ANTIQUARIAN ORIGINS, CLASSIFICATION, FORM AND CHRONOLOGY OF THE *PURANAS*

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Introduction

The *Puranas* are considered one of the most ancient treatises on Hinduism. By virtue of dealing comprehensively with diverse issues such as culture, geography, history, politics, society at large, etc., the *Puranas* have come to occupy a unique position in the cultural life of India. Given the currency of foundational myths, it would be easy to treat them as a homogenous text but this is not advisable as traces of change, modification and continuity are evident witnesses to their heterogeneity. Even though composed in the Sanskrit verse, attributes such as assimilation, integration and variety in the text, it would seem, reflect conscious attempts to incorporate changes in the socio-religious field owing to the spread of Brahmanism into non-Brahmanised zones.

We are referring to the period c. 300 BCE-1000 CE, during which the traditional socio-religious schema underwent myriad changes. Philosophical and religious debates abounded in the backdrop of new socio-ideological milieus and the formation of local states. The spread of Buddhism and Jainism too played an important role in the composition of the *Puranas*. Their religious activities and efforts for social transformation proved to be a challenge, giving rise to modification(s) in the Brahmanical traditions. The *Puranas* were thus composed by the Brahmanical class to register and reach out to, and include, the hitherto marginalized sections in the societal hierarchy, namely the tribals, lower castes and classes, and women. It is worth noting that these had been kept away from Vedic knowledge, traditions and practices until then. For the first time, the Brahmanical tradition was set aside and *varna* and gender biases

were somewhat diluted during the observance of rituals so that they could be acceptable to different sections of the society.

The dissemination of the *Puranas* among a vast populace was successfully achieved through a dialogic form using the technique of *katha,* i.e., narrative storytelling. The writing style of the *Puranas* bears testimony to the fact that their target audience was large. This technique allowed for not only storytelling but also a question-answer format for a better understanding of text in terms of clarification, explanation and elaboration of complex socio-religious concepts. It can be said that, in benefitting the common persons in this manner, the *Puranas* emerged during a crucial time to negotiate the processes of social change.

This article attempts to add to Puranic Studies by arguing for the *Purana's* complex origin, classification, form and content (including different vernacular versions), chronology, and evolution, along with an analytical study of the *Vishnu Purana* and the *Agni Purana* in light of the perspective outlined earlier. These two *Puranas* are chosen for study because they both belong to Northern India, where these developments were centered. While the *Vishnu Purana* dates to c. 700 BCE to 500 CE, the *Agni Purana* belongs to c. 900 CE.

Origins

Tracing the *Puranas* to their origins is a daunting task. However, to give an idea of their antiquity, it is worth mentioning here that the word 'Purana' was first referred to in the *Atharvaveda.* The latter volume mentions that a sacrificial ritual was the font of verses, songs, and the *Puranas.*[1] The word was used in connection with *itihasa,* or history, and *akhyanas,* or narratives. The *Itihasa-Purana* was included in the *Ashvalayana Grihyasutra*[2] for the study of sacred lore, along with the four Vedas, the Brahmanas, etc. The *itihasa* and *Purana* texts were often recited during later Vedic rituals, as in during the *pariplava,* i.e., recitations related to the *Ashvamedha,* or the horse-sacrifice. Though differing in details, these traditions collectively recognized not only the sacred beginnings of the *Puranas* but also conferred upon them a status almost at par with the Vedas. Recent studies have referred to the *Puranas* as the fifth Veda.[3]

With time, the elements relating to Vedic rituals (in the *Puranas*) began to diminish and were replaced by the more popular sectarian aspects. By sectarian I refer to aspects from local traditions, devoted to specific and different gods and goddesses, away from hold-all concepts and categories. This called for a re-consolidation of the

Brahmanical rites, customs, and religious practices such as *puja*, or ritual worship of the gods; *vrata*, or vow; *homa*, or burnt offerings; *utsarga*, or dedication; *tirtha* or pilgrimage; *sandhya*, or daily rites; *bhakti* or devotion; and *pratishtha*, or consecration of images.[4]

