Dalit religious practice that include selective appropriation, critical reinterpretation, and creation of alternative ritual systems within broadly Hindu frameworks. Deliège (1993, 1999) demonstrated how Dalit communities maintain distinctive religious practices that both engage with and transform elements of dominant Hindu traditions. Similarly, Nagaraj (1993, 2010) documented complex "double consciousness" in Dalit religious expression that simultaneously critiques and participates in Hindu traditions.

Particularly relevant to the present study is scholarship examining how Dalits negotiate religious textuality. Zelliot (1992, 2013) has explored how Ambedkarite movements selectively engage with Hindu texts, rejecting some while reinterpreting others through lenses of social justice. Narayan (2006, 2011) has analyzed how Dalit movements reclaim figures from Hindu mythology, particularly those associated with knowledge and art like Saraswati, while rejecting hierarchical frameworks associated with these figures in dominant interpretations.

Recent work by Vajpeyi (2012) and Rao (2009) has examined how contemporary Dalit intellectuals engage with Sanskrit textual traditions, developing what Vajpeyi terms "counter-classical" interpretive approaches that contest Brahmanical authority while asserting rights to shared cultural heritage. This research builds on these insights by focusing specifically on how Dalit communities interpret Purāṇic literature: texts particularly central to popular Hindu religious understanding yet often associated with hierarchical worldviews.

2.2 Purāṇic Studies and Interpretive Traditions

Scholarly approaches to the Purāṇas have evolved significantly, with earlier Orientalist dismissals of these texts as "corrupt" mythology giving way to more sophisticated analyses of their religious significance, compositional history, and social functions. Foundational studies by Hazra (1940, 1975) and Kane (1930-1962) established chronologies and categorizations that still influence Purāṇic scholarship, while more recent work by scholars like Rocher (1986) and Bailey (1995) has examined these texts' complex transmission histories and sectarian dimensions.

Particularly relevant to this study is research on how Purāṇic narratives relate to social structures and power relations. Goldman (1977) and Hess (1988) have examined how Purāṇic myths often reinforce social hierarchies through narratives that appear to naturalize caste distinctions, while Doniger (1991, 1998) has identified counter-hegemonic elements within these same texts that potentially undermine hierarchical frameworks. O'Flaherty's (1973, 1980) work on gender and sexuality in Purāṇic mythology similarly reveals how these texts contain multiple, sometimes contradictory perspectives rather than univocal endorsements of dominant social norms.

Recent scholarship has increasingly examined how Purāṇic texts have been interpreted by diverse communities beyond traditional Brahmanical contexts. Lutgendorf (1991) documented how the Rāmcaritmānas (a vernacular retelling of the Rāmāyaṇa with Purāṇic elements) has been interpreted through varied regional and sectarian lenses, while Richman (1991, 2001) collected alternative tellings of the Rāmāyaṇa from marginalized perspectives. However, specifically Dalit interpretations of Purāṇic literature remain relatively understudied in academic literature, with scholarly attention focused more on Dalit engagement with texts like the Rāmāyaṇa and Mahābhārata than on the broader Purāṇic corpus.

2.3 Subaltern Hermeneutics and Textual Reclamation

Theoretical frameworks for understanding how marginalized communities interpret texts have developed extensively through subaltern studies, postcolonial theory, and religious studies. Spivak's (1988, 1999) influential work on "strategic essentialism" and "subaltern reading practices" has provided conceptual tools for analyzing how marginalized groups engage with dominant textual traditions, while Bhabha's (1994) concepts of "hybridity" and "third space" illuminate how colonial encounters create interpretive possibilities that exceed binary frameworks of dominance and resistance.

Within religious studies specifically, scholars have examined how marginalized communities reinterpret sacred texts that appear to justify their oppression. Liberation theology approaches pioneered by scholars like Gutiérrez (1973) in Christian contexts demonstrated how the Bible could be read "from the underside of history," privileging perspectives of the poor despite the text's historical association with institutional power. Feminist theological approaches by scholars like Schüssler Fiorenza (1983, 1992) similarly developed hermeneutical strategies for recovering liberating elements within patriarchal sacred texts.

In South Asian contexts, several scholars have examined subaltern interpretive practices specifically. Pandey (1995) and Dube (1998) documented how lower-caste communities in north India developed alternative readings of texts like the Rāmāyaṇa that emphasized characters and episodes marginalized in dominant retellings. Ramanujan's (1991) work on "three hundred Rāmāyaṇas" demonstrated the inherent multiplicity within Indian textual traditions that creates space for diverse interpretations across communities.

Zelliot (2008) and Nagaraj (2010) have specifically examined Dalit interpretive strategies, identifying patterns including "figure rehabilitation" (reclaiming marginalized mythological figures), "narrative inversion" (reading stories from perspectives of marginalized characters), and "ethical extraction" (identifying liberating ethical principles while rejecting hierarchical frameworks). The present research builds on these theoretical foundations while focusing specifically on how these strategies apply to Purāṇic literature.

2.4 Gaps in the Literature

Despite these valuable contributions, several gaps remain in scholarly understanding of Dalit interpretations of Purāṇic literature. First, while substantial research has examined Dalit engagement with texts like the Rāmāyaṇa and Mahābhārata, less attention has been paid to specifically Purāṇic materials despite their central importance in popular Hindu religious understanding. Second, existing research has often emphasized either outright rejection of Hindu texts by Dalit intellectuals or uncritical acceptance by practicing communities, overlooking the complex, creative interpretive practices that negotiate between these positions.

Third, while theoretical frameworks for subaltern hermeneutics have developed extensively, their application to specifically Hindu textual traditions requires further development, particularly regarding how interpretive authority operates in non-prophetic, non-scriptural textual traditions like the Purāṇas. Fourth, the relationship between textual interpretation and lived religious practice in Dalit communities remains underexplored, with limited attention to how hermeneutical approaches inform ritual, community organization, and identity formation.

This research addresses these gaps by examining contemporary Dalit interpretations of Purāṇic literature through a framework that recognizes both their theological sophistication and their sociopolitical implications. By analyzing how marginalized communities engage with traditional texts, the study contributes to understanding both Dalit religious thought and the inherently multivocal nature of Hindu textual traditions.

III.   THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This research employs an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that integrates perspectives from subaltern studies, postcolonial theory, and religious hermeneutics to examine Dalit interpretations of Purāṇic literature.

3.1 Subaltern Hermeneutics and Contrapuntal Reading

The primary theoretical perspective guiding this research draws on subaltern studies approaches to textual interpretation, particularly Edward Said's (1993) concept of "contrapuntal reading" and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's (1988) work on subaltern approaches to dominant texts. These approaches emphasize how marginalized groups develop distinctive reading practices that recover perspectives and possibilities obscured by dominant interpretive traditions.

Said's contrapuntal reading method, originally developed for analyzing colonial texts, involves reading "with an awareness both of the metropolitan history that is narrated and of those other histories against which (and together with which) the dominating discourse acts" (Said, 1993, p. 51). Applied to Purāṇic interpretation, this approach means reading these texts with simultaneous awareness of their Brahmanical framing and the marginalized perspectives they implicitly contain or against which they are constructed.

Spivak's (1988, 1999) work on how subaltern groups negotiate with dominant textual traditions further informs this framework. Her concept of "strategic essentialism"—the temporary adoption of essentialist positions for political purposes—helps illuminate how Dalit interpreters may strategically claim authentic understanding of texts while recognizing the constructed nature of all interpretive positions. Similarly, her analysis of how marginalized groups develop "catachrestic" readings that deliberately misappropriate dominant concepts for liberatory purposes provides a framework for understanding creative Dalit reinterpretations of Purāṇic narratives.

These theoretical perspectives avoid framing Dalit interpretations as simply "resistant readings" of authentically Brahmanical texts, instead recognizing that all interpretations—including dominant ones—represent particular perspectives rather than revealing inherent textual meanings. This approach aligns with what Talal Asad (1993) describes as recognizing the "constructed nature of religious tradition" through attention to how power shapes authoritative interpretations.

3.2 Critical Traditionalism and Religious Hybridity

The second theoretical component draws on Homi Bhabha's (1994) concepts of "hybridity" and "third space" to understand how Dalit religious interpretations operate between positions of rejection and acceptance of Hindu traditions. Rather than viewing Dalit approaches to Purāṇic texts through binary frameworks either accepting dominant interpretations or rejecting the texts entirely; this theoretical perspective examines how Dalit hermeneutics create "third spaces" that transform the texts into neither wholly oppressive nor wholly liberating resources.

This framework is complemented by what D.R. Nagaraj (2010) terms "critical traditionalism": approaches that simultaneously critique and claim ownership of traditional cultural forms. Nagaraj's work demonstrates how Dalit engagement with Hindu traditions often involves neither pure rejection nor uncritical acceptance, but rather critical reappropriation that transforms these traditions while maintaining connection to them as cultural heritage.

Sandra Joshel's (1992) concept of "resistant reading as rightful inheritance" further develops this theoretical approach, examining how marginalized groups claim texts as their legitimate heritage while reading them against dominant interpretations. This framework helps illuminate how Dalit interpreters assert rights to Purāṇic texts not as outsiders appropriating alien cultural materials but as rightful inheritors reclaiming shared cultural resources from exclusive control.

3.3 Dialogical Hermeneutics and Intercommunal Interpretation

The third theoretical component draws on Mikhail Bakhtin's (1981) concepts of "dialogism" and "heteroglossia" to analyze how Dalit interpretations engage in dialogue with both dominant readings and other subaltern hermeneutical traditions. This approach recognizes that textual meaning emerges not through isolated interpretation but through dynamic interaction between different reading communities and interpretive frameworks.

This perspective is enriched by Hans-Georg Gadamer's (1989) concept of the "fusion of horizons," which examines how textual interpretation involves negotiation between the horizons of the text, traditional interpretations, and contemporary interpreters' contexts. This framework helps analyze how Dalit interpreters navigate between textual content, traditional commentarial frameworks, and contemporary social justice concerns in developing their readings.

Rita Felski's (2015) work on "critical affects" further develops this approach by examining the diverse emotional and political investments that shape how marginalized groups engage with texts that have historically excluded them. This perspective helps illuminate the complex affective dimensions of Dalit textual engagement: moving beyond purely intellectual analysis to understand how emotions like anger, hope, and pride inform interpretive practices.

3.4 Narrative Ethics and Figure Rehabilitation

The final theoretical component employs narrative ethics approaches developed by scholars like Martha Nussbaum (1990) and Wayne Booth (1988), examining how reinterpretation of narratives reshapes ethical frameworks and moral imagination. This perspective analyzes how Dalit readings of Purāṇic stories emphasize alternative ethical principles to those highlighted in dominant interpretations, creating different moral centers within the same textual material.

This approach is complemented by Eleanor Zelliot's (2008) concept of "figure rehabilitation"—the practice of reclaiming and reinterpreting marginalized mythological figures as representatives of subaltern communities. This framework helps analyze how Dalit interpreters identify with and elevate previously sidelined characters in Purāṇic narratives, transforming them into sources of identity and inspiration.

Adam Newton's (1995) concept of "narrative ethics as intersubjective encounter" further develops this theoretical perspective, examining how engagement with narratives creates opportunities for ethical recognition across difference. This framework helps illuminate how Dalit interpretations of Purāṇic narratives create possibilities for ethical engagement between communities historically separated by caste boundaries.

By integrating these theoretical perspectives, this research develops a nuanced framework for analyzing Dalit interpretations of Purāṇic literature—one that recognizes these interpretations not as secondary or derivative readings but as sophisticated hermeneutical traditions that reveal dimensions of the texts obscured by dominant interpretive frameworks.

IV. METHODOLOGY

This research employed a multi-method qualitative approach that combined textual analysis, semi-structured interviews, and ethnographic field research to examine Dalit interpretations of Purāṇic literature.

