

Puranas: Spirituality for the Masses

Swami Samarpanananda

IN HIS LECTURE 'BHAKTI', delivered in Lahore, Swami Vivekananda offers an interesting opinion about the Puranas:

Whether you believe in the scientific accuracy of the Puranas or not, there is not one among you whose life has not been influenced by the story of Prahlada, or that of Dhruva, or of any one of these great Pauranika saints. We have not only to acknowledge the power of the Puranas in our own day, but we ought to be grateful to them as they gave us in the past a more comprehensive and a better popular religion than what the degraded later-day Buddhism was leading us to.¹

He further said in his lecture in Calcutta: 'Very little of our life today is bound and regulated by the orders of the Karma Kanda of the Vedas. In our ordinary lives we are mostly Pauranikas or Tantrikas, and, even where some Vedic texts are used by the Brahmins of India, the adjustment of the texts is mostly not according to the Vedas, but according to the Tantras or the Puranas' (3,324).

Relevant Literature

The Puranas, of ancient times, are a class of sacred works that today form the basis of Hinduism. They are eighteen in number and are very popular among all classes of peoples. Whenever a Hindu speaks of religion and God, she or he is quoting the Puranas. This literature has been a source of great inspiration for centuries. Most of these Puranas are in the form of discourse by a sage or a dialogue between sages, and in some cases it is God or a god who teaches. They narrate in human terms the divinity and the doings

of gods, sages, and heroes. Of course, most of the descriptions of events are grossly exaggerated, but with the element of divinity or yogic power such stories do not sound incongruous, they rather appeal to the listener or reader. In addition the Puranas also discuss legends, traditions, philosophy, religious and social issues, different duties of people, customs and food, ceremonies and purificatory rites, sins and penances, pilgrimage, descriptions of heavens and hells, karma and rebirth, images and idols, and worship. Each Purana is complete in itself, and a person following any one of them would have all his or her religious and spiritual needs fulfilled. The stories of Sri Krishna in the Bhagavata, of Vishnu in the *Vishnu Purana*, and of Shiva in the *Shiva Purana* have influenced people for thousands of years.

Before they were standardized, the Puranas had a long oral tradition. They now contain more than five lakh—half a million—verses! The chief objective of this literature was to educate people about the greatness of religion and the pitfalls of worldly life as well as to teach sublime spiritual truths in simple form. That is why they exert a great authority in what they teach. The sages who first wrote them found suitable historical or semi-historical persons and superimposed upon them all the best, or worst, qualities, laying down rules of dharma for everyone. Though the Puranas have history at their core, they are not meant to be historical or geographical literature. None of the sages saw the Puranas as inferior, and Shukadeva, one of the greatest sages, was not only a knower of Pauranic lore but also played an important role in teaching the Bhagavata.

Characteristics

The tendency to create, understand, and live by mythology is prevalent all over the world, for it is part of the human mind. If we do not create a spiritual mythology, we create cartoons, movies, fiction, and other fantasy stories. At the dawn of civilization, before the system of writing and recording was developed, humans who watched the world with curiosity and tried to understand it recorded what they saw and thought in an oral tradition. Added to this were the narratives of divine beings and heroes, traditions, and customs arranged in wonderful stories. As these stories grew, there arose a class of people whose duty was to memorize and relate them to the community. All these stories were linked to the spiritual or religious life of the community and were endorsed either by rulers or by priests. Once this link to the spiritual or religious aspect of society is broken, these narratives lose their qualities and become mere folk or fairy tales.

In Hinduism the principles and philosophy of religion were zealously preserved in the Vedas, which were the highest class of sacred literature. They could not be distorted with mythology, though they were the source of most mythological stories. The principles and the philosophy of many other religions are so interwoven with mythology that it is hard to distinguish them. In many cases mythology stood supreme and swallowed the philosophy. With the passage of time people forget the spiritual principles and fight over the mythological descriptions; this process makes these religions simply Puranic.

