

THE AGE OF THE PURANAS

No question is more intriguing and more difficult of solution than the determination of the age of the Purāṇas. It has been admitted on all hands that there are eighteen Mahāpurāṇas and these are mentioned in the epic Mahābhārata, by hearing which, it is said, that one gets the same spiritual glory as he would get otherwise. This may mislead a superficial reader that the Purāṇas were generally compositions preceding the Mahābhārata. But if we examine the contents of the Purāṇas we are driven to the conclusion that several Purāṇas are to be placed after the composition of the Mahābhārata. It may be that some of the Purāṇas were prior to the epic. But in dealing with the royal dynasties the Purāṇa or Purāṇas added to the already existing material. Hence, the composition of the Purāṇas is to be spread over a long time covering several centuries from the epoch of the Brāhmaṇas and the Upaniṣads to the age of the Guptas and after. Further a close study of the Purāṇas shows that some were composed in the period prior to Mahāvīra and Gautama Buddha, while most of them came into existence in the epoch following them.

From the terms occurring in the older Purāṇas *arhata*, *budhyate*, *budhāya* it has been pointed out by some writers that these terms refer to the Jaina and the Bauddha and must therefore be later in composition. But the fact is that nothing of the kind is mentioned and from the circumstances in which these terms occur, one has to understand them in their literal sense, viz., 'one who is honoured', 'one possessing wisdom'. These are epithets which are addressed to Śiva as one of his names and they have nothing to do whatsoever with Jainism or Buddhism. In the Viṣṇu Purāṇa it is said that in the dispute between the Gods and Asuras, Viṣṇu created Māyāmoha whose followers were designated as *arhats*. The scene of this occurrence is laid on the banks of the Narmada away from the birth-place of