

1.What are the two main classification of Puranas? Explain along with the names of Mahāpurāṇas and Upapuranas.

Ans: The Puranas are an important part of ancient Indian literature. Traditionally, the Puranas are divided into two main classifications: Mahāpurāṇas and Upapuranas. There are eighteen main Puranas also referred to as Mahāpurāṇas. There is also an equal number of subsidiary or Upapuranas.

The Mahāpurāṇas (great Puranas) are the primary texts of the Purāṇic tradition. These texts deal with cosmology, theology, mythology, philosophy, ritual, and moral instruction, and they aim to provide a comprehensive picture of the universe and human life within it.

On the other hand The Upapurāṇas (subsidiary texts) are secondary compilations, composed later than the Mahāpurāṇas. They often focus on specific deities, sects, or regions, and emphasize practical religious observances such as vows (vratas), festivals, pilgrimages (tīrthas), and moral conduct.

In comparison, the Mahāpurāṇas are considered more ancient, whereas the Upapurāṇas are later compositions. The Mahāpurāṇas are generally larger in volume and greater in authority than the Upapurāṇas. The term “Mahāpurāṇa” was first used in the Bhāgavata Purāṇa and the Brahmavaivarta Purāṇa.

There are eighteen Mahāpurāṇas, namely:

1. Brahma Purāṇa, 2. Padma Purāṇa
3. Viṣṇu Purāṇa, 4. Śiva (or Śaiva) Purāṇa, 5. Liṅga Purāṇa, 6. Garuḍa Purāṇa, 7. Nārada Purāṇa, 8. Śrīmad Bhāgavata Purāṇa, 9. Agni Purāṇa, 10. Skanda Purāṇa, 11. Bhaviṣya Purāṇa, 12. Brahmavaivarta Purāṇa, 13. Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa, 14. Vāmana Purāṇa, 15. Varāha Purāṇa, 16. Matsya Purāṇa, 17. Kūrma Purāṇa, 18. Brahmāṇḍa Purāṇa

Apart from these eighteen Mahāpurāṇas, there are eighteen Upapurāṇas (subsidiary Purāṇas). The names of these vary slightly in different sources. According to the Kūrma Purāṇa, the names of the Upapurāṇas are as follows:

1. Ādya, 2. Narasimha, 3. Skanda, 4. Śiva Dharma, 5. Durvāsokta, 6. Nāradiya, 7. Kapila, 8. Vāmana, 9. Uśanas, 10. Brahmāṇḍa, 11. Vāraha, 12. Kālīka, 13. Māheśvara, 14. Śaiva Śāstra, 15. Saura, 16. Parāśara, 17. Mārīca, 18. Bhārgava

It is believed that the Upapurāṇas were composed at various times by scholars and sages to promote particular religious or moral ideals within society. They were likely written to influence specific social or spiritual purposes, following the model and ideals of the Mahāpurāṇas.

The Purāṇas also have been classified into three categories according to their qualities (guṇas): Sāttvika, Rājasa, and Tāmasa. Again, sometimes, based on the deity they primarily glorify, the Purāṇas are divided into three types — Vaiṣṇava, Brāhma, and Śaiva Purāṇas.

In the Matsya Purāṇa, the Mahāpurāṇas are further classified into four categories — Sāttvika, Rājasa, Tāmasa, and Saṅkīrṇa (mixed). It is stated there that—

Those Purāṇas which mainly glorify Hari or Viṣṇu are known as Sāttvika or Vaiṣṇava Purāṇas. Examples include the Bhāgavata, Nārada, etc. These are collectively known as the Vaiṣṇava Purāṇas.

Secondly, those Purāṇas which emphasize the greatness of Brahmā are called Rājasa Purāṇas, also known as Brāhma Purāṇas. Examples include the Brahma, Vāmana Purāṇas, etc.

Thirdly, those Purāṇas in which Śiva is regarded as the supreme deity are known as Tāmasa or Śaiva Purāṇas. Examples are the Matsya, Kūrma Purāṇas, etc.

Finally, the Purāṇas that glorify Sarasvatī and the Pitṛs (ancestors) are called Saṅkīrṇa or mixed Purāṇas.