The Puranas are distinct from the Itihasa, history—like the Ramayana and Mahabharata—through two chief characteristics: first, the Puranas focus on the mythological aspect, whereas the Itihasa focuses on the historical aspect; secondly, the Puranas describe the *pancha lakshana*, five features: *sarga*, creation

of the universe by God; *pratisarga*, destruction and re-creation; *vamsa*, genealogy of gods, sages, and dynasties; *manvantara*, the reigns of the fourteen Manus; and *vamsanucharitam*, history of the solar and lunar dynasties. However, most of these Puranas either omit some of these topics or deal with them superficially and instead incorporate extensive glorification of various deities. According to some ancient scholars, these *lakshanas* are for the Upapuranas, secondary Puranas. The Bhagavata gives ten conditions for a work to be Purana, in which geography and genealogy have not been mentioned as essential conditions.² Although the Puranas are ranked below the Vedas, they do command respect, for it is said in the Mahabharata's 'Adi Parva': 'By the aid of history [*Itihasa*] and the Puranas, the Vedas may be expounded; but the Veda is afraid of one of little information lest he should hurt it.'³

The Puranas are said to belong to the class of literature that are called Suhrit-samhitas, friendly treatises, as compared to the Vedas, which are Prabhu-samhitas, commanding treatises with supreme authority. Many Hindus, however, firmly believe that a recital of the Puranas is the easiest way to attain peace, perfection, devotion, and liberation. The Puranas were mostly narrated by sutas, who were children of mixed marriages between brahmanas and kshatriyas.

Origin

According to tradition, Veda Vyasa is accepted as the compiler of all the eighteen Puranas. It is believed that this great sage was so upset after the war recorded in the Mahabharata that he focused all his creative energies in compiling these devotional works for the common masses. Modern scholars, however, believe that the bulk of the eighteen Puranas was more or less established during the reign of the Guptas (320–550 CE),



Vishnu revealing his divinity to Vasudeva and Devaki (Bhagavata Purana), c.1725

with minor additions to the texts continuing up to later medieval times. Except the *Bhavishya Purana*, which continued to grow in size—it even speaks of British rule in India—most of the Puranas are believed to have been given a final form around 1000 CE. Acharya Shankara treats the Puranas as spiritually authentic and at times quotes their verses in his commentaries.

Many scholars believe that Veda Vyasa had originally composed only one Purana, which he imparted to his disciple Suta Lomaharshana. Later this work got divided and subdivided into eighteen. This also agrees with the fact that originally there was only one Veda that later was divided into four by Veda Vyasa. What Veda Vyasa did with the Vedas, his disciples might have also done with the Puranas.

The anecdote portion of the Vedas, known as *narasamsi*, contains stories. These stories were later taken up by various sages and developed into Puranas. Besides this, some Puranic stories were also current even during the later Vedic period, as is evinced by its mention in the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* of the Yajur Veda and also in the Atharva Veda. Both these works proclaim the sacred origin of the Purana and give it a status almost equal to the Vedas. This

made the Puranas popular as the fifth Veda.

The texts and the form of the Puranas were not fixed as in the Shrutis, Vedas. Being a Smriti class of literature, the sage-poets could modify them. Society was not immune from internal disturbances or external attacks and in order to counter such challenges rites, customs, and beliefs had to be modified constantly. This resulted in the fluid nature of this literature, although the additions and modi-

fications were not always new, for quite often verses and even chapters were incorporated from other Puranas, Smritis, or other similar works. In the same manner people of different sects took liberty in emphasizing their respective gods in the Puranas. The contradictions that came up due to this fluidity naturally made them less authentic, but as far as the essence is concerned, all Puranas contain the same truths expressed in the Vedas. That is why Acharya Shankara felt no hesitation to begin his wonderful commentary on the Bhagavadgita with a verse from the Puranas.

Growth and Popularity

The Sanskrit of the Vedas is archaic and difficult to master; the subtle metaphysics of the Upanishads is difficult for a common person to understand; the Puranas, hence, are of special value as they present Vedic truths in a simple manner. This literature gives a person easy access to the mysteries of life and the way to bliss, which otherwise would remain elusive. Moreover, the Vedas belonged exclusively to the brahmanas because of the discipline involved, while the Puranas, available to all, were far more interesting and had a dynamic nature. The aim of this literature is

to impress on the minds of the masses the teachings of the Vedas as well as to generate in them an undying devotion for God through concrete examples, stories and legends, lives of great sages, allegories, and chronicles of great events. In the Puranas emphasis is laid on the concrete aspects of religious and social life. This is how these books made religion possible for all.

