A note on Purṇaś

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Abstract

Puranas contain the essence of Vedas. Puranas are the vast genre of Indian literature about a wide range of topics, particularly about legends and other traditional lore. They contain narratives about the history of the universe from creation to destruction and the genealogies of kings, heroes, sages and deities. Some puranas are discourses on cosmology, geography and Hindu philosophy. They are usually written in the form of a dialogue. The puranas were meant, not for the scholars, but for the ordinary people who could not understand high philosophy and who could not study the vedas.

Keywords: Purana, laymen, repertoire, subline, treasure

Introduction

The word Purṇa means "ancient tales." They are the old books of Hindus and describe the origin of the world, the brave deeds of the Gods, and historical events of ancient times. They describe the principles of Hinduism in story form and in easy and attractive manner. The Purṇaś are generally in the form of conversation between two or more persons on various topics connected with the Hindu way of life, Hindu culture and manners, religious ceremonies, festivities, political history, philosophy etc.

The Purṇaś have always been one of the main sources of inspiration for the religious and socio-cultural activities of the Hindus. They are indispensable for the study of the religious and cultural history of India [1]. The Purṇaś deal with almost all topics under the sun. The nuances of cultural and social systems, the changes in nature and environment in different seasons, the different arts etc are dealt with in almost all Purṇaś.

The language of the Purṇaś, is simple and easy to understand. Often proceeding in the form of dialogues between two sages, it can easily understood by the laymen. It has often been said that Purṇaś were written for the sake of women and the āśdra class, who were not considered fit for Upanayana and initiation into the Vedas. In the Devēbhūgavata it is mentioned as follows:-

"Strēṣedra dvijabhūdhum na vedāt rava am matam
Teṣaṁ eva hita rha yā purṇaśi ni kṣetat ni ca" [2]

But this does not decrease the value of Purṇaś, which are a rich repertoire of the social, cultural, religious, philosophical, political and artistic and many other facets of the times when they were compiled.

According to Amarakośa, there are five characteristics which make a Purṇaś, viz., sarga (creation), pratisarga (dissolution and recreation), vaṇa (genealogy), manvantara (periods called manvantaras, each consisting of 71 Mahāyugas) and vamana (accounts of dynasties of Kings, Rājas and Gods).

"Sarga ca pratisarga ca vaṇa maṇvantara ca va
Vaṇam naḥ naḥcaiva purṇaśaḥ" [3]

Purṇaś which satisfy all these characteristics are rare. In time, the number of Purṇaś increased and later, in Mahābhūgavata the features of Purṇaṇas have been elaborated as ten in number.

"Atra sarga viṣaṁ ca
Stiḥ naḥ poṣaḥ naḥ am Śūryaḥ
Manvantaraḥ nukhaḥ
Nirodho muktir ca rayāḥ" [4]
It is really difficult to pinpoint a specific date for the origin of Puranas. The Purars have been in the process of formulation for a long period of time. Starting from the Vedic period and extending up to the eighth century AD, the Purrs have been undergoing many additions and deletions for around 2000 years. The only thing that can be assumed with a degree of certainty is that the Mahpurrs are older than the Upa-Purars.

There are 18 major Purars or Mahpurars and an equal number of minor Purars or Upa-Purars. A ोk refers easily remembering all the major Purars has been in vogue.

"madhavayam bhadavayam caiva
bratrayaṁ va catuṣṭayam
anāpali-ga kāśkīnī
puramsṁi pththak pththak" (DB) [5]


Bhīgavata Purāṇa is considered to be the most popular Purāṇa which is considered as a Purāṇa-aratna or gem among Purāṇas. It is presented as a dialogue between Purāṇa-aramuni and his disciple Maitreya. This Purāṇa is split into six aṣṭas or parts and 126 adhyāyas. The Purāṇa is considered to be one of the oldest Purāṇas. It is believed that the Purāṇa was composed around the 1st century BC.

The Garuva Purāṇa has nineteen thousand ोkas. This is a Vaiśāva Purāṇa. It deals with topics such as astronomy, medicine, the various types of punishment meted out to sinning souls etc.

Brahma Purāṇa contains 246 chapters and is divided into two parts, viṣṇu, the Pṛthvabhaṅga and the Uttarabhaṅga. The first part deals with the story of the creation of the cosmos and the detailed the lelas of Rīma and Krīva, a. It also deals with the glory of the Godvari river. The second part gives details about the Purūrattama Tirtha, in Puri, Orissa which is one of the holiest pilgrimage centers for Hindus.

Padma Purāṇa is a Vaiśāva Purāṇa and it is divided into five sections dealing with topics such as the significance of the numerous holy places of India, essence of religion, etc. Nīrada Purāṇa Presents us with a dialogue between Nīrada and Sanakumra, it deals with topics like the cosmos, places of pilgrimage etc.

Viāu, Bhīgavata and Mryka-eya Purāṇas omit Viyāu Purāṇa from the list of eighteen and add āivapurāṇa in its place. Originally referred to as āiva Purāṇa, āivapurāṇa details the emergence of the āivalinga form of āiva, the destruction of Tīrakṣara, birth of Ga, e etc.

Liīga Purāṇa, which is divided into four parts, describes the origin of Universe, rules of worship of the āiva Liīga, relation between Prakṛti and Purāṇa etc.

The Skanda Purāṇa tells us about Skanda or Kṛtikkeya, the son of āiva and Pṛva. It describes his birth, Daksha’s sacrifice etc.

Agni Purāṇa contains descriptions of the Daśavatara of Viāu, the Rṛjya, the Mahābhārata, astrology, cosmology etc.

Matsya Purāṇa describes the Matsya avatara of Viāu. It also deals the story of Manu, considered to be the progenitor of entire human kind.

The Varṇa Purāṇa deals with Varṇa avatara of Lord Viāu. It also narrates the story about how Pṛthvi was rescued by the Lord.

The Vīmana Purāṇa contains an account of the dwarf incarnation of Viāu. It is one of the shortest Purāṇas with around six thousand stanzas divided into 96 chapters.

Mryka-eya Purāṇa written as a dialogue between Sage Marka-eya and his pupil, Jaimini, elaborates about the Purāṇa’s themes.

Brahma Vaiavarta Purāṇa, which is divided into four parts, deals with Universe, the various Goddesses, Ga, e, son of āiva-Pṛva and the story of Kṛṣṇa.

Brahmrn-ā Purāṇa deals with the origin of the Universe, as detailed by Brahma. It says that the universe evolved from an egg or An-a. This Purāṇa also contains portions of Adhyāṭma Rigya, the story of Ṛdhr-kaṇā and Pṛva-yāma.

Kērra Purāṇa details the Kērra avatara of Viāu and speaks about the duties of four classes of society, six magic arts like aṇi, Viā-ekara, a etc and Mokṣa dharma.


**Conclusion**

Study of the past in general and of the past culture in particular should be carried out with a view to gain energy in the present for the benefit of building the healthy future. The educational value of the Purāṇas can never be neglected. As Swami Vivekananda has stated the object of Purāṇas is to teach mankind the sublime truth in various forms [6]. Any study related to Purāṇa will also have the same sublime aim.

Proper understanding of the wisdom of our ancient sages and its proper utilisation for the betterment of future are of great importance, especially in a country like India, which has the treasure of ancient wisdom in abundance.
References
2. Devebhīgavatam, 1.3.21
3. Amarakośa, 9.6.5.
4. BhĪgavata, Dvītīyaskandha, Ch.10.v.1
5. Devebhīgavata, 1.2.3.