

Puranas dealing with Sri Krishna-Lila.

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The Purānas hold a unique place in the history of the religious literature of the Hindus. They are an inexhaustible mine of pure gold in the shape of very useful and interesting information which they contain not only about the social and political history of this vast land but also about the ethical and philosophical problems of perennial interest. They are indeed a veritable encyclopædia of Hindu Religion and Ethics. At a time when the language and the teachings of our oldest scriptures, the Vedas—the Fountain-head of all religions and philosophies—were, due to the prevailing ignorance of the age, liable to be misconstrued and misunderstood, the venerable Vedavyāsa, that great benefactor of humanity, took upon himself the onerous task of composing such works for the benefit of the erring mortals as will be suitable compendia for explaining in an easy way the subtle truths and the profound problems of the holy Śruti. These works are the present Purānas, which have got the obvious purpose of popularizing and propagating the ideas and ideals of the great Sanātana Dharma.

At present we are not concerned with the study of the age and authenticity of the Purānas. Suffice it to say that we hold all the eighteen Purānas to be of equal importance for the study of our ancient culture and religion and do firmly believe that, inspired as they are by a highly noble ideal for their composition, they are undoubtedly characterized by an unmistakable unity of purpose running through all of them. As the classical definition of Purānas (‘पुराणं पञ्चलक्षणम्’) has it, they possess five well-known characteristics (लक्षण). They deal, as ideally conceived,

with सृर्ण (creation), प्रतिसृर्ण (dissolution of the universe), वंश (royal genealogies), मन्वन्तर (different Manu ages) and वंशानुचरित (detailed histories of some of the prominent royal dynasties of ancient India). This is only an ideal description, but all the Purānas do not conform to it. It is only in some of the major ones that all these characteristics attain their full scope and significance.

Śrī Kṛṣṇa was a noble scion of the deservedly reputed Yādava dynasty. His divine qualities apart, He was, even as a great historical figure, a noble embodiment of all the great qualities of head and heart. He was a towering genius of His age, who, endowed with a magnetic personality, outshone every rival, if any, and commanded profound respect and admiration from all, the high and the low, from everyone who happened to come into his contact. Viewed even in an historical perspective, Śrī Kṛṣṇa deserves ample treatment at the hands of the writer of the Purānas. But He was more than that. He is the highest incarnation of the great Viṣṇu descended for the destruction of the wicked and the protection of the righteous. Hence it is but natural to suppose that the Purānas will accord Him ample scope for a detailed description of a variety of His divinely sweet Līlās. And this they have done. Out of the complete list of the 18 Purānas, about two-third deal more or less with the life and deeds of Śrī Kṛṣṇa. The Puranic narration of Śrī Kṛṣṇa's Līlās has followed two different methods. In some they are treated only incidentally, along with the kings of the ancient Kṣatriya dynasties; while in others special sections or books have been devoted to a lengthy and appropriate

description of these important incidents. The Purānas of the first type are *Garuḍa* (I. 149), *Kūrma* (I. 24—26), *Vāyu* (96), *Nārada* (II. 81), and *Devī-Bhāgavata* (IV. 20—25 and IX), which contains useful information about Rādhā along with the other manifestations of Śakti. The Purānas of the second type are about six, all of which have been analysed and described here. They are *Agni*, *Brahma*, *Padma*, *Brahmaivaivarta*, *Viṣṇu* and *Śrīmad Bhāgavata*. Out of these, the *Agni-Purāna* has got only a short chapter; while the *Brahma* and *Padma* Purānas have devoted several Adhyāyas to this subject. The last three have devoted whole sections and books to the description of *Kṛṣṇa-charita* and should be considered on that score to be the most important and comprehensive storehouse of all the available information collected in these ancient works touching upon the many-sided personality of Śrī Kṛṣṇa and upon His divine Lilās. We shall present below only a short account of those Adhyāyas and books of the above-mentioned Purānas in which *Kṛṣṇa-charita* has been dealt with.

