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The Purāṇas: A Cornerstone of Indian Knowledge System

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Abstract

The Purāṇas, an extensive compilation of ancient Indian literature, are increasingly recognized as an invaluable repository of Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS). The present write-up explores the significance of the Purāṇas as a primary source for understanding traditional Indian knowledge across diverse domains. Far from being mere mythological narratives, the Purāṇas contain intricate details concerning a wide range of subjects including, but not limited to, cosmology, philosophy, social structures, ethics, governance, arts, science, astronomy and environmental practices. By analyzing the multifaceted information embedded within these texts, we can gain profound insights into the historical development and practical application of IKS in ancient and medieval India. This paper argues that a systematic study of the Purāṇas, utilizing interdisciplinary approaches, is crucial for reconstructing, preserving, and disseminating the rich intellectual heritage of India, offering relevant perspectives for contemporary challenges and fostering a deeper appreciation for the holistic nature of traditional Indian thought.

Keywords: veda, purāṇa, knowledge, mythology, religion

Introduction:

The Purāṇas are one of the indispensable sources for understanding the depth and breadth of Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS). In the India, the Vedas are regarded as the foundational sources of knowledge and sciences. On the other hand, the Purāṇas are a collection of narratives, myths, legends and genealogies, often used to illustrate moral and ethical principles. Actually, the Purāṇas have made easier to understand the Vedic principles and circulate them among the masses. The simple and explicit language of these works made easier the attainment of the desired objective of instruction to the common people in moral and mental education. Hence, the people have been studied it for centuries as they have found the easiest way of attaining the peace of mind and the perfection of life from the teachings of the Purāṇas.

The Purāṇas, a vast corpus of Sanskrit literature, stand as monumental pillars supporting the structure of Indian knowledge. While primarily known for their mythological narratives, the Purāṇas are veritable encyclopedias encompassing a diverse range of subjects. As a class of literature, the Purāṇas narrate the legends of kings and sages of ancient times; contain abstracts of works in arts, dramaturgy, music, astrology, astronomy, flora and fauna and other subjects; provide insight into different stages and features of Hinduism – its theism, pantheism, idol-worship, mythology, philosophy and

different customs. In brief, the Purāṇas compose a popular encyclopedia of ancient Indian Knowledge system in all its traits –historical, philosophical, social and political (Deka 2015). Thus, the Purāṇas are the only simple and best means of understanding the real nature of the Indian Knowledge System.

Objectives:

The study intends to attain the following specified objectives:

- To demonstrate and elaborate on why the Purāṇas are considered a fundamental and indispensable part of the broader Indian Knowledge System.
- To involves showing how the Purāṇas are not merely religious texts but encyclopedic sources of diverse knowledge.
- To provide a comprehensive analysis of the Purāṇas multifaceted contributions to the intellectual, spiritual, social and cultural fabric of India, thereby solidifying their position as a ‘Cornerstone’ of the Indian Knowledge system.

Methodology:

This write-up is primarily based on qualitative approach. The present study uses both the primary and the secondary sources. The primary sources are the original Sanskrit texts, commentaries and modern scholarly interpretations. The secondary sources are related to the journal, article and various websites. The present paper is descriptive in nature. Thus, the descriptive outlook paved the way for bringing to the fore the objectives of the research.

Discussion and Analysis:

The Purāṇas are generally divided into two classes – the Mahāpurāṇas or the major Purāṇas and the Upapurāṇas or the minor Purāṇas. The total number of the Purāṇas of both classes is stated to be eighteen. The eighteen Mahāpurāṇas are - *Viṣṇupurāṇa*, *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*, *Padmapurāṇa*, *Garuḍapurāṇa* *Nāradyapurāṇa*, *Varāhapurāṇa*, *Brahmapurāṇa*, *Brahmavaivartapurāṇa*, *Brahmāṇḍapurāṇa*, *Bhaviṣyapurāṇa*, *Vāmanapurāṇa*, *Mārkaṇḍeyapurāṇa*, *Agnipurāṇa*, *Śivapurāṇa* or *Vāyupurāṇa*, *Skandapurāṇa*, *Kūrmapurāṇa*, *Matsyapurāṇa* and *Liṅgapurāṇa*.