In the history of world religions every religion faces conflicts between its prophets, priests, and people. Prophets show the path to freedom, whereas priests are the keepers of the traditions that the prophets had created; and people are able to follow the prophets through the rules laid down by the priests. The Upanishadic period is marked by the rise in supremacy of the kshatriyas, warriors, over the brahmanas, priests, whereas the popularity of the Puranas is due to the rise of the masses against the brahmanas and the kshatriyas. Also, whenever a saint arose from the masses, people got the strength to throw away the religious yoke imposed by the priests. A saint invariably owed allegiance to some Purana; in consequence, a particular Purana became popular among the saint's followers, and with time many Puranas had a large following. That is how the Puranas become the connecting element of society.

The Puranas are easy to be read aloud, sung, and enacted in dramas during festivals. All these resulted in their overwhelming popularity. Today even an illiterate Hindu or Hindus living abroad are not ignorant of the principles and philosophy of Hinduism because of the Puranic stories that they had heard at some point in their lives. The Puranas not only educated the masses and infused them with noble ideals, they also tactfully solved social and economic problems that arose due to social upheavals and foreign invasions. Similarly, a look at the *vratas*, observance of vows and penances, shows the insight of the sages

concerning human nature, particularly those of women, who are the true keepers of religion.

Puranas and Upapuranas

According to the *Matsya Purana*, the entire body of the Puranas belong to three categories: sattvic, rajasic, and tamasic. They are also classified as belonging to Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva.

The Brahma Puranas are: (i) The *Bhavishya Purana*: It has 14,000 verses in the form of the sun god teaching Manu, the first born. It mostly contains statements about future events and persons and also describes holy places and the rights of pilgrims. (ii) The *Brahma Purana*: In 25,000 verses Brahma teaches Daksha Prajapati about the beginning of the universe. It is called the *adi*, first, Purana. (iii) The *Brahmanda Purana*: It has 12,000 verses and deals with the Cosmic Egg from which arose creation. It has the famous *Lalita Sahasranama* and the *Adhyatma Ramayana* and is considered to be the last of the Puranas. Its contents are similar to those of the *Vayu Purana*. (iv) The *Brahmavaivarta Purana*: Having 18,000 verses it describes creation, the purpose of life, and the deeds of gods like Ganesha, Krishna, and so on. It also describes the universe as *vivarta*, not an actual transformation but an appearance, of Brahman. It is one of the latest works and is in the form of Narada teaching Savarnika. (v) The *Markandeya Purana*: This early work has 9,000 verses and contains the dialogue between sages Jaimini and Markandeya. It is also famous for containing the *Chandi*. (vi) The *Vamana Purana*: Its 10,000 verses speak of the *vamana*, dwarf, avatara of Vishnu. This work originally belonged to the ancient school of philosophy called Pancharatra and is similar to the *Varaha Purana*. The episode of Shiva's marriage with Parvati is also described in it.

The Vishnu Puranas are: (i) The *Bhagavata Purana*: It is a superb literary creation with

excellent language, style, and metre in 18,000 verses that contain the records of Vishnu's devotees. In the tenth section appears the story of Krishna. In its original form the work must have been pre-Buddhistic. (ii) The *Garuda Purana*: In it Vishnu instructs Garuda, his devotee and vehicle, in 19,000 verses—though there is a smaller version of 8,000 verses. This work describes what happens after a person dies and various kinds of punishments. It is encyclopaedic and discusses astronomy, medicine, grammar, and many other things. (iii) The *Naradiya Purana*: It contains 25,000 verses and has a description on dharma and major pilgrimages. This is also a typical Vaishnava work and is a discourse by Narada to Sanatkumara. (iv) The *Padma Purana*: It contains 55,000 verses and deals with the essence of religion and the cosmos. It comes in two recensions: North and South. A careful examination shows that it has borrowed extensively from the *Matsya Purana* and the *Vishnu Purana*. (v) The *Vishnu Purana*: It is considered the oldest work and a *puranaratna*, the gem among the Puranas. Having a unified structure of 23,000 verses it was narrated by sage Parashara to Maitreya and is dedicated to Vishnu. (vi) The *Varaha Purana*: With 14,000 verses it is in the form of narration by the *varaha*, boar, avatara. It discusses holy places and different mantras.

