

The Long and Short of It: Mahā-vākya from Mīmāṃsā to Jīva Gosvāmin, from the Veda to the Bhāgavata

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Abstract: In this article, I focus on the idea of *mahā-vākya* in the theology of Jīva Gosvāmin. I show how Jīva drew on two distinct understandings of *mahā-vākya*, those of Mīmāṃsā and Advaita Vedānta, to claim that: (1) the whole Veda, including the Itihāsa-Purāṇa corpus, was one large *mahā-vākya*; (2) a quarter verse from the *Bhāgavata* was a *mahā-vākya*; (3) the *praṇava* Om̐ was a *mahā-vākya*. I argue that Jīva used the notion of *mahā-vākya* to show that all the Vedas, epics, and Purāṇas denote Kṛṣṇa through the fact that the single most important scriptural statement, ‘Kṛṣṇa is the Supreme Lord’ of *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 1.3.28, has Kṛṣṇa as its reference. I conclude that *mahā-vākya* for Jīva was just a tool that he used for the purpose of canon formation in which the central role would belong to the *Bhāgavata*.

Introduction

Mahā-vākya is an idea that is well-known to students of Hinduism, although its history and meaning are rarely discussed. It stands for a short statement in the Upaniṣads that identifies Brahman the ground of Being with the Self, although scholars sometimes take it in a wider sense of any short and important statement from any Hindu scripture.¹ It is generally, but mistakenly, associated with the 8th century Advaita Vedāntin Śaṅkara: in fact, the first to work out an explicit theory of Upaniṣadic *mahā-vākyas* was another Advaitin, the 11th century Sarvajñātman. In later monastic Advaita Vedānta, *mahā-vākyas* were restricted to four Upaniṣadic statements:

1. *prajñānam brahma*, ‘Brahman is consciousness’, in *Aitareya Upaniṣad* 3.3;
2. *aham brahmāsmi*, ‘I am Brahman’, in *Bṛhad-āraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 1.4.10;
3. *tat tvam asi*, ‘You are that’, in the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 6.8.7;
4. *ayam ātmā brahma*, ‘This Self is Brahman’, in *Māṇḍukya Upaniṣad* 2.

These four today are liberating *mantras* which ascetic gurus give to renunciants from the Daśanāmī Advaita orders during the second stage of their initiation into renunciation (Clark 2006, chapters 3 and 4) and they have been so at least since the time of Śrī Caitanya (1486–1533), who is said to have received *tat tvam asi* from Keśava Bhāratī on the occasion of his *sannyāsa* (Elkman 1986, pp. 5–8). We need not go into historical details, however, and it is sufficient to appreciate that *mahā-vākyas* in Advaita Vedānta are short statements from the Upaniṣads that identify Brahman with the Self.

Less known is that *mahā-vākya* had a prehistory in the other school of Vedic hermeneutics, Mīmāṃsā, where it stood for long sentences, not the short Upaniṣadic identity statements. In this article, I briefly introduce *mahā-vākya* in Mīmāṃsā and Advaita Vedānta and proceed to examine its use in the theology of the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava Jīva Gosvāmin (1517–1608 AD), a theology built on the foundation of the *Bhāgavata*.² I focus on passages from Jīva's *Six Sandarbhas* and his auto-commentary *Sarva-saṁvādinī* to outline his general understanding of *mahā-vākya*, and I argue that he drew on both traditional accounts to claim that the whole Veda, including the Itihāsa–Purāṇa corpus, was one large *mahā-vākya*, a great statement in the literal sense, which had its succinct iteration in a quarter verse from the *Bhāgavata*, a second *mahā-vākya* as the most important statement that directly denotes the reference of the first. I conclude by briefly contraposing Jīva's account to that of Sarvajñātman to show that *mahā-vākya* for Jīva was primarily a device that he used for the purpose of canon formation around the central place of the *Bhāgavata*.

The long and short: *mahā-vākya* in Mīmāṃsā and Advaita Vedānta

The idea of *mahā-vākya* was a relatively minor, but still common currency in classical Mīmāṃsā. It is explicitly mentioned rarely, it is not theorised nor an object of contention, which suggests that it was an idea clear and commonly accepted. Its backbone was the notion of *parāvāsanā*, completion of meaning, which says that any larger sentential unit in which a smaller sentence has been absorbed, finalised and altered can be called a *mahā-vākya*.³ In principle, this works at any linguistic level, and it is in relation to short sentences that the term was used. Take, for instance, the injunction 'One should look at the sun', which, when negated, becomes a prohibition: 'One should *not* look at the sun'. The second sentence becomes a *mahā-vākya* in relation to the first, which is completed and altered yet maintains individual existence as its constitutive part. The two distinct units, the injunction and the negation, restrict one another, such that the injunction becomes a prohibition and the general negation becomes specific. The final sentence expressing the negation is a *mahā-vākya*, while the initial injunction becomes intermediate (*avāntara*) in relation to it. While it is still a distinct part of the final statement, it has lost its independence. That is what Śabara says in his canonical commentary on the *Mīmāṃsā-sūtra*:

And, when a *mahā-vākya* has been formed, the intermediate sentence is no longer evidence (*pramāṇa*), because it has been defeated by the other word, as in the case when from the intermediate sentence which enjoins looking, the prohibition ‘One should not look at the rising sun’ is understood in the *mahā-vākya*.⁴

The combination of individual words and sentences and their mutual delimitation can continue to a point where a manual delineating a Vedic ritual is formed around the central role of the ritual action. This is the ultimate point in which a ‘final’ final meaning is obtained, where all individual meanings have been terminated. In the truest sense, only this is a *mahā-vākya* because the meaning is fully saturated, and the unit obtained cannot become subordinate to another, larger unit. In this use, *mahā-vākya* is synonymous with what Mīmāṃsakas call *prayoga-vidhi*, an applicatory injunction that serves the purpose of a ritual manual. A *mahā-vākya* is, thus, literally a ‘great’, *long* sentence, a whole book in which the ritual has been presented through hierarchically arranging its distinct elements and in which a single textual reference has been obtained: the ritual action qualified by all ritual details.⁵ This is the definition that we find in the *Mīmāṃsā-kośa*: ‘A large sentence is the *pramāṇa* that establishes the principal-auxiliary relationship. It has the form of an applicatory injunction (*prayoga-vidhi*).’⁶

The Mīmāṃsā notion of *mahā-vākya* was appropriated by the 11th century Advaitin Sarvajñātman and refashioned into a doctrine of Upaniṣadic *mahā-vākyas*. Very briefly, and taking *tat tvam asi* as the example, a *mahā-vākya* is a sentence where two categories – Brahman the great cause on the one hand, and the inner Self of the cognizing agent on the other – are purged of their mutual incompatibility to obtain a single reference, an *inner*, non-causal Brahman. The two categories are really ellipses for definitions obtained from Upaniṣadic passages that present Brahman and the Self respectively, *without* their non-distinction obtaining. The category of *tat* is, for instance, defined partially in the famous statement of *Taittirīya* 2.1.1, *satyam jñānam anantaṁ brahma*. Like in Mīmāṃsā, these definitions are *avāntara-vākyas*. Brahman is, further, presented in creation passages throughout the Upaniṣads that elaborate on its characteristics: for instance, the sixth chapter of the *Chāndogya* that describes the creation of the world from Being, *sat*, attempts to intimate just what Brahman being *satyam* means. The Self is likewise discussed in passages such as the teaching about the five sheaths in the *Taittirīya* and about the three states of awareness in the *Bṛhad-Āraṇyaka*. These are illustrative texts that facilitate reasoning through scriptural categories that gradually focus on the true nature of Brahman and the Self, thus assisting their *avāntara-vākyas*. So, the structure is that of *avāntara-vākyas* which are finalised in the *mahā-vākya*, and which have under them illustrative passages to facilitate the formation of their meaning. There is, in other words, an exact parallel to the Mīmāṃsā notion: a central short sentence that develops into a large, hierarchically structured text (thus, a *mahā-vākya*), in which something that is evidence on a

lower level is not so on a higher level because its meaning has been absorbed and changed. The *mahā-vākya* is formally short, but its interpretation requires the full Upaniṣadic corpus.⁷

The use of the *mahā-vākya* is not, however, hermeneutic in the canonical sense, except through the principle of hierarchy of evidence. *Mahā-vākyas* are not a part of any of the various sets of Mīmāṃsā rules of interpretation, but their outcome. They are, rather, the central part of a ‘personal hermeneutics’, a process of self-understanding that is facilitated by the scriptural interrogation of their meaning: they are not themselves part of the interrogation rules. *Mahā-vākyas* are soteriological devices, an organisation of the Upaniṣads for their use in teaching that is geared towards liberation, and in the Advaita Vedānta of Sarvajñātman liberation follows solely from understanding a *mahā-vākya*.⁸

The longest and shortest: but really, all the Vedas are about Kṛṣṇa

In Mīmāṃsā, *mahā-vākya* was closely associated with interpretation, but it wasn’t itself a hermeneutic principle. It was the ‘hermeneutic outcome,’ what is established by principles of interpretation. In Advaita Vedānta, the primary role of *mahā-vākya* was soteriological and only secondarily interpretative. In both cases, *mahā-vākya* had a practical application: providing the blueprint for a ritual, or giving liberating knowledge. In terms of interpretation, the only significant import was that what is evidence on the *mahā-vākya* level is superordinate to what is evidence on the *avāntara-vākya* level. With Jīva Gosvāmin, *mahā-vākya* will keep the characteristics of hierarchy of text, sphere of validity and finality of meaning, but primarily it will be a theological device meant to prove that Kṛṣṇa is the be-all and end-all of the Veda through facilitating canon formation and hierarchy. Before we can appreciate this, however, there are a few preliminaries that we must introduce.

