An Introduction to the Puranas

Tell me a fact and I will learn. Tell me a truth and I will believe.  
But tell me a story and it will live in my heart forever.  
An American Indian Proverb

Introduction

When I was a boy growing up in a village in India, I would occasionally eavesdrop on a group of men discussing someone in the habit of relating his woes to one or two of them. A common response was “What is his purana now?!” Others would share the laugh and move on to the next gossip.

The traditional Indian compositions known as puranas are encyclopedic compilations of ancient stories, wisdoms, and tradition--both religious and secular. The contents of puranas cover god stories, genealogies of kings, creation and destruction stories, advice on rituals, the caste system, prescriptions for spells and charms and many secular topics. They represent Hinduism at the street level and have enjoyed mass appeal because they were written both in Sanskrit and local languages in a mix of poetry and prose. Thus they have often provided better access to Hindu thought than the Vedas and Upanishads. Their sacred character was assigned to them by naming as their author/compiler the same Vyasa considered to be the compiler of the Vedas, the Mahabharata and Vedanta philosophy. They are, in fact, of more recent origin (500 BCE to 500 CE) with many later interpolations.

The puranas are structured in such a way that the contents are told by a narrator to an attentive listener. For example the Agni Purana is presented to sage Vasishtha by the fire god Agni who discusses a variety of topics including the worship of Shiva, Ganesha, Durga, installation procedures for deities in temples, astrology, architecture, sculpture, and principles of grammar.

However, puranas have never occupied the same level of respect and reverence as the Vedas. Many Hindus may not realize that Hinduism could not have survived had it not been for these ingenious and, as it happens, essential conduits to expand and expound on the carefully crafted and terse mandates of the Vedas. These conduits are indeed the puranas--those most absorbing and attention-getting stories of gods and demons.

There is another important reason for the development of such a conduit. The Vedas are sound-based and are therefore strictly structured in terms of pitch, intonation, cadence and other important parameters pertaining to producing sound. They needed to be precise and required training that led to Vedic chants as we know them today. Put the chants on paper and they lose their integrity unless they are noted with the equivalent of musical notes. Clearly this approach is beyond the reach of many – hence the prose, i.e. the word-based puranas.
Pujyasri Jagadguru Shri Chandrasekharendra Saraswati, the 68th pontiff of Kanchi Kamakoti Peetham, lovingly called Maha Periyavaal (the great beloved elder, in Tamil) referred to the puranas as the magnifying glasses of the Vedas, i.e. they clarify the mandates of scriptures in an elaborate and more clear way than can be readily absorbed from those Vedic texts.

Literally pura means past. And purana translates as events or stories or anecdotes of the past. Stories and story telling have served as essential foundations for all cultures. Rare indeed is a human who is not stirred by anecdotes and tales that reinforce belief systems and drive home a scriptural mandate or two. Hindus are big in this experience. And have always been so. Stories of major and minor gods and goddesses told and retold by professional harikatha dasas (literal meaning: devoted god-story-tellers) through recitals embellished by gestures and songs and jokes used to be a common feature of rural India. These harikatha dasas would travel from village to village staying for a day or two with some kind host family. Word would spread (way before version 1 of social media!) and as dusk settled folks would gather in the courtyard of a temple or at a street corner to listen to stories for an hour or two or more.

The harikathas I attended way back when, as a middle school student, were enjoyable and exciting. One particular dasa I do remember had rigged up what we now call a lectern with a series of collapsible metal tubes that let him arrange his note book and leave his hands free to use cymbals and other simple musical instruments. An accompanying violinist and a drummer (from within the community) would spring into action when the dasa began to render a song to illustrate the story. A bagful of individual handwritten booklets contained his repertoire. Before beginning he would ask the audience what story they would like to hear: Sita’s Abduction, Pandavas defeat at the Dice Game? Bhishma’s Vows? … Once the audience settled for a topic, an appropriate notebook would come out and the interest and anxiety build up – in adults as well as us children. Simple and yet so meaningful!

These experiences throughout India in villages and towns taking place for a thousand years and more escaped the attention of alien rulers! And the culture, values and traditions were preserved! Who would have guessed? To appreciate now that this was not an organized attempt at any level makes me feel humbled and grateful to Hindu ancestors who devised this natural, uncomplicated approach. If you never touched or read a Veda, you are not at a loss because the puranas took care of you!