The Upapurāṇas are also said to be eighteen in number. The eighteen Upapurāṇas are - *Kapila*, *Parāśara*, *Nāradya*, *Sanatkumāra*, *Nanda*, *Narasimha*, *Durovāsā*, *Vāmana*, *Uśanas*, *Śivadharmā*, *Mānava*, *Mārīca*, *Maheśvara*, *mVaruṇa*, *Bhārgava*, *Sāmba*, *Saura* and *Kālikā*. R.C. Hazra opines that there is much difference of opinion about the names, *śloka*-numbers and the order of the Upapurāṇas, which though numerous have been limited as eighteen only by the orthodox opinion (Hazra, Vol.I, p.2).

The spiritual commentators categorize the Mahāpurāṇas on the basis of its advocating the worship of a particular deity, generally one of the Hindu trinities, viz., *Brahmā*, *Viṣṇu* and *Rudra* or *Śiva*. The functions of these three deities being respectively creation, preservation and destruction, they came to be associated with the three *guṇas* of *rajas*, *sattva* and *tamas* respectively. Hence, the Purāṇas came to be classified sometimes on the basis of three *guṇas*. This is the most popular classification of the Purāṇas, which is found in some Purāṇas themselves (Wilson, p.xii). According to this classification, the six *Sāttvikapurāṇas* (*Viṣṇu*, *Bhāgavata*, *Garuḍa*, *Nārada*, *Padma* and *Varāha*) are dedicated to the Lord *Viṣṇu*; the six *Rājasapurāṇas* (*Brahma*, *Brahmavaivarta*, *Brahmāṇḍa*, *Bhaviṣya*, *Vāmana* and *Mārkaṇḍeya*) are dedicated to the god *Brahmā*; and the six *Tāmasapurāṇas* (*Śiva*, *Liṅga*, *Matsya*, *Kūrma*, *Agni* and *Skanda*) are dedicated to the Lord *Śiva* respectively.

Meaning of the term Purāṇa:

Generally, the term *purāṇa* is used in the sense of an 'old legend' (*purāṇam ākhyānam*). In the *R̥gveda* (3.54.9), the term *purāṇa* has been stated in the sense of 'ancient'. In the *Nirukta*, the saint Yāska has given the derivative meaning of the word *purāṇa* as that which is ancient yet new (*purā navam bhavati*, 3.4.9). Some of the Purāṇas also derive the term *purāṇa*. According to the *Vāyupurāṇa*, the word *purāṇa* means that which exists from the ancient times (I.183). The *Brahmāṇḍapurāṇa* also derives this word in a similar way. According to this Purāṇa, the word *purāṇa* is so called, because it conveys ideas with regard to old days (*Brahmāṇḍapurāṇa*, I. 1.173).

According to Amara Siṃha, the author of *Amarakoṣa*, the term *purāṇa* stands for old narratives (*Amarakoṣa*, 3.1.77). Among the Smṛti literatures, like *Manusmṛti* (3.232), *Yājñavalkyasmṛti* (1.1.3) etc., the word *purāṇa* is used in the sense of a literary branch without any specification whatsoever. Hence, it can be said that though the term *purāṇa* originally meant ancient narrative; yet the term is actually used as the designation of a class of literature in conjunction with ancient stories of the legends and the creation and destructions of the universe (Deka, 2015).