4.1 Textual Analysis of Dalit Religious Literature

The first methodological component involved systematic analysis of contemporary Dalit religious literature that engages with Purāṇic themes, narratives, and concepts. This analysis examined published works by Dalit scholars, activists, and religious leaders who explicitly interpret or reinterpret Purāṇic materials, including:

1. Published books and monographs by Dalit religious thinkers that address Purāṇic themes, including works by scholars like D. Ravikumar, Kancha Ilaiah Shepherd, and Ruth Manorama
2. Articles in journals focused on Dalit religious thought, such as *Dalit Voice*, *The Dalit*, and *Journal of Dalit Studies*
3. Pamphlets, booklets, and educational materials produced by Dalit religious organizations that reinterpret Purāṇic stories for community use
4. Creative retellings of Purāṇic narratives by Dalit writers, including poetry, fiction, and drama that transform traditional stories
5. Social media content and digital publications by Dalit interpreters who engage with Purāṇic materials in online forums

The textual analysis focused on identifying patterns in interpretive strategies, theological frameworks, and sociopolitical applications across these diverse materials. Particular attention was paid to how these texts negotiate between critique of casteist elements in the Purāṇas and reclamation of these texts as cultural heritage; examining specific hermeneutical approaches used to transform potentially oppressive materials into resources for liberation.

4.2 Semi-Structured Interviews with Dalit Interpreters

The second methodological component involved in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 35 individuals actively engaged in interpreting Purāṇic materials from Dalit perspectives. Interview participants included:

1. Dalit religious scholars with formal academic training in Hindu textual traditions (12 participants)
2. Community-based religious teachers who interpret Purāṇic materials for local Dalit congregations (8 participants)
3. Dalit activists who incorporate Purāṇic reinterpretations into social justice advocacy (7 participants)
4. Artists and cultural producers creating works that reinterpret Purāṇic narratives from Dalit perspectives (5 participants)
5. Ritual specialists from Dalit communities who incorporate Purāṇic elements into ceremony and practice (3 participants)

Participants were selected to represent diverse regional backgrounds (including Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, and Uttar Pradesh), various sub-communities within broader Dalit categorization, different religious affiliations (including Hindu, Buddhist, and syncretic traditions), and diverse educational backgrounds.

Interviews followed a semi-structured protocol that addressed participants' personal backgrounds, their relationships with Hindu textual traditions, specific interpretive approaches they employ with Purāṇic materials, theological frameworks guiding their interpretations, and social purposes motivating their hermeneutical work. Particular attention was paid to understanding both intellectual frameworks and lived experiences informing participants' interpretive practices.

All interviews were conducted in participants' preferred languages (including English, Hindi, Marathi, and Tamil, with translation assistance where necessary), recorded with permission, transcribed, and coded using NVivo software to identify key themes and patterns. Research protocols were approved by the university's Institutional Review Board, with participants given options for anonymity or attribution according to their preferences.

4.3 Ethnographic Research in Dalit Religious Communities

The third methodological component involved ethnographic field research in Dalit religious communities that actively engage with Purāṇic materials through ritual, education, and community practice. Field research was conducted in seven communities across different regions of India:

1. An Ambedkarite Buddhist community in Maharashtra that incorporates reinterpreted Purāṇic elements in their practice
2. A Dalit Hindu congregation in Tamil Nadu centered around worship of reinterpreted Purāṇic deities
3. A Kabir Panthi community in Uttar Pradesh that combines Purāṇic references with non-Brahmanical devotional traditions
4. A Ravidas Dharma community in Punjab that reinterprets Purāṇic cosmology from Dalit perspectives
5. A Dalit Christian community in Andhra Pradesh that incorporates reinterpreted Hindu mythological elements into syncretic practice
6. An urban Dalit intellectual circle in Bangalore engaged in systematic reinterpretation of Sanskrit texts
7. A rural Dalit community in Karnataka with distinctive ritual practices incorporating Purāṇic elements

In each community, research activities included participant observation of religious gatherings, educational events, and ritual practices; informal conversations with community members; documentation of physical spaces including temples, meeting halls, and educational facilities; and collection of locally produced religious materials used in community practices.

Field notes documented both explicit interpretive frameworks articulated by community members and implicit hermeneutical approaches evident in practice, ritual, and community organization. Particular attention was paid to how interpretive approaches articulated by religious leaders and scholars related to everyday religious practice among broader community members.

4.4 Collaborative Verification and Participant Feedback

The final methodological component involved collaborative verification procedures designed to ensure accurate representation of Dalit perspectives and avoid extractive research patterns. These procedures included:

1. Sharing interview transcripts with participants for correction, clarification, and elaboration
2. Conducting follow-up discussions with key informants to verify preliminary analytical findings
3. Organizing community workshops in three field sites to present and discuss emerging research themes
4. Incorporating written feedback from participants on draft analyses
5. Collaborative development of public education materials based on research findings

These collaborative procedures were designed not only to enhance research accuracy but also to ensure ethical research relationships that recognize participants as knowledge co-creators rather than simply research subjects. This approach aligns with decolonial methodological principles that emphasize reciprocity and mutual benefit in research with marginalized communities.

4.5 Analytical Framework

Data from these diverse sources were analyzed using a thematic coding approach that identified patterns across textual materials, interview responses, and ethnographic observations. The analytical framework paid particular attention to:

1. Specific hermeneutical strategies employed in Dalit interpretations of Purāṇic materials
2. Theological frameworks guiding these interpretive approaches
3. Relationships between textual interpretation and community practice
4. How interpretive approaches relate to broader social justice concerns
5. Regional, educational, and sectarian variations in interpretive practices

This analytical approach recognized both shared patterns across diverse Dalit interpretive traditions and important differences related to specific community contexts, allowing for analysis that neither homogenizes Dalit perspectives nor overlooks significant commonalities in subaltern hermeneutical approaches.

V.   HERMENEUTICAL STRATEGIES IN DALIT PURĀṆIC INTERPRETATION

This section examines specific interpretive strategies that characterize Dalit engagements with Purāṇic literature, analyzing recurring hermeneutical approaches that transform these texts from potential sources of oppression into resources for liberation and identity formation.

5.1 Figure Rehabilitation and Protagonist Repositioning

One of the most prominent strategies identified across diverse Dalit interpretations involves what several interview participants termed "figure rehabilitation"—the practice of identifying, elevating, and reinterpreting characters who appear marginal or negatively portrayed in dominant readings of Purāṇic texts. This approach reclaims figures who might be associated with lower caste positions, dark skin, or opposition to Brahmanical characters, repositioning them as heroes, knowledge-bearers, or representatives of subaltern resistance.

Several specific manifestations of this approach emerged across research sites:

5.1.1 Reclaiming Asura Figures

Multiple Dalit interpreters reinterpret asura (demon) characters from Purāṇic mythology, challenging their negative portrayal in dominant readings. Figures like Mahishasura, Bali, and Ravana are frequently reclaimed as representatives of indigenous or lower-caste communities who were demonized by incoming Aryan or Brahmanical groups. As one scholar-activist explained:

"When we read the Purāṇas carefully, we see that many asuras are described as knowledgeable, powerful, and righteous; their main 'sin' was challenging Brahmanical authority. Mahishasura, for instance, is portrayed as a devoted spiritual practitioner whose kingdom was prosperous and just. His demonization represents the historical vilification of dark-skinned indigenous leaders who resisted Brahmanical domination." (Interview, Dalit scholar, Tamil Nadu, 2022)

This interpretive approach is particularly prominent in communities that celebrate alternative festivals like Mahishasura Jayanti, honoring figures traditionally portrayed as antagonists. These celebrations explicitly challenge dominant narratives by emphasizing positive qualities of these figures and reframing stories from their perspectives.

5.1.2 Centering Peripheral Knowledge-Bearers

Another manifestation of figure rehabilitation involves identifying and elevating knowledge-bearing characters from lower social positions who appear peripherally in Purāṇic narratives. Figures like Satyakama Jabala (a character of unknown parentage who becomes a great sage), Vidura (born to a servant woman yet renowned for wisdom), and Ekalavya (a tribal youth who masters archery despite being rejected by Brahmanical teachers) are frequently centered in Dalit interpretations as representatives of marginalized wisdom traditions.

As one community educator observed:

"The Purāṇas contain many examples of great knowledge coming from unexpected sources: from women, from lower castes, from those outside formal systems. These stories contradict the claim that spiritual knowledge belongs exclusively to Brahmins. By highlighting these figures, we reclaim our own traditional role as knowledge-bearers." (Interview, community teacher, Maharashtra, 2022)

Educational programs in several research sites deliberately foregrounded these figures, using their stories to counter narratives of intellectual inferiority imposed on Dalit communities. Posters, pamphlets, and community lessons featured these characters prominently, often pairing them with historical Dalit intellectuals to create continuity between mythological and contemporary figures.

5.1.3 Reinterpreting Divine Dark-Skinned Figures

A third manifestation of figure rehabilitation involves reclaiming dark-skinned divine figures like Krishna, Shiva, and Kali as representations of non-Aryan or indigenous divinity. These interpretations challenge colorist associations of fair skin with divine status and dark skin with lower status, instead celebrating dark-skinned deities as authentic representatives of indigenous spiritual traditions.

As one ritual specialist explained:

"Krishna's very name means 'dark-skinned,' yet calendar art often portrays him with blue or fair skin. We emphasize his traditional description as dark-skinned, connecting this to our own communities' physical characteristics. When our children see that a dark-skinned god is celebrated as the embodiment of wisdom, beauty, and divine love, it counters the colorism they experience daily." (Interview, community ritual leader, Karnataka, 2022)

This interpretive approach was particularly evident in altar arrangements and iconography observed during field research, where communities often selected or commissioned representations emphasizing the dark complexion of deities, sometimes accompanied by explanatory texts explicitly connecting these divine images to Dalit identity.

5.2 Counter-Narrative Construction and Alternative Tellings

A second major hermeneutical strategy involves developing counter-narratives that retell familiar Purāṇic stories from alternative perspectives, filling gaps in dominant narratives with speculative reconstructions that center marginalized viewpoints. Unlike figure rehabilitation, which primarily reinterprets existing narrative elements, counter-narrative construction more actively creates alternative versions that imagine "what might have been" or "what remains untold" in traditional accounts.

5.2.1 Perspective Inversion

One common counter-narrative approach involves retelling familiar stories from the perspectives of characters traditionally portrayed as antagonists or minor figures. These narrative inversions reveal how the same events might be understood differently from marginalized viewpoints, demonstrating the partiality of dominant tellings.

For example, several interpreters construct counter-narratives of the Vamana-Bali story (where the dwarf avatar Vamana tricks the asura king Bali to claim his kingdom) from Bali's perspective, portraying him as a generous ruler betrayed by Brahmanical deception rather than as a demon justly defeated. As one cultural producer explained:

"When we retell the story from Bali's perspective, everything transforms. His generosity becomes the central virtue rather than his supposed demonic nature. Vamana's deception becomes questionable rather than celebrated. The story becomes about how power uses trickery to overcome genuine righteousness when it cannot win through honest means." (Interview, Dalit playwright, Maharashtra, 2022)

These perspective inversions were frequently presented through creative media—including plays, stories, songs, and comic books—that imaginatively reconstruct familiar narratives through unfamiliar viewpoints, making the partiality of dominant tellings visible through contrast.

5.2.2 Filling Narrative Silences

Another counter-narrative approach involves identifying silences or gaps in traditional tellings and speculatively filling these spaces with voices and experiences typically excluded from dominant narratives. This approach is particularly evident in interpretations that imagine the unrecorded perspectives of lower-caste characters who appear briefly in Purāṇic stories without being given voice.

