

Q. Explain the ethics of Purana.

Or

How the importance of *Dharma* has been discussed in the Puranas. Briefly Explain.

Ans: Dharma or duty forms the basis of Puranic ethics, and it embraces all those factors which contribute to the progress and well-being of the individual, society and the world at large. These factors include both the possession of virtues (guna) and the proper discharge of one's duty (karma). The Purana recognize two types of dharma: sādharma (generic) and viśesa (specific). The latter is known as svadharma.

Dharma contributes to the preservation, progress and welfare of human society and in a wider sense, of the whole world. In the scheme of life's eternal values (puruṣārthas) dharma occupies the premier and basic place. It is considered to be the best kith and kin for the embodied soul following it even in death and also to be the perennial source of perfection and bliss.

The Puranas have made a successful attempt at reconciling sādharma with svadharma. The former includes the possession of certain humanizing virtues and actions based thereon, which conduce to the welfare of the entire creation. The latter is a practical application of the former within a particular sphere by an individual belonging to a class characterized by certain prominent qualities (gunas). The scheme of varna and āśramadharma which the Purāṇas unanimously advocate, is based upon the duties of the individuals of a class and has as its aim the efficiency, welfare, smooth working and material and spiritual perfection of the society as a whole.

The sadharma-dharmas are universal in scope and eternal in nature, Some Puranas enumerate them as Ten Commandments of Christ and Buddha while others add more. For example the Padma, Agni, Kurma and Garuda Puranas mention ahimsa (non-injury), kṣama or ksanti (forbearance), indriyanigraha or sama and dana (self-control), daya (compassion), dāna (charity), sauca (purity), satya (truth), tapas (penance) and jñāna (wisdom) among them. Sādharma forms the basis of Svadharma and prescribes the limit within which the latter is to be observed.

The theory of karma and transmigration also plays a prominent and fundamental role in purāṇic ethics. Any action good, bad, or indifferent yields its corresponding fruit. The joy and sorrows of creatures in this life are predestined and determined by the nature of karma performed in a previous birth. The Purāṇas also stress the need for fasting and observing certain vratas or religious rites. These have great spiritual and ethical value.

Puranic ethics is intensely practical and utilitarian. It takes into consideration the welfare of society as a whole and prescribes the caste and customary duties for the individual. The scheme of varnāśramadharma has this end in view. While prescribing the practice of great virtues like self-discipline and renunciation as in the absolutist system, it advocates their practice as far as they are practicable in consonance with svadharma. It is a synthesis of the

ethical principles enunciated in the literature of the Samhitas, the Brahmanas and the Upaniṣads.

Short Notes:

1. Attainment of the Divine (Bhagavat-Prāpti)

In the Purāṇas, the effort to unite the individual soul with the all-pervading essence of the Supreme Being through pilgrimage, vows, worship, chanting, the sacred tulsī, the divine play of Bhagavān, and the narration of His qualities is referred to as the practice for attaining the Divine. This path is very simple, all-inclusive, and highly practical.

It is also mentioned that by seeing the deity's image, one attains the merit of visiting all sacred places: "Pratimāṁ ca harer dr̥ṣṭā sarva-tīrtha-phalaṁ labhet." All these verses in the Purāṇas speak about the attainment of the Divine.

Hence, by correctly performing any of these—His Name, divine play, pilgrimage, or vows—direct realization of the Bhagavata principle becomes possible. The Purāṇas describe this as the central aspect of Dharma: "Bhakti, virtue, action, and knowledge.

2. Polytheism and Monotheism

From the names of the Purāṇas, it becomes clear that different Purāṇas are associated with different deities. The Viṣṇu Purāṇa is associated with Viṣṇu, the Śiva Purāṇa with Śiva, the Saura Purāṇa with the Sun God (Sūrya), and so on. There are also certain Purāṇas that describe various deities in detail. Moreover, besides the deities, some Purāṇas are related to the incarnations of God, such as the Kūrma Purāṇa, Vāmana Purāṇa, Matsya Purāṇa, etc. In this way, we find many Purāṇas dealing with numerous deities. This tradition of polytheism has existed since ancient times and has been preserved through these texts which give permanence to practical religious activities.

In the Indus Valley Civilization too, the practice of worshipping many gods and goddesses is evident. But in the Vedic texts we find the statement: "Ekam sat viprāḥ bahudhā vadanti"—meaning, the One Reality is spoken of in many forms by the wise. Here, one single essence is linked to multiple deities, which is referred to as monotheism. Until a person realizes the greatness of this One Supreme Reality, they cannot focus themselves beyond the multiplicity of deities. Through the very idea of many gods, at a certain point, the human mind becomes centered on the notion of a single supreme entity. No matter by what name one worships different deities, the ultimate aim remains the same. This leads to the realization of the Bhagavata-tattva and the cessation of all desires.

On the foundation of this One Supreme Essence, the idea of divinity is perceived in everything. As stated: "From devotion comes existence; from that comes knowledge, and from knowledge comes liberation."

