

ANCIENT INDIAN HISTORY & ARCHAEOLOGY, PATNA UNIVERSITY, PATNA

The Puranic Tradition

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The Puranic tradition of historiography deserves our special attention. The *Puranas* have their own history. There was originally a single text called *Purana Samhita* (or *Itihasa Samhita*) whose authorship has been ascribed to the great sage, Veda-Vyasa, twenty-eighth in the line of Vyasas who were known by different names. He inherited the tradition of preserving and compiling the Puranic data from his predecessors. It is categorically stated in the Puranic texts that after having classified the single Veda into four *Samhitas*, he first composed the *Purana* divided into eighteen parts consisting of *akhyanas*, *upakhyanas*, *gathas*, etc. and then a *Itihasa* (history) named the Mahabharata (*Bharata Samhita*) incorporating in it some Puranic data in the Dvapara age itself. The said eighteen *Puranas* contain among other things historical tradition of the Aryans. A.K. Warder's view, that the original *Purana* was composed in the eighth century B.C. during the reign of Adhisimakrsna of the Kali age (sixth in the succession from Abhimanyu) or may have existed in some form earlier, appears to be confusing. In fact, the *Purana* was narrated and not composed during the reign of the said king. In reality, it was the Dvapara age, which marked the beginning of the tradition of historical writing in early India.

It is significant to note that Maharsi Veda-Vyasa in his *Puranas* and the Mahabharata also included some important historical subjects like dynastic genealogies of pre-Bharata war period, contemporary events, etc. And it is perhaps on this ground that Umasankara Diksita has called him *Itihasakartha* (composer of historical work) and "a great historian". N.S. Rajaram also observes: "In ancient times Veda Vyasa was considered a great historian. Tradition credits him with the authorship of the historical epic Mahabharata and also with the responsibility for preserving ancient records found in the *Puranas*. It is practically not possible to chronologically arrange his all works. Nor can he be placed in a chronological framework. He was not a mythical figure but a historical personage. In fact, rsis and maharsis built up the tradition of preserving the historical records of the past. It was Veda-Vyasa who taught the first lesson of history to his pupils. There are some concrete evidences in the Puranic records to show that he taught the *Itihasa-Purana* to his famous disciple, Romaharsana (called suta), who further taught it to his son, Ugrasrava, and six disciples at least five of whom were Brahmanas. The

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Puranic brahmanas belonging to a class of suta had developed historical sense. Their concept of history was fundamentally based on the precepts of said Vyasa. In all probability, the work begun by Vyasa might have been completed by Romaharsana and his disciples. The tradition of studying, teaching and interpreting the *Itihasa* and *Purana* set by Vyasa and followed by his disciples was handed down from generation to generation.

History of composition of Purana

The original *Purana* contained the details of the kingdoms and dynasties with genealogies of only the pre-Bharata war period. It saw several recensions with additions sometime between c.500 BC and AD 500. The *Puranakaras* applying their historical sense time to time incorporated the historical events of the past along with other subjects in it during the previously mentioned period.

The Puranic sutas played very important role in the preservation of ancient Indian historical tradition. According to some Puranic texts, their special duty was to compose, arrange and preserve the genealogies (*vamsavalis*) of the kings of various dynasties which constituted the source material for the *Itihisas* and *Puranas*. They used to compile the royal genealogies on the basis of the information collected from the royal families and the families of the priests and other. The materials collected by them were incorporated in the Puranic texts. They were also employed by the kings in their courts to record the events of their reigns as well as that of their ancestors. Thus they were preservers of historical tradition (both Brahmanical and Ksatriya), custodians of genealogical records and chroniclers of events of the past. Kautilya also informs us that “the pauranika, the suta and the Magadha” were three officials of salaried class retained by a king or prince for listening to the *Itihasa* and *Purana*. The former two are said to have been well conversant with their subjects. Maurice winternitz also admits that the *pauranikas* and *aitihāsikas* were professional storytellers in very ancient time. According to V.S. pathak, the sutas belonged to Brahmana class. He has connected them with the Bhrgu (Bhargava), Angiras (Bharadvaja) and Kasyapa clans of priests of whom the first two were associated with historiography or writing of history (*Itihasa Purana* and later some other texts). The sutas were also the warrior or ksatriya clas or of mixed parentage. The Bhrgu partly merged with Angiras to form a Bhrgvangiras tradition. There is evidence to show that from the end of the Paurava period to the foundation of the Magadha Empire school of Bhrgvangiras

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historians revised the *Itihasa-Purana* tradition. The contributions made by the sutas in the field of historiography was no less significant than that of any historiographer (or *Itihasakara*) of the contemporary age.

