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A note on Purāṇas

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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

Introductions

The word *Purāṇa* 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 *Purāṇas* 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, festivals, political history, philosophy etc.

The *Purāṇas* 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 *Purāṇas* 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 *Purāṇas*.

The language of the *Purāṇas*, 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 *Purāṇas* were written for the sake of women and the *āśṭra* class, who were not considered fit for *Upanayana* and initiation into the Vedas. In the *Devābhigavata* it is mentioned as follows:-

"Strēḥḍradvijabandhunim na vedaḥrava, am matam
TeḤmeva hitirthiya puri, jni kṛtjini ca" ^[2]

But this does not decrease the value of *Purāṇas*, 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 *Amarakoḥa*, there are five characteristics which make a *Purāṇa*, viz., *sarga* (creation), *pratisarga* (dissolution and recreation), *vaḤa* (genealogy), *manvantara* (periods called *manvantaras*, each consisting of 71 *Mahayugas*) and *vamḥnucarita* (accounts of dynasties of Kings, *Rāis* and Gods).

"Sargaḥca pratisargaḥca vaḤo manvantari, i ca
VaḤnucaritam caiva puri, aḤ paṇcalakā, am" ^[3]

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

"Atra sargo visargaḥca
SthinaḤ poḤa, amḤtayaḤ
Manvantareḥ jnukathj
Nirodho muktirjḥrayaḤ" ^[4]

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It is really difficult to pinpoint a specific date for the origin of *Puranas*. The *Purj*,as 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 *Purj*,as 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 *Mahipurj*,as are older than the *Upa-Purj*,as.

There are 18 major *Purj*,as or *Mahipurj*,as and an equal number of minor *Purj*,as or *Upa-Purj*,as. A *çloka* for easily remembering all the major *Purj*,as has been in vogue.

"madvayam bhadvayam caiva
bratrayam va catuÅayam
anipali'ga k£skjni
purj,jni p£thak p£thak" (DB) ^[5]

There are two *Purj*,as starting with ma - 1. *Matsya* and 2. *Mjrkaj*,eya; two starting with bha - 3. *Bhigavata* and 4. *BhaviÅya*; three starting with bra - 5. *Brahma*, 6. *Brahmj*,a and 7. *Brahmavaivarta*; four starting with va - 8. *ViÅ,u*, 9. *Varjha*, 10. *Vjyu* and 11. *Vjmana*; one with a - 12. *Agni*; one with na - 13. *Njradçya*; one with pa - 14. *Padma*; one named Li'ga - 15. *Li'ga*; one with ga - 16. *Garu-a*; one with ku - 17. *K£rma* and one with ska - 18. *Skanda*. These are mainly written in verse.

Bhigavata Purj,a is considered to be the most popular *Purj*,a, it describes the ten incarnations (*Daçjvatjra*) of Lord *ViÅ,u* and it also gives a detailed account of Lord *KṚṣṇa*'s life. This Purana contains twelve chapters and has a total of 18,000 verses. The *Purj*,apjrya,a tradition is very famous throughout India, especially in Kerala. *Purj*,apjrya,a is held in seven days also it is known as *Saptjha*. Devotees generally opt *Bhigavata Purj*,a for *Saptjha* and so *Bhigavata Saptjha* has become the most popular in Kerala.

The *ViÅ,u Purj*,a is a very important Purana which is considered as a *Purj*,aratna or gem among *Purj*,as. It is presented as a dialogue between *Parjçaramuni* and his disciple *Maitreya*. This *Purj*,a is split into six a£ças or parts and 126 adhyjyas. The *Purj*,a is considered to be one of the oldest *Purj*,as. It is believed that the *Purj*,a was composed around the 1st century BC.

The *Garu-a Purj*,a has nineteen thousand çlokas. This is a *VaiÅ,ava Purj*,a. It deals with topics such as astronomy, medicine, the various types of punishment meted out to sinning souls etc.

