

THE PURANAS

The Puranas are a group of eighteen religious Hindu texts consisting of 400,000 slokas. Their composition dates back to the 4th century CE (Wilson 22 & 24). They are often considered to be the fifth Veda. They are listed as follows, in respective order: *Brahma, Padma, Vaishnava, Saiva, Bhagavata, Naradiya, Markandeya, Agneya, Bhavishya, Brahma Vaivaarta, Lainga, Varaha, Skanda, Vamana, Kaurma, Matsya, Garuda*, and *Brahmanda Purana* (Wilson 23). They are the main source of Hinduism's mythology, but include history as well. They are not considered to be authoritative texts of Hindu belief, but are used as guides for worship (Wilson 5). There are also another group called the Upapuranas, which are also eighteen in number. They are considered to be lesser texts, and are not as studied due to their inferior status. The Puranas focus on mainly non-vedic deities: namely Visnu, Siva, and Devi, all of which are equated with Brahman, rather than Vedic deities (Wilson 13). The sage Vyasa is said to have composed the texts. As a result, it is similar to the epic the *Mahabharata* and is considered to be *smrti*. However, the Puranas focus on mainly on *bhakti* practices, rather than dharmic practices. In the Mahapuranas, the practice of worship (*puja*) is described as a form of worship that anyone can do, regardless of class or gender. These include forms of *puja* such as ascetic observances (*vrata*) and pilgrimages (Singh 219).

The Puranas were one of the first texts to be converted from oral representation to the written word (Brown 76). They can be classified in many different fashions, including general classifications dependent upon their general teachings. Classification based on the teachings of three qualities (alluded to in the *Matsya Purana*) are widely accepted (Wilson 19-22). The three qualities are: truth (Satta/Sattika), ignorance (Tamas/Tamasa), and passion (Rajas/Rajasa),

which are also the three *gunas* of Sankhya philosophy. Six Puranas represent each quality, thus the eighteen Puranas can be classified as three groups of six, corresponding with the quality they focus on. The Puranas that collectively represent Sattika are the Vaishnava Puranas. Tamasa is represented by the Saiva Puranas and Rajasa by the Brahmanda Puranas (Wilson 20). The *Matsya Purana* does not explicitly classify which Puranas are specific to each quality, but does give indications that sections within the Mahatmya Purana that refer to Hari or Visnu are considered to be Sattika; sections devoted to Agni or Siva are Tamasa; and sections which concentrate on Brahma are Rajasa (Wilson 20-21). More specifically, within the Vaishnava grouping are the *Vishnu, Srimad Bhagavata, Naradiya, Garuda, Padma* and *Varaha Puranas*. The Puranas included in the Saiva grouping are the *Siva, Linga, Skanda, Agni, Matsya, and Kurma Puranas*. The Brahmanda grouping includes the *Brahma, Brahmanda, Brahma Vaivrata, Markandeya, Bhavishya* and the *Vamana Puranas* (Wilson 20).

The Puranas can also be classified based on their narration of five main subjects, which are known as Pancha Lakshana (Wilson 10). The five properties are: Sarga (creation), Pratisarga (renewal or recreation), Vamsa (genealogy of the deities), Manwantara (period of time of the Yugas), and Vamsanucaritam (tales of genealogical figures, heroes, and deities) (Wilson 7). The Puranas also include descriptions of the cosmology and philosophy. Each of the eighteen Puranas do not necessarily teach about each of the Pancha Lakshanas. They may include some of them or none at all. They also use stories of deities to demonstrate their teachings (Vansanucaritam). Therefore, each of the Puranas differs in the material it covers. The Puranas are not entirely coherent in the information they provide, but have greater efficacy when viewed as a whole.

A general description of the teachings contained in each of the Puranas is given below: the *Brahma Purana* describes Sarga, tells of the Manvantaras, describes how yoga should be performed and dedicates much to Krsna (Wilson 28-29). The *Padma Purana* includes accounts of genealogy and cosmology and *bhakti* (Wilson 30). The *Visnu Purana* describes Sarga (Wilson 32). The *Saiva Purana* includes details of Vamsa and Manvantaras (Wilson 37). The fifth Purana, the *Bhagavata Purana*, tells the history of Krsna (Wilson 43). The *Narada Purana* is composed of prayers to Visnu (Wilson 53). The *Markandeya Purana* describes Sarga, Manvantaras, and Durga, but in an un-religious way. It is merely a sequential history (Wilson 56-58). The *Agni Purana* does not include accounts of the Pancha Lakshana. It focuses on medicinal therapies as described in the Sausruta as well as grammar (Wilson 55-56).

The ninth Purana, the *Bhavishya Purana* includes details of Pratisarga, in addition to dedication to numerous deities, religious rites and ceremonies, vratas and caste duties (Wilson, 58). The *Brahma Vaivarta Purana* mainly includes prayers dedicated to Krsna (Wilson, 66). The eleventh Purana, the *Linga Purana* deals with Sarga and Pratisarga (Wilson 68). The *Varaha Purana* focuses on pilgrimage sites (Wilson 71). The *Skanda Purana* deals with the importance of temples and their construction, not a topic directly related to any Pancha Lakshana (Wilson 74). It is said that the *Vamana Purana* is very un-puranic in nature. There are brief references to Sarga and Manvantaras, but it is generally lacking the five teachings of the Puranas (Wilson 76). The fifteenth Purana is the *Kurma Purana*, which refers to Sarga and Manvantara , with the use of Vamsanucaritam in its first section (Wilson 79). The *Matsya Purana* also includes Sarga as well as caste duties and *vratas* (Wilson 82). The *Garuda Purana*'s main objective is the description of *vratas*. It does briefly talk about Sarga, but it is not the main focus (Wilson 84). The last and eighteenth Purana is the *Brahmanda Purana*. This Purana also seems

to be a misfit, not coinciding with the general Puranic nature. It gives description of worship, but does not focus on any of the Pancha Lakshana (Wilson 86). Regardless of the way in which the Puranas are organized, they still have the same teachings and importance. Each is unique, but complementary to one another. Although some of the Puranas have more teachings than others and therefore may be considered more significant (such as the *Visnu Purana*), it is important to view all eighteen books as a whole.

References and Further Readings.

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Written by Erin Stewart (Spring 2009), who is solely responsible for its content.