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Sailaja Kaipa
Sri Venkatesvara University,
Tirupati, Andhra Pradesh, India

Puranas in brief description

Sailaja Kaipa

1. Introduction

The Puranas form a very important branch of the sacred literature of India. They enable us to know the true purpose of the ethics, philosophy and religion of Vedas. They are the frameworks of the Dharma-Satras, without which the life force of the Vedas cannot function with effect. The Puranas were written, according to Indian Tradition, with the object of the popularizing the Truths, Taught in the Vedas. These Truths are presented in relation to specific personages and to the events of their Lives.

The Puranas describe the Historic evolution of the Mankind in course of time. They describe the eternal cycle of the Creation, Destruction and Recreation of the world, which constitute a fundamental concept in all the Puranas. Besides the Puranas reflect in detail the contemporary Life and Thought of the Society. Thus they largely have moulded the public life, Belief, Conduct and Ideal for centuries and have contributed a great deal in bringing about Religious Harmony and understand among the various sections of the Hindu Society. The Puranas afford us for greater Insight into all aspects and phases of Development in the Hinduism like mythology, Idol-worship, Superstitions, Festivals, Ceremonies and ethics.

Some scholars say that the Puranas are sectarian and have contradictory in Character. It is not true because each Purana has preferences, but no exclusions in regards to the gods. In a Purana, whether it is a Saiva or Vaishanava or a Sakta, we find references to the exploits of respective Gods in each of them. For the purpose of intensifying Devotion to one God, the deity is described as the Supreme Reality. But this is not the denial of Godhood to others. In reality, the trinity of gods Brahma, Vishnu and Mahesa is one divinity associated with the three cosmic functions of Creation, Preservation and Destruction of the Universe.

2. The Term Purana and Its Antiquity

In general, the word Purana is used in the sense of "old". Even in the Rgveda, it is used in the same connotation taking into account, the Puranas being considered as an individual literary form, the Puranas derives the word different ways. The Vayu-Purana derives the word from "Pura" and the root "An" and gives the Meaning of the word as "that which breathed in old times". The Padma and Brahmnda Puranas also give similar meanings.

The word 'Purabhavam' is formed by the addition of "tyu" + termination to the indeclinable "Pura" according to Panini. The Nipata 'tud' can also be explained by another sutra.

The word 'Purana' can be shown to have been formed according to another Sutra also. It can be said that the root 'Ni' with the prefix 'Pura takes on 'Da "termination, which is changed to 'Na'. We know hardly anything about the Puranas mentioned in the Vedas, but it is clear that the Purana had attained a status of sacredness like the Vedas and was closely associated with Itihasa even in the Vedic times.

Though the work Purana was applied to a genre of literature in the later days, it is not known whether the Purana had got the same connotation in the Vedic days. The work occurs in the Rgveda but there, it means 'Old'. In the Atharvanaveda the word means a body of stories or legends, which were narrated in the intervals of the sacrifice 6. In the Brahmans and the Upanishads, the same meaning continues. Another word used in the similar meaning was "itihasa".

Though subtle distinction is made between 'itihasa' and Purana by some scholars it can be said that both the words meant 'an ancient legendary history' sometimes both the words were used together, this is the first stage in the evaluation of the Purana Literature.

Correspondence
Sailaja Kaipa
Sri Venkatesvara University,
Tirupati, Andhra Pradesh, India

3. The Purpose of Puranas

The Puranas satisfy our popular cravings, by catering to our physical, moral or spiritual needs. It was the feeling that the Vedas were dictatorial and had become confined to one particular classes, while the Puranas welcomed everybody and more than that, promised immediate fruits like material prosperity like than of obtaining wealth the birth of children etc., as the Vedic sacrifice was more complicate and also in values men and matter in producing and tangible result, and also as pilgrimages to sacred places as mentioned in the Puranas did yield the desired fruits, the appeal of the later has become more and more popular with the susceptible Hindu mind. Thus they became to constitute a miscellaneous encyclopedia of Hinduism in all its aspects – say mythology religion and philosophy. Beside our political history in the centuries following the epics till today, are all exhaustively discussed therein. The Puranas could however be studied by the common folk and even by women.

Perhaps the earliest of the Puranas must have been prose compositions as the evidence of Vidyaranya in his Aitareya Bhasya shows later they must have been versified. Gradually they must have increased in number to 18 Puranas and as many UpaPuranas, the latter being definitely very late in time.

4. The Definition of Purana

The different works known by the name of Puranas are evidently derived from the same religious systems as the Ramayana and MahaBharatha are from the mythological stage of Hindu belief.

It appears that the Purana works are of evidently of different ages and they have been complied under different circumstances their precise nature can be imperfectly conjectured from internal evidence and from the history of religious in India.

