

The Skanda Purana

The Puranas are a genre of *smṛti* literature in India. The Puranas literally mean “tales of old” or “ancient,” which adheres to the idea that they are the sourcebooks for Hindu mythology (Rodrigues 290). Historical information is blended with pseudo-history and myth to create the legends found in the Puranas. It can be argued, like E. H. Rick Jarow does in his encyclopedic article on the Puranas, that they are the core texts of Hindu religiosity as some provide the cornerstones of particular devotional traditions, templates for institutions, social observations, and traditions of secular knowledge (Jarow 7497). They are sometimes described as being the narrative portion of Vedic sacrifice; a kind of fifth Veda (Jarow 7497). The *Devibhagavata* says “*Sṛuti* and *smṛti* are the two eyes of *dharma* but the Purana is its heart” (Jarow 7499, XI.1.21). The Puranas are usually identified as having five characteristics (*pancalaksana*). These are creation (*sarga*), re-creation of the universe after its dissolution (*pratisarga*), genealogies of the gods, sages, kings, and patriarchs (*vamsa*), cyclic ages of humanity presided over by Manu, the father of humanity (*manvantara*), and royal dynastic histories (*vamsanucaritam*) (Jarow 7497). However, these characteristics make up only a small percentage of the vast and diverse narratives that cause the Puranas to be so difficult to define and comprehend. There are eighteen Mahapuranas (Great Puranas) in total. The thirteenth Purana is the *Skanda Purana*, which is the largest of the major eighteen Puranas as it contains the most number of verses. The *Skanda Purana* consists of doctrines and worship of Siva, as well as legends about Siva and his son Skanda (Tagare 1992: xvii). It is an expansive text, spread out over several books that address general topics of interest including social, cultural, political, historical, geographical, and

religious themes (Tagare 1992: xvi). Through the description of narratives included in the *Skanda Purana*, the different legends presented about the worship of Siva and Skanda, as well as legends derived from specific regions in India, are what make this an influential *smṛti* text in the Hindu tradition. The *Skanda Purana*, and the Puranas in general, are a tool for the modern historian of ancient India as they provide considerable help in reconstructing the past history as a major literary source containing such aspects of ancient Indian life listed above.

In Chapter 36, in the third book (Brahma-Khanda) and second section (Dharmaranya-Khanda) of the *Skanda Purana*, we get the narrative of King Ama of Kanauj/Kanyakubja. Puranic evidence clearly indicates that King Ama was an influential monarch well known both to the Jaina and Brahmanical traditions and that he ruled from Kanauj as his capital appears now to be a well founded fact (Agrawala 112). P. Agrawala's article "New 'Skanda Purana' Evidence on King Ama of Kanauj" says that this section of the text is extremely rich in cultural and ethnological material (110). During the Kali Age is when King Ama is on the throne. The Kali age is described in the *Skanda Purana* as an age of people that are full of lustfulness, greed, and destruction. The people of the Kali Age reject the Vedas and the class distinctions, so that all four castes are mixed. "Subjects became inclined to commit sins" under King Ama's rule and Jainism was adopted instead of their Brahmanical tradition that follows the Vedic literature closely (Tagare 1996: 191, III.ii.36.34-38). This chapter's explanation of the tendencies of the people from the so-called Kali Age is an example of the text's richness in cultural and social material. It describes the relations between people of the same and different social castes that reflects the change in religious following from the traditional

Hinduism to Jainism. The plight of the Brahmana class is what brings the Vedic tradition back. King Ama promises them if they bring Hanuman to him, he will restore their power and livelihood in his kingdom. However, when the Brahmins bring proof of Hanuman, the packet of hair from his left armpit, to King Ama, he went back on his word and expelled them, saying he will never give them anything (Tagare 1996: 210, III.ii.38.16-21).. The Brahmanas threw down the hair and when they departed the whole place was ablaze with flames of fire. In this episode of the burning of Kanauj by the Brahmanas, we presumably have a reference to some historical incident of incendiary destruction at Kanauj during King Ama's reign (Agrawala 113). By Chapter 40, the legend of King Ama and the struggle of the Brahmanas to reinstate Vedic tradition during the upheaval of the Kali Age finishes with the reasoning behind why it is important to listen to this Purana. It outlines what the Vedas bring to society and what the Brahmanas are responsible for. The restrictions and regulations are laid out so "He who wants to do what is beneficial to his sons" is clear about how to do that (Tagare 1996: 239, III.ii.40.36-38). This legend in the *Skanda Purana* is an example of how particular legends of this *smṛti* text can be used historically to situate the religious beliefs into the social (through the struggles of the Brahmana caste), the cultural (in the behavior of the people under the influence of Jainism with the rejection of the Vedas), and the political (with the emphasis on what King Ama does during his reign) history of ancient India.