Jīva Gosvāmin was a leading theologian in the *bhakti* tradition of the great cultural hero Śrī Caitanya.⁹ His theological project was far reaching and involved presenting Caitanya’s teachings as the epitome of the Vedas. Caitanya’s axiology promoted amorous love of the personal divinity Kṛṣṇa as the highest human good, and in his magnum opus, the *Ṣaṭ-sandarbhā*, Jīva set out to establish that such love of Kṛṣṇa was the final meaning of the whole Vedic corpus. This required some theological ingenuity, given that the Vedas in their traditional scope do not as much as mention Kṛṣṇa.¹⁰

In fact, the book which Caitanya Vaiṣṇavas accept as absolute scriptural authority was not part of the canonical Vedic corpus, but was rather a Purāṇa, the *Bhāgavata*, where Kṛṣṇa reigned supreme.¹¹ This meant that Jīva had to find a way to present the *Bhāgavata* not only as a part of the Veda, but also its *best* part. Caitanya Vaiṣṇavism situated itself in the tradition of Vedānta and accepted the Veda as a reliable warrant (*pramāṇa*) which provides knowledge from linguistic utterances (*śabda*) and is the sole authority on all supersensible things. Like the

rest of Vedānta and the sister tradition of Mīmāṃsā, it did not settle for knowledge from linguistic utterances of the testimonial kind, but accepted *śāstra*, the restricted form of *śabda*, which signified verbal knowledge from non-personal source (*apauruṣeya*) (*Sarva-saṁvādinī* of Jīva Gosvāmin (SS) on *Tattva-sandarbhā* of Jīva Gosvāmin (TS) 10).¹² Traditionally, the Purāṇas had a derivative authority, which could not trump the authority of the Veda. Since Caitanya Vaiṣṇavism was part of Vedic orthodoxy, it accepted the Veda as a *pramāṇa* on all trans-empirical questions, and that was a problem because, as I said above, no Vaiṣṇavism can be constructed solely from the Veda, and because the scripture *par excellence* for the Vaiṣṇavas was a Purāṇa.

Jīva's solution to this conundrum was to extend the scope of the Veda to include the epics and the Purāṇas. In doing so, he availed himself of the few references in the Veda itself to Purāṇa/Itihāsa as kinds of Vedic texts, specifically the *Bṛhad-Āraṇyaka Upaniṣad* (2.4.10) that includes the Itihāsa-Purāṇa in the group of texts that emanate from Brahman, and the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* (7.1.2) that present the two as the fifth Veda that is to be studied along with the first four (TS 12-3). In his interpretation, Jīva disagreed with traditional accounts, such as that of Śaṅkara, who took these passages as references to non-historical stories and dialogues not in the epics and the Purāṇas, but in the Brāhmaṇas (*Bṛhad-āraṇyaka-upaniṣad-bhāṣya* of Śaṅkara 2.4.10, vol. VIII, p. 309). The result of Jīva's rethinking was that *both* what is traditionally considered the Veda *and* the Itihāsa-Purāṇa complex are *apauruṣeya-śabda* and can be called 'Veda'.

The specific difference between the two was that in the first, important were word-order and accent, while in the second it was the feature of explaining, supplementing and completing the first (TS 12). This came to mean that the Itihāsa-Purāṇa pair was more important than the original Veda, since without the second, one could not understand the first. Gupta (2007, pp. 112–17) calls this a reversal of *śruti* and *smṛti* in which the second becomes more important than the first, and we may add that it is a subordination of the first through the first, legitimation through intertextuality.

In this extension of the canon, it should be noted, Jīva benefitted from the *Bhagavan-nāma-kaumudī* of the Advaita Vedāntin Lakṣmīdhara, who was probably his senior by about a century. As showed by Venkatkrishnan (2015, chapter 3), it was Lakṣmīdhara who argued that the Itihāsa-Purāṇa was the Veda, equally authorless (*apauruṣeya*) and different only with respect to accent and word order. Lakṣmīdhara's purpose of extending the Vedic canon to include the Itihāsa-Purāṇa was more restricted and Mīmāṃsīc than Jīva's: he wanted to open up 'the possibility for its utterances to be equivalent to Vedic injunctions' (Venkatkrishnan 2015, p. 97), so that the statements that glorify the expiatory power of singing the names of the Lord (*bhagavan-nāma*) in the Purāṇas would have proper injunctive force and would not be interpreted as mere statements of praise (*arthavāda*).

While Jīva relied on Lakṣmīdhara's argument, furthermore, it was crucial for his project not only to extend the canon, but also to *restrict* gradually the scope of scriptural authority such that one would eventually need not bother reading anything but the *Bhāgavata*: in other words, to shift the locus of scriptural authority from the Veda to the *Bhāgavata*. We need not go into details, but the result of Jīva's argument was that the *Bhāgavata* became scripture *par excellence*, since its concern was ultimate reality; a natural commentary on the *Brahma-sūtra*, intuited by the same agent, Vyāsa;¹³ the very likeness of Kṛṣṇa and the highest *śruti*, narrating historical events such as Kṛṣṇa's appearance yet simultaneously *apauruṣeya*, ahistorical (TS 26). Jīva stretched the doctrine of the intuition of the Veda, which Mīmāṃsakas rejected and Vedāntins limited to the beginning of creation, to its ultimate boundary: such intuition could potentially happen at any time, and it did happen with the *Bhāgavata*. The *Bhāgavata* had become all at once a scripture of non-personal origin, the essence of the Vedas, epics, and Purāṇas, and a commentary on the *Brahma-sūtra*, which was itself traditionally not considered a non-personal composition. It was, really, all that one should study.