The Puranas unanimously offer a definition that it should consist of Five Characters (Panchalakshna) they are:

1. Sarga : Primary creation or cosmogony;
2. Pratisarga : Secondary Creation or the Destruction and renovation of worlds, including chronology;
3. Vamsa : genealogy of gods and patriarchs;
4. Manvatara : Reigns of Manus or periods called Manvataras;
5. Vamsanucharitam: History or such particulars as have been preserved of the princes of the Solar and Lunar races and of their descendents to modern times.

The Theogony and cosmogony of the Puranas may probably be traced to the Vedas.

4a. the Author of the Puranas

The authorship of all these Puranas is attributed to Vyasa by tradition.

5. The Number of Puranas

The Puranas are of two kinds –Viz Maha Puranas and Upa Puranas. The MahaPuranas, which are in eighteen in number, are generally considered to be main and more authoritative than the latter. The same in number are the UpaPuranas or Subsidiary Puranas.

In the enumeration of eighteen Mahapuranas, there are only two or three variations. The Devi Bhagavatha state them as follows:

1. Markendeya Purana
2. Matsya purana
3. Bhagavatha Purana
4. Bhavisya Purana

5. Brahmanda Purana
6. Brahma Purana
7. Brahma Vivarta Purana
8. Vishuna Purana
9. Varaha Purana
10. Vamana Purana
11. Vaayu Purana
12. Agni Purana
13. Narada Purana
14. Padma Purana
15. Linga Purana
16. Garuda Purana
17. Kurma Purana
18. Skanda Purana

The Kurma Purana omits Agni Purana and substitutes the Vayu Purana. The Vayu Purana omits the Garuda Purana and Brahmanda Purana and inserts the Vayu Purana and Narsimha Purana.

The Devi Bhagavata Purana lists out the Upa Puranas in the order

- Sanatkumara
- Narasimha
- Naradiya
- Siva
- Durvasa
- Kapila
- Manava
- Ausasana
- Varuna
- Kalika
- Samba
- Nandi
- Saura
- Parasara
- Aditya
- Maheswara
- Bhagavata
- Vasistha

Generally the Bhagavata mentioned in the Mahapurana in considered as genuine Mahapurana as it is include in the 'Sattvik' class of Puranas known as Vaisnavite.

6. Division of Puranas

Generally main Puranas are classified into Three Divisions. When some classify them on the basis of the three Gunas, according to some the classification is on the basis of Trinity- is Brahma, Vishnu and Siva. Both are right as the trinity arises through the three gunas Nobility (Rajas), Rhythom (Sattva) and Immobility (Tamas).

In this unmanifested state, matter and spirit were latent: When the Gunas of matter began to be disturbed, there came into being the three Gunas as well as the three intelligences. Through Rajas, the one spirit became Brahma, the creator; through Sattava, he became Vishnu, the preserver; and through Tamas, siva, the Destroyer, who is also called Rudra or Mahadeva. The three Gunas cannot be entirely separated, one from the other. In chapter XI of the Bhagavad Gita, It is stated that the three Gunas having arisen from matter are in all objects; and whenever one guna of the three is made manifest in an object it preponderates in it, the other Gunas being along with it similarly with the three intelligences, Brahma, Vishnu and Siva who are inseparable from the Gunas.

So it is that the eighteen Puranas may be divided into three classes, either from the standpoint of matter or from that of consciousness. Some Puranas are dedicated to Brahma of Rajas; some to Vishnu of Sattwa, some to Siva of Tamas.

Thus it is said in the Uttara Khanda of the Padma Purana that the Puranas, as well as other works are divided in to three classes, according to the three qualities, which prevail in them. Thus the: Vishnu, Naradiya, Bhagavata, Garuda Padma and Varaha purans are Sattwika from the predominance in them of the Sattwa Quality. They are in fact the Vaishnava Puranas.

The Matsya, Kurma, Linga, Siva Skandha and Agni puranas are Tamasa Puranas, from the prevalence of Tamas. They are indisputably the Saiva Purans. The third series comprising the Bramhanda, Brahma Vaivarta, Markandeya, Bhavisya and Vamana are designated as Rajasa, from Rajas, which there are supposed to represent.

7. The content of puranas

7.1 Matsya purana

Lord Vishnu narrated this in the form of fish to Manu, the first king after the delug. [pralaya] The puranas contains 14000 slokas. The stories of kartikeya, yayati and savitri were described in this purana. The holy places prayaga and Varanasi, festivals, omens and rites to be observed by saivaites and vaishnavaites are described. References of the south India and south Indian architecture are available in this purana. Temple construction and it describes vamaana and varaha kalpa. We find a Devi stotra in matsya purana. The matsya purana done, among the 18 puranas displays the dasalaksana ten features of puranas which are

- Sarga-creation
- Pratisarga-recreation
- Vamsa-genealogies of gods and sages
- Vamsanucarita-genealogies of kings
- Vritti- means of subsistence
- Raksa-divine incarnations
- Mukti- final release
- Hetu- prime cause
- Apasraya- Supreme Being

The matsya purana divided into two parts and 201 chapters.

