

The Visnu Purana

The Puranas were composed as a tool to popularize the religion of the Vedas and still contain the essence of the Vedas (Sharma 1). The Puranas utilize themes from the Vedas to create connections with stories and deities of contemporary importance during their time of composition (Rodrigues 273). The works of the Puranas are derived from different ages and have been compiled under different circumstances (Wilson ix). It is not easy to date the Puranas. For instance, it is noted that the *Visnu Purana* lacks any clear particulars that aid in ascertaining the date of composition (Wilson lxix). The Puranas were composed in Sanskrit and therefore, were not directly accessible to the common person and were disseminated by Brahmin scholars (Sharma 5). It is believed that Puranas were composed within the oral tradition of recitations in temples, courts, and for royal patrons (Rodrigues 290). The Puranas have been regarded as traditional Indian history compiled and transmitted in order to preserve the past as a repository of values for the present and future (Matchett 138).

It is commonly held that there are eighteen major or Mahapuranas together with many lesser Puranas, called Upapuranas (Rodrigues 290). The number eighteen may not be intended to single out specific Puranas from the others, but instead it may be a symbol of their close connection with the Mahabharata, just as there were eighteen *paravans* in the *Mahabharata*, eighteen chapters in the *Bhagavadgita*, eighteen days of the *Mahabharata* battle, and eighteen armies fighting in it (Matchett 134). The Puranas make up a great deal of literature derived from the oral tradition and are usually categorized along with the Epics as they tell of historical information together with myth. The Mahapuranas and Upapuranas were written in Sanskrit and most contain five *laksanas*, or distinguishing marks. The five distinguishing marks are: *Sarga*, the creation of the universe; *Pratisarga*, secondary creations, or the destruction and renovation of

worlds; *Vamsa*, genealogy of gods and patriarchs; *Manvantara*, the creation of the human race; and, *Vamuanucaritam*, dynastic histories (Sharma 4). The five *laksanas* provide order for the events of the Purana and provides the listener with a view of time and space in which the narrated events occur (Narayana Rao 89). It is suggested that the five distinguishing marks found in Mahapuranas and Upapuranas are shared with other traditional religious scriptures of the world, including the Bible (Sharma 4).

A further classification is found within the eighteen Mahapuranas distinguishing between goodness (*Sattva*), passion (*Rajas*) and ignorance (*Tamas*) (Sharma 4). The *Visnu*, *Naradiya*, *Bhagavata*, *Garuda*, *Padma* and *Varaha Puranas* are considered to be pure or that of goodness and purity (Wilson xii). These are believed to be Vaishnava puranas. The second classification includes the *Matsya*, *Kurma*, *Linga*, *Siva*, *Skanda* and *Agni puranas* which are Tamasa or are considered to be Puranas of the darkness. These Puranas prevail from the quality of Tamas which refers to ignorance and gloom and are seen to be indisputably Saiva puranas (Wilson xii). Finally, the third classification includes *Brahmanda*, *Brahmavaivartta*, *Markandeya*, *Bhavishya*, *Vamana* and *Brahma Puranas* which are designated from Rajasa, or as being passionate. These Puranas are to represent the property of passion (Wilson xii). The *Visnu Purana*, according to the *Padma Purana*, is found within the Sattva category (Sharma 4).

The form of the Puranas is one of a dialogue and the immediate narrator is commonly believed to be Lomaharshana or Romaharshan, the disciple of Vyasa (Wilson x). Vyasa is a Sanskrit term meaning 'arranger' or 'compiler' of the Puranas as spoken by Brahma (Wilson x). The Puranas have different speakers for different listeners and no speaker ever directly narrates in any of the Puranas (Narayana Rao 94). The two poems, *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, are considered to be safe sources for ancient legends of the Hindus, and it is believed that most, if

not all, Puranas are drawn from these texts (Wilson lvi). Further, the *Visnu Purana* contains twenty-three thousand *slokas* and has six major sections (Sharma 309).

The first of the six books within the *Visnu Purana* focuses on the details of creation of the universe through the dialogue of Maitreya, attending the sage Parashara (Sharma 309). The first book first explains how the universe proceeds from eternal crude matter and how forms are created and developed from the simple substances previously evolved, or the concept how forms reappear after temporary destruction. This book tells of how creations are periodical and termination occurs when not only all gods and all other forms are annihilated but at the end of the life of Brahma, when again, the elements are merged into a primary substance (Wilson lvii). This is said to take place at the end of every Kalpa, or day of Brahma, and affects only the forms of inferior creatures and lower worlds (Wilson lvii). Visnu is claimed to adopt the form of Brahma to create the universe and when the universe is to be destroyed, Visnu then adopts the form of *Siva* and performs the act of destruction (Sharma 309).

The first book also illustrates the creation of beings that Brahma produced. Demons were created from Brahma's thighs, gods emerged from Brahma's mouth, ancestors or pitris were created from the sides of Brahma and the humans were created last (Sharma 309). The four *varnas* or classes of people are credited as being derived from Brahma: the brahmanas from his mouth; the kshatriyas from his chest; the vaishyas from Brahma's thighs; and the shudras from his feet (Sharma 309).

The second book tells the story of India receiving its name from Bharata and explains of the seven circular continents, their surrounding oceans and to the limits of the world (Wilson lx). Although the topographical system described are mythological fictions containing no truth with

respect to India or the Bharata, the mountains and rivers are verifiable along with verifiable truths surrounding cities and nations that are described (Wilson lx). This second book also tells of Bharata as a king turned Brahman, who attains liberation, which is peculiar to this Purana (Wilson lx)

The third book explains the authorities of their religious rites and beliefs together with describing the caste duties, the obligations of different stages of life and the celebration of rites, in harmony with the *Laws of Manu* (Wilson lxi). These descriptions are a distinguishing feature of the *Visnu Purana* which is further characteristic of being work of an earlier time than the other Puranas (Wilson lxi). The *Visnu Purana* directs no self-imposed observances, no holidays, no birthdays of Krsna, no nights dedicated to *Lakshmi*, no sacrifices and no models of worship other than those corresponding to the rituals put forth in the Vedas.

The fourth book includes comprehensive information about ancient history including dynasties and individuals which is thought to be somewhat of a genuine chronicle of persons and possibly occurrences (Wilson lxii). Although aspects surrounding the longevity of the princes of some earlier dynasties can be discredited, it is understood that a consistency in the succession of persons is based on a credible foundation (Wilson lxii).

The fifth book contains another distinguishing characteristic of the *Visnu Purana* in that it is almost entirely occupied with the life of Krsna (Wilson lxviii). This unique characteristic is an argument against its antiquity and this book leads some to question its originality (Wilson lxviii). Finally, the sixth book tells of the dissolution of the world and the end of all things by fire and water and then proceeds to tell of universal renewal (Wilson lxix). The annihilation of the universe and the release of the spirit from bodily existence, as described in the *Visnu Purana*,

is often comparable to other doctrines. The telling of the cyclical dissolution of the world followed by the perpetual renovation of the world in the sixth and final book of the *Visnu Purana*, exhibits commonly accepted opinions of the ancient Hindu world (Wilson lxix).

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