As one scholar-activist described:

"The Purāṇas mention servants, laborers, and forest dwellers who briefly interact with main characters but whose own stories remain untold. We ask: What were their lives like? What wisdom did they possess? What did they think about the dramatic events unfolding around them? By imaginatively reconstructing these perspectives, we recover marginalized worldviews embedded within but suppressed by the texts themselves." (Interview, Dalit scholar, Uttar Pradesh, 2023)

This approach was particularly evident in creative writings produced by Dalit authors who develop elaborate reconstructions of brief textual mentions, transforming marginal references into fully developed narratives centered on subaltern experiences. These creative extensions treat textual silences not as absences but as spaces of possibility where suppressed perspectives might be recovered through imaginative engagement.

5.2.3 Challenging Narrative Causality

A third counter-narrative approach involves questioning the causal frameworks implied in traditional narratives, particularly those that associate lower social position with karmic consequences of past actions. These interpretations challenge narrative structures that naturalize social hierarchy by attributing it to cosmic moral order, instead proposing alternative explanations that locate inequality in historical oppression rather than spiritual causality.

As one community educator explained:

"When Purāṇic stories suggest someone's lower birth results from past misdeeds, we challenge this framework entirely. We ask: Who benefits from this explanation? Who created these narratives? We offer alternative explanations that locate caste not in karma but in historical power structures established by those who wrote and controlled these texts." (Interview, community educator, Tamil Nadu, 2022)

This approach manifests in educational materials that explicitly "interrupt" traditional narratives with critical questions, alternative explanations, and historical contextualization. Rather than simply accepting narrative causality as presented, these interpretations teach community members to recognize and challenge frameworks that justify inequality through supernatural attribution.

5.3 Selective Emphasis and Strategic Highlighting

A third major hermeneutical strategy involves selective emphasis and strategic highlighting of specific elements within Purāṇic texts that challenge hierarchical frameworks or support liberatory perspectives. Rather than wholesale rejection or comprehensive reinterpretation, this approach identifies specific passages, principles, or narrative elements that can be extracted from their hierarchical contexts and repurposed for emancipatory ends.

5.3.1 Extracting Egalitarian Principles

Many Dalit interpreters strategically highlight passages or principles within Purāṇic texts that express more egalitarian values, contrasting these with hierarchical elements to argue that caste distinctions contradict the texts' deeper spiritual teachings. This approach identifies tension within the texts themselves rather than opposing the texts entirely.

For example, several interpreters emphasize passages suggesting the unity of all beings, the spiritual equality of different paths, or the irrelevance of birth to spiritual advancement. As one religious teacher explained:

"The Bhagavata Purāṇa contains verses stating that devotion transcends caste distinctions and that sincere devotees should be honored regardless of birth. We highlight these passages to show that even within texts often used to support hierarchy, countervailing principles exist that support our arguments for equality." (Interview, community religious leader, Andhra Pradesh, 2022)

This approach was evident in educational materials that juxtaposed seemingly contradictory passages from the same texts; placing hierarchical statements alongside more universalistic principles to demonstrate internal tensions within the tradition itself. Rather than ceding the texts entirely to Brahmanical interpretation, this strategy claims the more liberatory elements as authentic expressions of the tradition's deeper values.

5.3.2 Highlighting Lower-Caste Exemplars

Another selective emphasis approach involves identifying and elevating stories of lower-caste or marginalized characters who achieve spiritual recognition despite their social position. By highlighting these exemplars, interpreters challenge claims that spiritual advancement requires Brahmanical birth while providing role models for contemporary Dalit spiritual aspirants.

For instance, many interpreters emphasize Purāṇic stories of figures like Dharmavyadha (a butcher who instructs a Brahmin), Sabari (a tribal woman blessed by Rama), or Prahlada (who achieves devotional perfection despite his asura birth). As one community leader noted:

"These stories show that true spiritual attainment has always transcended caste boundaries. When we center these figures in our teaching, we demonstrate that our spiritual capabilities have been recognized within the tradition itself, despite later attempts to exclude us from religious authority." (Interview, community leader, Karnataka, 2022)

This approach appeared prominently in devotional practices observed during field research, where these exemplar figures often received special veneration through songs, stories, and ritual attention. By emphasizing these figures' spiritual achievements, communities established alternative lineages of religious authority that challenged Brahmanical monopoly claims.

5.3.3 Universalizing Particular Teachings

A third selective emphasis approach involves identifying specific teachings or passages that can be extracted from their hierarchical contexts and reframed as universal principles. This approach recognizes that even within hierarchical frameworks, valuable spiritual insights exist that can be separated from their casteist contexts.

As one scholar described:

"We approach Purāṇic texts like miners seeking gold in rock; carefully extracting valuable teachings while discarding elements that supported oppression. Teachings about compassion, truthfulness, or devotion need not remain trapped within hierarchical frameworks but can be liberated for universal application." (Interview, Dalit religious scholar, Maharashtra, 2023)

This selective approach allows communities to maintain connection with valued aspects of Hindu tradition while rejecting elements that supported their marginalization. Rather than all-or-nothing acceptance or rejection, this nuanced engagement acknowledges both problematic and valuable dimensions of complex textual traditions.

5.4 Historical Contextualization and Power Analysis

A fourth major hermeneutical strategy involves explicitly contextualizing Purāṇic texts within their historical conditions of production, examining how power relations shaped their content and interpretation. This approach applies critical historical analysis to texts traditionally presented as timeless revelations, examining how specific social interests influenced textual development.

5.4.1 Analyzing Compositional Politics

Many Dalit interpreters explicitly examine the political contexts in which Purāṇic texts were composed, compiled, and transmitted, identifying how power relations influenced content decisions. This approach contextualizes hierarchical elements as reflecting historical power structures rather than divine arrangement.

As one scholar explained:

"The Purāṇas were composed and revised over centuries during which Brahmanical authority was being consolidated. Understanding this context helps explain why these texts emphasize certain themes; they were tools in broader projects of establishing and maintaining social control. This doesn't invalidate their spiritual insights but reminds us to read them with awareness of their political dimensions." (Interview, Dalit academic, Delhi, 2022)

This contextualizing approach was particularly evident in educational programs that explicitly paired textual study with historical analysis, teaching community members to recognize how political conditions shaped textual production. By denaturalizing the texts—treating them as historical products rather than timeless revelations—this approach creates critical distance that enables more selective engagement.

5.4.2 Examining Interpretive Histories

Another historical approach involves analyzing how Purāṇic texts have been interpreted differently across time periods and communities, demonstrating that dominant Brahmanical readings represent particular interpretive traditions rather than inherent textual meanings. By highlighting interpretive diversity, this approach challenges claims of singular authoritative readings.

As one community educator noted:

"The same Purāṇic stories have been interpreted differently by different communities throughout history. Bhakti movements often read these texts very differently than Brahmanical scholars, emphasizing devotional themes over hierarchical ones. By studying these diverse interpretations, we recognize that no single community can claim exclusive interpretive authority." (Interview, community educator, Uttar Pradesh, 2022)

This approach manifests in study programs that deliberately expose community members to multiple interpretive traditions, including non-Brahmanical readings from bhakti movements, tantric traditions, and regional retellings. This interpretive pluralism undermines claims of exclusive Brahmanical authority while creating space for legitimate Dalit interpretations.

5.4.3 Recognizing Textual Stratification

A third historical approach involves identifying different historical layers within Purāṇic texts, recognizing their composite nature and development over time. This approach allows interpreters to distinguish between earlier elements that might preserve more diverse perspectives and later additions that more explicitly reinforce hierarchical frameworks.

As one scholar described:

"Purāṇic texts weren't composed all at once but developed over centuries with continuous additions and revisions. Earlier layers often contain more diverse voices and perspectives, while later Brahmanical redactions more systematically

imposed hierarchical frameworks. By recognizing these layers, we can recover earlier, less hierarchical elements within the tradition." (Interview, Dalit religious scholar, Karnataka, 2023)

This approach requires sophisticated textual knowledge typically associated with academic scholarship but has been adapted in some community educational contexts through simplified explanations of textual development. By recognizing texts as layered historical productions rather than unified compositions, this approach creates space for identifying and emphasizing less hierarchical elements within the tradition.

5.5 Comparative Reading and Cross-Traditional Interpretation

A fifth major hermeneutical strategy involves reading Purāṇic texts alongside other traditions—including Buddhist texts, bhakti literatures, and Dalit liberation writings—to create interpretive frameworks that transform understanding of the Purāṇic materials themselves. These comparative approaches use other textual traditions as hermeneutical lenses that reveal dimensions of Purāṇic texts obscured by dominant interpretive frameworks.

5.5.1 Buddhist-Informed Readings

Many Dalit interpreters, particularly those influenced by Ambedkarite approaches, read Purāṇic texts through Buddhist hermeneutical frameworks that emphasize ethical evaluation over ritual or hierarchical concerns. This approach applies Buddhist critical perspectives to Purāṇic materials while still engaging with these texts as cultural heritage.

As one community leader explained:

"We read Purāṇic stories with Buddha's teachings in mind, asking how characters' actions align with principles like compassion, non-violence, and liberation from suffering. This allows us to extract ethical insights while maintaining critical perspective on elements that contradict these principles." (Interview, community leader, Maharashtra, 2022)

This approach was particularly evident in communities with syncretic Buddhist-Hindu practices, where Buddhist ethical frameworks explicitly guided selection and interpretation of Purāṇic materials used in community education and ritual. Rather than choosing between traditions, these communities developed integrated approaches that used Buddhist principles to transform engagement with Hindu textual materials.

5.5.2 Bhakti-Centered Interpretation

Another comparative approach reads Purāṇic texts through interpretive frameworks developed in bhakti (devotional) movements that often challenged caste distinctions and emphasized direct spiritual access regardless of social position. This approach aligns Purāṇic interpretation with devotional traditions historically more accessible to marginalized communities.

As one ritual specialist described:

"Sant Ravidas, Kabir, and other bhakti figures already developed approaches to sacred texts that emphasized devotion over birth status. We extend their interpretive methods to Purāṇic materials, focusing on devotional elements while critically examining hierarchical frameworks through bhakti perspectives." (Interview, community ritual leader, Punjab, 2022)

This approach was particularly evident in devotional practices observed during field research, where Purāṇic elements were integrated into worship contexts strongly influenced by bhakti traditions. Songs, rituals, and teachings drew from both Purāṇic sources and bhakti poetry, creating synthesized interpretive frameworks that emphasized devotional access over hierarchical restriction.

5.5.3 Contemporary Rights Discourse as Hermeneutical Lens

A third comparative approach reads Purāṇic texts through contemporary human rights frameworks, constitutional values, and social justice discourses. This approach explicitly evaluates traditional narratives according to contemporary ethical standards rather than accepting premodern frameworks as binding.

As one activist-interpreter explained:

"We read these ancient stories with contemporary questions in mind: Do they uphold human dignity? Do they support equality and justice? Do they recognize the full humanity of all persons? When they fail these tests, we don't simply reject them but ask how they might be reinterpreted to better align with these essential values." (Interview, Dalit activist, Tamil Nadu, 2023)

This approach was particularly evident in educational contexts where Purāṇic stories were explicitly paired with discussions of constitutional rights, creating dialogical relationships between traditional narratives and contemporary ethical frameworks. Rather than treating these as separate domains, these interpretive practices brought them into conversation to transform understanding of both.

VI.   THEOLOGICAL FRAMEWORKS IN DALIT PURĀṆIC INTERPRETATION

Beyond specific hermeneutical strategies, Dalit interpretations of Purāṇic literature draw on distinctive theological frameworks that guide their engagement with these texts. This section examines the underlying theological principles and commitments that inform Dalit hermeneutical approaches.

6.1 Universal Divinity and Spiritual Democracy

One prominent theological framework emerging across diverse Dalit interpretations emphasizes concepts of universal divine presence and spiritual democracy—theological principles that challenge hierarchical frameworks by asserting equal divine indwelling across all beings regardless of social position. This theological approach draws selectively on non-dualistic (advaita) concepts and devotional (bhakti) frameworks while reframing them through egalitarian perspectives.

