

## CHAPTER-II

### Purāṇa As A Literary Form

The word purāṇa is defined variously by various authors. The Vāyu Purāṇa derives the word from, 'Purā', and the root 'An' and gives the meaning of the word as, 'that which breathed in old times'.<sup>1</sup> The Padma and Brāhmāṇḍa Purāṇas also give similar meanings.

Even though we know next to nothing about the Purāṇas mentioned in the Atharva Veda, the Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa, and the ancient Upaniṣads, still this much is certain that the Purāṇa had attained a status of sacredness like the vedas and was closely associated with Itihāsa even in the Vedic times. It is doubtful that the word Purāṇa, was applied in the sense of a type of literature in the Vedic times. The word occurs in the Rg Veda in the sense of 'old'.<sup>2</sup> In the Atharva Veda the word means a body of stories or legends, that were narrated in the intervals of sacrifice.<sup>3</sup> Even in the Atharvaveda, there is no evidence to prove that there was any written work. The same meaning i.e. stories or legends continues in the Brāhmaṇas and in the Upaniṣads.<sup>4</sup>

1 Cf. Yaśmātpurā hyanitīdaṁ Purāṇam tena tatsmṛtam |  
Vāyu P.I.203, also Brāhmāṇḍa P.I.1.173; Padma P.V.2.53.

2 e.g. Ayam Panthā anuvittah Purāṇah Rg Veda IX.18.1

3 AV.XV. 6.10.11.

4 Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa XI. 5.6.8; XIII.4.3.12-13;  
Chāndogya UP.II. 1.7.1; III.4.1.2.; VIII.1.2.4 etc.

Side by side in the Brāhmanas and in the Upaniṣads another word of similar meaning viz., 'Itihāsa' was also used.

Though subtle distinction is made between, 'Itihāsa' and 'Purāṇa' by some scholars, it can be said that both the words meant, 'an ancient legendary history'. Sometimes the two words were<sup>3</sup> used together, this is the first stage in the evolution of the purāṇa literature.

The Taittirīya Āraṇyaka mentions, 'Purāṇāni', which means that in its time there must have been more than two purāṇas at least. There was in existence a Bhaviṣyat-Purāṇa and other purāṇas that contain sarga and pratisarga, as well as some smṛti material. This may be regarded as the second stage of the Purāṇa literature. Some purāṇas containing the smṛti material must have been completed a good deal before the Yājñavalkya smṛti. This is the third stage in the evolution. Most of the Mahāpurāṇas attained the present stage in the period from the 5th or 6th century A.D. to the 9th century A.D. This represents the fourth<sup>5</sup> stage in the evolution of the Purāṇa literature.

With a view to weaning the people away from the influence of the non-vedic religions like Buddhism and Jainism, the purāṇas were revived and a lot of new material was added to them, in the Brahmanical revival of the Gupta period.

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5 Cf. History of Dharmasāstra; V.ii, PP.853 - 855.

The Itihāsa, Purāṇa literature dealt with many mundane objectives. While the vedic literature was the creation of Ṛṣis,<sup>5</sup> the Purāṇic literature was the creation of Munis,<sup>6</sup> who were more worldly in the outlook.<sup>6</sup> While the Mantras seen by the sages, served as means for the attainment of salvation, the acts of the sages described in the purāṇas served as models for social conduct. The aim of the Munis in propagating the purāṇas was to provide a code of righteous conduct associated with Bhakti of some deity. They drew inspiration as well as material from the exegetic Vedic literature like the Brāhmaṇas and the Upaniṣads and added to it the myths and tales of their own.

This original unwritten, legendary tradition got a fixed name Purāṇa. It was a very comprehensive term, which spanned the compass of life.

Owing to its all-embracing character it came to denote everything that was preserved and honoured by the society. It was a huge mass of worldly knowledge and a treasure house of all the lore that were cultivated throughout the ages.

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6. Cf. Ṛṣati Prāpnoti Sarvān manyān jñānena Paśyati  
SaṁsāraPāram Vā | Rṣi igupadhāt Kit it; Unādisūtreṇa  
itakicca | Siddhāntakaumudī 1287 Also cf. Vāyu P.7.75;  
Matsya P.145.83. At one place 'Muni' is described as  
follows :- 'Sūnyāgāraṇiketah ~~and~~ syād yatra Sāyaṁgrho  
munih Saṁkhaṣmṛti 7.6.