The root of the *Puranic* tradition, which was handed down over the ages, can be traced to the *akhyanas, upakhyanas*, or short narratives; *gathas*, or songs; and *kalpoktis*, or sayings. According to the *Vayu, Vishnu* and *Brahmanda Puranas*, these were used by the sage Vyasa for the compilation of the original *Purana Samhita*.[5] According to Ludo Rocher, however, an original body of the *Puranas* in the form of a *Purana Samhita* did not exist. He maintains that *Puranas*, as we know them now, are a formal effort to collect and compile the *akhyana*s and *gatha*s into larger volumes with an almost common format.[6]

Be that as it may, scholars more or less agree upon the fundamental genesis of the *Puranas*. Despite their differences in terms of the methodologies they use, they acknowledge the existence of a *Puranic* tradition as early as the period of the *Atharvaveda*,[7] *Satapatha Brahmana*,[8] *Srautasutras*,[9] *Dharmasutras*[10] and the *Smriti*[11] texts. One can neither overlook nor deny the fact that the myths and legends of the *Puranas*, which formed some of their non-sectarian content, came into existence much before the beginning of the Christian era. R. C. Hazra maintains that, by the 4th century CE, the *Puranas* had become important codes of Hindu rites and customs by including chapters on *varnashramadharma*, or duties of the four *varnas, achara*, or behaviour, *shraddha, prayaschita, dana, puja, vrata, tirtha*, etc.[12] The *Smriti*-related topics were assimilated into the same much later, somewhere between 200–600 CE.

From the above perspective(s), it would seem that the *Puranas*, as a literary form, might have existed before the early centuries of the Christian era. Their compilation as we know them now, however, was initiated around the 4th century CE.[13] Scholars like P. V. Kane and R. C. Hazra agree that different *Puranas* belong to different periods and mirror the socio-religious scenario and changes in their respective contemporary societies.

Classification

Puranic literature is heterogeneous, with its corpus consisting of several categories of texts that differ in content and style. It gives a greater insight into all facets of Hindu rites and customs related to the people's day-to-day living, their ethics, beliefs and conduct. Given the fact that it was meant for a larger audience, it becomes

imperative to understand on what basis the *Puranas*, which form the above-mentioned corpus, are classified.

At a cursory glance, it would seem that there are two categories of the *Puranas*, namely *Mahapuranas* and *Upapuranas*. The prefix *maha*, or 'great', was first used in the *Bhagavata Purana*.[14] The eighteen *Puranas* classified as *Mahapuranas* are the *Vayu, Brahmanda, Vishnu, Markandeya, Matsya, Bhagavata, Kurma, Vamana, Varaha, Skanda, Linga, Agni, Garuda, Brahma, Padma, Brahmavaivarta, Naradiya* and *Bhavishya Purana*. They are deemed to collectively contain four lakh *shlokas* or verses.

The *Mahapuranas* are further divided based on the three *gunas*, or principles, namely *sattva*, or light; *rajas,* or active; and *tamas*, or dark. According to this premise, they would thus be classified as follows.

- The *Sattvika Puranas* are said to lead one to salvation. The *Vishnu, Naradiya, Bhagavata, Garuda, Padma* and *Varaha Puranas* fall into this category.
- The *Rajasa Puranas* are devoted to Brahma and pave one's way to *svarga*, or heaven. The *Brahmanda, Brahmavaivarta, Markandeya, Bhavishya, Vamana* and *Brahma Puranas* find their place in this section.
- The *Tamasa Puranas* are said to lead one to *naraka*, or hell. They are the *Matsya, Kurma, Linga, Shiva, Skanda* and *Agni Puranas*.

P. V. Kane, on the other hand, chooses to classify the *Mahapuranas* into four distinct categories.[15] These are:

i. Encyclopedic *Puranas*, consisting of the *Agni, Garuda and Naradiya Purana*.
ii. *Puranas* dealing mainly with *tirtha*s. These are *Padma, Skanda* and *Bhavishya Purana*.
iii. Sectarian *Puranas* such as *Linga, Vamana* and *Markandeya*.
iv. Historical *Puranas* such as *Vayu* and *Brahmanda*.

As for the *Upapuranas*, modern scholars do not find clear-cut distinctions between them and the *Mahapuranas*.[16] Hazra deemed the former to be later compositions, more sectarian in nature, as in to do with sects after different deities, and of local interest. He, therefore, did not give them much importance initially and even excluded them from his book, *Studies in Puranic Records on Hindu Rites and Customs*; however, he did write several articles on them later and published two volumes as well.