7.2 Markandeya purana

Elaborate descriptions of creation and deluge, stories of Vedic gods like sun, fire, Indra gods etc., are available in this purana. The purana narrated by the sage markandeya and contain 9000 slokas. The Devi mahatyam or durga saptasati is a part of it. This is the base for chandi homa, sata homa, sahasra chandi homa etc., stories of the lord Rama and Krishna are also in this. In this purana we find the worship of the goddess.

7.3 Bhagavata purana

This is the most popular purana. It has been translated in all major Indian languages, it contains 18000 slokas. There are 12 books {skandas} in it and the tenth book describes the birth of Lord Sri Krishna. 24 incarnations of lord Vishnu is described and large number of devotional poems with high philosophical content are available. This purana narrated by sage vyasa to sage suka, suka narrates to the king parikshit.

7.4 Bhavishya purana

Talking about the future particularly kaliyuga continues in 14500 slokas. The puranas narrated by the god sun to Manu,

duties of four castes and methods to worship the sun, Agni, and nagas.

7.5 Brahma puranam

This is known as the first puranam, it is also called surya puranam, and this was narrated by the creator brahma to daksha. Prajapati in 10000 slokas. It contains greatness of holy places, the stories of Sri Krishna, markandeya, kasyapa, the description of heaven and hell.

7.6 Bramhanda purana

The popular adhyatma Ramayana is a part of it. This purana narrated by brahma to sage mariachi in 12000 slokas. This is in the form of dialogue between Siva and parvati. The stories of radha, Krishna, parasurama, Sri Rama. The stories like Sri Lalitha, Siva, and Krishna are available in it. It describes the vedangas and adhi kalpa.

7.7 Brahma vivarta purana

It describes that the whole universe is the illusory transformation of Supreme Being in 18000 slokas. Savarna manu narrated this purana to sage narada. In the fourth section of this purana it is beautifully described about Krishna and radha. Krishna is the god and radha is Maya {illusory power of god}. Who is insuperable from him but always controlled by him. Goloka is their abode which is far beyond vaikunta and the great devotees who have attained same ness of form with lord Krishna stay here. This is the source of jayadevas gita govindam. Durga, Lakshmi, saraswati, radha who were known as pancha sakti are described in it.

7.8 Varaha purana

This purana was told to bhudevi by mahavishnu in 24000 slokas. It describes different vratas, lord Vishnu glories. The stories of lord shiva –parvati, it describes dharma sastra and holy places. It is describing the daily life of a devotee of lord Vishnu.

7.9 Vamana purana

Starting with the description of vamaana avatar and proceeds to the worship of siva linga, the marriage of siva and parvati, the stories of Ganesh and kartikeya, pilgrimage to siva temples in total 10000 slokas narrated by the sage pulastya to the sage narada. This is the vamaana purana.

7.10 Vayu purana

This purana was narrated by vayu deva in 24000 slokas. It contains the glory of lord maheswara, describes the universe, solar system.

7.11 Visnu Purana

This is the oldest and was narrated by Parasara, father of Vedavyasa to his disciple Maitreya, stories of various devotees a description of the age of kali etc., in 23000 verses. This purana is divided into six parts, each of which is subdivided into many chapters. The first part gives an account of creation, which is attributed to purusha and prakriti. The second part describes the earth and the nethor worlds. Other parts contain some gathas, akhyanas, genealogies of Vedic seers and king's mythology, cosmogony, dharasasta etc. First part contains 22 adhyayas, second part contains 16 adhyayas, third part 18 adhyayas, fourth part 24 adhyayas, fifth part contains 38 adhyayas and the last part contains 8 adhyayas.

In Vishnu Purana we find only one Lakshmi Stotra [Sree stotra] in the 9th chapter [1-9-116-131].

7.12 Agnipurana (295 adhyayas)

Agni the fire god to sage vasistha, narrated this purana in 15.400 slokas. It is describing that Siva and durga cult. This purana contains many modern topics. It is almost an encyclopedia in its contents dealing with subjects like, Ayurveda, silpa sastra, jyotisha, poetics and politics. It also describes the isanakalpa. It describes grammar and the worship of Siva, durga and Ganesh.

7.13 Narada purana

The second purana named as 'Narada Purana' it only called as 'Brihannaradiya purana'. This is in the group of 'sattvik', it contains a synopsis of everything, and it describes Purijagannatha, dwaraka, badrinatha etc., in this purana there are 25000 verses.