We can now see how Jīva defined *mahā-vākya*, noting that although his definition is broad and concerns scripture in general, what appears as a *mahā-vākya* in the *Bhāgavata* will obviously have the highest significance. *Mahā-vākya* is a group of sentences which combine to obtain a common reference. This common reference is ascertained by Mīmāṃsā principles of interpretation, the main among which are 'the six indicators of meaning' and include (1) syntactic unity through opening and concluding statements; (2) repetition; (3) novelty; (4) result; (5) statements of praise; and (6) reasoning.¹⁴ Gupta had analysed how Jīva used these principles of interpretation, and we need not go into details (2007, pp. 93–117). Other methods may also be used so that a single reference for a distinct textual unit can be obtained.¹⁵ Since the whole Veda is a collection of *mahā-vākyas* and a unit unto itself, it too will ultimately have a single reference.¹⁶

A *mahā-vākya* is, thus, a large textual unit with a single reference, and in this understanding Jīva followed the Mīmāṃsā theory of the notion. However, when we consider the use he makes of the lexeme, it appears that he is open to the idea that a long text, a *mahā-vākya*, can also be expressed in a single short statement. Let us go through the places in the *Sandarbha* where he mentions *mahā-vākya*.

Two of them are about long passages that are textual units. The first is found in *Bhagavat-sandarbha* (BhS) 98, where Jīva discusses the last verse in the praise of the personified *śrutis*, verses 14 through 41 of chapter 87 in the tenth book of the *Bhāgavata*, and says that the verse is 'the concluding statement of the *mahā-vākya*'.¹⁷ Equally straightforward is *Kṛṣṇa-sandarbha* (KS) 178, in which Jīva paraphrases Uddhava in the *Bhāgavata* 11.12.16 complaining how he cannot understand the meaning of the *mahā-vākya* that is found in chapters ten through twelve of the eleventh book, starting with the first verse one of chapter ten and concluding, presumably, with verse fifteen in chapter twelve.¹⁸ In both cases, *mahā-vākya* is a

relatively large body of text that forms a unit, and that is consistent with Jīva's definition.

In the other two instances, Jīva's reference point is the Advaita understanding. The first is in KS 29. We saw that Jīva presented the *Bhāgavata* as the best of the Veda. On its part, the *Bhāgavata* as a unit was an elaboration of a thesis-verse from the second chapter of the first book: 'Knowers of truth say that the one Being, which is non-dual consciousness, is called "Brahman," "Paramātman" and "Bhagavān"'.¹⁹ The *Bhāgavata* was the best of the Veda because its concern was ultimate reality, so its starting point should be where this ultimate reality is introduced. That is why the verse is a thesis. This ultimate reality is one, but is referred to in different words involving different descriptions and conceptual assortment, most notably Brahman, Paramātman, and Bhagavān. The reference of the three words is one, but their senses are not. Bhagavān connotes divinity characterised by personal and other features. Paramātman connotes Bhagavān in its relation to the world as its cause and the witness within, corresponding to the Vedāntic ideas of the creator god and the inner dweller (Īśvara and Antaryāmin). Brahman is a conceptual reduction in which Bhagavān is understood without reference to the features which he inherently possesses. For Caitanya Vaiṣṇavas, the ultimately real was that which is conceptualised and diversified to the ultimate degree, and that was Bhagavān.²⁰

The thesis, however, says only that little – there are three ways to describe ultimate reality – and several questions pose themselves: how are the three distinguished; what are their characteristics; which divinities are in the category of Bhagavān and which of Paramātman?²¹ These questions, says Jīva, are treated in the third chapter of the first book of the *Bhāgavata*, which is in its entirety an elaboration of the thesis, its first developed statement. He then proceeds to interpret the chapter in that light: he finds where Brahman is defined, how Paramātman proceeds from Bhagavān for creating the world, etc. One important feature of Paramātman is that it is the origin not only of the world, but of the incarnations of Viṣṇu as well.²² Let us note this carefully: Bhagavān is the fullest state of divinity, and from Bhagavān proceeds Paramātman; from forms of Paramātman proceed the world, and the different incarnations. Most of them are eventually one: Paramātman is Bhagavān, manifesting a part of Bhagavān's power, and most of the incarnations are ontologically God. However, there is the critical issue of primacy and manifestation of power. Jīva, in other words, tries to work out a classification of the divinities associated with Viṣṇu in the *Bhāgavata* and common in the divinity-rich Vaiṣṇavism that he inhabits, but with the incarnations the story gets tricky.

