

INTRODUCTION

The Purāṇa is a class of literature that treats of ancient religion, philosophy, history, sociology, politics and other subjects. It is an encyclopaedia of various branches of knowledge and ancient wisdom. It has been defined as a class of literature that contains material on the topics of Creation, Dissolution of Manus, Ages of Manus, Genealogies and the History of glorious kings. For dealing primarily with these subjects it has been called Pañcalakṣaṇa¹—a title that was incorporated in the Purāṇas² themselves and had become popular by the Fifth Century A.D., for it was included by Amarasiṃha in his lexicon 'Amarakoṣa'.³ But as the process of interpolation continued, the Pañcalakṣaṇa definition was found inadequate. The Purāṇic redactors adopted a Daśalakṣaṇa⁴ definition that suited the contemporary text. Still the dynamic forces were at work and the process of insertion, modification and abridgement went on and it was soon discovered that the Daśalakṣaṇa definition too fell short of an actual fact. It was found that the purāṇas contained certain aspects that were not covered by any of the five or ten characteristics. Besides some of the characteristics covered by the Pañcalakṣaṇa or Daśalakṣaṇa definition were not found in certain Purāṇas.

In fact the Purāṇa as a class represents the different phases and aspects of life of diverse ages. It is impossible to adopt a standard definition for the class of literary composition that contains heterogeneous phases and aspects. Moreover, a definition framed on the numerical basis of points is bound to be imperfect.

The Purāṇas are divided into two classes—the Mahāpuraṇas⁵ and the Upapurāṇas⁶. Each class consists of eighteen purāṇas. Thus the number of the Purāṇas is thirtysix. The

1. For details see Kirfel: Das Purāṇa Pañcalakṣaṇa.

2. ŚP. Vā. I. 1. 41; Kūrma I 1. 12; Varāha 2. 4; Matya 53. 65; Vāyu 4. 10-11; Bhaviṣya 1. 2. 4-5.

3. Dr. Pusalker : Studies in the Epics and Purāṇas : Intro. P. 23.

4. Bhāgavata xi. 7.910.

5. Vāyaviya I. 1. 42; Umā 44. 119-121.

6. For details see R.C. Hazra. Studies in the Upapurāṇas, 2 Vols.