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Pauranic Influence on the Later Epic Literature

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Abstract: *The Pauranic literature occupies an important place in Sanskrit literature. As many Puranas state, the "Purana" is the divine voice (vaani) of Lord Brahma. In the Matsyapurana, it stated:*

पुराणंसर्बशास्त्रानांप्रथमंब्रह्मणाकृतम्।

अनन्तरंचवक्त्रेभ्योदेवास्तस्यविनिर्गता: ।। (मत्स्यपुराण 5/3/3)

—This means that the Puranas were the first of all scriptures composed by Brahma, holding a place right after the Vedas. "Puranangvedasammatam"—the Puranas arose following the tradition of the Vedas, with the Vedas serving as their origin. Furthermore, the Puranas consistently praise the Vedas. They act as a storehouse of ancient stories (aakhyanas and upakhyanas), through which not only later Sanskrit epic literature, but all subsequent literature across various Indian languages, has been enriched and made to flourish. The Puranas accurately reflect the religious and socio-cultural landscape of ancient India down to the present day. Indian epics draw their subject matter from the Puranas.

The earliest traces of the epics of India can be found in Vedic literature—specifically, in the akhyana hymns of the Rigveda, as well as the akhyanas, upakhyanas, Itihasas, and Puranas of the Brahmana literature.

There are eighteen Puranas, which are called Mahapuranas. These Mahapuranas serve as the source for various well-known epics in Sanskrit literature and other Indian literatures, such as the Adhyatma Ramayana, the works of the great poet Kalidasa, Bharavi's Kiratarjuniyam, and in Awadhi language, the renowned Sanskrit scholar Tulsidas created the masterpiece 'Ramcharitmanas', which is also rooted in the Puranas. Similarly, the great religious epic 'Kirtan Ghosha' in Assamese literature by Mahapurusha Srimanta Sankardev, the great preacher of the Vaishnav religion, and Mahapurush Madhavdeva—a disciple of Mahapurush Srimanta Sankardev—wrote numerous devotional works inspired by the Puranas, primarily the Bhagavata Purana. Consequently, Pauranic literature significantly influenced the development of later epic poetry. All in all, without the Puranas, Indian literatureespecially epic literature is incomplete.

Keywords: *Mahabharata, Brahmanda Purana, Matsya- Purana, Kalidasa, Kiratarjuniyam, Bhagavata Purana.*

Methodology: We propose to follow an analytical method through the study of primary sources—such as the Rigveda, Mahabharata, Ramayana, Matsya Purana, Vishnu Purana, Bhagavata Purana, the scriptures of Mahapurush Srimanta Sankardeva and Madhavdeva, and other original texts along with secondary data including books by modern writers, magazines, and journals, supplemented by electronic resources.

Introduction: Literally meaning 'ancient tales' or 'old stories' (puranamakhyatam), the Purana derives its name from its extreme antiquity, encompassing the folklore and legends preserved within its literature. The antiquity, authenticity, and authority of the Purana-Itihasa tradition are well-documented across numerous Vedic texts and the Dharmashastras of prominent scholars such as Apastamba and Gautama. The Mahabharata itself mentions older Puranic works. This indicates that during the Vedic period, texts existed that described ancient legends, including the lives of sages, kings, and heroes.

Examining the origins of the Puranas reveals a recurring claim within the texts themselves: they are the words of the Creator Brahma. The Matsya Purana recounts that an extensive primeval text, Vipulayatana, grew too complex for humans over time. To remedy this, the Lord incarnated as Vyasa and abridged it into the eighteen canonical Puranas. Notably, this text asserts that the Puranas predate all other scriptures.

"पुराणं सर्बशास्त्रानां प्रथमं ब्रह्मणा कृतम् ।

अनन्तरंच वक्तेभ्यो देवास्तस्य विनिर्गता:।।"(मत्स्यपुराण 5/3/3)

— "The Puranas were the first of all scriptures composed by Brahma" (Matsya Purana 5.3.3).

