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Paper: Vedic, Epic and Puranic Culture of India
Module: Brief Notes on Ashtadasa Maha Puranas

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Component-I (B) – Description of module:

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E-Text (Quadrant-I):

1. INTRODUCTION

As it has been learnt in the previous module, the Texts of Puranas, have a prominent place next to the Vedas, Dharma Sastras and the two Itihasas: The Ramayana and The Mahabharata. They are the chronicles of Ancient History of Bharata Varsha. They consist of vivid description of Brahmanda, the Geography of Seven Dvipas and also of Bharata Varsha with all details of Mountains, Rivers, Villages, Towns and Cities of ancient times. Those who study puranas with special interest can become masters of attaining all worldly and extra-worldly comforts with a great ease.

2. MNEMONICS TO REMEMBER THE NAMES OF THE 18 MAHA PURANAS:

As it has been discussed in the previous module the Puranas are classified into different groups as: Maha Puranas, Upa Puranas, Aupa Puranas, Upopa Puranas and Upaupa Puranas having 18 texts of different names in each the present module deals with the basic details of the 18 Maha Puranas in brief. To memorize the names of all the 18 puranas a technique of mnemonics was adopted by the ancient traditional scholars. Accordingly a sloka is available in our tradition composed with the first letters of all the 18 Maha Puranas by memorizing which one can very easily remember all the 18 Maha Puranas.

मद्वयं भद्वयं चैव ब्रत्रयं वचतुष्टयम्।
अ-ना-प-लिं-ग-कू-स्कान्न तमुराणानि पृथिविदुः॥

This sloka is composed of the beginning letters of the names of the 18 Maha Puranas

मद्वयं - मत्सस्यपुराणम्, माककण्डेयपुराणम्
(Two Puranas beginning with the letter म)

भद्वयं - भागवतपुराणम्, भनवष्यपुराणम्
(Two Puranas beginning with the letter भ)

ब्र-नयम् - ब्रह्मपुराणम्, ब्रह्माण्डपुराणम्, ब्रह्मवैवतकपुराणम्

ब्र-नयम् - ब्रह्मपुराणम्, ब्रह्माण्डपुराणम्, ब्रह्मवैवतकपुराणम्
(Three Puranas beginning with the letter ब)

ब- चतुष्टयम् - वराहपुराणम्, वामनपुराणम्, बायुपुराणम्, विष्णुपुराणम्

(Four Puranas beginning with व)

व- अप्रिपुराणम्

ना- नारदीयपुराणम्

प- पद्मपुराणम्

लिङ- लिङ्गपुराणम्

ग- गरुडपुराणम्

कू- कूम्भपुराणम्

स्क- स्कान्दपुराणम्

These names of the 18 Maha Puranas, the total number of slokas in each of these Puranas and the major details of the contents of each are given in detail in Shiva Purana, Devi Bhagavata, Srimadbhagavata, Naradiya Purana, Markandeya Purana, Brahmavaivarta Purana, Lingapurana, Varaha Purana, Kurma Purana, Matsya Purana and Padma Purana.

The following Table gives the details of the total number of slokas in each of the puranas as found in some of the above Puranas.

<table>
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<th>Bhagavata</th>
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### 3. CONTENTS AND DIVISIONS OF 18 MAHA PURANAS

All these 18 Maha Puranas give voluminous information about different subjects besides fulfilling all the Characteristics of a Purana. The information about each of the subjects given in these texts are more large and elaborate than the contents in any of the independent treatises on each of the subjects. Here is a brief introduction to each of these Puranas:

#### 3.1 Matsya Purana

This purana has 291 chapters and the sloka Sankhya in this purana varies from source to source. A brief account of Manvantaras, the story of Pitr Devatas (Manes), a detailed description of the kings of Lunar Dynasty and the victory of Shiva over the Three Demons of Tripuras are some highlighting episodes of this purana. The slaughter of Tarakasura also is well described. As the description of the Incarnation of Matsya (Matsyavatara) is predominant this is called Matsya Purana. The description of the holy places Kasi and Prayaga are note worthy. In about 25 chapters all the details of Royal Policy (Raja Niti) and about the Temple Architecture are of great importance.

#### 3.2 Markandeya Purana
This has 137 Chapters and 9000 slokas. The story of Madalasa and her son Alarka, a Brahma Jnani, is an important narrative in this purana. The interesting thing in this episode is that Madalasa was the Brahmopadesa Guru to her son.

The Stotra of Durga in 700 slokas which is popularly known as Durga Saptasati or Chandi Saptasati is a part of this purana only. Here the magnanimous grace of Mahakali, Maha Lakshmi and Maha Sarsvati and the slaughter of the demons like Sumbha, Nisumbha, Mahishasura and others was well described. This content in 13 Adhyayas is also known as Sri Devi Mahatmya. A detailed account of Mavantaras also is available in this purana.

