

# PURANA: THE OLDEST SACRED BOOK OF HINDUISM

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## ABSTRACT

This article throws light on the fact that Hinduism is one of the oldest religions of the world. Being one of the oldest, it has the oldest religious literature. Purana is the oldest sacred book surpassing Vedas as well. This article provides detailed information about the meaning, compilation history and contents of Puranas with strong references. It has been stated that Puranas are 18 in number containing 80000 couplets. The word 'Purana' means first or eternal. Some orthodox Hindus regard these texts as of divine origin. As far as the compilation history of Puranas is concerned, it is dated in 1300 B.C to 1500 A.D. The evolution of the universe, the recreation of universe at the close of each aeon, the genealogies of gods and goddesses, the groups of great ages and rebirth of mankind, and history of the royal families who rule over the earth during the four ages are the contents discussed in Puranas.

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## INTRODUCTION

Hinduism is, although, one of the oldest religions but the code of life suggested by it cannot be marked due to different theories about its evolution. One thing which is definite is that its followers are in millions. Historically, it is a religion 3500 years old: Vedas are its sacred books. Along with Vedas, Upanishads, Purana, Gita, and Shastars containing social rules are also of great importance. Trimurti is its basic belief. According to it, three gods are made known. Brahma is credited with the creation of the Universe. Vishnu is responsible for the survival and continuance of Universe. Shiva is the destroyer of the Universe. All the great reformers, according to Hindu belief, are the Avatars of Vishnu

and still one avatara to come. They are ten in number so the concept is named Disha Avatara.

### Religious Literature of Hinduism:

The books which Hindu regard as their religious literature, are, no doubt, more in numbers than other religions of the world. It is a fact that all the religions, followed today over the surface of the earth, do not have as many books as compared with Hinduism. Moreover, the divergences of dates for the compilation of these books, and other disputes like this have made this literature more interesting.

“The religious literature of Hindus is divided into two: (i) Sruti, (ii) Smriti.

Sruti means revelational. And Smriti means traditional.”

“The most sacred books of Hinduism and the oldest literature of India, represent the religious thought and activity of the Indo-European speaking people who entered South Asia in 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium.

Puranas have exerted influence on Hinduism and are in turn reflections of trends in Hinduism – no book can compare in popularity with the Bhagavata Purana and the Purana of god Krishna. The most popular part of the Purana is the description of the life of Krishna, for which it has since remained the principal authority.

The Puranas are of human origin, composed by the so-called Rishis. (Edward, 2007).

Vedas were only recited by Brahmins while Puranas are exception of this limited recitation and anyone could recite these collections. So Puranas are the most authentic and widely recited texts in Hindus. (Farooq, 2008)

#### **Meaning of the Word “Purana”:**

The word ‘Purana’ means first or eternal. (Edward, 2007)

- Any one of a class of sacred books in Sanskrit literature, cosmogonical, legendary, religious. (Chamber, 2008)
- Origin Sanskrit Purana-Pura, of old .
- (In Hinduism) breath as the life-giving force. (Oxford Dictionary, 2006)
- Purana: Literally means ‘ancient story’. (Encyclopedia, 2008)
- To the Hindu mind their name – archaeologia, ‘the ancient writings – suggests memorial antiquity. (Encyclopedia, 2006)
- Purana means ancient religious books. (Farooq, 2008)
- The Puranas means collections of ‘old-world’ legends writers. (Rapson, 2005)
- Puranas were written down in 1300 B.C. while some were also written in 1500 A.D. (Farooq, 2008)

Edward C. Sachau, in his Alberuni’s India has some other views about the compilation of Purana. He says: They were written from 2<sup>nd</sup> century to 9<sup>th</sup> century. The last one of these “Bhavesh Purana” was written in 10<sup>th</sup> century in which Holy Prophet Hazrat Muhammad (PBUH) and Hazrat Ali (AS) are also

regarded as Avatara of Vishnu. (Edward, 2007)

Klaus K. Klostermaier in his book “A Concise Encyclopedia of Hinduism” seems to have another idea. His words are: The Puranas themselves claim greater antiquity than the Vedas. The followers of various sects consider them to be revealed scriptures”. (Klaus, 2001) Another name, with some other views, seems on the list is of Bruce M. Sullivan. He composed a book with the title “A to Z of Hinduism” in which he says: “Ancient Tales. The term is used to refer to a class of texts that date in their written form to perhaps the fourth century C.E. and later, but which also contain, in many cases, material that may be a thousand years older than that. Preserved for centuries as oral traditions, they were written down, perhaps partly in response to the written scriptures of Buddhism and Jainism”. (Bruce,2006)

**Importance of Puranas (According to Hindus):**

It is a prominent feature of Puranas that unlike Vedas and Upanishads (which were rare, and were in the access of Brahmins only, and 80% of the population was unaware of them) Puranas were in the reach of every one,

and any such restriction was not for Puranas. This is the reason that these are most widely recited and most authentic books for Hindus. (Farooq, 2008)

Some Puranas have attained a status and authority comparable to the Vedas or exceeding the Vedas, notably the Bhagavata Purana in Vaisnava devotional groups. (Bruce, 2006)

Orthodox Hinduism regards these works as of divine origin, and their frame-work is stereo-typed in accordance with this view. The chief speaker is some ancient seer who has received the tradition through Vyasa, who himself received it from the creator. (Rapson, 2005)

**Puranas (in number):**

There are eighteen Puranas, most of them are called by the names of animals, humans or angelic beings, because they contain stories about them or because the book consists of answers given to certain questions about the creature whose name forms the title.