Regarding the importance of the Puranas, it is often said that without the lens of the Puranas, it is virtually impossible to comprehend the soul of India. On the other hand, although the status of the Vedas is supreme, their esoteric nature makes them largely incomprehensible to the general public.

The Puranas, however, are readily accessible while still carrying profound philosophical depth. They simplify complex and abstract concepts. In this regard, the Skanda Purana states that scholars of the Puranas can expertly and easily expound upon matters that remain obscure even in the Vedas and Smritis. Similarly, according to the Brahmada Purana, a person lacks true educational proficiency without the knowledge of the Puranas, even if they are well-versed in the four Vedas, the six Vedangas, and the Upanishads.

"यो बिद्याच्चतुरो बेदान् सांगोपनिषदो द्विज:।

न चेत् पुराण: स बिद्यान् न स्याद् बिचक्षण:।।"

It means- He, who knows the four Vedas with their angas (siksha, kalpa etc.) and upanishads, but does not know the Purana, is not a true scholar. Ultimately, proper knowledge of the Puranas is crucial not only for interpreting Vedic mantras correctly, but also for unlocking the deeper meanings of ancient, modern, and regional literature.

The antiquity of the Puranas is attested not only by Vedic literature (such as the Atharva Veda, Satapatha Brahmana, Jaiminiya Upanishad, Taittiriya Aranyaka, Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, and Chandogya Upanishad) but also by epics and Dharmashastras like the Ramayana, Mahabharata, Manusmriti, and Kautilya's Arthashstra. There are five characteristics of the Puranas as according to Matsya Purana, Vishnu Purana and Brahmanda Purana, they are—-

"सर्गश्च प्रतिसर्गश्च बंशो मन्वन्तराणि च।

बंशानुचरितं चैव पुराणं पञ्चलक्षणम्।।"

1) Sarga (सर्ग): The creation of the universe.

2) Pratisarga (प्रतिसर्ग): The secondary creation, i. e. the periodical destruction and fresh creation of the world.

3) Vamsha (वंश): The genealogies of gods, sages, and kings.

4) Manvantara (मन्वन्तर): The 'Manu periods', i. e. the great epochs, each of which has a Manu or progenitor of the human race.

5) Vamshanucharita (वंशानुचरित): The history of the dynasties that originated from the Sun and the Moon.

Regarding the classification of the Puraṇas, it has been accepted since ancient times that there are 18 Puraṇas. They are listed in a shortsloka of anuṣṭubh metre, quoted from the Devi Bhagavata Puraṇa (1/3/21).

"मद्वयं भद्भ्यं चैव ब्रत्रयं वचतुष्टयम्।

अनापद् – लिङ्ग –कू –स्कानि पुराणानि पृथक् पृथक्॥"

मद्भ्यम् (Madbhyaṁ): Matsya Purana, Markandeya Purana,

भद्भ्यम् (Bhadhvyaṁ): Bhavishya Purana, Bhagavata Purana,

ब्रत्रयम् (Bratrayam): Brahma Purana, Brahmanda Purana, Brahma Vaivarta Purana,

वचतुष्टयम् (Vachatushtayam): Varaha Purana, Vamana Purana, Vishnu Purana, Vayu Purana,

अ (A): Agni Purana

ना (Na): Narada Purana

प (Pa): Padma Purana

लिं (Liṁ): Linga Purana

ग (Ga): Garuda Purana

कू (Kū): Kurma Purana

स्क (Ska): Skanda Purana.

There are four types of subject-matters of Puranas as advocates initially in Vyasas Purana samhita which are supported by the Vishnu Purana (3.6.15). They are as follows—

i) Akhyana— an eye witness historical description.

ii) Upakhyana— a traditional account heard from others.

iii) Gaatha— an unnamed verse praising royal strength.

iv) Kalpasuddhi— malashudhi, enas- shuddhi (sin -purification) and manas-shuddhi.