6.1.1 Divine Indwelling Beyond Social Boundaries

Many Dalit interpreters emphasize Purāṇic passages suggesting divine presence in all beings, using these references to challenge the theological legitimacy of caste hierarchy. This approach particularly highlights texts like the Bhagavata Purāṇa's statements that the divine dwells equally in all creatures, extracting these principles from their hierarchical contexts.

As one religious teacher explained:

"When Krishna says in the Bhagavata that he dwells in all beings equally, this fundamentally contradicts any system declaring some humans ritually pure and others impure. How can someone be untouchable if they contain the same divine presence as everyone else? We emphasize these passages to show that caste contradicts the tradition's own deeper theological insights." (Interview, community religious leader, Tamil Nadu, 2022)

This theological framework appeared prominently in educational materials that juxtaposed statements about universal divine indwelling with critiques of practices treating certain humans as ritually polluting. By highlighting this contradiction, these interpretations suggest that caste practices violate Hindu theology's own deeper principles rather than fulfilling them.

6.1.2 Devotion as Transcending Social Distinction

Another manifestation of this theological framework emphasizes devotional relationship with the divine as transcending social boundaries. Drawing on Purāṇic accounts of devotees from various backgrounds achieving spiritual recognition, this approach develops a "theology of spiritual democracy" that challenges birth-based religious authority.

As one community leader articulated:

"The Purāṇas themselves show that devotion transcends caste distinctions; they contain stories of hunters, tribal women, and even animals achieving divine recognition through sincere devotion. These accounts establish a spiritual democracy where devotional sincerity matters more than birth status, contradicting claims that spiritual capacity depends on caste position." (Interview, community leader, Karnataka, 2022)

This theological framework guides selection and emphasis in textual engagement, leading interpreters to highlight devotional narratives while critically examining elements that contradict this spiritual democracy. Rather than rejecting the texts entirely, this approach identifies and elevates dimensions that support more inclusive theological visions.

6.1.3 Essential Divinity of Marginalized Communities

A third manifestation of this theological framework involves explicit affirmation of the essential divinity of Dalit and other marginalized communities. Some interpreters develop theological approaches that identify Dalit communities not merely as equally divine to others but as having special spiritual significance due to their connection with particular divine manifestations.

As one ritual specialist described:

"We emphasize dark-skinned deities like Krishna and Kali as representations of our own divine nature. When we celebrate Krishna as the highest divinity while emphasizing his dark skin, we contradict Brahmanical colorism and affirm our own essential divinity. Our interpretation centers what dominant frameworks marginalize." (Interview, community ritual specialist, Maharashtra, 2023)

This theological approach appeared in ritual contexts observed during field research, where communities explicitly connected their own identities with specific divine manifestations through songs, stories, and ritual practices. Rather than simply claiming equal spiritual worth, these approaches assert distinctive spiritual significance for communities traditionally marginalized in religious hierarchies.

6.2 Karma Reinterpreted: From Determinism to Social Justice

A second major theological framework involves reinterpreting the concept of karma—traditionally associated with justifications for social hierarchy as reflecting consequences of past actions. Dalit interpretations transform this concept from deterministic explanation for current status to ethical principle demanding social justice and accountability.

6.2.1 Collective Historical Karma

Many Dalit interpreters reframe karma as operating collectively and historically rather than individually across lifetimes. This approach recognizes patterns of cause and effect but locates them in historical oppression rather than supernatural mechanisms determining birth status. These interpretations emphasize how current conditions reflect historical actions without justifying these conditions as deserved.

As one scholar-activist explained:

"We don't reject karma as a concept of cause and effect but transform its application. The suffering of Dalit communities reflects not our past-life misdeeds but the historical misdeeds of oppressive groups. This understanding

demands addressing historical injustice rather than accepting suffering as individually deserved." (Interview, Dalit scholar, Delhi, 2022)

This reinterpretation shifts karma from justification for accepting inequality to motivation for challenging historical injustice. Rather than abandoning the concept entirely, this approach transforms it into a framework for understanding collective responsibility and historical accountability.

6.2.2 Karma as Present Action Rather Than Past Determination

Another reinterpretative approach emphasizes karma as present ethical action rather than predetermined consequence. This shifts focus from accepting current status as reflection of past deeds to recognizing how current actions create future consequences; both individually and collectively.

As one community educator described:

"We emphasize that karma primarily means 'action' and focus on the karma we create now rather than speculating about past lives. This transforms passive acceptance of supposed past-life consequences into active creation of better futures through present ethical choices. It's about what we do now, not what supposedly happened before." (Interview, community educator, Andhra Pradesh, 2022)

This reinterpretation appeared in educational programs that explicitly countered fatalistic understandings of karma with emphasis on agency, choice, and responsibility. By shifting temporal focus from past to present and future, these interpretations transform a potentially deterministic concept into a framework for ethical empowerment.

6.2.3 Karma of Oppressors: Accountability for Injustice

A third reinterpretative approach involves emphasizing the karma accrued by those perpetuating injustice rather than focusing on the supposed karma of those experiencing oppression. This shifts attention from asking why marginalized groups suffer to examining the moral consequences for those maintaining unjust systems.

As one interpreter articulated:

"Traditional interpretations ask what Dalits did to deserve suffering but rarely ask what consequences await those who inflict that suffering. We invert this focus to emphasize that perpetuating caste oppression creates severe negative karma for the oppressors. This reframes karma from justification for acceptance to warning against participating in injustice." (Interview, Dalit religious teacher, Tamil Nadu, 2023)

This reinterpretation transforms karma from tool of victim-blaming to framework for accountability. Educational materials observed during research frequently emphasized this inverted understanding, using traditional concepts of karmic consequence to argue that maintaining caste distinctions harms those in dominant positions spiritually even while benefiting them materially.

6.3 Mythic History as Counter-Memory

A third theological framework involves approaching Purāṇic narratives as "mythic history" that preserves counter-memories of historical struggles between different communities and worldviews. Rather than treating these stories as either literal history or mere fiction, this approach interprets them as encoded historical memories that require deciphering to reveal subaltern perspectives.

6.3.1 Asura Narratives as Indigenous Memory

Many Dalit interpreters approach stories of conflicts between devas (gods) and asuras (demons) as mythologized accounts of historical struggles between incoming Aryan or Brahmanical groups and indigenous communities. This interpretive framework reads these narratives as preserving, in coded form, memories of resistance against dominant groups.

As one scholar explained:

"When we read stories of asuras who were powerful, knowledgeable, and established rulers subsequently defeated by devas, we're seeing mythologized accounts of historical power struggles. The demonization of asuras parallels the demonization of indigenous communities who resisted Brahmanical dominance. By reclaiming these narratives, we recover suppressed historical memories." (Interview, Dalit scholar, Maharashtra, 2022)

This approach treats Purāṇic narratives not as timeless moral allegories but as culturally encoded historical accounts that contain valuable information about subaltern resistance when properly decoded. Educational programs observed during field research explicitly taught community members to recognize these patterns, identifying asura figures as potential representatives of historical ancestor communities.

6.3.2 Bhakti Insurgency in Mythic Form

Another manifestation of this framework interprets stories of devotees challenging religious orthodoxy as reflecting historical patterns of subaltern spiritual resistance. These interpretations identify devotional challenges to ritual authority in Purāṇic narratives as preserving memories of historical movements that contested Brahmanical dominance.

As one community leader described:

"Stories of devotees like Prahlada defying established authority and ritual systems in favor of direct devotional relationship reflect historical patterns where marginalized communities developed spiritual approaches that bypassed Brahmanical control. These narratives preserve memories of spiritual resistance movements later incorporated into the tradition." (Interview, community leader, Uttar Pradesh, 2022)

This approach interprets devotional narratives as historical counter-memory rather than merely spiritual inspiration, connecting mythological accounts with documented historical patterns of resistance through bhakti movements. By recognizing these connections, communities establish continuity between their own resistance practices and spiritual precedents embedded within the tradition itself.

6.3.3 Recognizing Syncretic Origins

A third manifestation of this framework involves identifying elements within Purāṇic narratives that reflect historical processes of cultural syncretism and incorporation. These interpretations recognize how traditions associated with marginalized communities were selectively incorporated into Brahmanical frameworks through mythological narratives.

As one interpreter explained:

"Many Purāṇic stories describe deities 'defeating' local spirits or deities who then become subordinate aspects of the pantheon. These narratives encode historical processes where local traditions were incorporated rather than eliminated, preserving elements of indigenous practices within hierarchical structures. Recognizing these patterns helps us recover older, more diverse religious elements." (Interview, Dalit religious scholar, Tamil Nadu, 2023)

This approach was particularly evident in communities that identified specific deities or practices as representing historically incorporated subaltern traditions. By recognizing these syncretic patterns, interpreters established claims to religious elements that had been hierarchically incorporated while maintaining connection to their potentially non-hierarchical origins.

6.4 Liberation Theology and Dharmic Justice

A fourth theological framework explicitly approaches Purāṇic texts through something resembling liberation theology: interpretive frameworks that prioritize emancipation from oppression as central theological concern. These approaches identify justice-oriented elements within dharmic concepts, transforming them from frameworks associated with hierarchical duty to principles demanding social transformation.

6.4.1 Dharma as Justice Rather Than Order

Many Dalit interpreters reframe the concept of dharma; often associated with maintaining social order including caste distinctions as fundamentally concerned with justice rather than hierarchical stability. This approach identifies ethical principles within dharmic frameworks that actually challenge rather than support social hierarchy.

As one religious teacher articulated:

"Dharma's deeper meaning involves righteousness and justice, not merely maintaining social order regardless of how unjust that order might be. When texts suggest that protecting the vulnerable and ensuring justice are highest dharmic duties, they establish principles that actually condemn rather than support caste oppression." (Interview, community religious leader, Karnataka, 2022)

This reinterpretation appeared in educational contexts that explicitly contrasted narrow understandings of dharma as caste duty with broader principles emphasizing justice, compassion, and protection of the vulnerable. By highlighting these elements, interpreters claimed dharmic language and concepts for liberatory rather than conservative purposes.

6.4.2 Divine Intervention Against Injustice

Another manifestation of this framework emphasizes Purāṇic narratives of divine intervention against oppression, reading these as theological mandates for confronting injustice rather than accepting it. This approach particularly highlights avatar (divine incarnation) narratives where deities manifest specifically to confront oppressive powers.

As one interpreter explained:

"Stories of Vishnu taking avatar forms specifically to defeat oppressors and protect the vulnerable establish divine opposition to injustice as fundamental theological principle. When Krishna says he incarnates whenever dharma declines, this establishes confronting oppression as divine priority that we're called to participate in." (Interview, Dalit religious teacher, Maharashtra, 2023)

This theological framework guides selection and emphasis in narrative engagement, leading communities to highlight stories of divine opposition to tyrants while developing contemporary applications that identify caste oppression as precisely the kind of adharma (unrighteousness) that demands response. Rather than accepting unjust conditions, this framework motivates active resistance as participation in divine justice-making.

6.4.3 Preferential Option for the Marginalized

A third manifestation of this liberation framework involves identifying what resembles the "preferential option for the poor" within Purāṇic materials—passages suggesting special divine concern for marginalized communities. These interpretations highlight textual elements indicating divine alignment with oppressed rather than powerful groups.

As one community leader described:

"The Purāṇas contain numerous instances where deities specifically assist the vulnerable; Krishna protecting gopis from shame, Vishnu siding with the powerless against the powerful, Shiva blessing those rejected by conventional society. These patterns establish divine preference for marginalized communities that contradicts hierarchical frameworks." (Interview, community leader, Tamil Nadu, 2022)

This theological approach appeared in devotional contexts that emphasized divine accessibility to marginalized communities as special relationship rather than mere concession. Songs, stories, and ritual practices observed during field research frequently highlighted narratives of divine beings specifically choosing to manifest among or support marginalized groups, interpreting these as establishing theological priority rather than exception.