There exists another class of *Puranas* apart from the *Mahapuranas*

and the *Upapuranas.* This is known as the so-called *Caste Puranas* as they focus more on regional base of different castes. The *Shrimalapurana* and the *Mallapurana,* which are well documented in Gujarat,[17] bear testimony to this thought as they focus on *Shrimala Brahmanas* and *Malla Brahmanas,* respectively.[18]

Puranic literature also includes a large number of *mahatmyas* besides the *Mahapuranas, Upapuranas* and *Caste Puranas.* The term *mahatmyas* refers to texts composed with the sole purpose of proclaiming the "greatness of a variety of things, a place, a deity, an auspicious time, a ritual activity such as pilgrimage (*tirthayatra*) ordination (*dana*)".[19]

Form and Content

The *Puranas* follow a dialogical structure, i.e., an exchange of words between the narrator, the audience as well as *Puranic* characters. This means that the narrator and the audience engage in continual interaction during the narration. The authors chose the style of storytelling to render the *Puranas* more popular and to reach out to broader, even uninstructed, segments of the society. For this, the services of *sutas,* or bards, were employed. The early contents of the *Puranas* were sung/recited by the *sutas* or bards prior to being absorbed by the Brahmanic Sanskrit literary traditions. The changes in narration were a continuous process and over a period of time, the style of writing became prophetic. They narrated these texts in a comprehensible manner so that people could make sense of the spoken words and imbibe the teachings into their lives. The *suta* Lomaharshana,[20] the narrator of most of the *Puranas,* regaled his audience through his inimitable and engaging narration style.

It has already been established that the *Puranas* are a compilation of heterogeneous texts composed over centuries on myriad topics related to society, religion, mythology and a lot more. Scholars like S. Bhattacharji suggest that the *Puranic* text is fundamentally sectarian and emphasizes the cult and spirit of Shiva, Brahma and Vishnu.[21] L. Rocher, on the contrary, maintains that the said sectarian matter, which is rather extravagant and farfetched per se, is a more recent addition to the *Puranas.*[22]

As per the *Amarakosha,* the famous Sanskrit lexicon, a *Purana* ought to contain the five traits called *panchalakshana,*[23] i.e., *sarga,* or creation; *pratisarga,* or secondary creation; *vamsha,* or genealogy of gods and sages; *manvantara,* or cosmic cycles; and *vamshanucharita,* or accounts of royal dynasties. This would mean that the *Puranas* must

contain *panchalakshana* traits over and above whatever subject(s) they deal with. However, scholars have time and again asserted that they do not contain much of such content.[24] As a matter of fact, their content exceeds far beyond, and some of them (the *Puranas*) hardly dwell on the *panchalakshana* elements. Be that as it may, let us now take a look at the content of the eighteen *Mahapuranas*.

The *Brahma Purana* contains all that Brahma told Marichi regarding the creation of lunar and solar dynasties as also the mode of worship of Krishna, in the form of Jagannatha. Chapters from the *Vishnu, Markandeya* and *Vayu Puranas,* and the *Mahabharata,* have also been included in this *Purana.* The *Padma Purana* is divided into six *khandas,* or parts – *Srishti khanda* on the creation of earth; *Bhumi khanda* on the description of the earth; *Svarga khanda* on the heaven; *Patala khanda* on the subterranean areas of the earth; *Uttara khanda* on the exaltation of *Vaishnava* legends; and *Kriyayogasara khanda* on devotion through holy acts.

The *Vishnu Purana* deals with the ten incarnations of *Mahavishnu* and closely adheres to the *panchalakshana* traits. It is also known as *Puranaratna,* or 'gem among the *Puranas',* and is deemed to be the most ancient of all the *Puranas.* We shall discuss this *Purana* in detail later in this article. The *Vayu Purana,* said to have been narrated by Vayu, deals with the creation and re-creation of the universe, the genesis of *Agni, Varuna* and other gods, the lineage of ancient kings, duties of the people of different *varnas,* funeral ceremonies, etc. The *Bhagavata Purana* is considered a priceless documentation of the Bhagavata doctrines vis-à-vis the worship and adulation of Vasudeva-Krishna, as also *dharma,* or duty. The *Gayatri mantra,* known to be the most powerful Vedic *mantra,* forms an integral part of this *Purana.*

The *Naradiya Purana* is replete with lively descriptions of worship of different deities such as Ganesha, Maheshvara, Devi and Mahalakshmi. It is divided into two parts viz. the *purvabhaga,* which has four *padas* where Narada is addressed by four different speakers; and the *uttarabhaga,* which contains eighty-two chapters. The *Markandeya Purana* adheres to the *panchalakshana* traits and contains vivid descriptions of creation, the *Manus,* rebirth, hells, and extols the greatness of Surya. It is thought to have been composed during the early period of the Christian era.