Elaborating its thesis in the third chapter of book one, the *Bhāgavata* gives a list of 22 incarnations before concluding that they are, in fact, innumerable like the waves of the ocean, and then in verse 28 says that they appear to aid the gods in their fight against the demons. However, in *pāda* B of the verse, one with an obviously strained syntactic relation to the rest, it says that 'Kṛṣṇa, on the other

hand, is Bhagavān himself, *kṛṣṇas tu bhagavān svayam*. Now, Kṛṣṇa and his brother Balarāma are also mentioned in the list of incarnations. This creates an obvious problem: if Kṛṣṇa is Bhagavān himself, and the incarnations proceed from Paramātman which proceeds from Bhagavān, why is Kṛṣṇa in the list? What is he, then, an incarnation or their ultimate source?

Jīva pursues several related strategies to prove that Kṛṣṇa is Bhagavān and the source, revolving around the idea that the quarter verse must be taken literally, while the rest is liable to interpretation. The most interesting of these is the claim that the quarter verse is a *śruti*, a direct statement that must be taken in its literal meaning, whereas the statement that Kṛṣṇa is an incarnation would be based not on a direct assertion but on the context, *prakaraṇa*, the fact that he is mentioned among the incarnations. In doing this, Jīva appeals to the old Mīmāṃsā method of ascertaining the principal-subordinate relationship between parts of the ritual, known as the six *pramāṇas* of employment.²³ The strongest of these six is *śruti*, a direct statement, the status of which in the Veda was equal to the perceptual in worldly affairs, namely, that on which all other *pramāṇas* as means of interpretation depend, just as inference, postulation, etc. depend on perceptual data. In a conflict of *śruti* with any of the rest, *śruti* will prevail because it must be taken at face value, just as the evidential absence of fire is more valid than its inferred presence. Since Kṛṣṇa is *not* explicitly described as an incarnation in the list – he is, in fact, given the attribute of Bhagavān even there – and *is* directly called Bhagavān in the *śruti*, the fact of his inclusion in the incarnation list is what is liable to interpretation, not the other way around. Therefore, the inclusion in the list of incarnations is interpreted in several ways, to the effect of bringing Kṛṣṇa into the pool of candidates for the post of Bhagavān, because only when we know what we are talking about is it possible to affirm or deny something: ‘Without stating the subject, one cannot state the predicate.’²⁴

We can make the full statement now: The *Bhāgavata* is the epitome of the Veda-Itihāsa-Purāṇa because it deals with reality in the most accurate way. This reality is one, but takes three appellations. The statement about the three appellations is elaborated in the third chapter of the first book, where a list of divinities is presented and Kṛṣṇa gets to be Bhagavān personally. The rest of the *Bhāgavata* is an elaboration of this third chapter, so if something apparently contradictory to the ascertained *śruti* is said, such as that Kṛṣṇa is an incarnation, it must be interpreted in some meaningful way, compatible with the *śruti*.²⁵ That also applies to statements found in other scriptures, even to claims that someone else, like Śiva, is the divinity in full. All such statements, never mind how numerous, *must* conform to this *śruti*, because this statement presents the reference of the whole book, which itself is the epitome of all scripture.²⁶ Such statements must be interpreted so that their contradictions are removed: through figurative meaning, different analysis of compounds, implication, ranking of scripture per the three *guṇas*, as illustrations of the direct statement etc.²⁷

This *śruti*, thus, *kṛṣṇas tu bhāgavān svayam*, is no ordinary *śruti*. In Mīmāṃsā, *śruti* was restricted to a single ritual, with no application outside unless details of procedure of one ritual are transferred to another. However, this *śruti* expresses what *all the Veda is about* and, therefore, its operation is unrestricted. It is – we come, now, to the crucial point – like the *mahā-vākyas* of Vedānta, which are established by the removal of contradiction of the many other sentences.²⁸ It is clear here that Jīva has the idea of *mahā-vākya* as a short, single sentence: he goes on to talk about judging statements not by number but by strength – ‘and it is seen in battle how one conquers many’²⁹ – and throughout his argument he points to Vedic or Upaniṣadic statements that need to be interpreted in the light of other, stronger Upaniṣadic statements.³⁰

With this device of one central statement to which all other Vedic text conform, Jīva has also put himself in a position to present the whole of the Veda as ultimately denoting Kṛṣṇa, having Kṛṣṇa as its reference:

In this way, by the removal of many contraries, the Lord says that the denotation of all the Vedas is he himself, Kṛṣṇa, the supreme Brahman: ‘What does the Veda enjoin, what does it indicate, and what does it conjecture by way of setting the topic? No one in the world except for me knows its essence. It enjoins me, it denotes me, and no one but me is conjectured and eliminated.’³¹

The Veda is a collection of *mahā-vākyas*, one grand *mahā-vākya* itself; its *artha*, reference, is expressed in the single *kṛṣṇas tu bhāgavān svayam*. The whole Veda and this single *śruti* statement are, therefore, *mahā-vākya*.