Objectives

- To investigate the textual foundation of the Puranas as an amplification (Upabrimhana) of Vedic teachings.
- To enlighten how Puranas simplify complex and abstract concepts of the Vedas, although the status of the Vedas is supreme which is convoluted & incomprehensible.
- To analyse the primary aims of the Puranas in propagating moral ethics (virtuous learnings) and fostering devotion toward various deities.

- To establish how the Puranas blend of ancient lore and contemporary themes laid the groundwork for later classical literature.
- To explore literary adaptations and motives.
- To assess Socio-cultural Impact how the dissemination of Pauranic narratives through later literature helped to shape cultural identity, religious devotion (bhakti), and communal harmony across different regions.
- Another notable feature of the Purana is its attempt to unite the diverse communities of India and people of different religious traditions—such as Shaivas, Shaktas, Vaishnavas, Buddhists, and Jains.
- How the generalization or simplification of Hindu religion and culture take place through Puranas.

Discussion: The subject matter of Indian epics is rooted in the Puranas. However, the initial traces of epic poetry appear earlier—in the akhyyna hymns of the Rigveda, as well as the akhyanas, upakhyanas, Itihasas, and Puraṇas of Brahmaṇa literature**.**

As a cycle of ballads dealing with the legend of Kadru (the snake-mother) and Vinata (the bird-mother) and the enmity between Garuda and the snakes, the legend dates far back into Vedic times and appears in the epic form in the 'Astikaparvam' of the Mahabharata. The Adhyatma Ramayana, which centres on Devi-bhakti and Vedantic devotion and is considered a part of the Brahmanda Purana, depicts Rama as the Supreme Being, and his virtues are taught as a path to salvation. Regarding Valmiki's poem, the work is a sacred book; in reality, it is a manual of devotion. Indeed, it is not rare in ancient texts for the Itihasas and Puranas to be interpreted alongside the Vedas and other branches of knowledge. Their study is regarded as an act pleasing to the gods, and in fact, the Itihasas and Puranas are even termed the fifth Veda. Though Vedic literature as well as the Puranas are the base of later Indian literature, especially epic forms, the two epics preserved to our present day certainly represent only the consequence of a long preceding period of epic poetry. However, the enlightenment of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata proves the great influence of the Puranas in Indian epic literature. After all, the skeleton story of later Indian epic literature belongs to the Puranas.

In the field of Indian epic literature, for instance, Kalidasa's epic Raghuvamsham occupies an unalterable position in the realm of Mahakavyas dealing with the Rama-story. Taking the title 'Raghu', who is a central character in the earlier part of the poem, the activities of Rama are described with artistic talent and skill in the later part of the work. This work is not only concerned with the story of Rama, but it gives an interesting account of kings belonging to the Solar Dynasty — Dilipa, Raghu, Aja, Dasharatha, Rama, and twenty-four other kings, ending with Agnivarna. In various Puranas as well as Valmiki's Ramayana, accounts of the Solar Dynasty are found in adventurous and descriptive forms. The chronology of kings mentioned in Raghuvamsham doesn't completely agree with that of the Ramayana; on the other hand, it shows a close resemblance to the account presented in the Vishnu Purana and Vayu Purana. Raghuvamsham—specifically Cantos 1 and 4—finds its origins in the Vishnu Purana's account of the Ikshvaku dynasty. Similarly, the Bhagavata Purana, particularly through the 8th and 9th Skandhas, provides vivid accounts of both the Suryavamsha and the Chandravamsha. Kalidasa's other great work, Kumarasambhava, originated from the Shiva Puraṇa. Most scholars opine that its subject matter borrows heavily from the Shiva Puraṇa and the legends of Kartikeya in the Skanda Puraṇa. Some scholars argue that although Kalidasa ornaments it through his own talent and skillful writing—making the abstract parts of the Kumarasambhava a brilliant creation of the great poet—the reference to the Madanadaha (burning of Kama) incident on the Himalayas was, of course, already known from the Puraṇas. It is illuminated in a manner that reveals the absolute brilliance of Kalidasa's poetic merit. Yet, the ultimate source of the epic undoubtedly remains the Puraṇas.

