

Greatness & Real Position of Epics & Purāṇas in Indian Tradition

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Abstract

In India the greatness of Epic & Puranic literature is being accepted by the people since time immemorial. The origin of the Sanskrit epics may be traced to the dialogue-hymns in the Ṛgveda. In the later Vedic literature, *i.e.* the Brāhmaṇas we find references to the Itihāsas, Ākhyānas and Purāṇas. There is ample evidence to show that the recital of these epic poems formed a part of the religious ceremonies at sacrificial and domestic festivals. Although there is no proof that collections of such poems existed as books, still it cannot be denied that the professional story-tellers, *i.e.* Aitihāsikas and Paurāṇikas existed in very ancient times.

Keywords: Epics, Itihāsas and Dharmasāstra

The Epics are really great works of Indian literature. The general human beings follow and read these spiritual texts for the social as well as cultural point of view. The epic poets and even the Buddhists and the Jainas draw abundantly from the rich store of narratives Itihāsas, Ākhyānas, Purāṇas and Gāthās that had accumulated in pre-Buddhistic times. The Mahābhārata refers to the ‘great itihāsas’ which evidently alludes to ancient poems of epic character. That the numerous ‘ancient tales’ of epic character must have furnished a large body of epic phrase as well as fable, out of which and on the basis of which our present epics arose is rendered more probable also by the fact that such epic verses as are preserved in other works, although not always from the extant epics, yet have the same character as the verses of the Rāmāyaṇa and the Mahābhārata. Finally the epic itself admits that the present text is not the original one:

ācakhyuḥ kavayaḥ kecit sampratyācakṣate 'pare/

ākhyāsyanti tathaiivānye itihāsamimā bhuvī// (Rāmāyaṇa, chapter, 28.)

It means some poets narrated this Itihāsa on the earth, others narrate now, and similarly others will narrate. It is to be noted that the past perfect use of ācakhyuḥ, which denotes ‘remote past’.

The Sanskrit Epics fall into two main classes, the one comprising old stories and legends known as Itihāsa and Purāṇa and the other comprising poems known as Kāvya or ‘ornate epics’. The Mahābhārata is the oldest work of the former class and the Rāmāyaṇa of the latter, although both the Rāmāyaṇa and the Mahābhārata are generally classed as Itihāsa. The Mahābhārata has exercised

a great influence on the later Purāṇas and the Rāmāyaṇa has served as a model for later court epics of the post-Purāṇic age. Though both these great epics are composed in the Anisṭubh metre, there are radical points of difference between the two, *i.e.* Rāmāyaṇa and Mahābhārata. The Rāmāyaṇa is a sustained and coherent narrative of a single story, whereas the Mahābhārata is composed of a jumble of too many different legends besides the main story. The Mahābhārata is not homogeneous in style, spirit or matter and is therefore not the work of a single hand or of a single age. It contains many archaic verses and tales in prose. The Mahābhārata is so overgrown that it is more an encyclopedia than a single work. The Rāmāyaṇa on the other hand is mostly uniform in matter and style and is the work of a single author. It has not a single line in prose or in the archaic metres. Dr. Winternitz describes the Mahābhārata as a whole literature and does not look upon it as one poetic production which the Rāmāyaṇa essentially is.

Epic Rāmāyaṇa:

The Rāmāyaṇa is a great epic of the mankind. It is also known as Ādikāvya (First Epic), written by the Ādi-kavi (first poet) Vālmīki. This famous Indian epic deals with social, moral, political, spiritual and philosophical aspects of human life, besides principally narrating the story of Rāma, an incarnation of Lord Viṣṇu.

The Rāmāyaṇa is highly popular epic which has become the property of the Indian people and it is not an exaggeration if it is said that it has influenced more than any other poem the thought and poetry of a nation for thousands of years. Regarding the importance of Rāmāyaṇa it is said :

*Varam vareṇyam varadam tu kāvyam
samsāra-satyāśu ca sarvalokam /
samkalpitārthaprathamādikāvyaṁ
śrutvā ca padam prayāti //*

People in different walks of life are all quite familiar with the characters and stories of the great epic. In the eyes of Indians Rāma is the ideal prince, the embodiment of all conceivable virtue and Sītā the ideal of conjugal love and fidelity, the highest virtue of women. Popular sayings and proverbs bear unmistakable testimony to the acquaintance of the Indian people with the stories of the epic. Preachers belonging to different sects draw upon the story of the epic at the time of the religious discourses meant for the mass.