Date of the Purāṇa:

The sacred origin of the Purāṇa has unanimously accepted in the ancient scriptures and has given almost an equal status of the Vedas (*Atharvaveda*, XI.7.24; *Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad*, 2.4.11). Indian tradition believes that the sage Vyāsa composed one manual on *Purāṇasamhitā* and taught it to his pupil named Romaharṣaṇa (otherwise called as Lomaharṣaṇa). He made that *Purāṇasamhitā* into six versions and taught them to his six disciples, namely Sumati, Mitrāyu, Agnivarca, Śāmsapāyana, Akṛtavarna and Sāvarni. Romaharṣaṇa composed another manual on *Purāṇasamhitā*, and so did Akṛtavarna or Kāsyapa, Śāmsapāyana and Sāvarni. These four scholars (Romaharṣaṇa and his disciples) edited the manual on *Purāṇasamhitā* in their own way and as a consequence the Purāṇic literature increased enormously. Hence, A. D. Pusalker has mentioned that 'these four were regarded as the root *samhitās*' (Hazra, p.li). Evidently this handing over from teacher to his pupil continued for sometimes and resulted in the evolution of eighteen Purāṇas.

The above references are sufficient to establish that the date of Purāṇas goes back to the centuries before the Christian era. However, there is no unanimity among the critics and no definite chronology can be fixed in respect of the extant Purāṇas (Deka, 2015). The different scholars have opined the different views regarding the date of the Purāṇas. Some of them are as follows:

- (i) Pargiter holds that the Purāṇas were compiled from 400 B.C. to 1000 A.D. (JRAS, 1914).
- (ii) C.V. Vaidya thinks that the present form of the Purāṇas is an output of the 4th century A.D. (Macdonell, Vol.I, Sec, IV, p.6).
- (iii) According to H. H. Wilson, the date of Purāṇas is not earlier than 8th or 9th century A.D. (Wilson, p.ix).
- (iv) R.C. Hazra makes an effort to fix the date of the Purāṇa on the basis of their materials on the topics of *dāna*, *dharma* etc. According to him, the date of the Purāṇas should be placed between the 3rd century A.D. and the 12th century A.D. (Hazra, p.6).

Characteristics of the Purāṇa:

According to a classical definition, contained in the famous Sanskrit lexicon *Amarakoṣa* (I.6.5), a Purāṇa is said to have *pañca-lakṣaṇa* or five characteristics. These five characteristics are referred to in most of the Purāṇas also. According to this definition, a Purāṇa must deal with five topics, viz., creation (*sarga*), recreation (*pratisarga*), genealogies of gods, sages and kings (*vaṁśa*), cosmic cycles (*manvantara*) and accounts of royal dynasties (*vaṁśānucarita*). Though these characteristics are commonly found in the all Purāṇas, they do not form their significant part. Actually the five characteristics occupy only a small portion of the Purāṇic literature. The Purāṇas have included many more topics than the five, e.g., vow (*vrata*), charity (*dāna*), pilgrimes (*tīrtha*), beliefs (*śrāddha*), glories of deities and temple-worship etc. These topics are intensively incorporated into these texts as their integral parts. Hence, the *pañcalakṣaṇa* definition is merely rendered a theoretical part. In order to get over this difficulty and to justify the subject matter interwoven with these texts, the Purāṇas like the *Bhāgavata* (II.9.43; II.10.1-7) and the *Brahmavaivarta* propose ten characteristics of a Purāṇa. The *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* (XII.7.9-10) mentions the ten characteristics (*daśalakṣaṇa*) as follows: primary creation (*sarga*), secondary creation (*visarga*), means of livelihood (*ṛtti*), protection of devotees (*rakṣā*), the periods of Manu's and history of that epoch (*manvantara*), dyanasties of kings (*vaṁśa*), dynastic accounts (*vaṁśānucarita*), dissolution of the world (*saṁsthā*), cause of the creation (*hetu*) and final stay of all (*apāśraya*). The *Brahmavaivartapurāṇa* also mentions the ten characteristics of the Purāṇas with slight difference to that of the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*. The ten characteristics are: primary creation (*śṛṣṭi*), secondary creation (*visṛṣṭi*), stability of creation (*sthiti*), protection (*pālana*), desire for work (*karma-vāsanā*), information about the different Manu's (*Manu-vārtā*), description of the final destruction (*pralaya-varṇanā*), showing the way to release from rebirths (*mokṣa-nirūpaṇa*), discourse to the Lord (*Hari-kīrtana*) and discourse to other gods (*Deva-kīrtana*) (*Brahmavaivartapurāṇa*, IV.131. 8-9). According the *Brahmavaivartapurāṇa* (IV.131.6,7,10), the five characteristics (*pañcalakṣaṇa*) definition of the Purāṇa intended merely to the Upapurāṇas and the ten characteristics (*daśalakṣaṇa*) definition should be for the Mahāpurāṇas (Deka, 2015).