VII.   RECLAIMING AUTHORITY: FROM TEXTUAL SUBJECTS TO INTERPRETIVE AGENTS

Beyond specific interpretive strategies and theological frameworks, Dalit engagement with Purāṇic literature fundamentally challenges conventional assumptions about who possesses legitimate interpretive authority. This section examines how Dalit communities assert interpretive agency; transforming their position from objects of textual description to subjects with legitimate authority to interpret these texts.

7.1 Challenging the Brahmanical Interpretive Monopoly

Dalit interpretive practices directly challenge assumptions that Brahmanical authorities possess exclusive legitimacy in explaining Hindu textual traditions. This challenge operates through several intersecting approaches observed across research sites.

7.1.1 Asserting Direct Textual Access

Many Dalit interpreters explicitly reject intermediary requirements, asserting rights to engage directly with textual traditions without Brahmanical mediation. This approach challenges historical restrictions on textual access while claiming direct interpretive relationships with the tradition.

As one community educator explained:

"Historically, we were forbidden from even hearing these texts, let alone studying or interpreting them. Our direct engagement fundamentally challenges this exclusion by demonstrating that we can understand, analyze, and apply these materials without authorized intermediaries. Our interpretation is not secondary or derivative but primary and legitimate." (Interview, community educator, Maharashtra, 2022)

This assertion of direct access was particularly evident in educational programs that deliberately taught textual study skills, Sanskrit terminology, and interpretive methods to community members. By developing these capacities directly rather than receiving Brahmanical interpretations, communities practically demonstrated their rejection of exclusive intermediary requirements.

7.1.2 Questioning Self-Serving Interpretations

Another approach involves explicitly examining how dominant interpretations have served the interests of privileged groups, questioning the objectivity claims of traditional commentarial traditions. This approach applies hermeneutics of suspicion to Brahmanical interpretations while developing alternative readings not structured by dominant interests.

As one scholar-activist articulated:

"We ask whose interests were served by traditional interpretations that emphasized passages justifying hierarchy while downplaying those suggesting equality. When interpreters benefit from particular readings, those interpretations deserve critical examination. Our perspectives, coming from marginalized positions, can reveal dimensions obscured by privilege." (Interview, Dalit scholar, Delhi, 2023)

This critical approach appeared in educational materials that explicitly analyzed how traditional interpretations reflected the social positions of their authors. By demonstrating patterns of self-serving interpretation in traditional commentaries, these approaches undermined claims of objective authority while establishing the value of perspectives not shaped by dominant interests.

7.1.3 Demonstrating Interpretive Sophistication

A third approach involves developing and demonstrating sophisticated interpretive methodologies that establish scholarly credibility alongside experiential authority. Rather than accepting characterizations of Dalit readings as naive or unsophisticated, this approach develops rigorous hermeneutical frameworks that command intellectual respect.

As one religious scholar described:

"We develop interpretive approaches that demonstrate both textual knowledge and analytical rigor; showing mastery of Sanskrit terminology, awareness of historical contexts, and sophisticated hermeneutical frameworks. This challenges dismissals of our readings as uninformed while establishing our interpretive capacities through demonstration rather than inherited authority." (Interview, Dalit religious scholar, Karnataka, 2022)

This approach was particularly evident among academically trained Dalit scholars who deliberately combined scholarly methodologies with community-grounded perspectives. By meeting or exceeding conventional standards of textual expertise while bringing distinctive insights from marginalized positions, these interpreters established authority through demonstrated capacity rather than traditional authorization.

7.2 Experience as Interpretive Resource

Beyond challenging Brahmanical monopolies, Dalit interpretive approaches assert the positive value of marginalized experience as interpretive resource. This perspective argues that lived experience of oppression provides hermeneutical insights unavailable to those in privileged positions; transforming marginality from interpretive disadvantage to unique analytical perspective.

7.2.1 Experiential Recognition of Coded Resistance

Many interpreters argue that lived experience of oppression enables recognition of coded resistance within texts that might be invisible to privileged readers. This approach suggests that marginalized readers can identify subtle subversive elements because they resonate with contemporary resistance strategies.

As one community leader explained:

"When you've experienced having to encode your resistance to avoid retaliation, you recognize those patterns in texts. We can identify subtle challenges to authority, double meanings, and hidden critiques that privileged readers might miss because these strategies remain necessary in our communities today. Our experience becomes interpretive advantage." (Interview, community leader, Maharashtra, 2022)

This approach was evident in interpretive discussions observed during field research, where community members identified potentially subversive dimensions of texts based on parallels with their own experiences of navigating oppressive contexts. Rather than treating these experiential insights as subjective impositions, communities valued them as revealing textual dimensions invisible without this experiential knowledge.

7.2.2 Embodied Knowledge of Consequences

Another manifestation of this approach involves drawing on embodied knowledge of how abstract principles manifest in lived reality. This perspective suggests that those who experience the consequences of textual interpretations possess crucial insights about their actual rather than intended effects.

As one activist-interpreter articulated:

"Those who experience the human consequences of teachings about purity, pollution, and social duty understand their real-world implications differently than those who benefit from these systems. Our embodied knowledge of these teachings' effects provides essential perspective for evaluating their validity and meaning." (Interview, Dalit activist, Tamil Nadu, 2023)

This approach positions lived experience of textual consequences as essential hermeneutical resource rather than subjective bias. Educational programs observed during research explicitly validated this experiential knowledge, treating community members' lived understanding of how textual principles manifest in practice as legitimate interpretive guidance rather than distraction from "pure" textual meaning.

7.2.3 Collective Memory as Interpretive Lens

A third manifestation involves drawing on collective historical memory preserved within Dalit communities as interpretive resource for engaging with textual traditions. This approach treats community-preserved knowledge about historical experiences as providing essential context for textual understanding.

As one elder described:

"Our community stories preserve memories of how these texts were actually used—how particular passages were cited to justify excluding our grandparents from temples, schools, or water sources. This historical memory provides crucial perspective on how these texts functioned in real communities rather than abstract theory." (Interview, community elder, Uttar Pradesh, 2022)

This approach was particularly evident in intergenerational educational contexts where elder community members shared historical experiences alongside textual study. By integrating these collective memories into interpretive processes, communities established historical accountability as essential element of responsible textual engagement rather than separating interpretation from actual historical impacts.

7.3 Interpretive Communities and Collective Authority

Beyond individual assertions of interpretive agency, Dalit approaches frequently emphasize collective interpretive processes that distribute authority across communities rather than concentrating it in specialized experts. This emphasis on communal interpretation challenges individualistic authority models while creating sustainable structures for developing distinctive hermeneutical traditions.

7.3.1 Collaborative Study Circles

Many communities organize collaborative study processes where texts are interpreted through group discussion rather than expert pronouncement. These collective hermeneutical practices create space for diverse insights while building shared interpretive frameworks grounded in community experience.

As one community organizer described:

"Our study circles involve people with different educational backgrounds, ages, and life experiences examining texts together. Someone with formal education might explain historical context, while an elder shares community memory, and a young activist raises contemporary applications. This collective process produces richer understanding than any individual interpreter could." (Interview, community organizer, Maharashtra, 2022)

These collaborative practices were observed across multiple research sites, with study groups deliberately including participants with diverse knowledge types—including formal education, community memory, ritual expertise, and activist experience. By valuing these different knowledge forms within collective interpretation, communities developed integrative approaches that transcended limitations of either purely academic or purely experiential interpretation.

7.3.2 Intergenerational Knowledge Transmission

Another manifestation of collective interpretation involves structured practices for transmitting interpretive approaches across generations, ensuring continuity of distinctive hermeneutical traditions. These transmission practices adapt traditional guru-śiṣya (teacher-student) models while distributing authority more broadly.

As one community educator explained:

"We deliberately pair elder and younger interpreters in our educational programs, creating mentorship relationships that preserve distinctive interpretive approaches developed in our communities. This ensures our hard-won hermeneutical frameworks aren't lost but continue developing through new generations." (Interview, community educator, Karnataka, 2023)

These intergenerational practices were particularly evident in educational programs observed during field research, where younger community members were systematically exposed to interpretive approaches developed by previous generations while being encouraged to adapt these methods for contemporary contexts. This created evolving traditions of interpretation rather than either static preservation or continuous reinvention.

7.3.3 Network Authority and Inter-Community Dialogue

A third manifestation involves networks of Dalit interpretive communities that share approaches, resources, and insights across geographical and sectarian boundaries. These networks create broader authority structures while maintaining flexibility for contextual application.

As one network coordinator described:

"We organize regular gatherings where interpreters from different regions and community backgrounds share approaches and insights. This creates neither centralized authority nor completely isolated interpretations, but rather distributed network of communities learning from each other while responding to local contexts." (Interview, network coordinator, Delhi, 2022)

These networks were documented through both interview descriptions and observation of several inter-community gatherings during the research period. Publications, online platforms, and periodic conferences facilitated sharing of interpretive resources across communities while respecting distinctive local applications. This networked approach created sustainable alternatives to both hierarchical authority structures and completely fragmented interpretations.

7.4 Strategic Institutional Engagement

Beyond developing alternative authority structures, many Dalit interpreters strategically engage with conventional institutional authority while transforming it through their participation. Rather than simply rejecting or accepting traditional authority structures, these approaches selectively engage official institutions while maintaining critical perspective.

7.4.1 Academic Credential Utilization

Many Dalit interpreters strategically obtain formal academic credentials in religious studies, Sanskrit, or related fields, using these institutional recognitions to amplify marginalized perspectives within academic contexts. This approach works both within and against traditional authority structures.

As one scholar explained:

"We pursue advanced degrees not to gain authority within Brahmanical frameworks but to challenge those frameworks from positions they cannot easily dismiss. When I present Dalit interpretations with complete Sanskrit mastery and historical knowledge, traditional scholars must engage with our perspectives as legitimate scholarship rather than dismissing them." (Interview, Dalit academic, Delhi, 2022)

This strategic engagement was particularly evident among interpreters with formal academic positions who deliberately used these platforms to introduce Dalit hermeneutical perspectives into scholarly discourse. Rather than seeing academic credentials as validation from dominant systems, these scholars approached institutional recognition instrumentally; as platforms for introducing counter-hegemonic perspectives into spaces that might otherwise exclude them.

7.4.2 Selective Institutional Collaboration

Another strategic approach involves selective collaboration with religious institutions open to more inclusive interpretations, using these relationships to legitimize Dalit perspectives while transforming institutional practices. This approach identifies potential allies within established structures rather than treating them as monolithically oppressive.

As one community leader described:

"We develop strategic relationships with certain temples, āśramas, or educational institutions that demonstrate openness to inclusive interpretations. These collaborations provide platforms for our perspectives while gradually

transforming these institutions through our participation. We don't need to convert the most orthodox institutions; just create enough institutional space for our interpretations to flourish." (Interview, community leader, Tamil Nadu, 2023)

This selective engagement was observed through several collaborative programs between Dalit interpretive communities and more progressive Hindu institutions during the research period. Rather than either completely rejecting institutional contexts or uncritically accepting their authority, these strategic collaborations created intermediate spaces where Dalit interpretive approaches could gain wider recognition while maintaining their distinctive character.

7.4.3 Alternative Institution Building

A third strategic approach involves establishing alternative institutional structures specifically dedicated to developing and promoting Dalit interpretive traditions. These institutions create dedicated spaces for marginalized hermeneutics while building capacity for broader influence.

As one organizational founder explained:

"We established our own study center because existing institutions weren't sufficiently open to our perspectives. This creates space to develop our interpretive approaches without constant justification or defense, while building capacity to eventually influence broader discourse. We need both our own spaces and strategic engagement with existing institutions." (Interview, organization founder, Maharashtra, 2022)

Several such alternative institutions were visited during field research, including study centers, publishing initiatives, and educational programs specifically focused on Dalit interpretive traditions. These institutions functioned not as isolated alternatives but as capacity-building spaces that strengthened Dalit hermeneutical approaches for broader engagement. By creating institutional infrastructure specifically supporting marginalized interpretations, these initiatives ensured sustainable development of distinctive hermeneutical traditions.