The *Agni Purana* consists of summaries of the epics – the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* – and the *Amarakosha.* It is an encyclopedic *Purana* and deals with different subjects such as *jyotishashastra,* or astronomy, and *shilpakala,* or architecture. More on this later. The *Bhavishya Purana* consists of details regarding holy places, pilgrimage

rites, future occurrences and events, and numerous chapters on solar myths. Believed to be narrated by Manu to *Surya*, the sun god, this *Purana* eulogizes Surya, Agni and the Nagas, or the serpent gods. The *Brahmavaivarta Purana* deals with *prapanchasrishti*, i.e., the creation of the universe, and is divided into four *khandas*. They are *Brahma khanda*, *Prakriti khanda*, *Ganesha khanda* and *Krishnajanma khanda*. The *Linga Purana* is also divided into two parts – *purvabhaga* and *uttarabhaga*. It refers to twenty-eight forms of Shiva and glorifies the worship of his phallic symbol over that of his image. Its most evident feature is the use of *Pashupata Yoga* to attain the world of Shiva.

The *Varaha Purana* is about the *Varaha*, or the boar, an incarnation of *Vishnu*. It is divided into 292 *adhyayas*, or chapters, and seems quite like a manual about different forms of prayers offered to *Vishnu*, and devotional rules for the said prayers. The *Skanda Purana* contains large sections that are still unpublished. The text has also undergone many modifications. One of its many themes recounts the killing of Tarakasura by *Skanda*, the son of Shiva. The *Vamana Purana* contains Vishnu's incarnation as a dwarf apart from the descriptions of his other incarnations. It also describes the earth, the duties of the four orders, and the battle between the demon Mahisha and the Goddess. Other Shaiva legends along with the wedding of Shiva and Parvati are also vividly elaborated upon.

The *Kurma Purana* contains references to Vishnu's incarnation as a tortoise. It describes not only the country of *Bharata* – also called *Jambudvipa* – which is believed to be located in the middle of the seven islands and seven oceans of the *Puranic* cosmos but also the said islands and oceans. The *Matsya Purana* adheres to the *panchalakshana* traits and deals with the geography of the earth, consecration of images and idols, and many other topics.[25] It is a humungous opera that deals with *vratas*; the many forms of worship; and various holy places, rivers, mountains, etc. Apart from eulogizing Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva and Surya, this *Purana* talks about both the disintegration and the preservation of the world through *dharma*; *artha*, or physical welfare; and *kama*, or pleasure.[26]

The *Garuda Purana* contains Vishnu's instructions for Garuda and deals with subjects like astronomy, medicine and grammar, among others. This, too, is an encyclopedic *Purana*, quite like the *Agni Purana*. The *Brahmanda Purana* contains descriptions of the origin of the universe as recounted by Brahma. The *Purana* owes its name to *Brahmanda*, or the cosmic egg, out of which the *prapancha*, or the universe, was formed.

A reference to the *Puranic* texts in vernacular languages will not be out of place here. Often thought of as translations of *Puranas,* they do not adhere too closely to the Sanskrit *Puranas.* This is so because the source material for the same were the popular tales and fables of the region. Let us consider the following instances to elaborate upon this argument.

The *Bengali Puranas*[27] were based on popular folk literature which was sung by the *Mangal Gayakas,* or professional singers. They came to be known as *Panchali* or *Mangala* literature. The *Sthala Puranas,*[28] instead, are brilliant exemplars of Tamil literature. They have nothing to do with typical *Puranic* texts. One of the notable ones is the *Periya Puranam,* which is considered to be an essential text for the study of *Shaivism* in particular, and the culture of southern part of the Indian sub-continent in general. The *Kannada Puranas* comprise stories of godly and saintly miracles. The *Vishvakarma Purana* and the *Devanga Purana* focus on caste hierarchy in artisanal communities.