The Shiva Puranas are: (i) The *Kurma Purana*: It contains 8,000 verses and has information on the *kurma*, tortoise, avatara of Vishnu. Some scholars believe that this book originally belonged to the Pancharatra school but was appropriated by the Pashupatas, Shiva's devotees. It is in the form of discourse by Kurma to Indradyumna in Patala. (ii) The *Linga Purana*: In 12,000 verses it describes the importance of the holy symbol of Shiva and also the origin of the universe. In it Shiva teaches about his twenty-eight different forms. (iii) The *Agni Purana*:

Here the fire god teaches Vashishtha in 12,000 verses about the various incarnations of Vishnu as well as the Shiva-linga, Durga, art, science, astronomy, and so on. It has taken its material from a large number of books including the Ramayana, the Mahabharata, the *Yajnavalkya Smriti*, and the *Harivamsha Purana*. (iv) The *Matsya Purana*: It contains 13,000 verses describing the first avatara of Vishnu, who taught Manu. It deals with pilgrimages, penances, gifts, politics, omens, portents, images, and so on. Some of its verses are taken straight from the *Vayu Purana*. (v) The *Skanda Purana*: It is the largest Purana, containing 84,000 verses, and is dedicated to Skanda or Kartikeya, offspring of Shiva and Parvati. It is a relatively late work and is narrated by Tarakasura to Skanda. (vi) The *Vayu Purana*: It contains 14,000 verses dedicated to the wind god. An ancient work that went through a lot of modifications and deals with the creation and re-creation of the universe, the measurement of time, the origin of gods, sages, demons, and apsaras. It also describes the divisions of earth, heaven, and hell.

In addition we have the *Shiva Mahapurana*, with 24,000 verses, and the *Harivamsha Purana*, with 14,000 verses, dedicated to Shiva and Krishna respectively. The *Bhagavata Purana* accepts the *Shiva Mahapurana* in the original list, but more ancient traditions do not accept them as correct.

There are an equal number of Upapuranas, and the *Matsya Purana* describes them as subdivisions of the original Puranas. Some of these works can be as old as the principal ones. The list of them varies widely, though the essential are: *Sanatkumara*, *Narasimha*, *Brihannaradiya*, *Shivarahasya*, *Durvasa*, *Kapila*, *Vamana*, *Bhargava*, *Varuna*, *Kalika*, *Samba*, *Nandi*, *Surya*, *Parashara*, *Vashishtha*, *Devi Bhagavata*, *Ganesha*, and *Hamsa*. There are also other religious books recently discovered that claim to be Puranic

literature, the latest being the *Svayambhu Purana*.

Rise of a New Religion

The important contribution of the Puranas is the introduction of the concept of avatara. The Vedas preach both an impersonal and a personal God, but the Puranas put forward a new ideal: God coming down. God incarnates again and again in one form or the other for the protection of religion and devotees. The concepts of Ishvara and *prakriti-laya* Purushas—perfected souls merged in nature to come out in a new cycle of creation as lords of that cycle—were rec- oiled in the Puranas.

