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DEPARTMENT OF ELECTRONICS & COMMUNICATION ENGINEERING

III YEAR/ VI SEMESTER

19HST105 ESSENCE OF INDIAN TRADITIONAL KNOWLEDGE

UNIT 2 INDIAN LITERATURE, CULTURE, TRADITION, AND PRACTICES
Puranas



THE PURANAS

Purana, (Sanskrit: -Ancient) in the sacred literature of Hinduism, any of a number of popular encyclopaedic collections of myth, legend, and genealogy, varying greatly as to date and origin.

Purana is a Sanskrit word that means "**ancient**" or "**old.**" It is a genre of ancient Indian literature found both in Hinduism and Jainism. Puranas are encyclopedic texts that cover various topics such as cosmogony, cosmology, folk tales, pilgrimages, temples, medicine, astronomy, grammar, mineralogy, humor, love stories, theology and philosophy as well as the genealogies of gods, goddesses, kings, heroes, sages and demigods.

It is believed that the first puranas were composed between the 3rd and 10th centuries C.E. The most famous purana by far is the "*Bhagavata Purana*," which outlines the childhood and early life of Krishna, the incarnation of the Hindu god, Vishnu. There is a wealth of information about yoga contained within various puranas. The "*Bhagavata Purana*" instructs the reader on Bhakti yoga practice, while other texts cover other types of yoga and different branches of spiritual practice.

Traditionally, there are 18 main puranas and 18 minor puranas, which contain over 400,000 verses. Puranas typically cover five signs, or topics.



- 4) Cosmic cycles
- 5) Legends during the times of various kings

Some other puranas, like the "Bhagavata Purana," add five more characteristics, expanding the list to 10:

- 6) Karmic links between the deities, sages, kings and living beings
- 7) Tales about god(s)
- 8) Finale or cessation
- 9) Spiritual liberation (*moksha*)
- 10) Refuge

The purpose of the puranas was to bring people closer to the gods. All of the purana texts are sectarian, dedicated to certain deities -- some to gods, some to goddesses. Puranas also served to give the common people access to and understanding of the essential teachings and complex yogic philosophies of the ancient Vedic texts.

Puranas are the most revered and pertinent texts in the Bhakti yoga tradition, where the devotional aspect of yoga is emphasized. This devotion is cultivated through the personification of the chosen deities in entertaining myths and stories.

The "Bhagavata Purana" describes Bhakti yoga and outlines all the steps of its practice. Another text, the "Linga Purana," covers the details about yama (disciplines), niyama (virtues) and pranayama (breathing techniques). Meanwhile, the "Vayu Purana" contains information about pratyahara (withdrawal of the senses), dharana (concentration) and dhyana (meditation).





Hinduism: The Puranas

Puranas were written almost entirely in narrative couplets, in much the same easy flowing style as the two great Sanskrit epic poems, the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*. The early Puranas were probably compiled by upper-caste authors who appropriated popular beliefs and ideas from people of various castes. Later Puranas reveal evidence of vernacular influences and the infusion of local religious traditions.

Traditionally, a Purana is said to treat five subjects, or “**five signs**”: the primary creation of the universe, secondary creation after periodic annihilation, the genealogy of gods and patriarchs, the reigns of the Manus (the first humans), and the history of the solar and lunar dynasties. Creation and dissolution (*sarga*, -emission, and *samhara*, -gathering in) occur when Prajapati, a creator figure of the Vedic age, emits the universe and opens it, but everything is always in it, just alternately revealed (manifest) or concealed (latent); *sarga* lets it out, and *samhara* pulls it back in.

All the Puranas are strongly sectarian—some devoted to Shiva, some to Vishnu, and some to a goddess. But even those officially devoted to a particular god often pay considerable attention to other gods. By far the most popular Purana is the *Bhagavata-purana*, with its elegant treatment of the childhood and early life of Krishna. There are also 18 -lesser Puranas, or *upa-puranas*, which treat similar material, and a large number of *sthala-puranas* (-local Puranas) or *mahatmyas* (-magnifications), which glorify temples or sacred places and are recited in the services at those temples.