Apart from the above-mentioned topics, the Purāṇas contain much valuable information about topics such as geography, astrology, astronomy, sacrificial rites, prosody, medicine, architecture, shrines, social institutions and polity, iconography, psychology, eschatology, flora and fauna, metaphysics, ethics and so on. Thus, Pt. Haraprasād Śāstri holds that anything old may be the subject of a Purāṇa, and it covers all the aspects of human life (JBRS, 1924).

Status and Importance of the Purāṇa:

The Purāṇas are the religious treatises of divine origin and occupy a very high position in Indian literature. The orthodox section of the Hinduism has invariably assigned a prominent position to the Purāṇas in the religious lore of India. The Itihāsa and Purāṇas are regarded as the important sources of knowledge classified along with the Vedas (*Mahābhārata*, I.1.267). The *Skandapurāṇa* (*Prabhāsa Khaṇḍa*, I.2.92) clearly mentions that what is not found in the Vedas may be found in the Smṛtiśāstras and what is not found in both the Vedas and Smṛtis may be found in the Purāṇas. The *Rāmāyaṇa*, the earliest treatises of classical literature, also mentions that the Purāṇas were held in high esteem in the ancient period (*Bālakāṇḍa*, 9.1).

The modern scholars also recognize the importance of the Purāṇas for understanding the historical, political and geographical knowledge of ancient India. The Purāṇas deal with the genealogical account of the kings of the Solar and Lunar dynasties up to the end of the 5th century A.D. Besides the genealogies of the kings of that time, some Purāṇas contain the information of the future kings also. Among these dynasties of the later periods, there are a few, viz., Nanda, Mauryas, Śiśunāgas, Sungas, Andhras Kanvas, and Guptas, who actually ruled in the different states of India in later times. Some Purāṇas also give the descriptions of the dynasties of barbarian kings, such as, Hunas, Śakas, Yavanas, Abhivas etc. However, it is fact that these genealogical records are so mixed with myth and fiction that they have lost their historic significance to a certain extent. Even then it cannot be denied the fact that the historical data found in these texts were actually predicated on real historical facts. If studied of the Purāṇas with caution and judgment, it will be possible to reconstruct the history of the ancient India (Deka, 2015).

The Purāṇas hold immense social importance in Hinduism, acting as the primary vehicles for conveying religious, philosophical, and cultural ideas to the masses for over two millennia. While the Vedas were restricted to the priestly and scholarly classes, the Purāṇas were designed to be accessible to everyone, including women and Śūdras. The Purāṇas also played a key role in shaping and reinforcing the social order and moral code. They provided a religious and moral justification for the social structure. Through their narratives, they illustrate the consequences of good and bad actions.

As Hinduism spread across the Indian subcontinent, it encountered diverse local tribes, deities, and cults. The Purāṇas acted as a powerful assimilative engine. Local gods and goddesses were often identified as manifestations, aspects or attendants of the major Purāṇic gods (Brahmā, Viṣṇu, Śiva, Devi). This provided a sense of continuity and inclusion for local communities, weaving them into the broader Hindu tapestry.