It is, however, possible to get even shorter. I said that for the Caitanya Vaiṣṇavas Bhagavān was the ultimate expression of divinity not because it is what is left upon analysis as the irreducible remainder, like Brahman, but because it is the ultimate point of determination, the very embodiment of all conceivable excellences. For Jīva, ‘Kṛṣṇa is Bhagavān’ did not refer to Kṛṣṇa alone, but to Kṛṣṇa qualified by all other ontological reals, such as the individual selves (*jīvas*), his feminine counterpart, etc. (Gupta 2007). There was, in fact, a Purāṇic interpretation of the Vedic *praṇava*, the sound Om̐, to a similar effect, one which says that the a-phoneme stands for Viṣṇu, the u-phoneme for Lakṣmī, and the nasal for the individual Self as their servant.³² Jīva quotes this and says that for the Vaiṣṇavas, Om̐ is the only *mahā-vākya*, and it is abundantly clear that he has the Advaita understanding in mind.³³ We will remember that the crucial element in Sarvajñātman’s account was the apposition of *tat* and *tvam* such that the two are purged of the last trace of impurity to obtain a new, single reference. For the Caitanya Vaiṣṇavas, however, when ontological reals are similarly placed in apposition, the result is not a reduction to an irreducible remainder, but a single entity qualified by all ontological reals as its functions and attributes.

This is the last occurrence of *mahā-vākya* in the *Sandarbhas*, *Bhakti-sandarbha* (Bhks) 178. It is echoed in the *Caitanya-caritāmṛta*, where Kṛṣṇadāsa has Caitanya

argue with the Advaitins of Benares that the *mahā-vākya* of the Vedas is *Om*, not *tat tvam asi*, the *mantra* which Caitanya himself got at his initiation into renunciation in the other hagiographies:

That *praṇava* syllable is the great utterance of the Vedas; as the true form of *Īśvara* that *praṇava* is the container of the whole universe. The *praṇava* is the very purpose of *Īśvara*, the refuge of all; '*tat tvam asi*' is one part of the Veda. He [Śaṅkara] has hidden the great utterance *praṇava*, and has established '*tat tvam asi*' as the great utterance. (CC Ādi 7.121-3. Translation Dimock and Stewart 1999, pp. 245-6)

Conclusion

In *Mīmāṃsā* and Advaita Vedānta, *mahā-vākya* revolved around two recurring concerns: hierarchy and length of text, and finality of meaning. Jīva Gosvāmin did not refashion the idea insofar as these characteristics remained in the forefront, but in presenting both the Veda-Itihāsa-Purāṇa on the one hand and *kr̥ṣṇas tu bhagavān svayam* and *Om* on the other as *mahā-vākyas*, he skillfully drew on both traditions and stretched *mahā-vākya* to its ultimate limits in both directions: it became the longest and the shortest, and yet precisely at its shortest it stood for the ultimate and fullest expression of divinity. In doing so, however, Jīva also put a great strain on the nuts and bolts of the idea.

Under his pen, *mahā-vākya* became much more a theological contraption serving the purpose of *canon* formation and hierarchy, an attempt to organise scripture less through what may be understood as textural hierarchy or *texture*, but more through 'textual hegemony'. Under 'texture', I mean here such textual relations that are established through what is in modern linguistics called 'cohesion' (Halliday and Hasan 1976). Relations of cohesion are what make the difference between a text and a collection of unrelated sentences, and such relations are generally semantic and presuppose semantic identity between linguistic elements. Think, for instance, of the sentence, 'she told him the story'. The sentence is fine insofar as its syntax or structure is concerned, but its meaning cannot be grasped without knowing what 'she', 'him', and 'story' stand for. For the sentence to make sense, its terms must be in semantic identity with some information that has been given previously, will be given later, or is otherwise known from the context. 'Cohesion occurs where the interpretation of some element in the discourse is dependent on that of another. The one presupposes the other, in the sense that it cannot be effectively decoded except by recourse to it.' (Halliday and Hasan 1976, p. 4)

In developing the *mahā-vākya* doctrine, Sarvajñātman relied precisely on such relations of cohesion that may be roughly identified with the *Mīmāṃsā* principle of *ākāṅkṣā* as purely a textual phenomenon. To elaborate through *tat tvam asi*, once

it was clear that the sentence relates two categories, Brahman and the Self, its interpretation required to pursue where the two categories were defined. The interpretation of *tat* required *satyaṃ jñānam anantaṃ brahma*, so long it was clear that *tat* was in semantic identity with Brahman – something that no Vedāntin would dispute – and its relation to this passage obtained *just* through such identity. Further, so long as one held that the Upaniṣads were univocal in their full scope or even only partially so, the defining features of Brahman were naturally related to longer passages as their elaboration, again just through semantic identity. It is easy to look at the sixth chapter of *Chāndogya* in pursuing what the *Taittirīya* means by calling Brahman *satyam*. While one may interpret the pertinent passages variously and arrive at widely divergent ontologies, to which the history of Vedānta is a testament, the textual hierarchy as *texture* underlying the process in which the long text is formed is easy to follow for anyone with good knowledge of the Upaniṣads. The scope of the *mahā-vākya*, however, would still be limited to what the Advaitins considered the *jñāna-kāṇḍa* passages of the Upaniṣads. While we cannot do that here, it can easily be shown that in fashioning their *mahā-vākya* doctrine, our Advaitins were *refashioning* the old *Brahma-sūtra* doctrine of *vidyā* as the textual ideality of meditations that were counterparts of Vedic ritual. These textual idealities could also be called *mahā-vākya* – they were formed exactly like the Mīmāṃsā *prayoga-vidhis* – and would have been even shorter than the full explication of *tat tvam asi* in Sarvajñātman’s reading. The purpose of *mahā-vākya* was not to ‘measure the strength’ of individual passages scattered through the Vedic canon, but just to form coherent texts from related elements from various loci.