The *Sutas* are often equated with bards as they used to bestow extravagant praise on great kings and heroes of the past while writing or singing about their deeds. However, the bards as such did not get official recognition in the royal courts before the dawn of the seventh century AD. Nor did their office become professional or hereditary before that period. The sutas gradually lost their importance. "In the early Medieval age when the heroic tradition of history changed into the courtly one, the wandering Sutas and the Bhrigvangirases were replaced by salaried court – poets. Pargiter has classified ancient Indian historical tradition broadly into two groups, the brahmanic and the ksatriya, for judging their comparative historical value. The events described in brahmanic tradition, according to him, do not bear historicity. Ksatriya tradition, on the other hand, professes to deal with history. He further states that the Vedic and other brahmanic literature give us notices of ancient times from purely the brahmanical point of view and they do not deal with history, while ksatriya tradition preserved in the *Puranas* enables us to have a picture of ancient India and its political conditions from the ksatriya standpoint. He continues to maintain that before the introduction of writing the brahmanas had to rely on tradition when referring to men and events of the bygone age as well as to contemporaneous occurrences, and even after writing was introduced, they discountenanced it so far as their religious books were concerned. There was a total lack of the historical sense among the brahmanas who composed the brahmanical literature. They failed to compose genuine history. They hardly maintained distinction between history and mythology. And there was a constant tendency on their part to confuse the two by mythologizing history, on the one hand, and historifying the mythology, on the other. He has also charged them with fabricating incorrect stories and fables. They often neglected to revise or harmonise historical tradition. The Puranic brahmanas are said to have preserved a large mass of ksatriya and popular tradition, which was inconsistent with brahmanic stories and tenets. He further adds that ksatriya tradition preserved in the *Puranas* is not deficient in the historical sense. This tradition is concerned chiefly with kings and heroes and their great deeds, genealogies, etc. Ksatriya tales and ballads have some historical consistency. Royal genealogies certainly do not

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betray the lack of historical sense. The Puranic “genealogies are essentially chronological; and the old tales, especially those narrated in the course of the best versions of the genealogies, have also an historical character.” The above observations amount to exaltation of the ksatriya tradition and depreciation of the brahmanic tradition. But the fact remains that the Vedic texts and the *Puranas* constitute joint testimony for writing traditional history. This is erroneous opinion about the ancient Indians that they had neither history nor did possess any historical instinct. The historical treasures buried in the *Puranas* are of great value. “The literature of the Brahmana was always supplemented from the earliest times by the literature of the Ksatriya kings. In fact, the Vedic, epic and Puranic traditions are supplementary to each other, and no coherent picture of early India can be presented without placing our reliance on the combined testimony of all the three. It is altogether different thing that the Puranic account of the subject are more elaborated and amplified than the Vedic and epic ones.

Attributes of Purana

The *Puranas* deal with five subjects or topics, viz. (a) Sarga (original creation), (b) Pratisarga (dissolution and recreation), (c) Vamsa (genealogies), (d) Manvantara (an epoch of each Manu) and (e) Vamsanucarita (histories of dynasties of kings mentioned in the genealogies). These are the five attributes (called *pancalaksana*) of a *Purana*. Out of these five, the two, vamsa and vamsanucarita, are purely historical subjects. The *Puranakaras* had no doubt clear conception of history. The dynastic genealogies in particular constitute nucleus of the political history in the *Puranas*. V.A. Smith says : . . . the most systematic record of the Indian historical tradition is that preserved in the dynastic lists of the *Puranas* . . . modern European writers have been inclined to disparage unduly the authority of the Puranic lists, but closer study finds in them much genuine and valuable historical tradition.

Historical value of Purana

About the historical value of Puranic genealogies of the royal families, Pargiter observes “Though historical works about ancient India are wanting, yet tradition has handed down fairly copious genealogies of the ancient dynasties. These states the successions of kings and in that way are historical. They are almost the only historical data found in Sanskrit books as regards ancient political development; and the list of teachers in professed chronological order set out in

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some brahmanical books supply evidence as regards brahmanical succession. The genealogies form the basis by which the investigation of tradition for historical ends may be tested. They supply the best chronological clue, for the Vedic literature . . . is not a sure guide in historical matters.