3.3 Bhagavata Purana

This is very popular among all the puranas as the toughest of all Puranas. It has popularity is Bhakti Sastra also. It is now available in 18000 slokas having been divided into 12 skandhas. This very beautifully bridges connecting the three main paths of Moksha : Karma, Bhakti and Jnana and prove the supremacy of Jnana. The 23 popular incarnations of Lord Vishnu are very authentically presented in this great work. Particularly the 10 Skandha of Bhagavata is spared for the very beautiful narration of the story of Sri Krishna.

If anybody proclaims that he is a scholar his knowledge should be tested in the text of Bhagavatha Purana. If he succeeds he can be declared a scholar. This notion is much spread in the Indian tradition. (Vidusham Bhagavate Pariksha).

There is a difference of opinion among the scholars regarding which text to be included by the title Bhagavata in the list of 18 Maha Puranas. While some people support Vishnu Bhagavata for inclusion others plead in support of Devi Bhagavata. There is another famous notion that Vishnu Bhagavata was written by a later scholar named Bopadeva. Hence the Sakteya Devi Bhagavata was included in the list in place of Vishnu Bhagavata.

But both the texts have their respect and status among the scholars. Like Vishnu Bhagavata, the text of Devi Bhagavata also was divided into 12 Skandhas with 18000 slokas in it. Devi Bhagavata deals with various incarnations of Goddess Para Sakti. Sarvam Sakti Mayam Jagat – is the declaration of Devi Bhagavata.

3.4 Bhavishya Purana

This is an interesting text in 18500 slokas consisting of the stories of many historical dynasties of Kings who ruled Bharata Varsha in the post Mahabharata War period. As Veda Vyasa belongs to Dvapara Yuga and this text deals with the accounts of the Kings of Kali Age this text is popularly known as Bhavishya Purana (the future to Dvapara Yuga). Besides the stories of the historical dynasties of the kings this text gives a detailed information of different the then existing cults and rituals too. Thus it has ritualistic importance too.

3.5 Brahma Purana

Another name of this Purana is Adi Purana as this text is considered by the scholars as the earliest of all the 18 Maha Puranas. The number of slokas in this text vary from 10000 to 13500 according to different sources. This has 245 Adhyayas in total. The description of Solar and Lunar Dynasties (Surya Vamsa and Chandra Vamsa), The episodes of Parvathi, Markandeya and Gautami Kshetra are very popular. This text deals with Sri Krishna’s Story in 22 Adhyayas which is larger in content, description and nature than the Sri Krishna charita in the Bhagavata Purana. Further this Purana gives a wonderful description of Konarka Temple, Jagannatha Kshetra and many other holy kshetras of ancient India.

3.6 Brahmanda Purana
This Purana has 12000 slokas divided into four quarters, Prakriya Pada, Anushanga Pada, Upodghata Pada and Upasamhara Pada by names. As the very name suggests this is a very beautiful text on the description of the Brahmanda, the Seven Dvipas: Jambu Dvipa, Salmala Dvipa, Kusha Dvipa, Krauncha Dvipa, Saka Dvipa and Pushkara Dvipa. The extensive description of all the Varshas, Countries, Mountains, Rivers, Forests, Cities, Towns, Janapadas and Villages of Jambu Dvipa is matter of great interest for the researchers on ancient World Geography. The story of Parasurama is elaborately given here. The popular Sri Lalithopakhyana, the most adorable story of the Goddess Sri Lalita Paramesvari, is a main constituent part of this Purana.

3.7 Brahma Vaivarta Purana

This Purana is presently available in 18000 or 18500 slokas varying from source to source. This four Khandas: Brahma Khanda, Prakriti Khanda, Ganesha Khanda and Sri Krishna Janma Khanda. The 16th Adhyaya of Brahma Khanda dealing with the science of Indian Medicine Ayurveda has a great importance. The Prakriti Khanda establishes PRAKRITI as the Prime Cause of the Universe and the Goddesses Durga, Lakshmi, Sarasvati, Savitri, Radha and others as the Divine Manifestations of that MULA PRAKRITI. Ganesha Khanda describes the detailed story of the Birth and Grace of Ganesha. Sri Kirshna Janmakhanda has the very interesting instance of the Marriage of Radha and Sri Krishna ritualistically performed by the Creator Brahma in the presence of all Gods and Nanda. The People of Gauda Region of India consider this as the holy text in their tradition of Sri Krishna cult.