The puranas open up the often abstruse material of the Vedas, Brahmanas and Upanishads in digestible form. For example, mandates such as सत्यं वद (Tell the truth) or धर्मं चर (Practice dharma) outlined in the Taittiriya Upanishad are crisp and terse. They are part of the concise instructions, given in ancient times, by the guru to a student completing his Vedic studies. Such statements are also dry. But when described through stories in context about what happened to Harishchandra or Yudhishtira or Duryodhana, then the concept comes alive. The stories may be
simple, complex or even fantasies but they all keep the interest level high. धर्म चर (Practice dharma) is a principle that most Hindus are aware of but it took Vyasa a hundred thousand couplets to elaborate and drive home the import of this fundamental Hindu value!

Consider another example. Chapter 6, stanza 30 of the Gita states:

यो मां पश्चिम सर्वं सर्वं च मभि पश्चिमि
तस्यां हि प्रणाश्यामि स च मे न प्रणाश्यामि

A person who sees me everywhere and sees everything in me never becomes separated from me nor do I become separated from that person.

A story, in the Srimad Bhagavatam (Canto 7), of a young boy named Prahalada, proves this point and illustrates the power of stories to drive home the fundamental principle stated above. Read the story of Prahlada in the section on Stories.

**The Principal Puranas**

There are 18 puranas identified as mahapuranas (great puranas or main puranas, 19 if you include Vayu Purana), an equal number or more of upa puranas (auxiliary, sub or second level puranas), and sthala puranas - puranas that are regional, highly localized puranas–associated with many holy places, great bodies of water and forests. Note that the Vayu is omitted when Shiva Purana is included and vice versa.

The Mahabharata contains 100,000 couplets. The mahapuranas contain 400,000 shlokas defined as granthas (a grantha is a verse containing 32 syllables), of which a single purana, i.e. Skanda Purana, alone takes up 100,000 shlokas! Generally each purana focuses on a single deity but not always.

The mahapuranas are Brahma Purana, Padma Purana, Vishnu Purana, Shiva Purana, (or the Vayu), Bhagavata Purana, Narada Purana, Markandeya Purana, Agni Purana, Bhavishya Purana, Brahmavaivarta Purana, Linga Purana, Varaha Purana, Skanda Purana, Vamana Purana, Kurma Purana, Matsya Purana, Garuda Purana and Brahmanda Purana.

**The Classification of Puranas**

The puranas are also, somewhat arbitrarily, classified as depicting a particular quality or glorifying a particular member of the Hindu Trinity
• Vaishnava aspects identified as Sattva, to which belong the Vishnu, Bhagavata, Garuda, Naradiya, Padma and Varaha Puranas
• Brahma as the central deity, identified as Rajas and including Brahma, Brahmanda, Brahmavaivarta, Markandeya, Bhavishya and Vamana Puranas or
• Shaivite aspects with the quality of Tamas and represented by the Shiva (or Vayu), Linga, Matsya, Kurma, Skanda and Agni Puranas. It is worth emphasizing the arbitrariness of such qualification as the puranas do not appear to lend themselves to such sharp differences as one might be lead to believe!

The Panchalakshnam Criterion (The Five Characteristics)

The traditional criterion for a manuscript to qualify as a purana is that it satisfy five requirements defined as panchalakshnam: (1) creation stories of the universe, (2) stories covering its growth leading to its destruction, (3) stories of gods and patriarchs during these periods, (4) histories of Manus and manvantaras, and (5) genealogies or histories of kings as descendants of the sun god (Surya Vamsha) or the moon god (Chandra Vamsha). It is important to note that almost none of the extant puranas fulfill all the above requirements.

Dating & Historic Relevance of the Puranas

There isn’t a topic that has remained more controversial among Indologists than dating Hindu scriptures. Accepting that fact, we may cite what may be probable post-Vedic and post-epics dates for the puranas. Between 500 BCE and 500 CE, the two famous Sanskrit epics—the Ramayana and the Mahabharata—were written down in the form in which they more or less exist today. Because the epics were favorite sources for storytellers throughout India, they existed for centuries in several editions (called recensions) that tended to carry the flavor of different regions. In so far as the mahapuranas are concerned, Swami Harshananda’s excellent treatise A Concise Encyclopedia of Hinduism presents a table (Vol. 2, page 572) that lists the period of composition of all the mahapuranas with dates varying between 200 A.D. and 1300 A.D.

