

PURĀṆA.

1) *General information.* The Amarakośa describes a Purāṇa thus :

Sargaśca pratisargaśca
Varṁśo manvantarāṇi ca /
Varṁśānucaritaṁ cāpi
Purāṇam pañcalakṣaṇam //

According to this definition, Purāṇa is one which describes Sarga, Pratisarga, Varṁśa, Manvantara and Varṁśānucarita. Among these Sarga and Pratisarga are natural creation and renovation (Cosmogony). Varṁśa means history of sages and patriarchs. By Manvantara is meant the period of different Manus. Varṁśānucarita means Genealogy of kings. In the Purāṇas which are current now some of these five divisions are wanting.

Statements about Purāṇas are found even in the Brāhmaṇas. Therefore it is to be surmised that Purāṇas existed even before historic times. Mahābhārata has used the term Purāṇa to mean stories about devas and siddhas. The Upaniṣads say that Purāṇas are itihāsas and as such constitute the fifth Veda. Smṛti says that Purāṇas are commentaries on Vedas. From all these statements it can be gathered that Purāṇas have a hoary past. The great Sanskrit scholar Raṅgacārya has defined Purāṇa as Purā nava (Purā=old; nava=new) meaning things which are as good as new though existing from olden times. Though there are large portions of wide imagination dealing with the human side in the Purāṇas many truths about the universe can be grasped from them. All the Purāṇas contain praises of Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Maheśvara. In most of the Purāṇas of old, new additions and interpolations are seen. The Purāṇas in original were in existence before Christ.

Ākhyānaiścāpyupākhyānair
Gāthābhiḥ Kalpaśuddhibhiḥ /
Purāṇasamhitāṁ cakre
Purāṇārthaviśāradāḥ //
(Śloka 15, Chapter 6, Arṁśa 3, Viṣṇu Purāṇa)
Aṣṭādaśa Purāṇāni
Kṛtvā Satyavatīśutaḥ /
Bhāratākhyānamakṣhilāṁ
Cakre tadupabṛmhaṇam //
(Śloka 70, Chapter 53, Matsya Purāṇa)

From the above it can be gathered that it was Vyāsa who composed all the Purāṇas. Bāna who lived in the seventh century A.D. speaks about Vāyu Purāṇa. Kumārila Bhaṭṭa who lived in the eighth century and Śaṅkarācārya who lived in the ninth century speak about the Purāṇas. Purāṇas must have therefore taken their present forms before the sixth or seventh century A.D. There are eighteen major Purāṇas and another eighteen minor ones. The major Purāṇas contain over four lakhs of Ślokas. All the Purāṇas are in verses like Mahābhārata. But none of them is as good as Mahābhārata as a piece of literature. Still the Purāṇas splendidly reflect the culture of Bhārata. The Purāṇas are the basis of the bulk of Indian thinking on matters social, cultural, religious and political. Even the Indian art has taken form from the Purāṇas. The Purāṇas are classified into three, those pertaining to Brahmā, those pertaining to Viṣṇu and those to Śiva.

2) *A. Viṣṇu-based Purāṇas.*

(i) *Viṣṇu Purāṇa.* This is one of the most important of all the Purāṇas. This contains the five technical divisions of the Purāṇas. This is divided into six arṁśas. This deals with the events of Vārāhakaḥkalpa and contains twentythree thousand ślokas. The theme is the ten incarnations of Mahāviṣṇu. Viṣṇu Purāṇa is the most ancient of all the Purāṇas and has got the name Purāṇaratna (gem of Purāṇas).

The method of narration is in the form of teaching his disciple Maitreya by sage Parāśara. Since there is a reference in it to the Maurya dynasty it is to be surmised that this was composed in the first or second century A.D. The narrator himself states thus :— “Vyāsa an adept in the composition of Purāṇas composed this Purāṇasamhitā with ākhyānas, Upākhyānas, gāthās and Kalpanirṇayas. A Sūta named Romaharṣaṇa was Vyāsa's chief disciple. The broad-minded Vyāsa gave that samhitā to that sūta. Romaharṣaṇa had six disciples named Sumati, Agnivarcaś, Mitrāyus. Śāṁśapāyana, Akṛtavraṇa, and Śāvarṇi. Of these Akṛtavraṇa, Śāvarṇi and Śāṁśapāyana born in the Kāśyapagotra have composed Purāṇasamhitās. There is yet another samhitā composed by Romaharṣaṇa which was the basis of the samhitās of his three disciples. I have composed Viṣṇupurāṇa basing on the above four samhitās.”

If a man gives as gift a book of Viṣṇu Purāṇa on the full moon day in the month of āṣāḍha (July) with Jaladhenu he will attain Viṣṇupāda.

(ii) *Bhāgavata Purāṇa.* This is the most popular and widely circulated of all the Purāṇas. It is dear to Viṣṇu-devotees. Divided into twelve Skandhas this contains eighteen thousand ślokas. All the incarnations of Viṣṇu are described in this. The most interesting Skandha is the tenth Skandha in which the author has described the life and activities of Śrī Kṛṣṇa. There was once a belief that it was Baladeva who lived in the thirteenth century A.D. that had composed this Purāṇa. But this belief was smashed when it was found that Vallālasena of Bengal who lived in the eleventh century A.D. had made references to this Purāṇa in some of his works. Bhāgavata accepts Kapila and Buddha as incarnations of Viṣṇu. This has been translated into all Indian languages. This book has to be given as gift on the full-moon day in the month of Proṣṭhapada (September). Agni Purāṇa instructs that this book is to be given along with a golden image of a lion.

(iii) *Nāradaīya Purāṇa.* This is in the form of a narration by Nārada to Sanatkumāra. In this book of twentyfive thousand verses Nārada teaches the dharmas of Brhatkalpa. If this is given as gift on the full-moon day in the month of Āśvina there will be great prosperity.

(iv) *Garuḍa Purāṇa.* This is in the form of instructions to Garuḍa by Viṣṇu. This deals with astronomy, medicine, grammar, and with the structure and qualities of diamonds. This Purāṇa is dear to Vaiṣṇavites. The latter half of this Purāṇa deals with life after death. The Hindus of north-India generally read this Purāṇa while cremating the bodies of the dead. This has given great importance to the origin of Garuḍa. There are eight thousand verses in this book. This book should be given as gift along with an image in gold of a swan to get prosperity.

(v) *Padma Purāṇa (Pādma Purāṇa).* This book is divided into six Khaṇḍas comprising fiftyfive thousand