Chronology and Development

The assignation of dates to individual *Purana*s is indeed an insurmountable task faced by historians and researchers. The existing editions of individual *Purana*s show a wide range of disparities ranging from minor differences to the inclusion/exclusion of entire chapters. Considering that they underwent countless modifications over time, the task of chronologizing the *Purana*s is, indeed, considerable.

Although they do throw light on different historical aspects of the period of their composition, it must be remembered that the extant *Purana*s are not in their original form. They must have been subjected to continuous and notable changes over generations. As a result, new editions were created, which were necessarily not new compositions; rather, they merely comprised texts transferred from and to different *Puranas.*

Both Kane and Hazra agree upon the theory that, despite their diverse chronological layers, the *Puranas* mirrored and represented the socio-religious aspects of the time of their composition. Kane suggested that in all likelihood, the existing *Puranas* were parts of an earlier form of *Purana* that was modified and tweaked according to the necessities of the periods in question.

Despite difficulties and problems, some scholars have attempted a chronological timeline of the *Puranic* texts. Indologists like George Bühler, Maurice Winternitz, P. V. Kane, R. C. Hazra and others have

debated this issue and concluded that assigning specific dates to each *Purana* was next to impossible.[29] Hazra did a thorough study of the *Smriti* chapters in the *Purana*s and concluded that the dates of different parts of the *Purana*s varied.

To better understand this complicated timeline, following is an insight into the approximate chronology of some of the eighteen *Mahapuranas* according to noted scholars and researchers.

- The *Vishnu Purana*: Rocher has drawn attention to various scholars who suggested that the *Vishnu Purana* be dated from c. 700 BCE to 500 CE.[30]

- The *Vayu Purana* and *Brahmanda Purana*: according to Hazra, *Vayu Purana* and *Brahmanda Purana* were culled out sometime after 325 BCE from a single volume known as *Vayaviya Brahmanda*.[31]

- The *Markandeya Purana*: many scholars have fiercely debated the dating of this *Purana*. In most cases, they have simultaneously examined the date of the *Devi-Mahatmya*, which enjoys an independent status, and that of the *Markandeya Purana*.[32] H. H. Wilson dated this *Purana* before the *Brahma*, *Padma*, *Naradiya* and *Bhagavata Purana*s but after the *Mahabharata*[33] and went on to affirm that it may be dated back to the 9th or 10th century CE. Haraprasad Shastri, instead, opined that the *Devi-Mahatmya* must have been written before 10th century CE. He based his conclusion upon a copy of the same, written in the old Newari characters, in the Royal Library in Nepal. This manuscript was dated 998 CE. He, however, dated the *Markandeya Purana* several centuries before the *Devi-Mahatmya*. In the light of this argument, it could be placed in 4th century CE.[34] F. E. Pargiter assigned three different periods to the three layers of the *Markandeya Purana*. According to him, the *Devi-Mahatmya* (cantos 78–90), generally dated in the 7th century CE,[35] was completed in the 9th century CE; the third (cantos 42–77) and fifth (cantos 33–91) parts, which formed part of the original *Purana*, already existed sometime in the 3rd century CE or even earlier; and, the first (1–9) and second cantos (10–22) were written sometime between the two periods mentioned above.[36] J. N. Farquhar proposed 200 CE for the text as a whole;[37] Kane, on the other hand, believed it to be dated not later than 600 CE.

- The *Matsya Purana*: while R. C. Dikshitar suggested that this *Purana* was written from the 4th century BCE up to the 3rd century CE, Manoranjan Shastri assigned the text to the first

half of the 11th century.[38] According to Hazra, a precise date could not be assigned to the *Matsya Purana*,[39] and Kane placed it between 200 CE and 600 CE.[40]

- The *Agni Purana*: being a compilation of several works written in different periods, it is difficult to assign dates with accuracy to this *Purana*. Kane has suggested that it could be placed in c. 900 CE.[41]
- The *Bhagavata Purana*: owing to considerable difference of opinion among them, historians and Indologists faced a real challenge in assigning a date to this *Purana*. Indologists like Wilson, Burnouf and Colebrooke dated the text to as late as 1300 CE; R. G. Bhandarkar and S. N. Dasgupta chose 1000 CE; and V. R. R. Dikshitar placed it in 300 CE. Hazra argued that it could neither be dated earlier than 500 CE nor later than 600 CE.[42] Kane chose 900 CE as its date while A. Gail assigned it to 750 CE[43] and F. Hardy thought of the 9th or early 10th century as its most reasonable date.[44]

The above arguments demonstrate the enormous difficulties scholars, historians and researchers have faced in the task of accurately chronologizing the *Puranas*.