Cosmogony

Puranic cosmogony greatly expands upon the complex cosmogonies of the Brahmanas, Upanishads, and epics. According to one of many versions of the story of the origin of the universe, in the beginning the god Narayana (identified with Vishnu) floated on the snake Ananta (-Endless!) on the primeval waters. From Narayana's navel grew a lotus, in which the god Brahma was born reciting the four Vedas with his

four mouths and creating the -Egg of Brahma, which contains all the worlds. Other accounts refer to other demiurges, or creators, like Manu (the primordial ancestor of humankind).

The Vedas do not seem to conceive of an end to the world, but Puranic cosmogony accounts for the periodic destruction of the world at the close of an eon, when the Fire of Time will put an end to the universe. Elsewhere the destruction is specifically attributed to the god Shiva, who dances the *tandava* dance of doomsday and destroys the world. Yet this is not an absolute end but a temporary suspension (*pralaya*), after which creation begins again in the same fashion.



Cosmology

The Puranas present an elaborate mythical cosmography. The old tripartite universe persists, but it is modified. There are three levels—heaven, earth, and the netherworld—but the first and last are further subdivided into vertical layers. Earth consists of seven circular continents, the central one surrounded by the salty ocean and each of the other concentric continents by oceans of other liquids. In the centre of the central mainland stands the cosmic mountain Meru; the southernmost portion of this mainland is Bharatavarsa, the old name for India. Above earth there are seven layers in heaven, at the summit of which is the world of *brahman* (*brahma-loka*); there are also seven layers below earth, the location of hells inhabited by serpents and demons.

The Mahapuranas

Of the many texts designated *Puranas* the most important are the *Mahapuranas*. These are always said to be eighteen in number, divided into three groups of six.

- 1) Agni Purana (15,400 verses)
- 2) Bhagavata Purana (18,000 verses). One of the most celebrated and popular of the *Puranas*, telling of Vishnu's ten Avatars. Its tenth and longest canto narrates the deeds of Krishna, introducing his childhood exploits, a theme later elaborated by many Bhakti movements.
- 3) Bhavishya Purana (14,500 verses)
- 4) Brahma Purana (24,000 verses)
- 5) Brahmanda Purana (12,000 verses; includes Lalita Sahasranamam, a text some Hindus recite as prayer)
- 6) Brahma Vaivarta Purana (18,000 verses)
- 7) Garuda Purana (19,000 verses)



- 8) Kurma Purana (17,000 verses)
- 9) Linga Purana (11,000 verses)
- 10) Markandeya Purana (9,000 verses; includes Devi Mahatmyam, an important text for Shaktas)
- 11) Matsya Purana (14,000 verses)
- 12) Narada Purana (25,000 verses)
- 13) Padma Purana (55,000 verses)
- 14) Shiva Purana (24,000 verses)
- 15) Skanda Purana (81,100 verses), the longest Purana, it is an extraordinarily meticulous pilgrimage guide, containing geographical locations of pilgrimage centers in India, with related legends, parables, hymns and stories. Many untraced quotes are attributed to this text.
- 16) Vamana Purana (10,000 verses)
- 17) Varaha Purana (10,000 verses)
- 18) Vishnu Purana (23,000 verses)

The Mahapuranas are frequently classified according the three aspects of the **divine Trimurti**,

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- 1) **Brahma Puranas:** Brahma Purana, Brahmanda Purana, Brahma Vaivarta Purana, Markandeya Purana, Bhavishya Purana,

The Brahma Purana is one of the eighteen major Puranas genre of Hindu texts in Sanskrit language. It is listed as the first Maha-Purana in all the anthologies, and therefore also called Adi Purana. Another title for this text is **Saura Purana**, because it includes many chapters related to Surya or the Sun god. The Brahma Purana is actually just a compilation of geographical Mahatmya (travel guides) and sections on diverse topics.

Out of 245 chapters, 18 chapters of the Brahma Purana cover the cosmology, mythology, genealogy, manvantara (cosmic time cycles) and topics that are required to make a text belong to the Puranic genre of literature. Other chapters cover Sanskara (rite of passage), summary of Dharmasastra, its theories on the geography of earth, summary of Samkhya and Yoga theories of Hindu philosophy, and other topics. While many chapters of the Brahma Purana praise temples and pilgrimage, chapters 38-40 of the text, a part of embedded Saura Purana, present arguments that are highly critical of the theistic theories and devotional worship proposals of 13th-century Madhvacharya and Dvaita Vedanta sub-school of Hindu philosophies.