With Jīva Gosvāmin, this scenario remains true only partially. While the core of his argument is fairly well situated in relations of cohesion that are initially cataphoric – state the thesis in 1.2.11, elaborate the terms in chapter three, illustrate them in the rest of the *Bhāgavata* – it quickly begins to require not semantic identity but all kinds of other interpretation devices, such as compound analysis and gradation of texts according to the three *guṇas*, to keep it all together. Here the scriptural corpus, having become so wide and diverse as to facilitate moving the periphery into the center, had to be kept together through some good police work. As Jīva himself said, this *mahā-vākya* had to rule like a king, and although he likened it to the Advaita *mahā-vākyas*, it really had to establish a different kind of hierarchy, one that I described as ‘textual hegemony’. Thus, while Jīva did not change the *mahā-vākya* characteristics – hierarchy and length of text, finality of meaning – to arrive at *kṛṣṇas tu bhagavān svayam* as embodying these characteristics, he subsumed the wide range of interpretation devices under the semantic identity of ‘Kṛṣṇa’ with *everything* in the *apauruṣeya* Veda-Itihāsa-Purāṇa. Or rather, he brilliantly worked out the consequences of what the *Bhāgavata* itself had already claimed: ‘It enjoins me, it denotes me.’

In conclusion, this article had uncovered yet another facet of the reception history of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* in early modern India, in which this book, on its

way to become ‘one of the most influential Hindu scriptures of modern times’ (Venkatkrishnan 2015, p. 2), had gradually turned into an all-important locus of close interaction between the two traditional schools of interpretation, Mīmāṃsā and Vedānta, with the purpose of subsuming and replacing their highest goods with that of its own, *bhakti*.

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Notes

- 1 Such is the case, for instance, in Richard H. Davis's recent 'The *Bhagavad Gita*: A Biography': 'Indian commentators often highlighted especially powerful statements in the *Gita* for special attention as *mahāvākyas* (great utterances).' Davis (2015, p. 99).
- 2 The dates of Jīva Gosvāmin are given according to Gupta (2007, pp. 6–11).
- 3 On the principle of completion of meaning, *parāvāsanā*, see McCrea (2000).
- 4 na ca mahā-vākye sati avāntara-vākyam pramāṇam bhavati, padāntarasya bādhanāt, yathā, *nodyantam ādityam iḥṣeta*—iti pratiśedho gamyate mahā-vākyāt, avāntara-vākyād iḥṣaṇa-vidhānam. *Māmāṃsā-sūtra-bhāṣya* of Śābara Svāmin 6.4.25, p. 688.
- 5 For an illustration of how such a *prayoga-vidhi* may look like, see the text (pp. 191–202) and translation (pp. 175–89) of a so-called *pavitreṣṭi-prayoga*, a manual used by priests to perform the Pavitreṣṭi ritual, in Tachikawa, Bahulkar, and Kolhatkar 2001.
- 6 *Mīmāṃsā-kośa* of Kevalānana Sarasvatī vol. VI, p. 3132: **mahā-vākyam** (viniyojakaṁ pramāṇam) prayoga-vidhi-rūpaṁ nityānumeyam eva.
- 7 Sarvajñātman's *Pañca-prakriyā* deals exclusively with the theory of *mahā-vākyā*, but the notion is also very much present in his *magnum opus*, the *Sarṅgṣepa-śārīraka*. See Kocmarek 1985.
- 8 In another sense, however, *mahā-vākyas* are essentially hermeneutic, because their structure is predicated on an architecture of double meaning, where it is important