Moving on to how the *Puranas* developed over time, it seems opportune to consider the authorship of the same right at the beginning. Traditionally *Vyasa* is deemed to be the author of all the *Purana*s[45] but the real writers were the *Pauranikas*, or pundits, who were adept at reading and interpreting them. They wrote the text and altered them according to the context at hand without claiming public recognition for their work. They were, then, transmitted orally to the masses through the *sutas*, who had heard the same from some earlier source.

The making of the *Purana*s was a sort of 'work in progress' at various levels. The *Puranic* corpus linked itself to the Vedic tradition by asserting that the result of reading and listening to the *Devi Bhagavata* was at par with receiving the fruits of reading the Vedas.[46]

As mentioned earlier, the *Puranas* were typically meant to include the five *Panchalakshana* traits over other content. These were: *sarga, pratisarga, vamsha, manvantara*, and *vamshanucharita*. Scholarly literature, however, has repeatedly indicated that the *Puranas* contained very less of these traits.[47]As pointed out before, the fact is that most of them dealt with other topics and hardly touched upon these elements.

Some of the Puranas like *Vishnu, Markandeya* and *Matsya Puranas* adhere to the *panchalakshana* traits. The *Bhagavata Purana*, instead, is

deemed a different kind of *Purana* as it contains ten *lakshana* traits.[48] These are: *sarga; pratisarga; vritti,* or means of subsistence; *raksha,* or protection; *manvantaras; vamsha; vamshanucharita; samstha,* or dissolution of the world; *hetu* or cause of creation; and *apashraya,* or the final refuge. As per the *Brahmavaivarta Purana,* the *Upapuranas* should have the *panchalakshanas* and the *Mahapuranas,* the ten *lakshanas.*[49]

It is clear from the above arguments that, despite the different types of texts and the characteristics that the *Puranas* were meant to incorporate, they were certainly written and developed to include other segments of the society namely, the tribals, the Shudras and the women.

Puranas and Their Significance in Geography

The geographical context of the *Puranas* cannot be undermined if one aims to fully understand their importance and impact on people and society. According to several historians, the *Puranas* were meant for the propagation of socio-religious norms followed by the assimilation of new ones in their times. For this, the spatial aspect of their composition ought to be considered too. Even though the geographical references of many *Puranas* have not been identified with clarity, their collated knowledge of different areas and zones may indicate their place of origin. Let us analyze this argument with the help of the geographical areas where some of the *Puranas* could have originated.

Several stories from the *Vishnu Purana* are associated with regions in northern India. A case in point is Dhruva's performance of *tapa,* or penance, which is said to have been in Mathura.[50] Hence, one can surmise that this *Purana* must have been composed in and around the city of Prayaga.

The *Markandeya Purana* is said to have been composed in the region near the Narmada and Tapti rivers.[51] The first section of this *Purana* refers to four birds that lived in the Vindhya Mountains where they delivered the *Puranas* to Jaimini, Vyasa's pupil. These birds were the four brahmin brothers who lived in a cave in the mountains with their father Shukra.[52] Mahishmati,[53] an ancient city associated with Shiva and the famous shrine of Omkara, was situated on the bank of the Narmada River near the Vindhya hills. The second section of this *Purana* states Sumati Jada, whose words the above-mentioned birds repeat, belonged to the Bhrigu family. Being a Bhargava himself, Markandeya's genealogy can be located in this region.