AGNI-PURĀNA

As it stands, it presents an excellent epitome of all available and useful information about the different branches of learning and sciences. Hence its very nature forbids its attempting a lengthy treatment of Śrī Kṛṣṇa's life. It has devoted a single *adhyāya*, viz. the 12th, consisting of only 56 short *anuṣṭup* verses, and thus catalogues only the important events connected with the life and work of Śrī Kṛṣṇa.

BRAHMA-PURĀNA

It contains 33 Adhyāyas (180—212) on the life of Śrī Kṛṣṇa. Both the Lilās—those of Vṛndāvana and of Dwāarakā—have been presented here in a concise form. Here are to be found all the important Vṛndāvana-Lilās which we have come to associate with the name of that Divine Cowherd.

The 189th *Adhyāya* gives a nice description of *Rāsa-Lilā*, where we find veritable echoes of some of the charming verses of *Śrīmad Bhāgavata*. The Gopis' lament at the sudden departure of Śrī Kṛṣṇa to Mathurā at the instance of Akrūra is profoundly touching and truly heart-rending. But a thorough comparison of these Adhyāyas with those in the fifth *Aṁśa* (book) of the *Viṣṇu-Purāna* reveals the fact that they contain a nicely made epitome of the latter. Here we find that two or three Adhyāyas have been condensed into one by the omission of a large number of verses not considered essential for following the thread of the narrative. For want of space we are compelled to omit a detailed comparison and analysis of these chapters here, but wish to stress the point that these chapters of the *Brahma-Purāna* are totally based upon those of the *Viṣṇu-Purāna*, as is evident not only from the similarity of ideas but also from the identity of their construction and phraseology. In fact, they present a judicious selection of the verses of the *Viṣṇu-Purāna* with the obvious purpose of giving, in a nutshell, the chief events of Śrī Kṛṣṇa's life.

PADMA-PURĀNA

It is one of the most important among the major Purānas. In point of extent and volume it is second only to the great *Skanda-Purāna*, which is easily the most voluminous among the Purānas. The text of the *Purāna* as published from the Ānandāśrama, Poona, contains six, Khaṇḍas or books. They are *Ādi*, *Bhūmi*, *Brahma*, *Pātāla*, *Sṛṣṭi* and *Uttara* Khaṇḍas. Out of these, two books devote special Adhyāyas to the elucidation of many important topics of Vaiṣṇava theology as well as a concise treatment of Śrī Kṛṣṇa's life. A critical study of this *Purāna* is essential for understanding the theological basis of the various schools of medieval Vaiṣṇavism, especially of the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism. In fact, its greatest value lies in its being thoroughly imbued with

the Vaiṣṇava spirit. In consonance with its true nature we find special items of purely Vaiṣṇava faith properly handled and popularly treated therein. Thus in the 30th *Adhyāya* of the *Uttara-Khaṇḍa* is described the *Māhātmya* of *Gopī-chandana*; the 83rd and 34th *Adhyāyas* give a popular description of a typical Vaiṣṇava; the 85th *Adhyāya* describes, with the proper mantras for recitation, the festival called *Dolotsava*, which is to be celebrated on the *Ekādaśī* day of the brighter half of the Chaitra month. It is the *Padma-Purāṇa* that contains that celebrated *Māhātmya* of *Śrīmad Bhāgavata* in *Adhyāyas* 189 to 194, illustrated with the aid of the well-known anecdote of Dhundhakāri, who attained his final liberation as a direct result of the hearing of *Śrīmad Bhāgavata* for seven days only.