Narada Purana comprised twenty five thousand Shlokas based on Brihad Kalpa Katha. Narrated by Suta Maha Muni to Shounaka Muni, the Purana was basically conceived by Brahmarsi Narada himself but preached by Sanaka Brothers to Narada. The earlier part of the Purana dealt with 'Pravritti Dharma' and the second part was devoted to 'Moksha Dharma'. Sanandana described at length the Six Vedangaas as Moksha Sadhanas and about the illustration of Suka Deva in this context. The Third Part gave 'Upadeshas' to Narada by Sanat Kumara about 'Pashu paasha vimoksha' and Mantras concerning major Deities, Diksha, Puja procedures, Stotras etc. The fourth Part provided details of tithi-wise and Maasa-wise Vratas as also an Index of 'Ashtadasha Puranas'. The 'Uttara Bhaga' of the Purana gave details of Ekadasha Vratas, Vasishtha-Mandhata Samvada, King Rukmanga and Mohini, curse to Mohini, her revival and her exposure to Tirtha Yatras. Sincere study and 'shravana' of the Purana on Ashwin Purnima followed by Puja to a Brahmana with daanas of seven cows, clothing and so on would surely pave the way to Salve

7.14 Padma purana

This is a huge puranam. It contains 55000 verses contains the glory of srimad bhagavatam. It describes the creation, geneology of kings, many sacred places of pilgrimage etc, in this toomany ceremonies to be observed by the devotees are described. It also contains the stories of Ramayana, story of sakuntala, ekadasi mahatmyam etc. It also describes the killing of madhu kaitabha demons, the greatness of Ganga, the story of gayatri, the worship and worshipper rules are contained.

The Padma Purana is contains five parts that as Srishti khanda, Bhoomi khanda, Swarga khanda, Patala khanda and Uttarakhanda. It describes the creation, geneology of kings, many sacred places of pilgrimage etc., it contains the stories of Ramayana, story of Sakuntala, Ekadasi mahatmya etc.

The first part (srishti khanda) contains an explanation of metaphysical knowledge in a dialogue style between Bheeshma and sage Phulastya.

In Padmapurana describes the embodiment of SriHari. According to Suta all the puranas are nothing but the mediums through which SriHari manifests himself, Brahmapurana is said to be the forehead of Srihari, Padmapurana is said to be the heart, Vishnu purana is right-arm, sivapurana is left-arm, srimd bhagavata purana is his thigh, narada purana is his navel, markandeya purana is his right-foot, agni purana is his left-foot, bhavishya purana is left-knee, linga purana is said to be his right knee, bramhavaivartapurana is right-ankle, varaha purana said to be left-ankle, skandha purana is to be his hair on the body of Sri Hari.

Vamanapurana is his skin, kurma purana is his back, matsya purana is his stomach, garuda purana is his bone-narrow, bramhanda purana is his bone. So all the puranas being manifestation of different parts of sriharis body are vary sacred and capable of bestowing salvation. [Ch3-5th para].

7.15 Linga purana

The linga purana describes the 28 incarnations of lord siva and contains the greatness of linga rupa, different types of worships and vratas. It also describes the universe.

7.16 Kurma purana

This purana narrated by visnu in his incarnation as a tortoise. The avataras of varaha, narasimha are described. It contains the conversation between Krishna and sun god, danvantari and it describes the lakshmikalpa in 17000 verses. It also describes the holy places like Varanasi, prayaga etc., and the worship of siva and his incornations.

7.17 Garuda purana

This purana was narrated by lord visnu to his vehicle garuda in 19000 verses. Methods of worship, feasts and ceremonies are described, it is also described about the soul after death and the neral rites etc. description of tarsya kalpa is in this purana.

7.18 Skandha purana

This is a very huge puranam consisting of 81000 verses narrated by skandha. It describes the story of siva, the birth of skandha, based on this purana the great poet kalidasa composed kumara sambhava. The purana describrds somany stotras like pradosha etc. kasha, kedara, reva, Vaishnava, ultala, kumarika, brahma, brahmottara, avantika are the khandas of this purana. Each part describes like satyanarayana vrata in reva khanda, the greatness of venkatachala in viashnava, the pilgrimage centre poori in utkala, the arunacala mahatmya in kumarika, in brahma khanda the greatness of rameswara temple, gokarna and pradosha pooja in brahmottara khanda, the glory of mahaka and river kshipra were also described in this purana.

8. Conclusion

All the puranas describe our culture, tradition, philosophies. Those are very useful to the new generations. The Vedic and puranic genealogies indicate a greater antiquity of the Vedic culture.

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