Brahma Purj,a contains 246 chapters and is divided into two parts, viz., the *P£rvabhjga* and the *Uttarabhjga*. The first part deals with the story of the creation of the cosmos and detailed the lçlas of *Rjma* and *KriÅ,a*. It also deals with the glory of the *Godjvari* river. The second part gives details about the *PuruÅottama Tçrtha*, in Puri, Orissa which is one of the holiest pilgrimage centers for Hindus.

Padma Purj,a is a *VaiÅ,ava Purj*,a 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.

Njrada Purj,a Presents us with a dialogue between *Njrada* and *Sanatkumjra*, it deals with topics like the cosmos, places of pilgrimage etc.

ViÅ,u, *Bhigavata* and *Mjrkaj*,eya *Purj*,as omit *Vjyu Purj*,a from the list of eighteen and add *åivapurj*,a in its place. Originally referred to as *åaiva Purj*,a, *åivapurj*,a details the

emergence of the *åivalinga* form of *åiva*, the destruction of *Tjtrakjsura*, birth of *Ga,eç,a* etc.

Li'ga Purj,a, which is divided into four parts, describes the origin of Universe, rules of worship of the *åiva Li'ga*, relation between *Prakṛti* and *PuruÅa* etc.

The *Skanda Purj*,a tells us about *Skanda* or *Kjrtikeya*, the son of *åiva* and *Pjrvati*. It describes his birth, *DakÅa*'s sacrifice etc.

Agni Purj,a contains descriptions of the *Daçavataras* of *ViÅ,u*, the *Rjmjya,a*, the *Mahjbhjrata*, astrology, cosmology etc.

Matsya Purj,a describes the *Matsya avatjra* of *ViÅ,u*. It also details the story of *Manu*, considered to be the progenitor of entire human kind.

The *Varjha Purj*,a deals with *Varjha avatjra* of Lord *ViÅ,u*. It also narrates the story about how *P£thvi* was rescued by the Lord.

The *Vjmana Purj*,a contains an account of the dwarf incarnation of *ViÅ,u*. It is one of the shortest *Purj*,as with around six thousand stanzas divided into 96 chapters.

Mjrkaj,eya *Purj*,a written as a dialogue between Sage *Markaj*,eya and his pupil, *Jaimini*, it elaborates about the *PuruÅjrtas*.

Brahma Vaivarta Purj,a, which is divided into four parts, deals with Universe, the various Goddesses, *Ga,eç,a*, son of *åiva-Pjrvati* and the story of *KṚṣṇa*.

Brahmj,a *Purj*,a deals with the origin of the Universe, as detailed by *Brahma*. It says that the universe evolved from an egg or *An-a*. This *Purj*,a also contains portions of *Adhyjtm Rjmjya,a*, the story of *Rjdhj-KṚṣṇa* and *Paraçurjma*.

K£rma Purj,a details the *K£rma avatjra* of *ViÅ,u* and speaks about the duties of four classes of society, six magic arts like *åjnti*, *Vaççkara,a* etc and *MokÅa dharma*.

BhaviÅya Purj,a contains prophecies about the future, laws of *Manu*, creation of Universe etc. It also contains sections dealing with *Tjntric* elements.

These 18 *Purj*,as are classified into three on the basis of the cosmic qualities - *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*. In the *Sjttvika Purj*,as *ViÅ,u*, in the *Rjasa*, *Brahma* and in the *Tjmasa*, *åiva* are exalted.

The *Sjttvika Purj*,as (*VaiÅ,ava Purj*,as) are: 1. *ViÅ,u* 2. *Bhigavata* 3. *Njradçya* 4. *Garu-a* 5. *Padma* 6. *Varjha*. The *Rjasa Purj*,as are: 1. *Brahma* 2. *Bṛhamj*,a 3. *Brahma-Vaivarta* 4. *Mjrkaj*,eya 5. *BhaviÅya* 6. *Vjmana*. The *Tjmasa Purj*,as (*Saiva Purj*,as) are: 1. *åiva* 2. *Li'ga* 3. *Skanda* 4. *Agni* 5. *Matsya* 6. *K£rma*.

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 *Purj*,as can never be neglected. As Swami Vivekananda has stated the object of *Purj*,as is to teach mankind the sublime truth in various forms ^[6]. Any study related to *Purj*,a 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.

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