This knowledge was claimed to be the Upebṛāhṇa or the elucidation of the Vedas. What was implied in the Vedas, was elucidated by the Purāṇas.<sup>7</sup> Manu propagated this Upebṛāhṇa theory which stresses the real essence of the Purāṇas.<sup>8</sup> The Vedic theology and the traditional mythology were knit together in the Purāṇas. This elevation of the traditional lore was an important phenomenon in the religious history of India. It connected the Vedas and the Epics. The Epics also continued the same tradition.

The Purāṇas also lay down religious codes, not mentioned in the smṛtis. Various Vēṭas and Pilgrim-Places that are just mentioned in some smṛtis are elaborately discussed in the Purāṇas. Many Śruti and Smṛti injunctions were elucidated and some more were added by the Purāṇas.<sup>9</sup> They were like the heart, which correlates the impression of the two eyes.<sup>10</sup>

7. Cf. Itihāsapurāṇābhyāṃ Vedaṃ  
SamuPebrmbhayat | Mbh. I. 267.68;  
Vāyu P. I. 20.1 etc. is an Opt-quoted line.
8. Vide Kumar Dr. Puṣhpendra (ed.), The Mahābhāṣyavetapurāṇa, Introduction P. 19.
9. Cf. Yann dṛṣṭam hi Vedesutatservamlakṣyate Smṛtau /  
Ubheyoryannadrṣṭam hi tatPurāṇaiḥ Pragīyate //  
Vedārthādhikam manye PurāṇārthamVarānana /  
Vedāḥ Iretisthitāḥ Samyak Purāṇa nātre Samśayaḥ //  
Bṛhannāredīya Pu. Uttarārṇha, 24.
10. Cf. Śrutismṛti Ubhe netro Purāṇasmṛdayam Smṛtam /  
Devī Bhāṣyavata XI. 1. 21.

By the time of the completion of the major purāṇas their status was further raised to that of Śruti and Smṛti. Since the Purāṇas contained almost all types of material dealt with by the Śruties, Smṛties, Brāhmaṇas, and Upaniṣads, they attained encyclopaedic character. In spite of differences caused by the sectarian development, they adhered to a common tradition. Their common features were known as lakṣaṇas.

### Pañcalakṣaṇa

Purāṇa is generally spoken of as 'Pañcalakṣaṇa' - (Possessing five characteristics), viz. Sarga, (creation), Pratisarga (creation after the previous destruction), Vaṃśa (dynasties either of the Sun, the Moon, Gods or Patriarchs), Manvantara (time-circles of different eras of Manus), Vaṃśānucarita (deeds and history of the descendants of the solar, lunar, and other dynasties or genealogies of the kings).<sup>11</sup> This Pañcalakṣaṇa theory was propagated by Amarasiṃha which relates to their external aspects.<sup>12</sup>

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11. Cf. Sargaśca Pratisargaśca Vaṃśo manvantarāṇica /  
Vaṃśānucaritaṃ caiva Purāṇaṃ Pañcalakṣaṇam //
- This verse with certain Variations, occurs in Viṣṇu P.III. 6.24; Mārkaṇḍeya P.XIII,4.13; Agni P.I.14; Bhaviṣya P.II.5; Garuḍa P.Ācārekāṇḍa II.28 etc.
12. Vide Kumer Dr. Puṣpendra (ed.), The Mahābhāgavata-purāṇa, Introduction P.19.

The Ten Characteristics of a Purāṇa

The Bhāgavata mentions ten characteristics of a Purāṇa. They are respectively as follows :-

- (1) Sarga - creation
- (2) Visarga - The creation of individual souls  
Vividhā sṛṣṭih.
- (3) Vṛtti - Sustenance of human life.
- (4) Rakṣā - The Protection given by the Lord to the  
People through His avatāres.
- (5) Antara - Manvantara
- (6) Vamśa
- (7) Vamśyānucarita
- (8) Saṁsthā - Corresponds to the 'Pratisarga' of  
the five Lakṣaṇas.
- (9) Hetu - The individual soul, who with his karma  
determines and influences ~~and influences~~ the  
cosmic creation or deluge.<sup>13</sup>
- (10) Apāśraya - This is the epithet of Brahman, the  
Highest Reality. He is beyond Māyā and is  
always a witness.<sup>14</sup>

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13. Cf. Heturjivośya SargādirevidyāKārmaKāraKaish /  
tasmācānuśāyinaṁ Prāhuravyākṛtaṁ utāpare // Bhag.P.XII,  
7.18.