3.8 Varaha Purana

This is in the form of a conversation between the Goddess Earth (Bhu Devi) and Varaha Swami (The incarnation of Vishnu), the Earth as the questioner and Varaha Swami as the narrator. Hence this is called Varaha Purana. According to various source this purana had 25000 slokas. But this is presently available in 11000 slokas. While the ancient text was consisting of innumerable Shiva Legends the presently available texts presents all detailed accounts of Indian Vishnu cult, the rituals related to Vishnu such as: Matsya Dvadasi, Kurma Dvadasi, Varaha Dvadasi, Nrsimha Dvadasi, Vamana Dvadasi, Prasurama Dvadasi, Rama Dvadasi, Ashadha Dvadasi, Buddha Dvadasi, Kalki Dvadasi and Padmanabha Dvadasi. The episodes of Madhura, Nachiketas and various Vishnu incarnations have prominence in the present text.

Curiously there are several aspects of Ramanujya Vaishnava cult, the importance of Pancharatra Agama and many standardized aspects of Vishnu cult found in this text. Hence some scholars opine that these are latter interpolations.

3.9 Vamana Purana

This is one of the smaller Puranas of the 18 Mahapuranas consisting of 10000 slokas in 95 Adhyayas. This consists of the stories of various incarnations of Lord Vishnu. This extols the greatness of Lord Shiva and Shiva Bhakti with high attention. The details of a good number of Shiva Bhakti kshetras is note worthy here.

3.10 Vayu Purana

This is 24000 slokas according to all sources and is in 112 Adhyayas. Another popular name of this Purana is Shiva Purana. This Purana has four quarters by names Prakriya Pada, Anushanga Pada, Upodghata Pada, and Upasamhara Pada. This text gives many interesting aspects of Cosmology. Then it deals in detail with the Varna Dharmas and
Ashrama Dharmas. The Geographical description of the earth given in this Purana is vivid and detailed. In the Adhyayas 50 to 53 The astronomical description also given with all rare details of the celestial world. The information about Yajnas, Yagas, The sages, the races of sages, ancient royal dynasties and the social customs has a great prominence in assessing the ancient Indian Knowledge spheres. The chapters 86 and 87 deal with the secrets of Music. Though this is said to be a Purana dealing with the stories of the glory of Siva there is a considerable account of various incarnations of Vishnu also. While 11th to 15th chapters deal with Pasupata Yoga with a lot many facts and method of practising it, the last 9 chapters of the text are spared for an exhaustive narration of Vaishnavism.

3.11 Vishnu Purana

This is one of the most authentic one among the 18 Puranas. This has 23000 slokas distributed to six Amshas and 126 Adhyayas. The first Amsha is about the Creation of the Universe. The second Amsha gives a detailed Geographical Picture of the Globe. The Third Amsha is meant for the elaboration of Varna Dharmas and Ashrama Dharmas. The fourth Amsha exclusively explains the stories of the Kings of Chandra Vamsha (The Lunar Dynasty). In the fifth Amsha the story of Sri Kirshna is narrated which matches at length with the Dasama Skandha of Srimadbhagavata. The sixth Amsha is about the very systematic process of Dissolution of the Universe. This Purana reconciles both the paths of Bhakti and Jnana to pave a safer and straight way for salvation. The specialty of this Purana is that it was quoted by Adi Shankara also. He paid respect to this text on par with the text of the Mahabharata.

3.12 Agni Purana

This Purana is encyclopedic by nature having 16000 slokas in 383 Adhyayas presenting the stories of all the incarnations of Vishnu, the story of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata in brief. Besides these stories many chapters are spared for dealing with various branches of learning such as: Temple Architecture, canons of Indian ethical code, Ritualistic procedures, Astronomy, Astrology, Prosody, Grammar, Poetics, Yoga Sastra, Gemology, Ayurveda, Geology and subjects related to many other sciences and arts.

3.13 Naradiya Purana

This Purana is in praise of the Glory of Vishnu in 25000 slokas and is divided into two parts. In the Purva Bhaga of this Purana there are 125 Adhyayas and in the Uttara Bhaga there are 82 Adhyayas. This text highlights the Pancharatra Agama tradition. This purana gives a detailed information of various festivals and rituals that occur on all different Tithis in both bright fortnight and dark fortnight of all the twelve months of a year. Particularly the 24 Ekadasivratas in a cycle of every year and their ritualistic and devotional importance in Sanatana Dharma are well annotated. Just like in the Agni Purana in this Text also there are very rare topics presented pertaining to Vyakarana (Grammar), Nirukta (Etymology), Jyotisha (Both Astrology and Astronomy), Chandas (Prosody) and other branches of learning. In addition to this there are many interest details of different Mantras of Rama, Hanuman, Krishna, Kali, Mahesha and other gods.