The teachings of Rāmāyaṇa are practical and, therefore, easily comprehended. In the Rāmāyaṇa, we find cut and dried solutions for the abstract mysteries of life. The reader finds for himself how ideal brothers (Bharata and Lakṣmaṇa), an ideal husband (Rāma) and the ideal wife (Sītā), an ideal devotee worker (Hanuman), an ideal son (Rāma) and even an ideal king (Rāma) should behave in life.

Daśaratha's sincerity of promise and affection for son are unique; Kauṣalyā's sense of duty and Sumitrā's spirit of sacrifice are unparalleled; and Lakṣmaṇa's reverence for elder brother's wife is simply amazing. Rāma is deservedly called 'Maryādā Puruṣottama'. In short, we find living examples of highest morality in the Rāmāyaṇa. As such, it has inspired in the past, inspires today and will inspire in the future, millions of lives in India and abroad.

The study of Rāmāyaṇa is also important from the historical point of view, because it gives us an account of the state of Aryan civilization in ancient times. It gives us an insight into the social and political conditions of ancient India. Besides, it gives us copious information about the geographical conditions of epic India.

The epic Rāmāyaṇa is roughly estimated to be more than 5000 years old. But Indians, always regard this epic as the earliest one. The very metre of Anuṣṭubh is said to have been first used by the great sage Vālmīki. The episode of the sage's heart getting moved to pity on seeing a bird pierced by the arrow of a hunter and his pent-up sorrows resolving in to chandas or metre are too well-known to require recapitulation. The verse that emanated from the lips of the sage condemning the hunter to a shortened life on account of his cruelty in killing the bird, made the sage himself wonder at its conformity to rhythm, musical quality and proportion in words. Sage Nārada congratulated Vālmīki upon the gift of poetic composition that he had won by the grace of Brahmā, the creator of the universe.

The epic Rāmāyaṇa consists of about 24000 verses and is divided in to seven books, called Kāṇḍas. The first (Bāla) Kāṇḍa describes Rāma's early youth, his accompanying Viśvāmitra to protect the latter's sacrifice his slaying the Rākṣasas there and his marriage with Sītā. The second (Ayodhyā) Kāṇḍa deals with the events at the royal court of Ayodhyā, preparations for Rāma's coronation, Kaikeyī's hostility, Rāma's exile, Daśaratha's death in separation and Bharata's futile efforts to bring Rāma back to the capital Ayodhyā. The third (Araṇya) Kāṇḍa deals with Rāma's life in the Daṇḍaka forest, his slaying of demons like Virādha, his life in the Pañcavaṭi, meeting with Śūpaṇakhā, slaying of Khara and other demons, Rāvaṇa's stealing away of Sītā and Rāma's bitter lamentations. The fourth (Kiṣkindhā) Kāṇḍa narrates Rāma's alliance with Sugrīva, his slaying of Vāli and Hanumata's guest for Sītā – in company with other monkeys. The fifth (Sundara) Kāṇḍa described the beautiful island of Laṅkā, Rāvaṇa's magnificent palace. Hanumat's consoling of Sītā and his return back with the happy news. The sixth (Yuddha) Kāṇḍa is the most extensive of all and deals with Rāma's final victory over Rāvaṇa. The seventh (Uttara) Kāṇḍa deals with Rāma's later life at Ayodhyā, ill-report about Sītā, her exile by Rāma, Sītā's grief, birth of two sons Kuśa and Lava at Vālmīki's hermitage and the ultimate end.

There are indications which clearly suggest that the original story of the Rāmāyaṇa concluded with the sixth Kāṇḍa. The seventh Kāṇḍa abounds in myths and legends which have nothing do with the main story. Similarly, in the first Kāṇḍa, there is much extraneous matter which could have not belonged to the original Rāmāyaṇa. On several grounds/ points Prof. Jacobi concluded that Kāṇḍas II-VI form the nucleus of the Rāmāyaṇa to which Kāṇḍas I and VII were added later and several passages were interpolated even in Kāṇḍas II to VII. But this view is not accepted by the Indian scholars.

From a study of Jātaka literature it would appear that the stories of some of the Jātaka's naturally remind us of the story of the Rāmāyaṇa thought it must be admitted that we seldom observe any 'literal agreement' between the two. To cite an instance, the Daśaratha Jātaka relates the story of the Rāmāyaṇa in a different way, where Rāma and Sītā are described as brother and sister. But it is highly significant that while the Jātakas give us innumerable stories of the demon world and the animals, they never mention the names of Rāvaṇa and Hanumān and other monkeys. It can be said that Rāmāyaṇa was written much prior than Buddha or Buddhism.