The Purāṇas glorify numerous rivers, mountains, and forests as pilgrimage sites. This created a unified sacred landscape for a vast and diverse population, fostering a shared religious and cultural identity. Pilgrimage routes described in the Purāṇas became channels for cultural exchange. The Purāṇas also document and prescribe rituals, festivals, codes of conduct, dietary rules, and social customs, providing a window into the life of ancient and medieval India.

The Purāṇas are the theological bedrock of the Bhakti movement, which emphasized passionate, personal devotion to a chosen deity as the path to liberation. They popularize the worship of God with form and attribute (*saguṇa*), like the compassionate Viṣṇu, the powerful Śiva or the fierce Goddess Durgā. This made the divine more relatable and accessible to the common person than the formless, abstract Absolute (Brahman) of the Upaniṣads. Thus, it can be said that the Purāṇas were far more than just 'ancient tales.' They were a dynamic social force that shaped Hindu identity, unified a diverse population, provided a moral compass, and made the spiritual journey a possibility for every member of society.

Influences of the Purāṇas on Indian Knowledge System:

The impact of the Purāṇas on Indian knowledge systems is multifaceted:

- **Cosmology and Astronomy:** It has already been discussed that the Purāṇas offer detailed descriptions of the universe, its creation, and its cyclical nature. Concepts

like the creation and destruction of the world (*Sṛṣṭi* and *Pralaya*) find elaborate explanations in all the Purāṇas.

- **Mythology and Religion:** As the primary source of Hindu mythology, the Purāṇas are introducing a pantheon of gods and goddesses and their associated legends. Again, the Purāṇas also delve into philosophical and theological doctrines, shaping religious beliefs and practices.
- **History and Genealogy:** While not strictly historical, the Purāṇas provide genealogies of kings, dynasties and sages of ancient India, offering valuable insights into socio-political structures and cultural revolution.
- **Social and Ethical Values:** The Purāṇas encapsulate the essence of dharma, the moral order, and outline duties and responsibilities for individuals and society.
- **Arts and Literature:** The Purāṇas have inspired countless works of art, music, dance, and literature, enriching the cultural landscape of India.
- **Science and Technology:** Although often overlooked, some Purāṇas contain references to scientific concepts like medicine, metallurgy, and agriculture.

Relevance in Contemporary IKS Studies:

The Purāṇas continue to be a vital area of study in contemporary IKS research for several reasons:

- **Holistic Understanding:** The Purāṇas offer a holistic perspective on ancient Indian thought, demonstrating the interconnectedness of various disciplines (religion, philosophy, history, science, art).
- **Cultural Continuity:** The Purāṇas also represent a continuous thread of Indian cultural and intellectual heritage, showcasing how ancient wisdom has been preserved, adapted, and transmitted across millennia.
- **Source for Interdisciplinary Research:** The diverse content of the Purāṇas allows for interdisciplinary studies, bringing together scholars of history, religion, philosophy, linguistics, architecture, and environmental studies.
- **Understanding Traditional Practices:** Many traditional rituals, festivals, and social practices prevalent in India today find their roots and explanations in the Puranic literature.
- **Ethical and Moral Frameworks:** The Purāṇas consistently emphasize *Dharma* (righteous conduct) and *Karma*, providing enduring ethical and moral frameworks that remain relevant in contemporary society.

Conclusion:

From the above discussion, it is clear that the Purāṇas are far more than just collections of myths. They are dynamic, encyclopedic repositories of Indian Knowledge Systems, offering profound insights into cosmology, history, geography, social structures, religious practices, and various scientific and artistic traditions. Their narrative accessibility made them powerful tools for cultural synthesis and popular education, shaping the beliefs, practices, and intellectual landscape of India for centuries.

In conclusion, it can be said that the Purāṇas constitute an invaluable treasure trove of knowledge and shaping intellectual, spiritual and cultural landscape of India. Enduring influence of the Purāṇas testifies to their profound impact on the Indian knowledge system.

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