3.14 Padma Purana
This is the second largest of all the 18 Maha Puranas. It has 55000 slokas divided into six Khandas: Srishti Khanda, Bhumi Khanda, Brahma Khanda, Patala Khanda, Svaraga Khanda and Uttara Khanda.

As these names suggest the Srishti Khanda gives the accounts related to the Churning of Milky Ocean, the episode of the Sovereign King Prthu, The slaughter of the demon Vṛtra, The incarnation of Vamana, The story of Markandeya, The birth of Kartikeya, The slaughter of the demon Tarakasura, The story of Rama and many other stories are described in a novel manner. In the Bhumi Khanda the stories of ancient kings of different dynasties are narrated. The Brahma Khanda establishes the glory of the worship of Shiva and Keshava with equal respect. The equal stature of Brahma with Shiva and Vishnu to is very devotedly established. The Svaraga Khanda presents an interesting description of the regions of Gods, Gandharvas, Apsaras and Yakshas. The episode of Shakuntala with all closest similarities with the theme of Kalidasa’s Abhijnana Shakuntalam is found in this Purana and this episode of Shakuntala has striking differences from the episode of Shakuntala in the Mahabharata. The Patala Khanda describes the beauty and glory of the region of great Serpents. Scholars are of the opinion that Uttara Khanda is a latter addition as it has all the details of the clashes between Shiva and Vaishnavas during the reign of Kulottunga Chola of 1133 AD. Besides, this part of this Purana gives details of the story of Ramanjua also.

3.15 Linga Purana

This is a Purana in 11000 slokas. This Purana deals with various incarnations of Lord Shiva. As this text has a special reference to the story of Agni Linga (A Firy Linga) this is called Linga Purana. Besides the stories of Shiva’s glory this Purana gives the details of many sacred places of Shiva Temples in India.

3.16 Garuda Purana

Another name of this Purana is Sauparna Purana. Except in the Matsya Purana in all the other sources it is said that this is a text in 19000 slokas while Matsya Purana says that this has 18000 slokas only. This Purana has 264 Adhyayas in two Khandas. This is a wonderful text on different disciplines of knowledge such as: Royal Policy, Ayurveda, Architecture, different systems of Indian Philosophy giving prime importance to Sankhya, Yoga and Vedanta, Prosody, Gemology, Ethics, Agamas etc. All these matters are well described in the Purva Khanda. The latter Khanda is in 45 Adhyayas and popularly known as Preta Khanda. This part of Garuda Purana is recited in Indian tradition during the days of the demise of any person in traditional families. But this Purana gives many interesting accounts of various fields of knowledge satisfying the thirst of knowledge seekers. This Purana was narrated by Vishnu to Garuda. Hence this is known as Garuda Purana.

3.17 Kurma Purana

This Purana contains 17000 slokas according to most of the available sources. But Matsya Purana says that this is in 18000 slokas. This was narrated by Vishnu in the Kurma incarnation to the king Indradyumna. Hence this is called Kurma Purana. Descriptions of many holy places and rivers are widely presented in this text. Though this was narrated by KURMA-VISHNU the main subject matter of this Purana relates to Shiva only. Hence this is included in the list of the six Shaiva Puranas.

3.18 Skanda Purana
This is the largest of all the 18 Maha Puranas. While Shiva Purana mentions this to have 84000 slokas, all the other sources say that this has around 81000 slokas in total. The 81000 slokas are divided into six Samhitas (Texts) by names: 1. Sanatkumara Samhita (36,000 slokas), 2. Suta Samhita (6,000 slokas), 3. Shankara Samhita (30,000 slokas), 4. Vaishnava Samhita (5,000 slokas), 5. Brahma Samhita (3,000 slokas) and 6. Saura Samhita (1,000 slokas).

According to another division the entire Skanda Purana is divided into 7 khandas by names: Maheshvara Khanda, Vaishnava Khanda, Brahma Khanda, Kashi Khanda, Reva Khanda, Tapi Khanda and Prabhasa Khanda.

Of all the Six Samhitas of the first division Suta Samhita is very prominent one which is with a great devotion recited by the devotees of Shiva. This Suta Samhita has four major divisions: 1. Shiva Mahatmya Khanda, 2. Jnana Yoga Khanda, 3. Mukti Khanda and 4. Yajna Vaibhava Khanda. This is a very prominent Purana on the worship of Shiva. This is rich even in the poetic beauty also when compared to all the rest of the Puranas.

4. Summary

This is the brief description of all the 18 Maha Puranas. A detailed study of all the Puranas will help to estimate the valuable contributions of the Puranas in understanding and appreciating our ancient Indian Geography and Indian history.