However, it can be said Rāmāyaṇa is easily the most popular of all the Indian epics. It has influenced the religious life of the Hindus to a greater extent than any other literary work. Countless religious Hindus hold a study of this epic to be an act of piety or many of the National festivals are based on the story of the Rāmāyaṇa and many Hindus are named after the characters of the Rāmāyaṇa. Incessant recitals and expositions of the epic are hold even to this day in most of the Hindu towns and villages. On the literary side, the influence of the Rāmāyaṇa on the succeeding ages has been immeasurable. Vālmīki has been adored by all the later plots as the first among poets and the model for all successors. Kālidāsa and numerous other successors owe much of their style, plot and imagery to Vālmīki. Many writers of ornate epics and dramas have taken their plots from this source. Raghvaṁśa, the Setubandha, Bhaṭṭikāvya and Jānakiharaṇa among ornate epics, Pratimā-Nāṭaka, Abhiṣeka-Nāṭaka, Mahāvīracarita, Uttara-rāmacarita, Anargharāghava, Bāla-rāmāyaṇa and Prasannarāghava among the dramas and the Rāmāyaṇa-campū are the Chief among the innumerable Sanskrit works that derive their plots from the Rāmāyaṇa. In the form of translation and adaptations, it has found its place in all the languages of India. The prophecy about the future of the epic, found in the epic itself, that it will survive so long as the mountain ranges stand and the rivers continue to flow, how been more than fulfilled. As nicely said in the Rāmāyaṇa:

*yāvat sthāsyanti girayaḥ saritaśca mahītale/
tāvad rāmāyaṇa kathā lokeṣu pracariṣyati//* (Bālakāṇḍa, III.36-37)

Epic Mahābhārata:

The Mahābhārata is the earliest example of Itihāsa. So; the original work was in its nature a historical and not a didactic work. The Mahābhārata (I.2. 83.) itself claims that Maharshi Veda Vyāsa composed the work as a great Dharmaśāstra, as Arthaśāstra, Mokṣaśāstra and also Kāmaśāstra. (Mahābhārata, I.2.83 & 62.23.) So it is rightly said :

*dharme hyarthe ca kāma ca mokṣe ca bharatarṣabha/
yadhīhāsti tadanyatra yannehāsti na tat kvacit//* (Mahābhārata)

In the last parvan it claims that whatever is said in it would be found elsewhere and what is not contained it would not be found anywhere else, i. e. it claims to be encyclopedic work and hence there was a great incentive to later scholars to add to it fresh matter. In the Udyoga Parva (Mahābhārata, 130.18) and Adiparva (*Ibid.*, 62.20) the Mahābhārata is spoken of as Jaya and in the last parvan (5.51), the epic is also called Samhitā (1.16; 63.90), Purāṇa (I.17), Ākhyāna (2.388–389), Itihāsā (1.19,26 & 2.36, 41, etc.), Kāvya (I.61 & 73, 2.3.90), Kārṣṇaveda (I.268 and 62.18). In the Svargārohaṇa-parvan it states that the epic is so called because of its greatness (*mahattvādbhāravattacca mahābhārata mucyate*–) and the weightiness (of its contents) and that the epic is equal (in importance) to the eighteen Purāṇas, all the Dharmaśāstras and the Vedas with their subsidiary lores (Ch. V. 45-46).

It is stated that Bhārata means the epic without the Upākhyānas (tales) and contains 24000 verses and the work Mahābhārata consists of one hundred thousand verses inclusive of the upākhyānas. (*Ibid.*, Ādiparva, 1.101-2) The Ādiparva states that sage Vedavyāsa taught the four Vedas together with the Mahābhārata as the fifth to four pupils, viz. Sumantu, Jaimini, Paila, Vaiśampāyana and to Śuka his own son and these five promulgated separate five versions of the story. As rightly said :

*Vadānadhyāpayāmāsa mahābhārata pañcarmān, sumantum
jaiminim pailam śukam caiva svamātmajam, prabhurvariṣṭho
varado vaiśampāyanameva ca; samhitāstaiḥ pṛthaktvera
bhāratasya prakāśitā /* (*Ibid.*, Adiparva, 63.89-90)

The Śāntiparva (*Ibid.*, Śāntiparva, Ch. 327.26-33 & 349.10-12) repeats the same story about the five pupils of Vedavyāsa. The extant Mahābhārata is supposed to be the one that Vaiśampāyana narrated to Janmejaya, son of Parikṣit, the latter being the grand-son of Ajjuna and son of Abhimanyu.