2. Briefly discuss the various contents of Puranas.

Ans: Almost every aspect of Indian religion, society, and culture can be found in the Purāṇas. Therefore, the subject matter of the Purāṇas is extremely vast. The Purāṇas primarily deal with five characteristics. In other words, the main content of the Purāṇas consists of five parts. These five Characteristics are collectively known as the pañcalakṣaṇa (the five characteristics of a Purāṇa). The five characteristics or subjects are—

Sarga (Creation), Pratisarga (Re-creation), Vaṃśa (Genealogy), Manvantara (Cosmic Cycles), and Vaṃśānucarita (Dynastic History).

1. Sarga (Creation):

Sarga means creation. It describes the origin of the universe.

2. Pratisarga (Re-creation):

Pratisarga means re-creation. The re-creation of the world after its destruction is known as Pratisarga.

3. Vaṃśa (Genealogy):

This refers to the genealogies of gods and sages. The description of their lineages forms the subject of Vaṃśa.

4. Manvantara (Cosmic Cycles):

This topic deals with the creation of mankind and the story of the first human beings. Each cycle of creation is ruled by a Manu, the progenitor of humanity. Fourteen Manus are said to have reigned during the course of creation.

5. Vaṃśānucarita (Dynastic History):

This describes the histories of royal dynasties. The life stories of kings, particularly those descended from the Solar and Lunar races, are recounted here.

These five topics are considered the distinctive features of a Purāṇa. The idea of pañcalakṣaṇa has become such an essential aspect of Purāṇic literature that it is accepted even in other scriptures.

However, in the Matsya Purāṇa, along with these five features, six additional characteristics are mentioned. These are—

Bhuvanavistara (Description of the Worlds), Dāna-dharma-vidhi (Rules of Charity), Śrāddhakarma (Ancestral Rites), Varṇāśrama-vibhāga (Social Order), Iṣṭāpūrta (Pious Acts), and Deva-pratiṣṭhā (Installation of Deities).

Although it is claimed that all Purāṇas contain these five characteristics, in reality, not every Purāṇa follows them strictly. Some Purāṇas adhere to them only partially. According to the scholar Pargiter, the pañcalakṣaṇa are the features of the earlier Purāṇas, whereas those Purāṇas that do not follow them belong to a later period. The Brahmavaivarta Purāṇa mentions that these five characteristics are applicable to the Upapurāṇas, while the Mahāpurāṇas are said to have ten characteristics. The Bhāgavata Purāṇa describes these ten topics as follows:

1. Sarga (Creation) – The story of the creation of the universe.
2. Visarga (Secondary Creation) – The description of the creation of living beings.
3. Vṛtti (Livelihood) – The modes of human subsistence and livelihood.
4. Rakṣa (Protection) – The divine incarnations of Nārāyaṇa taken to protect the world from demons and evil forces.
5. Vaṃśa (Genealogy) – The genealogies of gods and sages.
6. Antara or Manvantara (Cosmic Ages) – The account of mankind and the reigns of different Manus.
7. Vaṃśānucarita (Dynastic History) – The history of royal lineages.
8. Saṃstha (Dissolution) – The description of cosmic dissolution or destruction.
9. Hetu (Cause) – The causes behind the bondage of living beings in the world.
10. Apāśraya (Refuge) – The relation of the individual soul (jīva) with the Supreme Being (Brahman).

In the Purāṇas, the earliest contents included legends, stories (ākhyāna-upākhyāna), ballads (gāthā), and descriptions of sacred rites (kalpaśuddhi) as mentioned in the Viṣṇu Purāṇa (3.6.15). Later on, the ideas of five and ten characteristics were developed.

In the Vedas, Vedāṅgas, Itihāsa, and Purāṇas, there are many ancient verses whose authors are unknown; such anonymous verses are known as gāthā.

Thus, from the above discussion, it becomes clear that the Purāṇas, through various stories and legends of ancient events, vividly present the narratives of creation and dissolution, royal dynasties and their deeds, as well as philosophical reflections on the origin of existence, the significance of living beings, and the nature of the ultimate reality, Brahman. Hence, in the broadest sense, any scripture that contains such accounts can be called a Purāṇa.