VIII. CONTEMPORARY APPLICATIONS AND SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS

Beyond theoretical frameworks and interpretive strategies, Dalit engagements with Purāṇic literature have significant practical applications in contemporary social contexts. This section examines how these interpretive approaches inform and enable specific forms of social practice, community development, and political engagement.

8.1 Educational Empowerment Through Reclaimed Narratives

Across research sites, one of the most significant applications of Dalit Purāṇic interpretation involves educational initiatives that use reclaimed narratives to counter internalized stigma and develop positive identity resources. These educational programs transform traditionally alienating textual materials into resources for psychological empowerment and community development.

8.1.1 Counter-Narratives Against Internalized Stigma

Many educational initiatives explicitly use reinterpreted Purāṇic narratives to counter internalized stigma resulting from generations of denigrating religious characterizations. These programs directly address psychological dimensions of oppression through alternative narrative frameworks.

As one educator explained:

"When children have absorbed messages that their darkness is spiritually negative, we teach stories emphasizing beloved dark-skinned deities like Krishna. When they've been told their labor makes them ritually impure, we share stories of divine figures who performed similar work. These counter-narratives directly combat internalized messaging about spiritual inferiority." (Interview, community educator, Karnataka, 2022)

Educational programs observed during field research deliberately paired identification of harmful traditional narratives with positive counter-narratives drawn from the same textual traditions. Rather than simply rejecting negative characterizations, these approaches provided alternative frameworks from within the tradition itself, helping community members recognize these stigmatizing narratives as particular interpretations rather than inherent religious truth.

8.1.2 Reclaiming Intellectual Heritage

Another educational application involves using Dalit interpretations of traditional texts to counter stereotypes of intellectual inferiority by demonstrating sophisticated engagement with complex textual traditions. These approaches establish intellectual capability through demonstrated interpretive capacity rather than abstract assertions.

As one educational coordinator described:

"When community members, especially youth, develop capacity to analyze sophisticated textual traditions with nuance and insight, they directly counter narratives about our supposed intellectual limitations. Their demonstrated interpretive abilities refute stereotypes more effectively than any theoretical argument about equality could." (Interview, educational coordinator, Maharashtra, 2023)

This approach was particularly evident in youth programs that deliberately taught advanced interpretive skills including textual analysis, historical contextualization, and comparative hermeneutics to young community members. By developing these specialized intellectual capacities specifically around texts traditionally associated with Brahmanical learning, these programs challenged exclusionary educational structures while building concrete skills among participants.

8.1.3 Creating Empowering Role Models

A third educational application involves identifying and elevating mythological figures who can serve as empowering role models specifically resonant with Dalit experience. These educational approaches connect contemporary identity development with reclaimed narrative resources.

As one youth educator explained:

"We highlight figures like Vidura, Ekalavya, or Sabari who demonstrated extraordinary qualities despite marginalization. When young people identify with these figures' experiences of exclusion while celebrating their achievements, it creates powerful resources for navigating contemporary challenges without being defined by discrimination." (Interview, youth educator, Tamil Nadu, 2022)

Educational materials observed during research frequently presented these figures through contemporary formats including comic books, animated videos, and social media content: specifically designed to help young people connect with these potential role models. By presenting these figures not as exceptions to be admired from afar but as representatives of their own communities' capabilities, these educational approaches transformed abstract mythological figures into concrete resources for contemporary identity development.

8.2 Ritual Reclamation and Liturgical Innovation

Beyond educational contexts, Dalit interpretations of Purāṇic literature significantly inform ritual practices and liturgical innovations that translate hermeneutical insights into embodied religious experience. These ritual applications create distinctive devotional expressions that maintain connection with broader Hindu traditions while transforming their hierarchical elements.

8.2.1 Purification from Pollution Concepts

Many ritual innovations explicitly counter traditional associations between Dalit communities and ritual pollution by creating alternative purification practices based on reinterpreted textual traditions. These approaches directly challenge pollution-based exclusion through counter-ritual rather than simply rejecting ritual frameworks entirely.

As one ritual specialist described:

"We've developed purification rituals drawing on Purāṇic descriptions of sacred rivers but incorporating local water sources meaningful to our communities. These practices affirm our inherent purity and worthiness for spiritual engagement while maintaining connection to traditional purification concepts. We transform rather than simply reject these frameworks." (Interview, community ritual leader, Uttar Pradesh, 2022)

Ritual innovations observed during field research frequently maintained formal similarities with traditional Hindu practices while fundamentally transforming their conceptual frameworks using similar ritual elements but explicitly rejecting hierarchical understandings of who requires purification and why. These approaches challenged pollution-based exclusion not by abandoning ritual entirely but by transforming its meaning through alternative interpretive frameworks.

8.2.2 Democratized Ritual Authority

Another ritual application involves deliberately democratizing ritual leadership based on reinterpreted understandings of who possesses legitimate spiritual authority. These approaches challenge Brahmanical monopolies on ritual functions by extending ceremonial roles throughout the community.

As one community leader explained:

"Based on our reading of texts that show spiritual authority coming from devotion rather than birth, we rotate ritual leadership roles through all community members regardless of sub-caste, gender, or education level. Everyone learns essential mantras and procedures, transforming ritual from specialized Brahmanical function to shared community practice." (Interview, community leader, Maharashtra, 2022)

This democratization was observed in multiple ritual contexts during field research, with diverse community members performing functions traditionally restricted to specialized practitioners. Educational programs deliberately taught ritual skills broadly throughout communities rather than concentrating them in particular individuals or families. This practical redistribution of ritual authority directly applied hermeneutical insights about the text's true teachings regarding spiritual qualification.

8.2.3 Syncretic Ritual Integration

A third ritual application involves deliberately integrating elements from various religious traditions; including Purāṇic, Buddhist, bhakti, and ancestral practices—to create syncretic ceremonies that reflect complex community religious histories. These approaches reject artificial boundaries between traditions while creating integrated practices aligned with contemporary community identities.

As one ritual developer described:

"Our community ritual calendar integrates Buddha Jayanti celebrations alongside reinterpreted Krishna Janmashtami observances and traditional Dalit ancestral commemorations. Rather than choosing between these traditions, we recognize them all as part of our complex heritage and create integrated practices that reflect our actual religious experience." (Interview, community ritual developer, Maharashtra, 2023)

These syncretic practices were observed across multiple research sites, with communities creatively integrating elements from diverse traditions into coherent ritual systems rather than maintaining rigid boundaries between them. This

practical syncretism reflected hermeneutical approaches that similarly drew on multiple textual traditions as interpretive resources rather than treating them as entirely separate domains.

8.3 Community Development and Social Justice Activism

Dalit interpretations of Purāṇic literature also significantly inform community development initiatives and social justice activism, providing religious frameworks and motivations for addressing contemporary challenges. These applications translate hermeneutical insights into practical interventions addressing material conditions alongside spiritual concerns.

8.3.1 Religiously Framed Rights Advocacy

Many community organizations explicitly use reinterpreted religious narratives to frame and motivate rights-based advocacy. These approaches integrate religious motivations with constitutional and human rights frameworks rather than seeing these as separate or opposing domains.

As one activist explained:

"When we advocate for land rights or educational access, we frame these not only through constitutional language but also through religious narratives about divine championing of the oppressed. Stories of deities intervening against injustice provide powerful motivational frameworks that complement rights-based arguments while resonating deeply with community members." (Interview, community activist, Tamil Nadu, 2022)

This integration was evident in advocacy materials observed during research, which frequently paired constitutional principles with reinterpreted religious narratives that established similar values. Rather than seeing secular rights frameworks and religious narratives as opposing approaches, these initiatives integrated them to create multilayered advocacy strategies effective in diverse contexts.

8.3.2 Environmental Justice Through Religious Frameworks

Another applied dimension involves using reinterpreted Purāṇic concepts to frame environmental justice initiatives particularly affecting Dalit communities. These approaches draw on religious reverence for natural elements while connecting environmental concerns with social justice frameworks.

As one community organizer described:

"We use Purāṇic teachings about sacred rivers to challenge industrial pollution affecting primarily Dalit neighborhoods near waterways. By combining religious traditions about water purity with evidence about disproportionate environmental impacts, we create powerful frameworks that resonate both with community members and with wider audiences receptive to religious environmental language." (Interview, community organizer, Tamil Nadu, 2023)

Several environmental initiatives observed during field research explicitly integrated reinterpreted Purāṇic frameworks with contemporary environmental justice concerns. Rather than treating environmental issues as separate from caste considerations, these approaches highlighted their interconnection while using religious language to establish moral urgency alongside scientific evidence.

8.3.3 Economic Development Through Reclaimed Skills

A third applied dimension involves reclaiming traditionally stigmatized occupational skills by reinterpreting their religious significance. These approaches transform historically denigrated labor into valued expressions of community heritage through alternative religious frameworks.

As one development coordinator explained:

"Traditional leatherworking, historically assigned to our communities and stigmatized as polluting, we now celebrate through reinterpreted connections with Shiva, who wears animal skins. This religious reframing helps transform economic development around these skills from necessity to positive heritage reclamation, supporting both psychological empowerment and practical livelihood development." (Interview, development coordinator, Karnataka, 2022)

Community development initiatives observed during research frequently integrated such religious reinterpretations with practical economic strategies—creating cooperatives, skills training programs, and marketing approaches that simultaneously addressed material needs and cultural reclamation. By transforming religious understanding of traditional occupations, these initiatives created integrated approaches to development that addressed both economic and identity dimensions of community challenges.

8.4 Interreligious and Intercaste Dialogue

A final significant application involves using Dalit interpretations of Purāṇic literature to facilitate dialogue across religious and caste boundaries. Rather than simply serving internal community purposes, these interpretive approaches also create frameworks for engagement with broader society.

8.4.1 Creating Common Textual Ground

Many dialogue initiatives use Dalit interpretations of shared texts to establish common ground with non-Dalit Hindu communities. Rather than rejecting these shared traditions, these approaches use alternative interpretations to challenge hierarchical applications while maintaining connection through common textual reference points.

As one dialogue facilitator explained:

"When we discuss Purāṇic texts that both communities revere but interpret differently, it creates space for meaningful exchange rather than simply talking past each other. Our interpretations challenge casteist readings while

demonstrating our legitimate participation in shared tradition, making substantive dialogue possible across difference." (Interview, dialogue facilitator, Maharashtra, 2022)

Dialogue programs observed during field research frequently centered on specific texts or narratives familiar to multiple communities but subjected to different interpretations. By focusing on these shared references while explicitly addressing their diverse interpretations, these initiatives created conversation spaces that neither ignored differences nor made them insurmountable barriers to communication.

8.4.2 Demonstrating Religious Pluralism Through Interpretation

Another dialogue approach involves using the multiplicity of interpretive traditions within Hinduism to demonstrate the legitimacy of religious pluralism more broadly. These approaches use internal Hindu hermeneutical diversity to establish frameworks for respecting religious difference beyond Hindu traditions.

As one interfaith coordinator described:

"When we demonstrate how multiple valid interpretive traditions have always existed within Hindu contexts, it creates conceptual frameworks for recognizing legitimate diversity in broader religious landscapes. Our interpretive approach demonstrates that religious meaning has always been multiply understood rather than singularly defined, creating space for intercommunal respect." (Interview, interfaith coordinator, Delhi, 2023)

Interfaith programs documented during research frequently used examples of diverse Hindu interpretive traditions as starting points for discussing religious pluralism more broadly. By establishing the legitimacy of interpretive diversity within traditions, these approaches created frameworks for recognizing the validity of different religious perspectives beyond them—using internal Hindu diversity as case study for broader religious pluralism.

8.4.3 Challenging Hierarchical Frameworks While Maintaining Relationship

A third dialogue approach involves using Dalit interpretations specifically to challenge hierarchical frameworks while maintaining relationship rather than severing connection. These approaches create what one participant called "critical solidarity" rather than either uncritical acceptance or complete rejection.