After Kalidasa, the renowned poet Bharavi wrote his epic Kiratarjuniyam, whose authentic sources are the Mahabharata and the Puraṇas (the shiva Puraṇa in particular). The poem opens with a description of devotion

to Lord Shiva. Inspired to write this epic, Bharavi centred its subject matter on the story of Arjuna's penance on the Indrakila mountain, his encounter with Lord Shiva disguised as a Kirata (fowler), and his subsequent acquisition of the divine weapon Paashupata. Since Bharavi's time, the style of Sanskrit epic poetry has become more elaborate and artificial, yet its ultimate origin in the Puraṇas cannot be ignored.

Therefore, it is worth noting that the foundation of Magha's epic Shishupalavadham rests upon the legends of the Viṣṇu Puraṇa and Bhagavata Puraṇa. Here, the poet appears to have been inspired by the deep devotional sentiments dedicated to Lord Krishna's life, prompting him to compose the Shishupalavadham. Beyond the aforementioned works, numerous other epics, court poems, and dramas in later Sanskrit literature owe their inspiration to the Puraṇas. They taught moral precepts, good conduct, and proper behavior through their interesting stories, becoming very popular among the common people.

Just as the Puranas have influenced later Sanskrit poetry and literature, various regional languages and literatures of India have undoubtedly been influenced by them as well. The great Sanskrit scholar Tulsidas (1532–1623) was also a leading poet of Hindi literature. He made the meaning of the real Ramayana simpler and more understandable to the general public by writing the poem Ramacharitmanas, which is an adaptation of the Ramayana in the Awadhi language. The Ramacharitmanas or Manas, is a very popular work of poetry, drawing its sources from the Ramayana of Valmiki, the Adhyatma Ramayana, as well as the Shiva Purana and the Bhagavad Purana. Although Tulsidas faced the wrath of traditional Sanskrit scholars in Varanasi for writing poetry in the local language, he persevered in bringing the profound philosophy of the Vedas, Upanishads, and Puranas to the common people. By rendering these complex spiritual truths into accessible local verse, he was determined to empower everyone regardless of their learning with divine knowledge.

Similarly, the famous book 'Kirtan-Ghosha' by the Vaishnava preacher of Assam (Ekasarana Naama Dharma), Mahapurusha Srimanta Sankaradeva, is based primarily on the Bhagavata Purana; however, certain sections, chapters or narratives are directly taken from the Padma Purana. Furthermore, the Mahapurusha sourced the legend of 'Harishchandra Upakhyan' from the Markandeya Purana. His chief disciple, Mahapurusha Madhavdeva, also drew his works from the Puranas. For example: 'Bhakti Ratnavali' is based on the Bhagavata Purana, 'Naam-Ghosha' based on the Bhagavata Purana, and the Bhagavat Geeta as well as 'जन्म -रहस्य' (Birth -mystery') very similar to the concept of Pauranic creation (sarga, pratisarga) and 'Bhojan Bihar' on the Bhagavata Purana.

Mahapurusha Srimanta Sankaradeva translated the major portions of the original Sanskrit Bhagavata Purana into Assamese (primarily in Pada or Payaar meter) and gifted them to Assamese society, an impact of which is beyond words. Because of this, even in remote areas of Assam where formal education has not reached, the discussion and recitation of the Bhagavata still take place. Even elderly women who have no inkling of literacy can beautifully narrate the stories of the Bhagavata. In short, by removing the complexities of the original Sanskrit Vedas, Puranas, and religious scriptures and translating or adapting them into the local language, the two Mahapurushas (Sankaradeva and Madhavdeva) empowered common people to attain the spiritual teachings and wisdom of these texts. In this manner, the two Mahapurushas absorbed the philosophical essence of the core scriptures of India's Sanatana Hindu Dharma, simplified complex concepts, and enriched the treasury of Assamese literature by composing various works infused with indigenous environments and the emotional flavor of Bhakti (devotion).

