

***Purāṇas* : A Brief Survey**

Itihāsa and *Purāṇas* occupy a very important place as a class of literature. This class of books was written in the later Vedic period. The texts from *Itihāsa* and *Purāṇas* were occasionally recited in the later Vedic period. It is generally believed that when the *Vedas* were present why the *Purāṇas* were written. Vedavyāsa following this maxim—ऋजुमार्गेण सिद्धं तं को वक्रेण प्रसाधयेत्। (if something can easily be accomplished why should one take a curved or difficult or difficult path) wrote the *Purāṇas* to explain the verdict of the *Vedas* in a very simple manner. *Itihāsa* and the *Purāṇas* are recognised as the fifth *Veda*¹. The study of these texts is necessary for the correct interpretation of the *Vedas*. These *Purāṇas* have influenced deeply the religious and moral thought of India.

हिंसया दूयते चित्तं तेन हिन्दुरितीरितः (Hindu is one who believes in non-violence). The Hindu religion is inextricably woven with mythology which can be studied in its proper perspective only on the background of the history of the development of human thought as a whole. So the mythology of the proper Hinduism has always become richer and richer on account of the legends pertaining to gods, goddesses, men, kings, women and the like. It can be said that this class of literature or the *Purāṇas* have been written as a medium to import the Vedic concept to women and others. Unless one knows thoroughly the *Purāṇas*, one should not be regarded as proficient even if one has studied the four *Vedas* with its auxiliary sciences and the *Upaniṣads*—

यो विद्याच्चतुरो वेदान् साङ्गोपनिषदो द्विजः।

पुराणं च विजानाति य स तस्माद् विचक्षणः।।²

Rather the *Veda* is afraid of him who is deficient in traditional knowledge on the plea that he will kill the *Veda*, one should nourish the *Vedas* with *Itihāsa* and the *Purāṇas*.

इतिहासपुराणाभ्यां वेदं समुपबृंहयेत्।

बिभेत्यल्पश्रुताद् वेदो मामयं प्रहरिष्यति।।³

The *Purāṇas* originally meant “ancient” or “old narrative” and deal with variety of subjects such as cosmology, re-creation, dynasty, religious rituals, *Bhakti* movement, gods, goddesses, and all the changes in the society. They command the highest regard of the people for their practical approach to life. Dealing with the legends, the *Purāṇas* attracted the masses for explaining the Highest Knowledge and the like. They are considered the ideal religious books for the propagation of the culture enshrined in the *Vedas*. The *Paurāṇic Dharma* was in no way different from that of the *Vedas*. Besides, the *Purāṇas* have not neglected the other useful aspects of life.

The basic idea of *Dharma* underlies alike the ethical, social, spiritual and other aspects of life. The basis of the Indian society was a sort of realistic idealism. One should endeavour to reach the highest level of spiritual bliss by a rigorous discipline of mind and body. The *Purāṇas* prescribe that achievement of bliss through the observance of *Vratas* and *Tirthas*.

The *Purāṇas* are of inestimable value for the history of social development. While some opine that the *Purāṇas* are mere encyclopaedia of multiplicity of beliefs and practices, a closer scrutiny discloses the fact that there is a certain moral integrity and a pervading unity binding them all into one unified work. Our knowledge of the most ancient times depends only on tradition. According to the definition, the term ‘*Purāṇa*’ is so-called because it desires or likes the past traditions. Tradition is woven with fact and fiction both and is used in a very wide sense; it does not restrict itself to any particular matter. The line between fact and fable was hardly definite and became more and more blurred especially when the historical sense was lacking. The *Purāṇa* tradition has all along been floating and dynamic and in that process the *Purāṇas* assimilated several altogether different topics like *Vratas*, *Tīrthas*, *Dānas*, *Śrāddha*, temple-worship, glories of the gods, Viṣṇu, Śiva, Gaṇeśa and other gods. Moreover, the legends regarding the glory of women and some others were freely incorporated in the *Purāṇas*.

The legends could become the integral part of the *Purāṇas*, there were changes in the ideas and beliefs in the modes of living, thinking and in the environment of different types of people. Therefore, the *Purāṇas* were recast, rewritten as well as adapted to different new requirements.

As regards the number of the *Purāṇas*, it is recorded in all the extent *Mahāpurāṇas* that, they are eighteen in numbers at some places the number does vary but none were the first and none the last. But all had already existed when each separate one was composed⁴. The *Devī Bhāgavata Purāṇa*⁵ enumerates the *Purāṇas* in a nut-shell with the help of the first letter of each as :

मद्वयं भद्वयं चैव ब्रत्रयम् वचतुष्टयम्।
नालिंगपाग्निं कूस्कं गारुडमेव च॥

The details of this shortlist are as following: (मद्वयं) is *Matsya Purāṇa* and *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa*. (भद्वयं) is *Bhāgavata* and *Bhaviṣya*. (ब्रत्रयम्) is *Brahma*, *Brahmāṇḍa* and *Brahmavaivartta*. (वचतुष्टयम्) is *Varāha*, *Vāmana*, *Viṣṇu* and *Vāyu* and then *Nāradiya*, *Liṅga*, *Padma*, *Agni*, *Kūrma*, *Skanda* and *Garuḍa*. There are eighteen minor *Purāṇas* also.

The major *Purāṇas* contain near about four lakh verses. They all reflect the Indian culture. These major *Purāṇas* are divided into three categories. First is that pertaining to Brahmā, second to Viṣṇu and third to Śiva.

The *Garuḍa*, *Padma* and *Matsya* classify the *Purāṇas* as follows—

1. *Sāttvika Purāṇas* belonging to Viṣṇu are—*Viṣṇu*, *Bhāgavata*, *Garuḍa*, *Nārada*, *Padma* and *Varāha*.
2. *Rājasa Purāṇas* belonging to Śiva are—*Brahmāṇḍa*, *Brahmavaivartta*, *Mārkaṇḍeya*, *Brahma*, *Vāmana* and *Bhaviṣya*.
3. *Tāmasa* belonging to are—*Matsya*, *Kūrma*, *Agni*, *Liṅga*, *Śiva* or *Vāyu* and *Skanda*.

This division is only apparent, because each *Purāṇa* deals with the glory of all the gods but gives weightage to one of them.

The *Purāṇas* make it clear to us that Hindu society in ancient India unlike that of the present time, was a living one with great vital force, which could mould itself into according to circumstances and absorb easily and without much ado not only the numerous native tribes scattered all over the country, but also hordes of castless foreigners who poured into this land during the few centuries preceding and following the Christian era⁶.

The *Purāṇas* have been a great binding force of all diverse people of India. To a staunch Hindu, the *Purāṇas* are considered a great vital force for the propagation of the culture of the *Vedas*, which became popular even amongst the women and others. The *Purāṇas* created the congenial atmosphere for the spiritual ascent of men and women both. For the attainment of that goal, various legends were incorporated in the *Purāṇas*.

For the details of the *Purāṇas*, please consult the author's book—“*Religion and Philosophy of the Padma Purāṇa*”.

References—

1. *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*, vii.1.2.
2. *Padma Purāṇa, Sṛṣṭi Khaṇḍa*, 2.50
3. *Padma Purāṇa, Sṛṣṭi Khaṇḍa*, 2.51
4. Winternitz, M.A., *History of Indian Literature*, Vol. I, Part II, p. 466.
5. *Devī Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, 1.3.2.
6. *Cultural Heritage of India*, Vol. II, p. 266.