One is tempted to raise a major question when one realizes that most of these stories, if not all of them, are covered by that great epic, the Mahabharata. Furthermore, Vyasa, the composer of the vast poem, who is also credited with the composition, arrangement and editing of the puranas, actually boasts about his epic at the very beginning of the poem:

यदिहास्ति तदन्यत्र यशेहास्ति न कुञ्जचित्

What is found here may be found elsewhere
but what is not here cannot be found anywhere else
If that is indeed the case, then one might ask, why bother with the puranas? What purpose do they possibly serve? A short answer may be that the epic is entirely non-denominational, i.e. it represents the total Hindu tradition (and indeed human kind) - in every aspect, whereas the puranas are sectarian in nature and the author/s may have selected some or many of the stories in the epic and tweaked them a little here or more there to suit a particular sect of Hindus. For example, the Vaishnava sect may choose a story and have their deity Vishnu play all the roles in full and entirely by him–roles normally played separately by the Hindu Trinity–to the complete satisfaction of Vaishnavas. Shaivites have done similarly where Shiva is glorified as the totality, i.e., IT (Brahman)! Lord Krishna (worshipped by all factions of Hindus as an avatar of Vishnu) declared himself as IT in the Gita. However it is necessary to sound a note of caution. The sectarian nature alluded to above is not a common feature of all puranas. Agni Purana, for example, does indeed include both Vishnu and Shiva aspects.

Another cautionary note to the reader: If you were to pick up a purana, any purana, do not expect an efficient organized textual content. The contents do not always even agree with the title of a section or chapter and it has remained so, several interpolations notwithstanding! A good example is the so-called Bhumi Kanda in the Padma Purana which one would expect to begin with a description of the earth. Instead it begins with a discussion of deeds; good and bad, committed by a man during his lifetime! It gets even more puzzling in that the subsequent sections contain a discussion of King Yayati and his wedding!! Similarly, elaborate description of Varaha, the third avatar of Vishnu is to be found in the Vayu, Brahmanda, Brahma, Padma and Matsya Puranas – and NOT in Varaha Purana! One could speculate about the reasons for this utter lack of a logical structure (it is beyond the scope of this work) except to observe that a logical structure may indeed have been a feature of the original but subsequent interpolations by a number of different authors may have resulted in the current version.

The basic problem may lie in the variety of versions and fragments of these puranas available with different people in different locations with widely varying number of stanzas, topics covered, some stories told in one purana retold in another and versions in several languages. Horace Hayman Wilson constantly refers to copies of some puranas he possessed which, when compared with those stored at the East India Company’s library, showed substantial differences in some cases. There may have been many other versions too not accessible to him. It is as though there were thousands of Wikipedias in ancient India where authors/monks/scholars/teachers threw in what they thought was relevant to one or other purana, resulting in a chaotic situation demanding organization and collation.

And yet the most remarkable and almost miraculous, but rarely noticed, fact is that over the millennia the very many factions of Hindus have followed their beliefs and practices with little or no interference or obstruction from other Hindus! Hundreds of different gods and goddesses are chosen as ishta devatas (preferred deities) and worshipped without any hindrance freely and openly. This philosophy of “live and let live” is so ingrained in the minds and hearts of Hindus
Concept of Time in the Puranas

As every purana is required to provide an account of the creation of the universe, it is necessary to consider the Hindu concept of time which serves as the basis for developing theories of creation. Irrespective of the theory/concept/myth of creation presented in one or other purana, the temporal scheme is the same and is defined by the life span of Brahma visualized as follows:

The Hindu believes in the idea that time is circular and not linear. According to this concept, there are no beginnings and no finite endings; time is simply a continuum. When the words beginning and end are used they pertain to a cycle. Thus we should regard the so called creation myths as re-creation myths. Hindus define periods of time as cyclical in nature, with each cycle containing four sub-periods known as yugas: Krita, Treta, Dwapara, and Kali Yuga. Added together, the four yugas, known as a mahayuga, total about 4.5 million years. During the cycle, the quality of life decreases. Each successive cycle is characterized by gradually declining time spans and human values leading to imbalance and lack of equilibrium inviting dissolution. Then another cyclical period starts, and the cycles repeat all over again. This view of time has helped in developing the ancient Hindu perspective on life—a perspective that allows for a tolerant view of events and people. One might think of this decline as the dissipating sound of a bell struck at the beginning of a cycle which eventually ends with total stillness.

The fundamental parameter that defines balance and equilibrium is the uniquely Hindu concept of dharma. During the first yuga, i.e. Krita, dharma is visualized as a cow fully stable on its four legs. In the subsequent Treta Yuga the cow has only three legs but can still stand. As values and quality of life worsen in Dwapara Yuga the cow has only two legs with a bare semblance of stability. However at the end of the cycle, as we reach Kali Yuga (present age), the dharma cow has the impossible task of balancing on a single leg! The evident instability leads to chaos and the end of the mahayuga.