In the context of Pauranic influences on later epic literature, the internationally renowned scholar A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada (1896-1977), a monumental spiritual teacher, philosopher founder of "The International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON)", commonly known as the "Hare Krishna Movement", through his authoritative monumental translations and commentaries are based on Bhagavata Purana is worth mentioning. Swami Prabhupada written books that are directly derived from and based on the Puranas such as

1. Shrimad-Bhagavatam (Multi-Volume Cantos 1 through 12) Corresponding Purana: Bhagavata Puraṇa (also known as the Shrimad Bhagavatam). It is Swami Prabhupada's most extensive literary work, where he translated and provided detailed purports (commentaries) for the entire Bhagavata Puraṇa, spanning 12 cantos.

2. Kṛiṣṇa, the Supreme Personality of Godhead (The "Krishna Book") Corresponding Purana: Bhagavata Puraṇa (specifically the 10th Canto).

Life holy grail of Shrila Prabhupada is depicted as fulfilling the order of his spiritual Guru, Shrila Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati Ṭhakura, to spread Shri Caitanya Mahaprabhu's message of Kṛiṣhṇa consciousness throughout the western-world and across the globe and fostering Universal Brotherhood. This demonstrates that the influence of the Puranas, which testify to great antiquity, continues to this day.

Conclusion: As established in the foregoing discussion, it is observed that the Puranas occupy a distingushing place among the foundational scriptural texts of Indian civilization and culture. The Puranas serve as the sole vehicle for propagating Indian civilization and culture among the general public through poetry, narratives, anecdotes, and ballad. Purana is the treasury of the vivid knowledge including Vedas. Observing and reflecting upon the Puranas is paramount for comprehending the true significance of the Vedas. According to Manu, the Vedas and the Puranas are equally glorious. Because, indeed listening to the recitation of the Puranas yields the same auspicious results as listening to the recitation of the Vedas. Like the Vedas, there is a rule of listening to the Itihasas and Puranas during the Shradha ritual.

स्वाध्यायं श्रावयेत् पित्रो धर्मशास्त्राणि चैव हि ।

आख्यातानीतिहासांश्च पुराणादि खिलानि च।।

In the continuum of time, the influence of the Puranas has never faded away; rather, becoming the foundation of subsequent literature, it has attained novelty in the forms of poetry, tales, and scripts, becoming even more captivating. Taking powerful source materials from the Puranas, proficient scholars have demonstrated their exceptional mastery to create new literary works that have made them world-famous and enabled them to occupy a lofty place in the hearts of readers. For instance, taking the core source material from the 'Dushyanta-Shakuntala' Upakhyana of the 'Adi Parva' of the 'Mahabharata' and the 'Shakuntala' Upakhyana of the 'Padma Purana', Mahakavi Kalidasa composed the innovative play titled 'Abhijnanashakuntalam', through which he became renowned not only in India but across the entire world, earning the esteemed title of "Kavikulaguru".

The influence of Puranas on later epic literature is a keen and far-reaching subject. This study proves that ancient Puranas were not only descriptive and religious texts but they also pondered clearly the plot, subjects, characterization, philosophy and ethics of later epics. The concept of the subject matter of Puranas (akhyana, Upakhyana, gaatha and Kalpasuddhi) could be the best source for later composers to enlarge their imaginative scope. This research focuses on the continuity and interdependence of ancient Indian literature, while commencing various new paths for comparative studies evaluating the influence of these Puranas on regional epics.

At last, following extensive discussion, it is evident that Indian literature particularly epic poetry is incomplete without the Puranas.

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