The epic in its present form is divided into eighteen parvans, viz. Ādi, Sabhā, Vana, Virāṭa, Udyoga, Bhīṣma, Droṇa, Karṇa, Śalya, Saaptika, Strī, Śānti, Anuśāsana, Aśvamedhika, Āśramavāsika, Mausala, Mahāprasthānika and Svargārohaṇa- parvans, with a supplement called the Harivaṃśa. The famous

Bhagavadgītā is a part of the Bhīṣma-parvan and contains eighteen sections. The Gītā is a simplification in verse of the general doctrines in Hindu Philosophy and is a book specially meant for the dwellers of the society rather than for one who has renounced it. The book is not doubt one of the finest fruits of Indian Philosophy and has gained worldwide recognition in the hands of philosophers. The theme of the book is the advice, given by Lord Kṛṣṇa for counseling dispersed Arjuna, mainly dwelling on the doctrines of Karman, Jñāna and Bhakti. The Gītā has been widely and admired for many countries past, ever since Alberūni spoke highly of it. Its language, style and metre prove that the poem is one of the earliest parts of the Mahābhārata.

The nucleus of the Mahābhārata is the great war of eighteen days fought between the Kauravas, the hundred sons of king Dhṛtarāṣṭra and the Pāṇḍavas, the five sons of Pāṇḍu. The poet narrates all the circumstances leading up to the war. In this great Kurukshetra battle were involved almost all the kings of India joining either of the two parties. The result of this war was the total annihilation of the Kauravas and their party, and Yudhiṣṭhira, the head of the Pāṇḍavas, became the sovereign monarch of Hastināpura. But with the progress of years new matter and episodes, relating to the various aspects of human life, social, economic, political, moral and religious as also fragments of the heroic legends and legends containing reference to the famous kings, came to be added to the aforesaid nucleus and this phenomenon probably continued for centuries till the early part of the Christian era the epic gathered its present shape, which said to contain one lakh verses. It is therefore, that the Mahābhārata has been described not only as a heroic poem, but also as a ‘repertory of the whole of the old bard poetry’.

The subject matter of Mahābhārata :

The Ādi-parvan describes the early life of the Kauravas and the Pāṇḍavas, Draupadī’s marriage and the Pāṇḍava’s acquaintance with Kṛṣṇa, the hero of the Yādavas. The second parvan describes the prosperity of the Pāṇḍvas at Indraprastha, and the lost of everything, including Draupadi, by Yudhiṣṭhira in a play of dice with Duryodhana. The Pāṇḍavas ultimately agree to go into banishment for a period of twelve years and to remain incognito for a thirteenth. The Vana-parvan elaborates the forest life of the Pāṇḍavas for twelve years in the Kāmyaka forest, and the Virāṭa-parvan narrates how they spent the thirteenth year incognito as servants of Virāṭa, the king of Matsyas. The Udyoga-parvan narrates the preparations for war by the Pāṇḍavas as the Kurus give no sympathetic response to their just demands. The next five parvans give in detail an account of the great battle in which all except the Pāṇḍavas and Lord Kṛṣṇa were lost.

The eleventh parvan deals with the funeral rites of the dead. The next two deal with Bhīṣma's lengthy discourse to Yudhiṣṭhira on Rājadharmā. The fourteenth parvan deals with Yudhiṣṭhira's coronation and the horse sacrifice; the fifteenth with the resort to forest of Dhṛtarāṣṭra and his queen Gāndhārī; and the sixteenth with internecine conflict of the Yādavas and Lord Kṛṣṇa's accidental death at the hands of a hunter. The seventeenth parvan describes how the Pāṇḍavas get weary of life and make the great departure to the Meru Mountain, leaving Parikṣita, Arjuna's grandson, in charge of the government. The last parvan narrates the Pāṇḍavas ascent to heaven.

The Harivaṁśa is regarded as a supplement or appendix to the Mahābhārata but the connection between the two is purely external and is limited essentially to the fact that the same Vaisampāyana is the speaker of the both. The Harivaṁśa contains 16374 (Approx.) verses and is divided into three sections. The first section deals with Kṛṣṇa's ancestry, the second with Kṛṣṇa's adventures and the third with the future corruptions of the Kali age.