14. Cf. Vyatirekēn vayo yasya jāgratsvapnaśuṣu Ptisu /  
Ayāmayeṣu tad brahma jīvevṛttisvapāśrayaḥ // Bhag.  
P.XII.7.19.

The same Purāṇa adds some more characteristics. In that list, Sthānam, (the entire Universe), Poṣaṇam (the grace of the Lord), Ūti (the urge for doing actions - Karmavāsanā), Īśānukathā (the stories about the descents of Bhagavān and his followers), Nirodha (pratisarga), Mukti (Realization of one's own self), are new ones.<sup>15</sup>

In spite of the mention of a number of lakṣaṇas all the topics of the Purāṇas were not covered up. Newer matter was introduced in the Purāṇas, which could not be classified under five or ten lakṣaṇas. Ācāra-dharmas, some principles of statecraft, glorification of certain Vratas and Tīrthas - all these are found in almost every Purāṇa. So the lakṣaṇas only give a <sup>cl</sup>ue to the contents of the Purāṇas and do not permeate the entire gamut.

The Purāṇas represent the literature of growth and hence it is very difficult to say anything with certainty about them. There is a Paucity (Scarcity) of the critical edition of the Purāṇas. The lines or verses quoted from these Purāṇas by the rivals may prove to be later additions from the critical point of view. Granted that it is difficult to accept a particular view, it will not be out of place to bring together the arguments, marshalled by both the groups and to see whether any compromising formula

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15. Cf. Atra sarge Visargaśca Sthānam Poṣaṇam Ūtayah /  
manvantaresānukathā nirodho muktirāśrayah //

can be found out.

The Upaniṣads have rightly declared the Purāṇas as the fifth Veda. The Purāṇas have contributed a great deal in bringing about religious harmony and understanding amongst the diverse sections of the Hindu society. They are primarily of a didactic and liturgical character and have, therefore, a greater religious than literary interest.<sup>16</sup>

They have exercised a powerful influence on the subsequent literary productions and have served as a source of inspiration to later poets, dramatists, historians searching a chronicle of prehistoric and historic ages, law-givers etc.<sup>17</sup>

As a matter of fact, the Purāṇas have rendered the greatest service in effecting the social and religious unification of diverse people of India. They have treated every religious faith of the soil with respect and accorded to it a position in the Paurnanic pantheism by explaining its deity and its principles through a reconciliation of the teachings of Sāṃkhya and Vedānta. It is the Purāṇas which have brought about unity in diversity, and religious toleration

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16. Vide Kumer Dr. Pushpendra (ed.), The Mahābhāgavatapurāṇa, Introduction, P.19.

17. Ibid. P.20.



to the followers of different faiths by making them realize that god is one, though called by different names. It is mainly through these works that the Vedic ideas and ideals of religion and society have survived up to the present day and got wide circulation among the people of India.<sup>18</sup>

The Purāṇas have laid great stress on the practice of Yoga, especially the Kuṇḍalinī Yoga. They propagate Karma theory and also believe in the transmigration of soul. For final salvation - a synthesis of Karma, Jñāna and Bhakti is prescribed as the only means.<sup>19</sup>

Though the Upapurāṇas are not less important as recorders of the social and religious history of India from the Gupta period downward, than the Mahāpurāṇas, these have been treated with indifference by scholars both modern and ancient and have been called as secondary ones i.e. Upa-purāṇas. This Upa-purāṇa literature, though said to be eighteen in number is very extensive and even includes works of later ages.<sup>20</sup>

Śaktism is a very important cult among the Hindus of the present day all over India. Feasts and festivities pertaining to these Śākta deities abound in different parts of the country. Occasionally these include the ritual of

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18. Ibid., P.21

19. Ibid., PP.22-23.

20. Ibid. P.20.

sensual and revolting practices, but by no means these practices are the characteristic or the most important feature of Śakti cult. In fact, it has lofty spiritual ideals, aiming at perfect realization of the Vedantic principle of the identity of the individual soul and the supreme Brahman, who is none but the Śakti, that pervades the whole universe. The very first principle is to identify oneself with the deity one worships. This has been described as the mental worship and meditation.<sup>21</sup>

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21.. Ibid.. P.23.