A yuga is an era. Using the span of the present era, the Kali Yuga, with a duration of 432,000 years as a measure, the span of the four yugas are as shown below:

* Krita Yuga, which lasts 432,000 x 4 years
* Treta Yuga, which lasts 432,000 x 3 years
* Dwapara Yuga, which lasts 432,000 x 2 years
* Kali Yuga, which lasts 432,000 years
A complete cycle of a Maha Yuga therefore lasts about 4.5 million years. Hindus believe that our present age is in Kali Yuga which has just begun subsequent to the end of Dwapara Yuga when Parikshit, the grandson of Arjuna and son of Abhimanyu ascended to the throne at Hastinavati about 7,000 years ago. So we are at the very early stages of our era.

One complete cycle is a manvantara (period of a Manu, the progenitor of the age; the current age is that of Vaivasvata Manu) and spans a time period of 4.32 million years. One thousand such cycles equals a single day of Brahma known as a kalpa and is 4.32 billion years long. Brahma’s night is just as long. When Brahma rests at night, at the end of each kalpa, the three worlds (Bhuloka, Bhuvarloka & Suvarloka) are dissolved in a deluge (pralaya); when his life span ends, all seven worlds will perish. When a life span of Brahma ends, the cosmos ends but Brahman remains; another Brahma will begin the task of creation and the cycles will repeat. It is during this very long night, lasting over 4 billion years, that the chaos of a pralaya (huge flood) which dissolves every entity in the universe ends and leads gradually to calmness and absolute stillness.

One may look upon the kinetic energy that prevailed during the chaotic period at the ending of the cycle as converting to pure potential energy over those billions of years. When conditions are right, activities pertinent to re-creation begin with this vast potential energy converting slowly and gradually to kinetic as needed.

There isn’t only one theory (story!) of creation (re-creation) or myth presented in all the puranas. There are several beliefs varying in levels of sophistication – some requiring the ingredient of total belief and some tempting the reader to speculate a possibly scientific view that somehow did not reach completion. Three such concepts are briefly shown below for interested readers to pursue in depth to obtain a fuller understanding of the Hindu views of creation. All the myths assume an extraordinarily large period of rest at the end of which there are stirrings of a new cycle beginning.

1. Narayana (Vishnu) floating in eternal calm resting on a bed which is a serpent known as Anantha (endless) or Adishesha (the first remainder). A lotus sprouts out of Narayana’s navel indicating a birth and out of this lotus emerges Brahma the Creator charged with the task of initiating the new cycle.

2. A golden womb which has the primal egg (cosmic egg) serving as an abode of Brahma resting on the vast ocean from which life issues.

3. An interaction between Purusha and Prakriti (Spirit and Matter), not unlike an interaction between a sperm and an egg leading to creation.

Summary

The vastness in terms of topics covered, the repetitious nature of the puranas (driven by the aforementioned panchalakshanam requirement), loose organizational structure of the texts, frequent interpolations resulting in sheer voluminous nature of the individual puranas are all
overwhelming to the casual reader and frustrating to scholars. These characteristics were articulated by Indologist Sir Monier Monier-Williams thus: “… interwoven with the radically pantheistic and Vedantic texture of these compositions, tinged as it is with other philosophical ideas (especially the Sankhayan doctrine of Prakriti), and diversified as it is with endless mythologies, theogonies, cosmogonies, and mythical genealogies, we have a whole body of erroneous teaching on nearly every subject of knowledge.” A brief comment about “erroneous teaching” is in order. From a Hindu point of view (at least this Hindu’s) it is very unlikely one would go to the puranas to learn about a philosophical idea such as Sankhya or Varnashrama. Such concepts are rooted either in the Vedas or the Gita anyway, and therefore the latter serve as sources of reference to the seeker. The core value of the puranas therefore lies in the stories which are aimed at teaching a moral or value. Stories, by definition, may embellish an incident, exaggerate a conflict and add color to drive home a point or two. In this context the intention of teaching a value is not diminished and therefore an “error” is immaterial. Nevertheless scholars have had a difficult time reconciling real differences in content, dates, organization and intent. If the panchalakshanas were to be used as a yard stick, some puranas might not even qualify to be called such as is often noted by Horace Hayman Wilson. As to contents, Ernest Wood and S.V. Subramanyam (The Garuda Purana, Bibliobazaar, 2008) express their frustration with a harsh comment: “Our Hindu Puranas, however, among the great mass of rubbish they contain, …”

The frustration is understood, but there cannot be much dispute about how the puranas, on the whole, have served to nurture Hindu beliefs over centuries. The reference to possible “errors” in the above characterization is acknowledged by no less an authority than the Shankaracharya of Kanchi Peetham when he declared during one of his discourses that “it would be better to preserve the Puranas in the form in which they have been handed down to us notwithstanding the apparent errors and distortions” (Hindu Dharma, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, p 444). Thus the context is all important in viewing the puranas.