The principal gods of the Vedic pantheon, like Indra and Varuna, were slowly superseded by new popular gods. It was during this time that there was a great assimilation of peoples into the main body of Aryan society, and what better way to assimilate them than by accepting their gods. In the early Vedic period Vishnu was one of the twelve Adityas, but in the later Vedic period he was of secondary importance. With the rise of the Puranic period Vishnu became much stronger and popular than he was originally. Later on Rama and Krishna were also portrayed as his incarnations. Similarly, Rudra was a Vedic god and in this period he was given the personality that combined the Pashupati of the Indus valley civilization and the Shiva of South India. The stories that we usually hear about Shiva are a mixture of all these personalities. The rise of the *trimurti*, trinity, Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva was an important development of

this phase. The concept of *trimurti* as Agni, Vayu, and Surya was present in Vedic times as well, but the new trinity replaced the older one. It resulted in the emergence of the powerful movements of Vaishnavism and Shaivism. Synthesis rather than dogmatism was the watchword of the Puranas. By accepting Vishnu as a presiding deity the pastoral and agricultural people were brought to the main-stream; the same occurred with the tribes living in the forests and hills, which considered Shiva as their presiding deity.

The Puranic period is especially famous for the worship of Shakti. Each god had his female counterpart. Female divinities like Shri, Sarasvati, Lakshmi, Durga, Parvati were Vedic goddesses, but they rose to prominence and glory in this period. This male-female conception of the chief divinities was also in reply to the popular Sankhya philosophical principles of Purusha and Prakriti, along with the rise of women's prominent role. In the Puranas the gods and goddesses responded to their devotees, were comforting, compassionate, and solicitous, which made people easily relate to them.

Durga slaying the demon Raktabija and Kali lapping up the demon's blood (Markandeya Purana), c.1800-25



The doctrine of bhakti, which had its origins in the Vedas, now became fully developed and powerful. Devotion to any of the popular gods replaced the complicated and complex Vedic rituals. Bhakti has been discussed in all its richness in the Puranas. The lives of sages and saints were illustrated with devotion to God and this acted as a great impeller for the masses. Hence, the study of the Puranas and listening to its sacred recitals that narrated God's different lilas became an important part of sadhana for devotees.

In the *Shiva Mahapurana* Shiva is highly praised, while an inferior position is given to other gods. On the other hand, in the *Vishnu Purana* Vishnu is highly praised, while an inferior position is given to other gods. However, this was only meant to increase the faith of the devotees in their particular Ishta Devata, Chosen Deity. But the principle that these gods are in essence one and the same keeps running through the literature.

The rise of bhakti also brought out the popularity of image worship. Slowly the Vedic sacrificial altars were replaced by images. This was also the time when Buddhism, along with their places and modes of worship, was assimilated into the Hindu fold. Temples and gorgeous rituals arose, but now with Vedic mantras and traditions. The construction of images and temples and the connected rituals were discussed elaborately in some of the Puranas.

In this period a greater emphasis was laid on ethical teachings rather than metaphysical speculations. The concepts of *ritam*, divine law, karma, rebirth, heaven, and hell became crystallized. The Puranas describe many heavens and hells, where persons either enjoyed or suffered according to their karma—once their karma is exhausted, they are reborn. Therefore, the Puranas state that these heavens and hells are not permanent and that this world is the place for

karma. During the Puranic period a life of activity was specifically recommended as against useless renunciation; this gave a great impetus to the concept of karma yoga. *Loka samgraha*, doing good to the world, was also emphasized as a spiritual discipline.

The Puranas made a successful attempt at reconciling virtues and actions that were practised by brahmanas, kshatriyas, vaishyas, and shudras. By bringing them together and by giving them a universal status through the concept of *svadharma*, one's own dharma, the Puranas created a powerful and silent social revolution that made society cohesive and progressive.

Conclusion

Everything that is conducive to the attainment of spirituality in the world must be brought to the aid of humanity, and the Puranas fulfil this condition. Swami Vivekananda says:

So long as there shall be such a thing as personal and material love, one cannot go behind the teachings of the Puranas. So long as there shall be the human weakness of leaning upon somebody for support, these Puranas, in some form or other, must always exist. ... This is a necessity of the nature of man; for them only are there no Puranas who have gone beyond all human weakness and have become what is really wanted of a Paramahansa, brave and bold souls, who have gone beyond the bondages of Maya.¹⁴



References

1. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, 9 vols (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1-8, 1989; 9, 1997), 3:386-7.
2. *Bhagavata*, 2.10.1.
3. *Mahabharata*, trans. Kisari Mohan Ganguli, 4 vols (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1997), 1.15.
4. *Complete Works*, 3:387.