No date can be assigned to the Mahābhārata as a whole. As it is noticed above, there are three definite stages of evolution. The date of the original Mahābhārata, therefore, differs from the date of present Mahābhārata by several centuries. To the strictly orthodox Indian mind, the Rāmāyaṇa appears to have been composed earlier than the Mahābhārata. Indians believe that of the two incarnations of the Lord, Rāma and Kṛṣṇa, the former was born earlier. Professor Jacobi also thinks that of the epics, the Rāmāyaṇa is the earlier production and he bases his theory on the supposition that it is the influence of the Rāmāyaṇa which has moulded the Mahābhārata in to a poetic form. That the Rāmāyaṇa is earlier than the Mahābhārata may be proved on the strength of the following points. The Vana-parvan of the Mahābhārata contains references to the Rāma's story while no such reference to the Mahābhārata story in to be found in the Rāmāyaṇa. Again the Mahābhārata contains references to the burning of widows as evinced in the story of Mādri's satīdāha. But nothing akin to it is found in the Rāmāyaṇa. From the references of Megasthenes we come to know that the practice of burning of widows was in vogue in the third century B. C. In the Vedic period such a system was unknown to this country. Further Pāṭaliputra is mentioned as a city in the Mahābhārata which according to Megasthenes was founded by Kālāśoka in the fourth century B.C. But it is interesting to note that this important city is not mentioned in the Rāmāyaṇa though many cities of lesser importance and some of them again very close to Pāṭaliputra have been alluded to.

It is asserted by Winternitz that the Rāmāyaṇa appears to be an ornate poem having served as the pattern to which later Indian poets admiringly aspired. What Wintemitz mean by ornate poetry is that kind of poetic composition in which

greater importance is attached to the form than to the matter and contents of the poem and in which literary embellishments are profusely used even to excess. The Rāmāyaṇa is the first literary work in which the aforesaid peculiarities of ornate poetry are found. These peculiarities, however, are not present in the Mahābhārata which is, therefore, presumed to be the earlier composition. Again, it has been pointed out those expressions like ‘Bhīṣma spoke’. ‘Sañjaya spoke’ which the poet of the Mahābhārata, uses to introduce a character, are reminiscent of ancient ballad poetry. But in the Rāmāyaṇa, the speeches are introduced in verses and therefore in a more polished form. The theory of Professor Jacobi may be further contested on the ground that from a perusal of the two epics, the reader will unmistakably carry the impression that while the Mahābhārata describes a more war-like age, the Rāmāyaṇa depicts a comparatively refined civilization. Hence, it is to be concluded that Rāmāyaṇa is to be considered as the earliest composition with comparison to the facts of Mahābhārata.

The Bhagavad Gītā is also a part of Mahābhārata. It has about 700 verses it is divided into Eighteen chapters and believed to be a dialogue between Lord Krishna and Arjuna in the field of battle. When the armies of both the sides are arranged ready for battle and Arjuna hesitates to fight, being shocked at the thought of slaying his own kinsfolk and preceptors, Lord Krishna expounds to him the great truths of real duty and the knowledge of the self, so as to inspire into him the spirit of selfless service. The poem sets forth elaborately the eternal nature of the souls, the need for the proper performance of one’s own dharma, the value of karma or selfless action, jñāna or the spiritual knowledge and bhakti or incessant devotion as the means of attaining liberation from the bondage of worldly existence. The doctrine of self surrender, the lesson of detachment from the fruits of one’s own action and numerous other similar great principles of Hindu Philosophy all compressed in the Gītā and it has therefore been all along the most popular and adored treatise on Hindu Philosophy. Numberless Philosophers like Ācārya Śaṅkara, Rāmānuja and Mādhva have commented on it. There are translations and commentaries on Gītā in all the Indian and many foreign languages. In short, Gītā is the greatest and most popular work in Indian Philosophical literature.

The Purāṇas :

The Purāṇas are known as the fifth Veda in Indian culture. The aim of Purāṇas is to acquaint the general mass with the teachings and philosophy of the Veda which are to be adopted as the principle and thus achieve the goal of life.

As Vedavyāsa says: “itihāsa-purāṇābhyām vedaṁ samupabr̥mhayet.” (Mahābhārata,1.1.68) So, for the complete study of the Veda, Purāṇas are

indispensable. Various Purāṇas provide us valuable information about the social religious and cultural life of ancient and medieval India. It is noteworthy that despite exaggerations, myths and legends, some of these works throw considerable light on the early political history of India.

The Eighteen Mahā Purāṇas (vide, Bhagavata Purāṇa (XII.7.23-24) enunciates the meaning and the implication of vice and virtues in our life in various ways. They elaborately describe the aim of our life with a view to making our life more virtuous and fit to achieve the goal of four Puruṣārthas, *i.e.* dharma, artha, kāma and mokṣa. Hence, the Purāṇas explain the real truth and value of life and thus serve the purpose of welfare of mankind in their own way.

The Purāṇas are a sort of encyclopedia endeavouring to deal with the histories of five independent subjects, viz. creation and recreation of the universe, gods, reigns of fourteen Manus, and the kings of the solar race as Rāma and others, and of the lunar race as Pāṇḍavas and others. Similarly, are mentioned the dynasties of the Nandas, Mauryas, Guptas and others. In no other country or civilization such gigantic attempt was ever made to treat of so many subjects in such single volumes.