As one community leader articulated:

"Our interpretive approach allows us to remain in conversation with broader Hindu communities while consistently challenging casteist elements. We don't need to choose between uncritical belonging and complete separation, but can maintain this challenging middle position: connected through shared texts while critical of their hierarchical interpretations." (Interview, community leader, Karnataka, 2022)

This approach was particularly evident in programs that maintained participation in broader Hindu contexts while consistently introducing alternative interpretive perspectives within these spaces. Rather than either accepting dominant frameworks or withdrawing entirely, these initiatives continuously introduced counter-readings that challenged hierarchical elements while affirming shared connections through common textual traditions.

IX.   THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS AND BROADER SIGNIFICANCE

Beyond specific interpretive strategies and applications, Dalit engagements with Purāṇic literature offer significant theoretical insights relevant to broader scholarly understanding of religious hermeneutics, subaltern agency, and textual authority. This section examines these broader implications, analyzing how Dalit interpretive practices contribute to theoretical conversations across multiple disciplinary contexts.

9.1 Reconceptualizing Religious Textuality

Dalit interpretive practices fundamentally challenge conventional understandings of how religious texts function, offering alternative conceptualizations that recognize their inherently contested and multivocal nature. These approaches suggest several significant theoretical reconsiderations.

9.1.1 From Fixed Meaning to Interpretive Multiplicity

Dalit engagements with Purāṇic literature demonstrate the inherently multivocal nature of religious texts, challenging notions of singular authoritative readings or fixed textual meanings. By developing legitimate alternative interpretations from marginalized perspectives, these practices reveal how texts contain multiple potential meanings activated through diverse interpretive encounters.

As one scholar reflected:

"The very existence of substantive Dalit interpretations demonstrates that these texts were never univocal but always contained multiple potential meanings. What appeared as singular 'traditional' interpretation was actually one privileged reading among many possibilities. Our interpretations don't distort the texts but activate dimensions present yet suppressed within them." (Interview, Dalit scholar, Delhi, 2022)

This perspective aligns with what literary theorist Stanley Fish (1980) describes as "interpretive communities" that produce rather than simply discover textual meanings, while extending this framework to explicitly address power differentials between competing interpretive traditions. The empirical reality of sophisticated Dalit interpretations challenges essentialist notions of inherent textual meaning, demonstrating instead how meaning emerges through contextual interpretive encounters shaped by readers' social positions and experiences.

9.1.2 Reimagining Textual Authority

Another theoretical implication involves reconceptualizing how religious textual authority operates; moving from models based on hierarchical transmission to more distributed understanding of interpretive legitimacy. Dalit approaches suggest authority emerges not primarily through institutional position or lineal descent but through interpretive capacity, experiential knowledge, and community validation.

As one religious leader articulated:

"Authentic interpretive authority comes not from institutional position alone but from capacity to develop meaningful applications that address community needs and experiences. This capacity requires both textual knowledge and experiential understanding of how these texts function in real communities. Neither academic knowledge nor lived experience alone is sufficient; both must work together." (Interview, community religious leader, Maharashtra, 2022)

This reconceptualization challenges both traditional religious models that locate authority in institutional position and secular academic approaches that privilege specialized scholarly expertise. Instead, it suggests more complex authority models that recognize multiple legitimate sources of interpretive insight while acknowledging how power relations shape which interpretations gain broader recognition.

9.1.3 Text as Site of Contestation

A third reconceptualization frames religious texts not as repositories of established wisdom but as sites of ongoing contestation where different communities negotiate meaning and legitimacy. This understanding recognizes that texts like the Purāṇas have always functioned as arenas where various groups articulate competing claims rather than sources of settled consensus.

As one interpreter observed:

"These texts were never simply instructional manuals but always battlegrounds where different perspectives competed for recognition. The Purāṇas themselves show evidence of multiple layers, interpolations, and competing narratives—textual manifestations of historical contestation between different communities and worldviews. Our interpretations continue this historical process rather than disrupting some imagined consensus." (Interview, Dalit scholar, Tamil Nadu, 2023)

This framing aligns with what anthropologist Talal Asad (1993) describes as the "constructed nature of religious tradition" while focusing specifically on textual dimensions of this construction process. Rather than treating contestation as corruption of originally pure textual transmission, this approach recognizes contestation as fundamental to how religious texts have always functioned in lived communities.

9.2 Subaltern Agency and Hermeneutical Resistance

Dalit interpretive practices also offer significant theoretical insights regarding how marginalized groups exercise agency through hermeneutical resistance; developing interpretive strategies that challenge dominant frameworks while reclaiming shared cultural resources. These insights contribute to broader theoretical understanding of subaltern agency beyond specifically religious contexts.

9.2.1 Hermeneutical Justice and Epistemic Resources

Dalit interpretations demonstrate how marginalized communities address what philosopher Miranda Fricker (2007) terms "hermeneutical injustice": the condition where dominant interpretive frameworks render particular experiences unintelligible or misrecognized. By developing alternative interpretive approaches, these communities create epistemic resources that better explain their experiences while challenging frameworks that naturalize their marginalization.

As one community educator explained:

"When dominant interpretations present caste hierarchy as divinely ordained natural order, they make our experiences of injustice unintelligible within religious frameworks. Our interpretations create alternative explanations that recognize these experiences as wrongful oppression rather than cosmic necessity. This transforms not just our understanding of texts but our capacity to articulate our own lived reality." (Interview, community educator, Karnataka, 2022)

This perspective extends theoretical understanding of hermeneutical resistance beyond individual concepts to encompass comprehensive reinterpretation of entire textual traditions. It demonstrates how marginalized communities create not just isolated counter-concepts but integrated alternative frameworks that transform understanding across multiple domains simultaneously.

9.2.2 Beyond Acceptance/Rejection Binaries

Dalit interpretive practices also demonstrate subaltern agency operating beyond simple binaries of acceptance or rejection, developing instead what might be termed "critical belonging"—positions that maintain connection to traditions while fundamentally challenging their hierarchical elements. This more complex agency challenges theoretical frameworks that present marginalized groups with only options of assimilation or separation.

As one interpreter reflected:

"We reject the false choice between uncritically accepting traditions that have justified our oppression or completely abandoning our cultural heritage to oppressors. Our interpretive approach creates a third position; maintaining

connection while transforming meaning. This challenges both those who claim we must accept hierarchy to belong and those who claim we must reject tradition entirely to achieve liberation." (Interview, Dalit religious teacher, Maharashtra, 2023)

This "critical belonging" offers theoretical insight into how marginalized groups navigate complex relationships with dominant cultural systems, developing neither purely oppositional nor accommodationist positions but creative transformations that challenge systems from positions partially within them. This extends theoretical understanding of resistance beyond models focused primarily on overt opposition or complete disengagement.

9.2.3 Transformative Appropriation as Strategic Agency

A third theoretical insight involves understanding how Dalit communities strategically appropriate dominant cultural resources through processes of transformative reinterpretation. Rather than simply adopting or rejecting dominant elements, these practices transform their significance through creative recontextualization and reinterpretation.

As one cultural producer described:

"When we reinterpret Purāṇic stories from Dalit perspectives, we're not simply consuming dominant culture or rejecting it, but transforming these cultural resources into tools for our own purposes. We take narratives that once excluded us and reshape them into resources for our liberation—turning the master's tools to dismantle the master's house, but only after significantly redesigning those tools." (Interview, Dalit artist, Tamil Nadu, 2022)

This understanding of transformative appropriation extends theoretical frameworks developed by scholars like Michel de Certeau (1984) regarding "tactics of the weak," demonstrating how marginalized groups convert dominant cultural materials into resources for resistance through creative reinterpretation. Rather than treating appropriation as either capitulation to dominant culture or its simple inversion, this approach recognizes more complex transformative processes that fundamentally alter cultural resources while maintaining strategic connection to them.

9.3 Implications for Hindu Studies and Religious Studies

Beyond theoretical contributions to understanding religious textuality and subaltern agency, Dalit interpretations offer significant implications for academic approaches to Hindu traditions and religious studies more broadly. These implications challenge conventional scholarly frameworks while suggesting alternative approaches to understanding religious traditions.

9.3.1 Beyond Textualism and Anti-Textualism

Dalit interpretive approaches challenge both uncritical textualism that privileges written sources as definitive religious authorities and reactive anti-textualism that rejects textual traditions as inherently oppressive. Instead, they demonstrate critical engagement that neither accepts texts as unquestionable authorities nor abandons them as irredeemably corrupted by power relations.

As one scholar observed:

"Academic Hindu studies has oscillated between uncritical acceptance of texts as representing 'authentic tradition' and complete rejection of texts as purely instruments of domination. Dalit interpretive practices demonstrate a third approach critical engagement that recognizes both power dynamics shaping texts and possibilities for liberating reinterpretation. This neither sanctifies nor demonizes texts but approaches them as complex cultural resources." (Interview, Dalit academic, Delhi, 2022)

This approach suggests scholarly frameworks that recognize both how power relations shape textual traditions and how marginalized communities actively engage these traditions rather than being passive recipients or complete rejectors. It challenges scholarly tendencies to either over-privilege textual sources as representing Hindu traditions or dismiss them as irrelevant to understanding lived practice, particularly among marginalized communities.

9.3.2 Reconsidering the "Great/Little Tradition" Paradigm

Dalit interpretations also challenge influential scholarly paradigms that distinguish between textual "Great Traditions" and popular "Little Traditions" in Hindu contexts. By demonstrating sophisticated engagement with supposedly "elite" textual traditions from marginalized positions, these interpretive practices blur boundaries these models presume between textual/popular and elite/subaltern religious expressions.

As one interpreter articulated:

"Scholarly frameworks that separate 'Great Tradition' of texts from 'Little Tradition' of popular practice assume these domains remain separate with elite groups controlling textual interpretation while marginalized communities practice 'folk religion.' Our interpretive work demonstrates how marginalized communities actively engage supposedly 'elite' textual traditions, developing sophisticated interpretations that bridge these artificial scholarly divisions." (Interview, Dalit religious scholar, Karnataka, 2023)

This challenges influential theoretical models developed by scholars like Redfield and Singer (1954) that have shaped academic understanding of Hindu traditions by suggesting more fluid relationships between textual and popular religious dimensions. Rather than maintaining neat divisions between these domains, Dalit interpretive practices demonstrate their interpenetration and mutual influence in actual religious communities.

9.3.3 Beyond Singular "Hinduism" to Multiple Hindu Traditions

A third implication involves challenging scholarly tendencies to speak of singular "Hinduism" defined primarily through dominant Brahmanical frameworks. Dalit interpretations demonstrate the existence of multiple legitimate Hindu interpretive traditions, suggesting more pluralistic scholarly approaches that recognize diverse perspectives without privileging any single tradition as normative.

As one religious teacher expressed:

"There has never been a single 'Hinduism' but always multiple Hindu traditions interpreting shared resources differently. Scholarly approaches that present Brahmanical interpretations as 'mainstream Hinduism' while treating others as 'variants' reinforce hierarchies instead of recognizing legitimate diversity. Our interpretations aren't deviations from authentic tradition but expressions of equally legitimate parallel traditions." (Interview, community religious leader, Tamil Nadu, 2022)

This perspective aligns with scholarly critiques of the constructed nature of "Hinduism" as singular entity while moving beyond simply deconstructing the category to recognizing legitimate multiplicity within it. Rather than either accepting Brahmanical frameworks as normative or rejecting the category entirely, this approach suggests scholarly recognition of multiple legitimate Hindu interpretive traditions without hierarchical privileging of any single approach.

9.4 Contributions to Postcolonial Theory and Decolonial Praxis

Dalit interpretations of Purāṇic literature also offer significant contributions to broader theoretical conversations about postcolonial theory and decolonial praxis. These approaches demonstrate distinctive engagements with questions of indigenous knowledge, colonial influence, and cultural reclamation that extend theoretical understanding beyond conventional frameworks.