Tod also writes: “In the absence of regular and legitimate historical records, there are, however, other native works, which in the hands of a skilful and patient investigator, would afford no despicable materials for the history of India. The first of these are the *Puranas* and genealogical legends of the princes, which, obscured as they are by mythological details, allegory; . . . contain many facts that serve as beacons to direct the research of the historian.

The *Puranas* in general are partly legendary and historical. Out of eighteen main *Puranas*, the six – Matsya, Vayu, Visnu Brahmanda, Bhagavata and Bhavisya – are very important from a historical point of view. The first two have been called by their authors puratana *Itihasa* (ancient history) in support of their historicity as they (like other four *Puranas*) deal with historical events of the past. These six *Puranas* really constitute very faithful historical records. They have preserved highly valuable accounts of different dynasties of both pre- and post – Bharata war period with the help of which we can throw some new light on the dark or obscure aspects of ancient Indian political history of those periods. They have great historical value from dynastic, genealogical and chronological points of view. A. Weber has also admitted that some of the old *Puranas* contain historical portions with kings, dynasties, genealogies and chronology. The observation made by J.F. Fleet is worth-quoting here: “the ancient Hindus could write short historical compositions concise and to the point but limited in extent. The historical chapters of the *Puranas* do certainly indicate a desire on the part of the ancient Hindus not to ignore general history altogether and are clearly based on ancient archives which had survived in a more or less complete shape and were somehow accessible to the composers of those works.

Historical time span of Purana

The *Puranas* are not the productions of one age or of one brain. As stated earlier, the original *Purana* was composed by Vyasa sometime before the Great Bharata battle began. Then time-to- time several additions were made in it by the *Puranakaras*. The process of incorporating the past events in some of the *Puranas*

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began as early as the sixth or fifth century BC and generally continued till the fourth or fifth century AD but in some cases even beyond that period.

Since the Vayu and Visnu provide dynastic history up to the beginning of the Gupta rule, they in the present form must have existed about the middle of the fourth century AD. The Matsya (One of the early *Puranas*) was compiled with new additions towards the end of the reign of king Yanja Sri Satakarni (c. 165 – 95) of the Andhra or Satavahana dynasty. Its compilation was further carried up to AD 236. It was finally completed before the end of the third century AD as it covers the dynastic accounts only up to the end of the rule of the Andhras or Satavahanas. The Brahmanda in the present form existed in or about AD 400.

The Bhavisya *Purana* existed before c. 500 BC as appears from the Apastamba Dharmasutra. The Kaliyugarajavrttanta (details of the dynasties of the Kali age) given in this *Purana* appear to be the oldest of all other Puranic details thereof. The dynastic accounts of the rulers of the Kali age was first included in it towards the end of the second century A.D. the text in the revised form very much existed in the middle of the third century AD which is supported by the fact that the Matsya borrowed its account of the dynasties of the Kali age from it before the end of that century, and the Vayu and Brahmanda borrowed their accounts of the same dynasties from it in the next century as the internal evidence therein indicates. The Bhavisya *Purana* contains the accounts upto the times of the famous Rajput ruler, Prthviraja Chauhan (AD 1179-92), as far as the ancient period is concerned. The events of the subsequent periods also appear to have been recorded in it. Therefore, no definite date can be assigned to it in the present form.

The Bhagavata *Purana* existed in the middle of the third century AD. Some additions were, of course, made in it sometime between AD 600 and 800 as appears from the text itself. Some other important *Puranas* like the Brahma (the oldest of all), and Padma (next to it in order of antiquity) must have existed at least as early as the beginning of the fifth century BC. “Verses praising gifts of land are quoted in various land-grants, that are dated; and some of those are found only in the Padma, Bhavisya and Brahma *Puranas* and thus indicate that those *Puranas* were in existence before AD 500 and even long before that time. Some of those verses, which occur in grants of the years 475-6 and 482-3, are declared in some grants to have been enunciated by Vyasa in the Mahabharata.

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The *Agni Purana* in its original form can be placed much earlier than the fourth century AD. However, some additions were made in it between CAD 500 and 900. The Karma, Markandeya, Brahmavaivartta, Linga, Vamana and other *Puranas* were also in existence before AD 500.