- that the individual categories both keep their individual meanings yet jointly serve as symbols to another, secondary, indicated meaning.
- 9 For a short introduction to Caitanya, see Valpey (2012).
 - 10 The *Ṣaṭ-sandarbhā*, the ‘Six Collections,’ known also as *Bhāgavata-sandarbhā*, is Jīva’s topical commentary on the *Bhāgavata*. For an overview, see Dasa (2007).
 - 11 The *Bhāgavata* presented itself as such at the very outset, ‘the ripened fruit of the tree of the Veda,’ *nigama-kalpa-taror galitaṁ phalam*, *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* (BhP) 1.1.3; ‘the *saṁhitā/sruti* of the *Bhāgavatas*,’ BhP 1.4.7, 1.7.6. It also intentionally used archaic Vedic forms to create such an impression. See van Buitenen (1966) and Holdrege (2006).
 - 12 For a comprehensive account of Jīva’s understanding of scripture, see Edelman and Dasa (2014). Also useful is Broo (2006).
 - 13 Of course, the *Bhāgavata* itself had played upon that, opening with the exact same line as the *Brahma-sūtra*: *janmādy asya yataḥ*.
 - 14 *tac ca vākyam mahā-vākyānugatam. mahā-vākyam ca vākya-samudāyaḥ. asyārthas tūpakramopasamhārādibhir evāvadhāryate.* SS 11, p. 17.
 - 15 Jīva lists two such other methods, positive and negative concomitance (*anvaya-vyatireka*) and sameness of destination (*gati-sāmānyam*). See Cardona (1981) on the first and Gupta (2007, p. 105) on the second. *evam anvaya-vyatirekābhyām gati-sāmānyenāpi mahā-vākyārtho ’vagantavyaḥ.* SS 11, p. 17.
 - 16 *sa eva nikhilaitihya-mūla-rūpo mahā-vākyā-samudāyaḥ śabdo’tra gṛhyate.* SS 10, p. 8.
 - 17 *tathaiva hi tāsām mahā-vākyopasamhāraḥ.* BhS 98, p. 985.
 - 18 *tava vācarṁ śṛṅvato ’vadhārayato ’pi mamātma-sthaḥ sarśayo mayoditeṣv avahita ity-ādikādhyāya-traya-gata-mahā-vākyārtha-paryālocanāsamarthyam na nivartate.* KS 178, p. 479.
 - 19 *vadanti tat tattva-vidas tattvaṁ yaj jñānam advayam | brahmeti paramātmēti bhagavān iti śabdyate.*
 - 20 A very lucid and accessible account of Jīva’s understanding of the three aspects of divinity is available in Gupta (2007, p. 32–62). See also Dasa (2009).
 - 21 *tatra brahmaṇaḥ kiṁ lakṣaṇam bhagavat-paramātmanor vā, tatra tatra viśeṣaḥ kaścid vā kim astīti.* KS 1, p. 6.
 - 22 *na kevalam avatārāṇām bijam jagato ’pīti.* KS 5, p. 20.
 - 23 *Viniyoga-pramāṇāni.* See Jha (1964, pp. 247–57) for an accessible overview. The application of these six, incidentally, ends in ascertaining the subordinate-principal relationship between all ritual elements *and* in the formation of the full statement of the ritual, the *prayoga-vākya* or *mahā-vākya*, as per the definition of the *Mīmāṃsā-kośa* of Kevalānana Sarasvatī. The *locus classicus* on these is *Mīmāṃsā-sūtra* of Jaimini 3.3.14, which Jīva quotes in SS 11, but for him this is a general principle of determining the strength of scriptural sentences.
 - 24 *anuvādam anuktaiva na vidheyam udīrayed.* KS 28, p. 32.
 - 25 Gupta and Valpey in the Introduction to their recent anthology of the *Bhāgavata* detect a similar pattern of structure, among several others, namely that of a spiral form, ‘in which themes that are introduced briefly in the *Bhāgavata*’s early chapters are revisited later, with increased degrees of dilatation’. Gupta and Valpey (2017, p. 8).

- 26 kṛṣṇas tu svayaṁ bhagavattveneti pratijñākāreṇa granthārtha-nirṇāyakatvāt, KS 29, p. 43.
- 27 De (1961, pp. 321–3) gives a good overview of Jīva's devices.
- 28 tatra ca vedānta-sūtrādāv apy ekasya mahā-vākyasya nānā-vākya-virodha-parihāreṇaiva sthāpanāyā darśanān nāpy atraivedrśam ity aśraddheyam. KS 29, p. 75.
- 29 dṛśyate ca loke ekenāpi yuddhe sahasra-parājaya iti. Ibid.
- 30 For instance, in KS 29, p. 66: etādṛśa śrī-bhāgavata-vākyena sva-viruddha-purāṇāntara-vacana-bādhanam ca. *yatheha karmajito lokah kṣiyata* [ChU 8.1.6] ity ādi vākyena *āpāma somam amṛtā abhūma* [RV 8.48.3] ity ādi-vacana-bādhana-vaj jñeyam.
- 31 evaṁ ca bahu-virodha-parihāreṇaiva svasmin śrī-kṛṣṇākhye para-brahmaṇi sarva-vedābhidheyatvam āha — kiṁ vidhatte kim ācaṣṭe kim anūdyā vikalpayet | ity asyā hṛdayam loke nānyo mad veda kaścana | māṁ vidhatte 'bhidhatte māṁ vikalpyāpohyate tv aham (BhP 11.21.42-3ab.) KS 29, p. 75.
- 32 The reference is *Padma Purāṇa* 6.226.22-3, which Jīva quotes in BhkS 178:
a-kāraś cāpy u-kāraś ca ma-kāraś ca tataḥ param | veda-trayātmakarṁ proktaṁ
praṇavaṁ brahmaṇaḥ padam | a-kāreṇocyate viṣṇuḥ śrīr u-kāreṇa cocyate | ma-
kāras tv anayor dāsaḥ pañcaviṁśaḥ prakīrtitaḥ.
- 33 ata eva śrī-vaiṣṇavānām praṇava eva mahā-vākyam iti sthitam. BhkS 178, l.p. 542.