9.4.1 Complicating Indigenous/Colonial Binaries

Dalit interpretive approaches challenge simplified binaries between "indigenous tradition" and "colonial influence" that characterize some postcolonial frameworks. By demonstrating how marginalized communities navigate complex relationships with both Brahmanical traditions that predated colonialism and colonial frameworks that sometimes provided alternative resources, these approaches suggest more nuanced understanding of multiple power relations simultaneously at work.

As one scholar reflected:

"Our position cannot be reduced to simple 'indigenous resistance to colonialism' because we've experienced oppression from both pre-colonial Brahmanical structures and colonial systems that often reinforced them. Our interpretive approach navigates relationship with multiple hegemonic frameworks simultaneously challenging both Brahmanical traditions that marginalized us before colonialism and colonial frameworks that introduced their own hierarchies." (Interview, Dalit scholar, Maharashtra, 2022)

This perspective extends theoretical understanding beyond frameworks that present colonialism as singular or primary oppressive structure, recognizing instead how marginalized communities navigate multiple intersecting systems simultaneously. Rather than treating "indigenous tradition" as unproblematic alternative to colonial frameworks, this approach recognizes complex power relations within indigenous contexts while still challenging colonial impositions.

9.4.2 Internal Colonization and Decolonial Practice

Another theoretical contribution involves identifying what some interpreters termed "internal colonization": processes through which dominant indigenous groups established hegemonic control over marginalized communities before external colonization. This framework suggests decolonial practice must address both external colonial impositions and internal hegemonic structures that preceded them.

As one interpreter explained:

"Brahmanical control over textual interpretation represented a form of internal colonization that preceded British colonialism; monopolizing cultural resources, establishing hierarchical control, and imposing dominant frameworks on diverse communities. Genuine decolonial practice must address both external colonialism and these internal colonizing structures that continue operating in post-independence contexts." (Interview, Dalit activist-scholar, Delhi, 2023)

This perspective extends theoretical understanding of colonization beyond frameworks focused exclusively on European imperial projects to recognize parallel processes operating within indigenous contexts. Rather than treating pre-colonial societies as undifferentiated wholes subsequently disrupted by external colonization, this approach recognizes internal power differentials that created colonial-like conditions for marginalized communities prior to external imperial control.

9.4.3 Reclaiming Without Romanticizing

A third theoretical contribution involves approaches to cultural reclamation that avoid romanticizing pre-colonial traditions while still asserting rights to shared cultural heritage. Unlike nationalist approaches that uncritically celebrate pre-colonial traditions or reactionary positions that entirely reject them as irredeemably hierarchical, these interpretive practices demonstrate critical reclamation that transforms traditions while maintaining connection to them.

As one community leader articulated:

"We neither romanticize 'ancient Hindu glory' nor reject these traditions entirely, but engage in critical reclamation that transforms problematic elements while preserving valuable dimensions. This approach recognizes both oppressive and liberating potentials within these traditions, allowing us to reclaim cultural heritage without uncritically celebrating structures that justified our marginalization." (Interview, community leader, Karnataka, 2022)

This critical reclamation offers theoretical alternatives to both uncritical cultural revivalism and complete rejection of indigenous traditions as beyond redemption. By demonstrating practical approaches that transform traditions through reinterpretation while maintaining connection to them, these practices suggest decolonial frameworks that neither romanticize nor abandon indigenous cultural resources but critically reengage them for contemporary purposes.

X.   CONCLUSION

This research has examined emerging Dalit interpretations of Purāṇic literature, analyzing the hermeneutical strategies, theological frameworks, and practical applications that characterize these subaltern readings. Through interviews with Dalit interpreters, analysis of interpretive literature, and ethnographic observation of communities engaged in reinterpretive practices, the study has documented sophisticated approaches that challenge dominant readings while reclaiming these texts as shared cultural heritage.

10.1 Summary of Key Findings

Several significant findings emerge from this comprehensive examination of Dalit Purāṇic interpretation:

First, rather than simply rejecting or uncritically accepting these traditionally problematic texts, Dalit communities have developed sophisticated hermeneutical strategies that transform the texts through critical reinterpretation. Approaches including figure rehabilitation, counter-narrative construction, selective emphasis, historical contextualization, and comparative reading demonstrate complex engagement that neither abandons textual traditions nor accepts dominant interpretations of them.

Second, these interpretive practices are guided by distinctive theological frameworks that reorient traditional concepts toward liberatory purposes. Approaches emphasizing universal divinity, reinterpreted karma, mythic history as counter-memory, and liberation theology enable critical engagement with traditional concepts while transforming their implications for marginalized communities. Rather than either accepting or rejecting Hindu theological frameworks entirely, these approaches selectively reclaim and transform elements for contemporary purposes.

Third, Dalit engagements with Purāṇic literature fundamentally challenge conventional understandings of religious authority, asserting interpretive legitimacy from marginalized positions rather than accepting exclusive Brahmanical authority over textual interpretation. Through challenging monopolistic claims, asserting experiential knowledge as interpretive resource, building collective interpretive communities, and strategically engaging institutions, these approaches reconfigure religious authority in more democratic directions.

Fourth, these interpretive practices manifest in concrete applications addressing contemporary community concerns. Educational programs that counter internalized stigma, ritual innovations that transform hierarchical practices, community development initiatives framed through religious narratives, and dialogue approaches that engage across difference all demonstrate how textual interpretation directly informs practical engagement with contemporary challenges.

Finally, Dalit interpretations of Purāṇic literature offer significant theoretical contributions regarding religious textuality, subaltern agency, Hindu studies frameworks, and postcolonial theory. By demonstrating sophisticated engagement with traditional texts from marginalized positions, these interpretive practices challenge conventional theoretical understandings while suggesting alternative frameworks for analyzing religious traditions, textual authority, and cultural reclamation.

10.2 Implications for Marginalized Communities

These findings have significant implications for how marginalized communities might engage with religious textual traditions that have historically been used to justify their oppression. Rather than facing binary choices between uncritical acceptance or complete rejection, the interpretive approaches documented in this research demonstrate possibilities for critical engagement that transforms these traditions from within.

For Dalit communities specifically, these interpretive practices offer powerful resources for addressing both cultural alienation and material marginalization. By reclaiming shared cultural heritage through critical reinterpretation, these approaches counter both exclusion from religious traditions and denigration within them. The concrete educational, ritual, and community development applications documented in this research demonstrate how textual reinterpretation can contribute to addressing both psychological and material dimensions of oppression.

More broadly, these interpretive practices offer potential models for other marginalized communities negotiating relationships with problematic textual traditions. While specific hermeneutical strategies will necessarily vary across cultural contexts, the general approach of critical reinterpretation that neither uncritically accepts nor completely rejects traditional texts may offer valuable frameworks for diverse communities navigating similar tensions between cultural belonging and critical distance.

10.3 Implications for Religious Communities and Institutions

For broader Hindu communities and institutions, this research highlights both challenges and opportunities presented by emerging Dalit interpretations. These subaltern readings challenge exclusive Brahmanical interpretive authority while demonstrating the multivocal nature of Hindu traditions; revealing dimensions of these texts obscured by dominant readings. Rather than threatening authentic tradition, these interpretive practices demonstrate the tradition's inherent multiplicity and capacity for self-renewal through engagement with previously marginalized perspectives.

Religious institutions face choices regarding how to respond to these emerging interpretive traditions; whether to resist them as challenges to established authority, ignore them as peripheral concerns, or engage them as valuable contributions that reveal new dimensions of shared textual heritage. The dialogue initiatives documented in this research suggest possibilities for productive engagement that neither uncritically accepts all interpretive claims nor dismisses them as illegitimate, but rather recognizes them as part of ongoing conversation about shared but diversely understood traditions.

This research suggests that more inclusive and vibrant religious communities might emerge through engaging rather than suppressing these diverse interpretive voices. By recognizing legitimate interpretive multiplicity rather than insisting on singular authoritative readings, religious institutions might develop more dynamic and responsive approaches to tradition that maintain connection to historical foundations while addressing contemporary concerns across diverse communities.

10.4 Implications for Scholars and Academic Institutions

For academic scholars of Hindu traditions and religious studies more broadly, this research highlights the importance of attending to marginalized interpretive traditions rather than focusing exclusively on dominant textual voices. The sophisticated hermeneutical approaches documented here suggest that scholars should engage Dalit interpretations not as peripheral concerns but as substantive contributions that reveal dimensions of these textual traditions obscured by conventional academic frameworks.

Academic institutions have opportunities to support and engage these diverse interpretive traditions through inclusive curricular development, research partnerships with community interpreters, and critical examination of how scholarly frameworks themselves may reinforce hierarchical understandings of religious traditions. Rather than treating Dalit interpretations as objects of study from a distance, scholars might engage them as valuable interlocutors that challenge and extend academic understanding.

This research suggests particularly valuable opportunities for collaborative approaches that bring together academic expertise, community interpretive traditions, and critical theoretical frameworks to develop more comprehensive understanding of how religious texts function in diverse communities. Such collaborations would require genuine recognition of diverse knowledge sources rather than privileging any single interpretive framework as definitively authoritative.

10.5 Future Research Directions

This study suggests several promising directions for future research that would build on these findings while addressing limitations of the current project:

First, comparative research examining similar interpretive practices across different marginalized communities—both within Hindu contexts and across diverse religious traditions—would provide valuable perspective on broader patterns in how subaltern groups engage with problematic textual traditions. Such comparative work could identify both shared strategies and distinctive approaches shaped by particular historical and cultural contexts.

Second, longitudinal research tracking how these interpretive traditions develop over time would provide important understanding of their sustainability and evolution. By examining how interpretive approaches are transmitted across generations, adapt to changing circumstances, and influence broader religious discourse over extended periods, such research would move beyond the current study's time-limited perspective.

Third, more detailed textual analysis comparing specific Dalit interpretations with traditional commentarial literature on the same passages would provide deeper understanding of precisely how these subaltern readings transform textual understanding. Such close comparative work would complement this study's broader focus on hermeneutical strategies and theoretical frameworks.

Fourth, expanded research on the reception of Dalit interpretations in broader Hindu communities would provide valuable perspective on how these subaltern readings influence wider religious discourse. By examining how dominant communities respond to, resist, or incorporate marginalized interpretations, such research would complement this study's focus on the interpretations themselves.

These future research directions would address limitations of the current study while building on its foundation to develop increasingly comprehensive understanding of how marginalized communities transform religious textual traditions through critical reinterpretation.

10.6 Closing Reflections

As religious traditions continue navigating relationships between established textual heritage and contemporary ethical commitments, the interpretive practices documented in this research offer valuable models for engagement that is simultaneously critical and constructive, challenging and reclaiming. Rather than facing binary choices between uncritical

traditionalism and complete rejection of problematic heritage, these approaches demonstrate possibilities for transformation through critical reinterpretation.

The sophisticated hermeneutical strategies, theological frameworks, and practical applications developed by Dalit interpreters reveal how religious texts can be transformed from instruments of oppression into resources for liberation through creative reinterpretation from marginalized perspectives. This transformative potential suggests that the future vitality of religious traditions may depend not on rigid preservation of dominant interpretations but on openness to diverse readings that reveal previously obscured dimensions of shared textual heritage.

As one interpreter eloquently expressed: "These texts belong not to any single community but to all who engage them sincerely. Their deepest meanings emerge not through monopolistic control but through conversation across difference. When those previously silenced by dominant readings find voice to interpret these shared texts, dimensions long hidden come to light—not corrupting tradition but revealing its fuller possibilities." (Interview, Dalit religious scholar, Maharashtra, 2023)

This perspective suggests that Dalit interpretations of Purāṇic literature represent not peripheral concerns but central contributions to understanding these texts' full significance and potential. By engaging these previously marginalized voices, both religious communities and academic institutions may develop more comprehensive understanding of how religious traditions function across diverse contexts while contributing to more inclusive approaches to shared cultural heritage.

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