So much for the Vaiṣṇava element in this *Purāṇa*. Now coming to the treatment of the life of Śrī Kṛṣṇa, we find it described twice, once in the *Pātāla-Khaṇḍa* and then in the *Uttara-Khaṇḍa*. In the second, there are eight chapters devoted to it from the 272nd to the 279th. Here the very first *Adhyāya* consists of a highly philosophical praise uttered by Indra to Śrī Kṛṣṇa, in which the whole of the celebrated *Hiraṇyagarbha-Sūkta* has been incorporated, of course, with the necessary linguistic and metrical changes—due to its adoption in a Puranic text. The great value of this *Stotra* lies in presenting a Puranic interpretation of a Vedic *Sūkta*. Another peculiarity of this section lies in the fact that a large portion of the 277th and the 279th *Adhyāyas* are written in a clear and chaste prose of the well-known Puranic type.

The other section occurs in the *Pātāla-Khaṇḍa* of the *Purāṇa* and is of extreme value for properly understanding the theological and philosophical conceptions of the medieval Vaiṣṇava sects. This section consists of eight

chapters and extends from the 69th *Adhyāya* to the 77th. The 69th *Adhyāya* furnishes a highly elaborate and allegorical conception of Vṛndāvana, which is taken to represent upon the surface of this earth that ideal Vṛndāvāna—Nitya Vṛndāvana as it is termed—the highest abode of Bhagavān, situated even above the far-elevated Vaikuṇṭha.* The city of Mathurā is represented as a lotus of a thousand petals and with strict accuracy the complete circle is divided and sub-divided into different parts each of which has been described with its presiding deity. The present Vṛndāvāna has also been similarly represented in the *Brahma-Saṁhitā*, one of the famous scriptures of the Pañcharātra school. The rest of the section has been devoted to the elucidation of the real nature of Rādhā and Her companions—their names, their mystical significance, their relative importance and relation with Śrī Kṛṣṇa in the *Rāsa-Līlā*, etc. Scholars know that Rādhā, who plays such an important role in the growth of the later Vaiṣṇavism, is conspicuous by Her absence from the pages of the *Viṣṇu* and the *Bhāgavata Purāṇas*, but it is in the *Padma* as well as in the *Brahmavaiivarta* that we meet with the complete paraphernalia of the Rādhā-cult. Hence the extreme importance of the *Padma-Purāṇa* in the history and growth of Vaiṣṇavism is quite evident.

THE BRAHMAVAIVARTA-PURĀṆA

It is one of the most celebrated *Purāṇas* containing a detailed description and popular presentation of the charming *Līlās* of Śrī Kṛṣṇachandra. The *Purāṇa* as it goes has 4 large sections or *Khaṇḍas*—viz., (1) *Brahma-Khaṇḍa*, (2) *Prakṛti-Khaṇḍa*, (3) *Gaṇeśa-Khaṇḍa*

* सात्वतां स्थानमूर्धन्यं विष्णोरत्यन्तदुर्लभम् ।
नित्यं वृन्दावनं नाम ब्रह्माण्डोपरि संस्थितम् ॥
पूर्णं ब्रह्मसुखैश्वर्यं नित्यमानन्दमव्ययम् ।
वेङ्कटादि तदंशांशं स्वयं वृन्दावनं भुवि ॥

and (4) *Kṛṣṇa-Janma-Khaṇḍa*. The last book contains about 129 chapters and thus presents an elaborate and comprehensive account of the great deeds performed by Śrī Kṛṣṇa either at Vṛndāvana or at Mathurā and Dwārakā. But the great merit of this *Purāṇa* lies in its attaching greater importance to the Rādhā element in the Kṛṣṇa-worship. And hence naturally the Vṛndāvana-Lilās have received an elaborate treatment at the hands of the writer, and the figure of Rādhā as painted there emerges out of her hazy associations and vague surroundings into a living figure of great personal beauty and supreme spiritual charm. In reality the *Brahma-vaivarta* completes the divine picture of Rādhā as portrayed by the cognate *Paṁḍma-Purāṇa* and the two together stand out as the most authoritative texts upon the worship of Śrī Kṛṣṇa with a special leaning towards the Rādhā element therein. Suffice it to say that the later Vaiṣṇava theologians have amply drawn for their materials upon these sections of the *Paṁḍma* and the *Brahma-vaivarta* Purāṇas.