- i) Adi Purana i.e. the first.
- ii) Mastya Purana i.e. the fish.
- iii) Kurma Purana i.e. the tortoise.
- iv) Varaha Purana i.e. the bear.
- v) Narasimha Purana i.e. a human being with lion's head.
- vi) Vaman Purana i.e. the dwarf.

- vii) Vaya-Purana i.e. the wind.
- viii) Nanda-Purana i.e. a servant of Mahadeva.
- ix) Skanda-Purana i.e. a son of Mahadeva.
- x) Aditya – Puirana i.e. the sun.
- xi) Soma-Purana i.e. the moon.
- xii) Samba-Purana i.e. the son of Vishnu.
- xiii) Brahmand Purana i.e. heaven.
- xiv) Markandeya-Purana i.e. a great Rishi.
- xv) Tarkshya-Purana i.e. the bird Garuda.
- xvi) Vishnu-Purana i.e. Narayana.
- xvii) Brahma-Purana i.e. the nature charged with the preservation of the world.
- xviii) Bhavishya-Purana i.e. Future things. (Edward,2007).

Purana are in fact a bulky collection of religious literature. Famous puranas are 18 which contain 800000 couplets. (Farooq, 2008)

While it is possible that there was a single original Purana, from which 18 major ones somehow derive. (Encyclopedia)

**Contents of Puranas:**

Any old-world story may in fact be called Purana; but the term is especially

applied to certain works which, in conformity with the classical definition, deal, or are supposed to deal, with the following five topics.

- i) Sarga, the evolution of the universe from its material cause.
- ii) Pratisarga, the recreation of the universe from the constituent elements into which it is merged at the close of each aeon (Kalpa) or day in the life of the creator, Brahma.
- iii) Vamca, the genealogies of gods and rishis.
- iv) Manvantara, the groups of great ages (mahayuga) included in an aeon, in each of which mankind is supposed to be produced a new from the first father, Manu.
- v) Vamcanucharita, the history of the royal families who rule over the earth during the four ‘ages’ (yuga) which make up one ‘great age’.

**Contents & Importance of Puranas**

According to Renowned Encyclopedia:

Purana (literally ancient story) is a general name of a long series (traditionally 18) of often voluminous texts that treat in encyclopedic manners myths and legends, as well as genealogies, of gods, heroes and saints. They can loosely be divided into three groups: those exalting the god Brahma, those devoted to the god Vishnu, and those devoted to Siva. The division

however is an artificial one. Many deal with the same or similar materials. The puranic literature continues with upapuranas (sub-puranas) and Mahatmayas (glorification) of temples and sacred places.

The nature of the works called Puranas which have been referred to demands brief explanation. The Puranas commonly recognized in the north of India are eighteen in number. Others, about which little is known to European scholars, are used in the south. A Purana, according to the Indian definition, best exemplified by the Vishnu Purana, should treat of five subjects, namely, primary creation, secondary creation, genealogies of gods and patriarchs, reigns of various Manus, and the history of ancient dynasties. The treatises consequently are bulky and crowded with legendary matter of various kinds. They have been well-described by Buhler as Popular sectarian compilations of mythology, philosophy, history, and the sacred law; intended, as they are now used, for the instruction of the unlettered classes including the upper division of the Sudra varna. Much of the contents come down from remote antiquity, as the name Purana, meaning old, testifies, but

the books as they stand are of various dates. The Puranic genealogies of kings in prehistoric times, seem to be of doubtful value, but those of the historical period or Kali age, from about 600 B.C are records of high importance and extremely helpful in the laborious task of reconstructing the early political history of India. Each of the Puranas is more or less especially consecrated to the service of a particular form of the godhead.(Smith,1983)

The Puranas are post-Vedic texts which typically contain a complete narrative of the history of the V from creation to destruction, genealogies of the kings, heroes and demigods, and descriptions of Hindu Cosmology and geography. There are 17 or 18 canonical puranas, divided in to three categories, each after a deity: Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva. There are also many other works termed Purana, known as "Upapuranas."

Puranas are considered reliable texts after Upanishads. It is generally read and recited. The history of early Aryan tribes and the life of Hindu gods are the contents of Puranas.

The most important is Bhavishya Purana. It is named so as it serves as a parameter of events to happen in the

future. Hindus regard it the word of God. Vyas has just compiled it but its real author is God Himself. (Zakir, 2002)

To the Hindu mind, their mane 'Archaeologia' the ancient writings suggests immemorial antiquity. It has been the habit of critics to date the best known of them, Visnu Purana, about A.D 1045. It has, however, recently been proved that this and other important works of the same series must be dated about A.D 500 while the Vayu Purana is referred to the 4<sup>th</sup> century, and all the principal works, which in their present form are recensions of a much older body of literature, were re-edited in the Gupta period (320-480A.D) when the study of Sanskrit was revived. (Encyclopedia)

## CONCLUSION

In the light of given information it may be humbly concluded that Puranas are the most sacred oldest religious scripture of Hinduism, one of the oldest religions of the world. They hold a very important position. They are important for their availability and easy access to every one, not only for a particular caste like Vedas and Upanishads. They are a great source of knowledge regarding their contents.

One finds a detailed account of creation of the universe, the stories of gods and goddesses, their battles, their love affairs and their encounters with evil spirits in them.

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