In the *Devi-Mahatmya* – a part of the *Markandeya Purana* with an independent status – the only local reference is the goddess Mahakali or Mahakale. This, incidentally, is what a shrine devoted to Shiva at Ujjain is called.[54] Considering the above, it would be safe to surmise that the *Markandeya Purana* was composed in the western region of the Indian sub-continent.[55]

According to Hazra, the *Vaishnavas* living in the vicinity of Narmada[56] composed the *Matsya Purana.* A. M. T. Jackson believed that this *Purana* may be an original work of brahmins living in and around Narmada.[57] The text states that the river Narmada survived the destruction of the world.[58] A chapter from the *Matsya Purana* extolling the Narmada *mahatmya*, notes that one living on the banks of Narmada reaps many benefits like freedom from anger, passion, adverse effects of jaundice, old age sufferings and the sin accrued by killing a brahmin.[59]

The *Agni Purana* vividly describes Ayodhya, Mathura, Gaya, Ganga, and Yamuna, along with other places and rivers. One can, therefore, say that this *Purana* was composed in northern India.[60]

The *Bhagavata Purana* refers to Vaishnava *Alvars* visa-à-vis the Kaveri River, making it evident that the same was composed in the Tamil-speaking area of southern India.[61] Other details that identify southern India as the location of this *Purana* are the three myths about the Pandya kings, a version of Krishna's bullfight, geographical details, and linguistic evidence.[62]

The *Puranas* in Focus

The Vishnu Purana

The *Vishnu Purana* is one of the most important of the existing eighteen *Mahapuranas* as just listening to it bestows those rewards that one would obtain when having performed a horse sacrifice.[63] From a chronological point of view, several scholars and researchers placed it from c. 700 BCE to 500 CE.[64] Whereas H. H. Wilson and V. R. R. Dikshitar assigned the date of 500 CE to this *Purana*, P. C. Bagchi, J. N. Farquhar and M. Winternitz preferred a date earlier than 400 CE. Hazra undertook a comparative study of *Harivamsha* and *Vishnu Purana* and concluded that the latter could not be dated later than 4th century CE. Kane, on the other hand, asserted that it was written between 300 CE and 500 CE.[65]

The numerous geographical references mentioned in the *Vishnu Purana* indicate that it was composed in the vicinity of the Ganga–

Yamuna doab. These references are: several northern Indian rivers such as Ganga, Yamuna, Vipasa, Sarasvati, Sutudri and Gomati; [66] mountains like Govardhana, Himalaya, Kailasha and Kolahar;[67] Kandu sage's [68] penance on the banks of Gomati; the Gokula,[69]the Hastinapura and Dvaraka adventures of Krishna and Balarama; and west of Prayaga[70] as the location of many tribes mentioned in this *Purana.*

From the perspective of its structure, the *Vishnu Purana* adheres faithfully to the *Panchalakshana* traits despite its *Vaishnav Pancharatra* precepts. It is a comprehensive treatise on different socio-religious matters, social groups and their duties, customs, impurity and funerary rituals, and hell.[71] Each of its six *amshas,* or parts, is sub-divided into several parts. The *suta* merely narrates what Parashar, the main interlocutor, says in response to Maitreya's enquiry: "I am interested in knowing from you how the world has come into existence and how it will be in the future".[72] The first three sections are about the genesis of the earth; its recreation including its detailed geography; a description of the solar system; the fourteen *manvantaras*; and the names of twenty-eight Vyasas from different eras. It also refers to *kaliyuga* evils and discusses *yoga* as a means of actualizing the supreme entity, i.e., Vishnu himself. Considered to be later additions, chapters 17 and 18 of the third part narrate how *Mayamoha* (an illusory figure) was created by Vishnu from his own body to turn the demons into *arhats,* or the venerable ones. The fifth, and the longest, part of this *Purana* provides comprehensive details of Lord Krishna's adventures in Vrindavan and Dvaraka. Its chapters on *Dharmashastric* subjects went on to become a source for later *Smriti* writers such as Lakshmidhara, Aparaka, Jimutavahana and Hemadri.[73] However, no *tirthas* have been mentioned in the *Vishnu Purana.*

The Agni Purana

The *Agni Purana* also forms part of the corpus of the *Mahapuranas.* Also known as *Agneya Purana,* it is a narration, by *suta* Lomaharshana, of Agni's words that were communicated to Vasishtha. It also contains summaries of the *Ramayana,* the *Mahabharata* and the *Amarakosha* and deals with subjects like astronomy and architecture.