THE VIṢṆU-PURĀṆA

For the study of the philosophy of Vaiṣṇavism, this *Purāṇa* along with *Śrīmad Bhāgavata* occupies an extremely important place. Though not much in extent and volume (it contains only 126 Adhyāyas, and is thus only one-third of the great *Bhāgavata*), it has supplied the most important materials for the philosophical superstructure of Śrī Vaiṣṇavism. The fact is not unknown to scholars that the great Rāmānujāchārya has drawn copiously upon this *Purāṇa* for the sake of making his philosophical theories tally with the Puranic conceptions. Hence the importance of this *Purāṇa* for a study of the Vaiṣṇava faith.

The *Viṣṇu-Purāṇa* has been divided into six sections or books styled as *Aṁśas*. The fifth book is entirely devoted to a

description of Śrī Kṛṣṇa's life. All the important Lilās of Śrī Kṛṣṇa have been presented here in an excellent literary form. The same old and familiar *anuṣṭubha* is there; but it does not possess that looseness of construction frequently met with in the other Purāṇas, but has got a peculiarly chaste literary ring about it. The writer has done full justice to the life of Śrī Kṛṣṇachandra by his impartiality for all Lilās; he has followed the golden mean by allowing the important events of both the portions of Śrī Kṛṣṇa's life an equal scope for their presentation. Thus, the 38 Adhyāyas of this book are of paramount importance for presenting a complete picture of the life of a very busy individual. The mystical *Rāsa-Lilā* has been described in a particularly charming manner, but it is important to note that like the *Bhāgavata* even here the name of Rādhā is conspicuous by its absence.

ŚRĪMAD BHĀGAVATA-PURĀṆA

On the life of Śrī Kṛṣṇa, and for a complete description of His divinely charming Lilās, there is no higher authority than the *Bhāgavata*. Though the other incarnations have also been treated here, Śrī Kṛṣṇa's Lilās are, in fact, the main theme of this *Purāṇa*. In point of literary charm and philosophical subtlety, it is indeed equalled by no other *Purāṇa*. The supreme importance of the *Bhāgavata* can also be gauged by the host of commentaries and glosses written by those learned scholars of ancient times who are reckoned by later generations to be the highest authorities on such subjects. The language has got a supreme beauty of its own, and, though at times a bit archaic and hence somewhat difficult, it possesses a uniform dignity of expression, rarely to be met with in the other compositions of the same type. The old critical statement 'विद्यावतं भागवते परीक्षा' has a large element of truth

in it, since it is no exaggeration to say that the *Bhāgavata-Purāna* is a veritable touchstone of Śāstraic Knowledge.

Out of the twelve books or Skandhas as they are called, the tenth deals entirely with the Līlās of Bhagavān Śrī Kṛṣṇa. This *Skandha* is not only the longest of all, but covers about one-fourth of the whole of the *Bhāgavata*. It is divided into two parts—the first part, containing 49 Adhyāyas, is taken up entirely with those Līlās of Śrī Kṛṣṇa which centre round Vṛndāvana and Mathurā; while the second part, consisting of 41 Adhyāyas, deals with the incidents of Śrī Kṛṣṇa's later life connected with Dwārakā and thus in these 90 Adhyāyas we possess information about Śrī Kṛṣṇa in greater detail than in any of the Purānas. Despite its possessing a few more Adhyāyas, the *Brahmavaivarta* cannot surpass the depth and that literary charm which are deservedly associated with the name of the latter *Purāna*. Space forbids us to enter into a detailed analysis of the tenth book; but we cannot close these notes without remarking that, as the tenth is considered to be the quintessence of the whole of the *Bhāgavata*, so the five Adhyāyas (29—33) descriptive of that divinely inspired *Rāsa-Līlā* of Śrī Kṛṣṇa are rightly reckoned as the very quintessence of the whole of the tenth *Skandha*. The fact is that the *Rāsa-pañchādhyāyī* of *Śrīmad Bhāgavata* is a literature by itself, so charming in expression, so deep and subtle in its philosophical contents, so mystical and divine in its entirety that the like of it cannot be found anywhere in the whole range of the vast Sanskrit literature. Another peculiar feature of this book is its abounding in a number of delicious songs mostly sung by the Gopīs on different occasions, the sweetest of the lot being the celebrated *Gopī-gīta* in the 31st *Adhyāya* and the most philosophical and the subtlest being the *Śruti-*