The Brahma Purana dedicates a majority of its chapter to describing the geography, temples and scenes around the Godavari River and of Odisha.



- 2) **Vishnu Puranas:** Vishnu Purana, Bhagavata Purana, Naradeya Purana, Garuda Purana, Padma Purana, Varaha Purana, Vamana Purana, Kurma Purana, Matsya Purana

The **Vishnu Purana** is one of the eighteen Mahapuranas, a genre of ancient and medieval texts of Hinduism. It is an important Pancharatra text in the Vaishnavism literature corpus.

The *Vishnu Purana* is among the shorter Purana texts, with about 7,000 verses in extant versions. It primarily centers around the Hindu god Vishnu and his avatars such as Krishna, but it praises Brahma and Shiva and asserts that they are one with Vishnu. The Purana, states Wilson, is pantheistic and the ideas in it, like other Puranas, are premised on the Vedic beliefs and ideas.

Vishnu Purana, like all major Puranas, attributes its author to be sage Veda Vyasa.



- 3) **Shiva Puranas:** Shiva Purana, Linga Purana, Skanda Purana, Agni Purana, Vayu Purana
- Shiva Purana* is one of the eighteen major *Puranas*, a genre of Sanskrit texts in Hinduism, and part of the Shaivism literature corpus. It primarily centers around the Hindu god Shiva and goddess Parvati, but references and reveres all gods.
- The *Shiva Purana* asserts that it once consisted of 100,000 verses set out in twelve *samhitas* (books). It was written by the Romaharshana, a disciple of Vyasa belonging to Suta class.
- The *Shiva Purana* contains chapters with cosmology, mythology, relationship between gods, ethics, Yoga, *Thirtha* (pilgrimage) sites, bhakti, rivers and geography, and other topics. The text is an important source of historic information on different types and theology behind Shaivism in early 1st-millennium BCE. The oldest surviving chapters of the Shiva Purana have significant Advaita Vedanta philosophy, which is mixed in with theistic elements of bhakti.

According to the *Padma Purana*, the texts may be classified in accordance with *the three gunas or qualities*; truth, passion, and ignorance:

- 1) **Sattva ("truth; purity"):** Vishnu Purana, Bhagavata Purana, Naradeya Purana, Garuda Purana, Padma Purana, Varaha Purana
- 2) **Rajas ("dimness; passion"):** Brahmanda Purana, Brahma Vaivarta Purana, Markandeya Purana, Bhavishya Purana, Vamana Purana, Brahma Purana



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- 3) **Tamas ("darkness; ignorance"):** Matsya Purana, Kurma Purana, Linga Purana, Shiva Purana, Skanda Purana, Agni Purana

The Upapuranas

The *Upapuranas* are lesser or ancillary texts: these are sometimes also said to be eighteen in number, with still less agreement as to the canonical titles. Few have been critically edited. They include: Sanat-kumara, Narasimha, Brihan-naradiya, Siva-rahasya, Durvasa, Kapila, Vamana, Bhargava, Varuna, Kalika, Samba, Nandi, Surya, Parasara, Vasishtha, Devi-Bhagavata, Ganesha, Mudgala, and Hamsa.

The Ganesha and Mudgala Puranas are devoted to Ganesha. The Devi-Bhagavata Purana, which extols the goddess Durga, has become (along with the Devi Mahatmya of the Markandeya Purana) a basic text for Devi worshipers.

There are many others all over the Indian subcontinent.



Sthala Puranas

This corpus of texts tells of the origins and traditions of particular temples or shrines—the word *sthalā* means "spot" in Sanskrit. There are numerous Sthala Puranas, most written in vernaculars, some with Sanskrit versions as well. Some appear in Sanskrit versions in the Mahapuranas or Upapuranas. Some Tamil Sthala Puranas have been researched by David Dean Shulman.

Kula Puranas

These Puranas deal with a caste's origin myth, stories, and legends (the word *kula* means "family" or "tribe" in Sanskrit). They are important sources for caste identity though usually contested by rival castes. This subgenre is usually in the vernacular and may at times remain oral. These have been little researched, though they are documented in the caste section of the British Census of India Report and the various Gazetteers.

Jain Puranas

Jain Puranas deal with Jain myths, history and legends and form a major part of early Kannada literature. The best known is the Mahapurana of Acharya Jinasena.



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