P. V. Kane's opinion – that this *Purana* can be dated back to c. 900 CE [74] – finds basis in Vishvarupa's commentary named *Bala-Krida* (800–825 CE) from the *vyavahara* section of the *Yajnavalkya Smriti.* The various references to astronomy, medicine and *tantra* also suggest that this *Purana* could not have been composed later

than 800 CE.[75] While Haraprasad Shastri dated the *Purana* between 800 CE and 900 CE, S. D. Gyani was more generous in assigning a date – from 700 or 800 CE to 1000 or 1100 CE [76] – to allow for its growth to its extant form. S. B. Chaudhuri proposed 750–850 CE as a probable date whereas Wilson considered it to be before the 8th and the 9th centuries.[77] According to Hazra and S. K. De, however, the composition of this *Purana* must have been between the 9th and 12th centuries CE.[78] The information provided in the *Agni Purana* is extremely significant vis-à-vis tracing changes in society during 300–1000 CE. It best represents all the local and regional elements in terms of duties, rituals and shrines. As mentioned earlier, the vivid descriptions of Ayodhya, Mathura, Gaya, Ganga, Yamuna, etc., allude to it being composed in North India.

Structure wise, the *Agni Purana* is divided into 383 chapters. The earlier chapters are devoted to Vishnu's *avataras*, particularly Rama and Krishna. The subsequent chapters, instead, are about the worship of Krishna as *Narayana*, or Vishnu. It also describes the worship of Shiva as *linga* and is replete with *tantra* rituals and ceremonies to extol the deity. Several chapters are devoted to the discussion of rituals; *homa*; *mantras*, or mystical formulae; *mandala*s, or mystical diagrams; the *pavitra* or purificatory thread; and the construction and consecration of temples, images, tanks, gardens and flags. *Mantras* and details of acts and gesticulations with which they ought to be recited abound in this *Purana*. Several other chapters focus on the *ashrama*s, purificatory rites, expiation of sins and *vrata*s. The astronomical and/or astrological sections contain vivid descriptions of the sun and planets as also the related magical rites and formulae.

The latter portion of this *Purana* talks about different subjects such as *dharma*, royal lineages, political concerns, lexicography, weaponry art and techniques, human diseases, the use of herbs, schools of philosophy, and the appearance of men and women. It gives detailed treatment to the science of politics and talks extensively about many issues such as the duties of kings, ministers and others holding high offices; the organization of the army and the reasons for waging a war; guidelines for inter-state relations, etc. Such descriptions bestow upon the *Agni Purana* an encyclopedic mantle and establish the premise that its authors indeed succeeded in their effort.

Conclusion

The antiquarian origins, classification, chronology, structure and content of the *Puranas* form the basis of this study, which is further elaborated with insights from two *Mahapuranas*, namely

Vishnu and *Agni.* The former is from c. 3rd to 7th centuries CE; the latter, from c. 8th to 12th centuries CE. Both contain a variety of coherently but thematically unorganized, fundamentally sectarian, content. However, the non-sectarian elements of myths and legends, belonging to an earlier period, also find their way into these texts.

The *Vishnu* and *Agni Puranas* were composed in different places too. While the former adhered to the *Panchalakshana* traits, the latter went far beyond them. Nevertheless, both incorporated eulogies of Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva, Surya and Shakti, and details of the different social norms and practices within their respective areas.

Both follow the dialogic structure. In the *Vishnu Purana,* the *suta* merely narrates Parashar's words to his disciple Maitreya; in the *Agni Purana,* the *suta* follows his regular style of narration of what was communicated to him directly by different sages.

The study has also established that, despite the various categories of the *Puranas,* the particularly significant ones are the *Mahapuranas.* They deal with diverse topics to popularize the different values and rituals of the Brahmanical culture. Vernacular editions bear testimony to the widespread expansion of the *Puranas.* Their popularity suggests that they were read, or heard, by a large section of society across the subcontinent.

This study has extensively dealt with the chronology and contents of the *Puranas* and highlighted the prevailing religious ethos at the time of their composition. It shows the diverse traditions they embodied and how, despite their importance being at par with the Vedas, they differed from the *Dharmashastras.* The *Puranas* were created to reach the masses while the *Dharmashastras* remained restricted to the upper categories. Thus, the *Puranas* emerged as a significant aspect of traditional Indian knowledge system where changes in their content were continuous from the stage of composition to compilation. The oral stories which belonged to the masses had to be acknowledged by those in authority.

Notes

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