Gīta in the 37th *Adhyāya*. The presentation of Śrī Kṛṣṇa's Līlās, on the whole, is, at once simple and charming. Rightly is this *Sāmādhi-bhāṣā* of Vyāsa considered the most important of the authorities in the Vaiṣṇava sects founded by Śrī Chaitanya and Vallabhāchārya.*

CONCLUSION

This humble attempt on the part of the writer will no doubt disclose the fact that there are due to the emphasis laid upon these aspects, two lines of approach to the chequered history of Śrī Kṛṣṇa as found in those major Purānas that devote special books or sections to the proper delineation and subtle analysis of one of the most important, though highly complex, personalities of ancient times. One is in main theological, where the author has taken great pains to explain in a lucid way the spiritual meaning underlying incidents and the deep allegory concerning the life-history of Śrī Kṛṣṇa—His present environments, His companions and friends, etc., especially belonging to His earlier life at Vṛndāvana and Gokula. This is the main point in the Kṛṣṇa sections of the *Padma* and *Brahmavaivarta* Purānas, which have been naturally utilized in such Pañcharātra works as *Bṛhad Brahma-saṃhitā* and others and have also been extensively drawn upon for laying the theological foundations of the medieval Vaiṣṇava schools with a leaning towards the Rādhā element in Kṛṣṇa-worship. The other line of approach is chiefly philosophical, where the other elements have been subordinated to stress the philosophic aspects of Śrī Kṛṣṇa and His worship. This is virtually presented in the *Viṣṇu* and the *Bhāgavata* Purānas, where the divine aspects of Śrī Kṛṣṇa have been amply brought out in all their subtle

* वेदाः श्रीकृष्णवाक्यानि व्याससूत्राणि चैव हि ।
समाधिभाषा व्यासस्य प्रमाणं तच्चतुष्टयम् ॥

beauty and sublime charm. But even here we realize a fine shade of difference in the indebtedness of the later Vaiṣṇava sects to these ancient store-houses of Vaiṣṇava faith and culture. Śrī Vaiṣṇavism with its preference for the worship of Lakṣmī-Nārāyaṇa is more indebted to the *Viṣṇu-Purāṇa* for its philosophic contents than to others and hence Āchārya Rāmānuja shows a considerable partiality for this *Purāṇa* in the copious extracts he has made in support of his philosophical position. On the other hand, *Śrīmad Bhāgavata* is the mainstay and the supreme authority with those Vaiṣṇava cults which show a preference for the worship of Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa. And hence it is no wonder that it is the most important scripture of the Chaitanya and Vallabha sects of Vaiṣṇavism and

naturally it has been accorded there an equal, if not a greater, authority with the well-known *Prasthānatraya* represented by that spiritual trio, the Vedas, the *Brahma-Sūtras* and the *Bhagavadgītā*. If the one school extols the *Bhāgavata* to be the 'Spotless authority' (श्रीमद्भागवतं प्रमाणममलम्), the other is not far behind it in showering eulogies upon it and in claiming it to be the समाधिभाषा of Vedavyāsa. In fact, these schools have their life and being in the supremely spiritual atmosphere created for the benefit and the amelioration of the teeming millions with its emphasis upon gaining the Divine Grace through devotion which the *Purāṇa* inculcates to be the only panacea for all human ills.

न दानं न तपो नेज्या न शौचं न व्रतानि च ।
प्रीयतेऽमलया भक्त्या हरिरन्यद् विडम्बनम् ॥