Besides, the Purāṇas are a vast store-house of authentic materials supplying themes or many works of classical Sanskrit, prose, poetry, and drama. They also contain useful geographical information and also mention different cult of worship, vratas and tīrthas. In addition to these, Purāṇas also contain the knowledge of various branches of science, viz. Medical science, Astronomy, Botany, Chemistry, Vāstu, and Architecture.

Among the Eighteen Mahā Purāṇas, ten are termed as Śaiva-Purāṇas, four Brahma-Purāṇas, two Śākta-Purāṇas and four Vaiṣṇava Purāṇas as mentioned in the Kedāra Khaṇḍa of Skanda Purāṇa. The Śaiva, Bhaviṣya, Mārkaṇḍeya, Liṅga, Varāha, Skanda, Matsya, Kūrma, Vāmana, Brahmāṇḍa are the ten Śaiva Purāṇas; Viṣṇu, Bhāgavata, Nārādīya and Gaṇḍa are four Vaiṣṇava Purāṇas; whereas Brahma and Padma describe the glory of lord Brahmā and hence are called the Brahma Purāṇas.

The noted Sanskrit Lexicographer, Amarasimha, gives us a definition of Purāṇas which has been repeated in some of the extant Purāṇic texts. According to Amarasimha, every Purāṇa should discuss five topics: (i) Sarga—creation, (ii) Pratisarga, (iii) Vaṁśa—genealogy of gods and sages; (iv) Manvantara – the Manu period of time, *i.e.* the great periods each of which has a Manu (primal ancestor of the human race) as its ruler, and (v) Vaṁśānucarita – the history of the dynasties the origin of which is traced to the Sun and the Moon. But all these five characteristics are not present in every Purāṇa and though in some they are partially present, we notice a wide diversity of topics in them. We find many

chapters dealing with the duties of the four castes and of the four Āśramas, sections on Brāhmanical rites, on particular ceremonies and feasts and frequently also chapters on Sāṅkhya and Yoga Philosophy. But the most striking peculiarity of all the Purāṇas is their sectarian character as they are dedicated to the cult of some deity who is treated as the principal god in the book. Unique is the importance of the Purāṇas from the stand point of history and religion. The genealogical survey of the Purāṇas is immensely helpful for the study of political history in ancient India, and yet it is a task for the scholar to glean germs of Indian history, hidden in the Purāṇas. Dr. Smith says that the Viṣṇu Purāṇa given us invaluable information about the Maurya dynasty. The Matsya Purāṇa is most dependable in so far as the Andhra dynasty is concerned, while the Vāyu Purāṇa gives us detailed descriptions about the reign of Chandragupta I. As the object of the Purāṇas was to popularize the more difficult and highly philosophical preaching of the Vedas through the modicum of historical facts and tales, we naturally find in them Hinduism in a fully developed form. So the student of religion cannot pass it by. The Purāṇas are not also wanting in literary merit and they abound in numerous passages which speak of highly artistic talent of their makers.

As mentioned above the number of the Purāṇas in eighteen in number, and there are also minor Purāṇas (Upa-purāṇas), which all again number eighteen. The eighteen Purāṇas are classified from the standpoint of the three cosmic qualities (guṇa), viz. Sattva, Rajas and Tamas. The Purāṇas generally exalting Viṣṇu are called Sāttvika, those exalting Brahmā are called Rājaśa, white those exalting Śiva are called Tāmasa. The Purāṇas are classified as under :

A) Sāttvika Purāṇas: Viṣṇu, Bhāgavata, Nārada, Garuḍa, Padma and Varāha.

B) Rājasa Purāṇas: Brahma, Brahmāṇḍa, Brahma-Vaivarta, Mārkaṇḍya, Bhaviṣya and Vāmana.

C) Tāmasa Purāṇas : Śiva, Liṅga, Skandha, Agni, Matsya and Kūrma.

1. Bhāgavata Purāṇa :

This Purāṇa is the most famous work of Purāṇa literature. It is regarded by the adherents of the Vaiṣṇava cult as the 'fifth Veda'. Its artistic excellence is widely admired and it is believed by Indians that real scholarship is tested by one's proficiency in this Purāṇa. The Purāṇa which bears the stamp of a unified composition consists of 18000 stanzas divided into twelve books or skandhas. The tenth skandha (book) concerns itself with an account of the various activities of Lord Kṛṣṇa including the exquisite love-scenes with the milk-maids. Basically, this Purāṇa deals at length with the stories of the ten main incarnations and many minor ones of Lord Viṣṇu and includes many devotional and thrilling hymns. According to Pargiter, the Purāṇa was written sometime in the ninth century A.D.