The *Skanda Purana*'s also offer geographical and local information on the sites where the legends take place. In R. Mehta's "Two Legends from the 'Skanda Purana' – Study" she uses the legend of the goat-faced daughter of Bharata's son in the Kaumarikakhanda and the legend of the woman with the deer's face in the

Vastrapathamahatmya to explain how these *Skanda Purana* texts can be used to eulogize the power and sanctity of a local *tirtha* (sacred place, usually destination of pilgrimages, that is associated with a deity or saint) (208). The legend of the girl with the head of a goat relies on the local flora and fauna as well as local geographical features of the Cambay region (Mehta 208). Migrating herds of cattle, sheep, and goat are an annual phenomenon (Mehta 208). Therefore the motif of the goat is an outcome of the local peculiarities of this site. The goat-faced girl's voyage to Cambay after her realization of her previous birth relates to the fact that Cambay is a well-known medieval port (Mehta 208). Also, the legend's praise of Siva indicates the Saivite learning of the legend, which adds to the site's holiness (Mehta 208).

In the legend of the girl with the face of a deer, the girl narrates to King Bhoja of Kanyakuba the history of her seven births. A well-known motif in Indian literature is the relationship of two individuals through a series of birth, which is clearly an inspiration for this legend of the *Skanda Purana* (Mehta 208). The death of the deer in her sixth birth by a lion relates to true events in the Gir forests. The Gir forest is a sanctuary for lions even today, and their natural food includes the deer (Mehta 208). This region is also populated with a variety of deer (Mehta 208). As a result of these two facts about the geographical location of the legend, the local experiences are weaved into the narration of the legend. Another part of the legend that leads to this belief in the influence of local phenomenon on the *Skanda Purana* narrations is the legend's disclosure of knowledge of the previous births due to the intervention of Sarasvata, the best of the Brahmins (Mehta 209). The term *sarasvata* might refer to a *tantrika* or to a Brahmin from the Sarasvata caste (Mehta 209). While human speech by animate and

inanimate objects is a widespread motif in Indian literature, the belief in the *tantrika* powers, which would make an animal speak in human tongues proposed in this legend, emphasizes the power of Sarasvata (Mehta 209).

While the studies of these two legends, outlined by Mehta, seem to reflect legends that explain local phenomenon in their stories, this is only one way to define the *Skanda Purana*. The title of this section of the Puranas, “Skanda,” is the name of Siva’s son Kartikeya, also called Skanda. The beginning of the *Skanda Purana* tells the tale of Skanda’s birth, starting with the narration of Siva’s marriage first to Sati and then to Parvati (Sharma 126; 128-129). The demon Tarakasura was tormenting the deities and could only be killed by a child. It was believed that only Siva’s son could kill Tarakasura (Sharma 128). Agni (the God of Fire) consumed the semen Siva discharged on the earth and Parvati cursed the earth for preventing her sexual intercourse with Siva and her ending her desire to have a son (Mani 747). Agni could no longer hold Siva’s semen as it was diminishing his powers, so Ganga (the river goddess) asked Agni to throw the semen into her waters, where it remained for nearly five thousand years (Mani 747). The semen, however, became a burden to Ganga as well, so the Brahma told her to take the semen to a forest in the Udaya mountain and deposit the semen on a particular kind of grass and after ten thousand years a male child would be born (Mani 747). When the child was born, called Subrahmanya, he let out a cry that brought the six Krttikas to provide him with breastfeeding (Mani 747). Since Subrahmanya looked at all six Krttikas, one after the other as it nursed, it developed six faces (Mani 747). After the birth of this child was known, the question of ownership of the child came up between Agni, Ganga, Parvati and the Krttikas (Mani 748). As the child had six faces, Siva said that it should be the

Krttikas' son under the name Karttikya, Ganga's son under the name Kumara, Parvati's son under the name Skanda, Agni's son under the name Mahasena, and his own son under the name Guha (Mani 748). Siva declared this son would be a great yogi that will be known under all of these names (Mani 748). At his coronation, Siva's son was crowned the army-chief, and as such the God of War. Skanda eventually defeats Tarakasura and takes a vow of celibacy that leads to his more humane treatment of women by looking upon them as equal to his much respected mother, Parvati (Mani 748).

The legend of how Skanda came to be born is important for the cult of Siva worship the *Skanda Purana* emphasizes. The locations of Siva's semen deposits are considered holy sites and are used as sites of pilgrimage for believers of the Hindu tradition, especially the holy Ganga river. The emphasis on both the worship of the great Lord Siva and on specific localities within the legends included in the *Skanda Purana* make it an important text that deals largely with places of pilgrimage and therefore worship (Jarow 7498).

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Related Topics

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Websites Related to *Skanda Purana*

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