Puranas are anecdotes, plots within plots, depicting sometimes hilarious and sometimes deadly serious and dangerous situations --- all geared towards translating what may be termed as terse philosophical mandates into an elaborate scenario to teach the true meaning of applying that principle so we can lead better lives on this earth.

A good example, from the field of science, may be Newton’s second law of motion, which simply states that the force acting on a body in motion is the product of its mass and its acceleration. A purist needs to know no more. All that is implied in this equation is clear and evident to the purist. But the rest of us may be able to understand, appreciate and enjoy the beauty of this principle when we learn that there isn’t a single machine operating on land, water or air that can function without the proper application of this equation in its design. Students of physics and engineering brighten up in class seeing an analysis showing how a car operates or an airplane flies when this equation is used in their designs. That indeed is the “story” or “purana” of a Mercedes Benz or a 747!
Puranas can therefore be enjoyed at various levels. They can be (and are) appreciated as mere stories that tell the life’s trials and tribulations of heroes and others – or as messages of a moral or ethical nature that we need to pay attention to in dealing with similar situations. Hindu children growing up listening to the stories develop a permanent feeling and attachment to the characters. The stories are also acted out in dramas where the audiences can experience the pain, suffering or joy of the characters as they use, violate or adopt a moral law. Millions enjoy to this day the great contributions of a Vyasa or a Homer. The world is richer for it. Peter Brooks’ nine hour drama of the Mahabharata is an example of how Europe and America enjoyed the experience of watching people of another culture ten thousand miles away and five thousand years ago struggle with the consequences of winning or losing the battle between good and evil.

Or the puranas can be challenged as to their veracity, historicity, accuracy, authenticity, in which case all is essentially lost – the joy, the moral principle, and the intrigue. The questions and doubts may be appropriate but the challenged cannot, in most cases, come up with any document or an inscription that can satisfy a historian bent upon evidence. The fact that some of these events may have occurred thousands of years ago may not convince the stubborn. Even accepting that there are likely exaggerations, interpolations, additions to stories over the course of time to magnify a point or two may not be satisfactory to those who do not/cannot feel the stories. Legends and stories in every culture raise similar questions. Perhaps Carl Sagan’s declaration that absence of evidence is not evidence of absence may be invoked to simply enjoy the tales. Many Hindus have naturally done so for thousands of years and there is no indication that that will change soon. Thank goodness!

Hindu scholars believe that the accessibility of the puranas compared to the much more complex Vedas and Upanishads, has been largely responsible in preserving the tenets and practice of Hinduism in spite of major turmoil both within Hindu society as well as external invasions and conquests. Hindu audiences assemble in the evenings in a temple hall or a village square to listen to professional story tellers. Children learn these stories from their parents and grand parents. Adults look to these treatises for instruction regarding conducting ceremonies and celebrations. In modern days stories of interest from one or the other puranas are embodied in movies, dramas, dance dramas, popular fiction, television and other media outlets. Tapes, CDs and search engines allow folks to listen to these puranas at will.

The Individual Mahapuranas

Our intention in providing a short summary of each purana (in future postings) is to note the narrator and the listener(s) in the dialogue that initiates each purana and to highlight a list of topics covered in each purana. Readers interested in an in-depth look of a purana may consult the list of references cited here.
A brief description of the location where the discussions took place is given below:

Naimisharanya, a forest region, about 90 km from present day Lucknow, a peaceful area full of trees, birds, flowers, bees, and fruits and lakes and fish and deer, on the banks of the Gomati river, plays an important role in ancient Hindu practice of conducting yagnas. This is where Vyasa and his disciples are said to have held long sessions and taught the puranas and the epics to a large assembly of sages. Even though a purana may have originally been narrated by a god to a chosen sage (for example Brahma to Narada) in a conversational mode, the eventual rendering, which was composed and written down, always occurred at Naimisharanya where a visiting sage such as Suta or Ugrasharavas sat down with the sages to narrate.