2. Viṣṇu Purāṇa :

Among the eighteen Purāṇas this is the second only to Bhāgavata in popularity and is quoted from, more profusely than any other Purāṇa, by the great religious teachers like Śrī Śaṅkara. There is more of the unity and less of exaggerated emphasis on sectarian sacrifices and ceremonies in this Purāṇa than what we find in the other Purāṇas. This fact makes it probable that it is the earliest of Purāṇas. The whole text is narrated by the sage Parāśara to his disciple Maitreya. In six books called Anśas, the Viṣṇu Purāṇa speaks of the stories of the ten Avatāras of Viṣṇu, besides the usual Purāṇic matter. This Purāṇa gives an account of Maurya dynasty and therefore might have been composed about second century B.C.

3. Nārada Purāṇa :

In this Purāṇa the sages Śaṅkara and others expound to Nārada the doctrine of devotion to Viṣṇu with numerous illustrative legends.

4. Garuḍa Purāṇa :

It is so called as it was first expounded by Lord Viṣṇu to Garuḍa. It deals at length on various fasts and ceremonials relating to Vaiṣṇavite faith, although it commends the worship of other gods also like Śiva, Pārvatī, Sūrya and Gaṇeśa. The especially important person of this epic is the latter half which speaks at length of the story of the soul after its departure from the human body. It also describes the horrors of hell, caused by acts of sin and expounds the significance of the funeral ceremonies conducted for the departed souls by their survivors which are said to accrue to the well-being of the souls in their post-mortem journey.

5. Padma Purāṇa :

This Purāṇa consists of about 55000 verses, divided into six sections. The Sṛṣṭi Khaṇḍa gives a description of the creation and the genealogy of king's up to Śrī Kṛṣṇa. The Bhūmi Khaṇḍa contains an account of the earth and its divisions with the glorification of some sacred places like, Puṣkara. The Svarga Khaṇḍa gives a description of the heavenly regions. The Pātāla Khaṇḍa has an account of the lower worlds, wherein is introduced the story of Rāma and the Uttarakhaṇḍa sets forth the sacred nature of the several months and the special efficacy of several acts of piety and charity performed in them. There is an account here of the mystic lotus on which Brahma appeared before creation and this explains the title of this Purāṇa. The last section called the Kriyāyogasāra prescribes several fasts, prayers and ceremonies to be observed by the devotees

of Viṣṇu. This Purāṇa is especially noteworthy since the stories of Rāma and his ancestors and the story of Śānkuntalā found here are quite in agreement with the versions found in the Raghuvamśa and in the Abhijñāna Śākuntala of Kālidāsa. This Purāṇa refers clearly to the Bhāgavata cult and to the Jainas and narrates to the local tradition of many places.

6. Brahma Purāṇa :

This Purāṇa is also called the Ādi Purāṇa and is mentioned first in all the lists. It is said to have been expounded by Brahma to Dakṣa. Besides the usual Purāṇic contents, it gives an account of the several holy places in the country of Utkala, now called Orissa.

7. Vāyu Purāṇa :

This is so called as it was narrated by Vāyu, the wind god. In many lists of the Mahā Purāṇas, this Purāṇa is inserted in the place of the Śiva Purāṇa. It has great resemblance to parts of the Mahābhārata and the Harivaṃśa. Bana of seventh century AD mentions this Purāṇa with reverence. The Gupta Kings of the fourth century A.D. are mentioned in this Purāṇa in the chapter on the prophecy of the future ages and therefore the epic might have been composed somewhere in the 5th or 6th century A.D. In subject matter, this Purāṇa is quite like many others, but it is strongly Śaivite in tendency and glorifies the worship of Lord Śiva and Śaivite rituals.

8. Agni Purāṇa :

This is so called as it was communicated to sage Vasiṣṭha by Agni, the God of fire. Though the incarnations of Viṣṇu particularly as Rāma and Kṛṣṇa are dealt with in this Purāṇa, it is essentially Saivite in nature. It deals with the cult of the liṅga and Durgā elaborately. It further deals at great length with all sorts of mostly topics, not included in the scope of a Purāṇa and is almost an encyclopedia, treating among other things, of medicine, astronomy, architecture, prosody, poetics and dramaturgy.

9. Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa :

It is one of the most interesting and important probably one of the oldest among the Purāṇas. It gives an elaborate account of creation and deluge. It is not sectarian in spirit.

The Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa is one of the oldest Purāṇas. It is a very popular and most important work of the Indian tradition. This Purāṇa has 137 chapters.

A study of the treatise reveals three stages of its developments. Chapters 1-44 are represented as narrated by four wise birds living Vindhya Mountain. Chapters 45 to 80; nominally a dialogue between Jaimini and Dharma-birds, but in reality the interlocutors are Mārkaṇḍeya and his pupil Krauṣṭuki who starts the real discussion on the Purāṇic contents. Chapters 81 to 93 constitute the Durgā-saptaśatī or Devī Māhātmya, popularly known as ‘Caṇḍī’ or ‘Durgā Saptaśatī’. Presently, Durgā-saptaśatī is well-recognized as a separate sacred text like Bhagavad Gītā and it is being Chanted everyday by a number Hindus, *i.e.* the worshippers of Devī Durgā. In order to satisfy the Supreme Goddess Durgā the devotees used to chant the sacred verses of this holy text.

10. Bhaviṣya Purāṇa :

As the above title suggests, the aims at giving prophetic accounts of future age’s and contains a great mass of description of religious and propitiatory rituals; especially those advocating the worship of Sūrya, Agni and the Nāgas. It often contains a vitiated account of genealogies. For instance, it says each Paurava King ruled at least for 1000 years.

11. Brahmavaivarta Purāṇa :

The Brahmavaivarta Purāṇa derives its name from the theory that the whole creation of the universe is a ‘vivarta’ or transformation of Brahma, the Supreme Being. The Brahma Khaṇḍa, the first section deals with the creation of the world by Brahma; the next section, the Prakṛti Khaṇḍa, describes the manifestation of Prakṛti as Durgā, Lakṣmī, Sarasvatī and Radhā; the third section, the Gaṇeṣa Khaṇḍa, speaks of the legends of Lord Gaṇeṣa and the last portion, Kṛṣṇa janma Khaṇḍa, gives an account of Śrī Kṛṣṇa who predominates in the whole Purāṇa, with emphasis being laid on the Rādhā episodes.

12. Brahmāṇḍa Purāṇa :

This is so called on account of the description the primeval golden egg which evolved into the universe later. It is important on account of the Ādhyātma Rāmāyaṇa which forms a very significant part of it.

13. Liṛga Purāṇa :

Especially his Purāṇa expounds the glory of Lord Śiva in the form of Liṛga and contains an elaborate account of 28 different incarnations of Lord Śiva.

14. Skanda Purāṇa :

It narrates the story of the birth and exploits of Skanda, chiefly the destruction of the powerful demon Tārakā. The parts of the Purāṇa dealing with the wedding of Pārvaṭī and Śiva bear close similarity to the Kuārasambhava of Kālidāsa. It is very elaborate in its treatment of the various holy places dedicated to Śiva. Kāśī Khaṇḍa, a famous portion of this Purāṇa, describes the sanctity of Kāśī or Varanasi and its surroundings. The Purāṇa contains very lengthy theses on Śaivite philosophy and Metaphysics. The famous Suta Samhitā forms an important part of this Purāṇa.

15–18. Matsya, Kūrma, Varāha and Vāmana Purāṇas :

These Purāṇas describe the exploits of Lord Viṣṇu during his respective incarnation as a Fish, a Tortoise, a Boar and a Dwarf. The contents suggested by the titles occupy only comparatively minor portion is devoted to the narration of numerous other legends, to the eulogy of many holy places of pilgrimage and to the glorification of several rituals and religious vows, as is the case with most of the Purāṇas in general.

Besides, these Mahā Purāṇas, there are an equal number of Upa-Purāṇas, the chief among them being, the Narasiṃha, the Devī Bhāgavata, the Sausa, the Viṣṇudharmottara, the Kālikā, Śiva and the Gaṇeśa Purāṇas.

Out of the eighteen Mahā Purāṇas, only seven contain accounts of genealogies and dynasties. The remaining Purāṇas, therefore, are not so important for the political history of India, but very important for the cultural (and spiritual) history of India.

However, it can be said that the Epics and the Purāṇas are the earliest of the poetic records in Sanskrit literature. To know and understand the Vedas one has to read these texts properly. Now a day, these Epics and Puranic literature are more popular in India and also in the World. Specially, Rāmāyaṇa is more popular in South-east Asian countries these days. In Thailand and Indonesia, the general public used to stage Rāmāyaṇa and even enjoy it very interestingly since last two hundred years. However, the Rāmāyaṇa is really a great Epic which has received more appreciation from the different groups of people through the globe. Besides, the whole Epic and Puranic literature too has a significant place in the major literary works of the World.

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