3. Worship of Gods (Devopasana)

To truly understand the nature of the Supreme Being, the first step is to understand the divine forms that are expressions of Brahma. For this initial level, the Purāṇas prescribe the method of worshipping the gods.

When people worship gods and goddesses, they gradually begin to give up many bad habits and immoral actions. The more sincerely they perform these acts of worship, the deeper their connection with the divine becomes.

Worship is of two types: Nitya (daily/regular) and Naimittika (occasional/specific purpose): Nitya worship is performed daily without any desire for personal gain; it is done purely out of devotion.

Naimittika worship, such as fasting on Ekadashi, Purnima, and other vows, is done with the intention of fulfilling a specific desire.

Nitya worship has two methods—Mental worship (Mānasa Pūjā) and External worship (Bāhya Pūjā).

In mental worship, one offers prayers, ritual offerings, and other acts internally through the mind.

In external worship, rituals are performed following sixty-four prescribed rules. Generally, external worship uses the five offerings known as Pancha-Upachara: fragrance, flowers, incense, lamp, and food offering (naivedya).

The Purāṇas mainly prescribe special forms of worship for five principal deities: Ganesha, Durga, Shiva, Vishnu, and Surya. For each ritual of worship — such as offering the seat, invoking the deity, giving a ceremonial bath, offering the lamp and food — specific mantras are prescribed.

After the rituals comes the instruction to perform japa (chanting of sacred mantras). Japa is considered even more important than yajña (sacrifice). Japa is of three kinds:

1. Mānasa Japa – chanting silently in the mind
2. Upāṁśu Japa – moving the lips and tongue without making audible sound
3. Vācika Japa – chanting aloud

Among these, Upāṁśu Japa is regarded as the most effective. To keep count during japa, two methods are used:

Kara-mālā – counting on the fingers

Mani-mālā – using a rosary

Each deity has specific mantras for japa, such as:

For Indra: “Om Indrāya Namah”

For Shani: “Om Shanaiścarāya Namah”

4. ব্রতোপবাস (Fasting or Vratopabasa)

In the Purāṇas, great importance is given to fasting (upavāsa). Through fasting, a person’s mind and thoughts become purified. By observing fasts, one also purifies the body. As a result of performing vows and fasting, one’s faith in God increases. The body becomes lighter, and the mind becomes more devoted to worship and prayer. One’s tendencies become sattvic (pure), and through this, all kinds of physical, mental, and other sins are destroyed.

Since the practitioner endures physical hardship while observing vows, it is also called tapa (austerity). Certain rules must be followed during brata and upavāsa, such as:

Observing virtuous behaviour – forgiveness, compassion, cleanliness, etc.

Avoiding immoral actions – stealing, adultery, dissatisfaction, desires, and other bad habits.

Maintaining purity in daily life – bathing, meditation, chanting, and similar practices.

These are referred to as the essential rules. During brata and upavāsa, tāmasic foods—such as oil, turmeric, meat, etc.—are prohibited. A person should remain engaged in listening to sacred stories, charity, good company, worship, and related religious activities.

Since fasting is performed on special sacred days, it is called Brata-Upavāsa. Through it, the body, speech, and mind become purified. As a result, one attains both worldly and spiritual happiness.

Anyone—of any caste, religion, or gender—can perform these vows. Three types of brata-upavāsa are recognized:

1. Nitya – performed regularly without any specific need, such as Ekadashi.
2. Naimittika – performed for a particular purpose, such as fasting on Sundays dedicated to the Sun God.
3. Kāmya – performed to fulfill a personal desire.

Accordingly, specific rules of worship are prescribed for different kinds of vows. If a person is unable to perform the vow due to illness, impurity, or any other reason, then it may be performed on their behalf by a friend, brother, son, wife, or priest.

5. Pilgrimage (Tīrthayātrā)

The Purāṇas contain extensive discussions on pilgrimage and sacred places. Even in Vedic literature, we find references to tīrtha. In the Ṛgveda, the term was used to indicate the banks or nearby areas of rivers and seas. But over time, its meaning evolved.

In later periods, sacred places came to be known as tīrthas.

According to the Skanda Purāṇa, the lands and mountains that serve as the dwelling places of sages, gods, and goddesses are considered tīrthas.

The Brahma Purāṇa places associated with great persons, saints, or divine incarnations are regarded as holy places.

Additionally, natural sites such as forests, mountains, rivers, lakes, and places where divine acts occurred or extraordinary events took place are given the status of tīrtha. The Purāṇas even regard the banks of sacred rivers as tīrtha.

Thus, according to the Purāṇas, a tīrtha or sacred place includes: the playgrounds of gods (divine līlā-sthalas), places where God incarnated, sacred rivers, seas, mountains, forests, and holy fields, important temples, hermitages of sages, places of penance and spiritual practices, etc.

The Purāṇas also use the term tīrtha-tama, meaning the most eminent or supreme tīrtha. A single sacred place may contain many smaller tīrthas, but the most important among them is called tīrtha-tama.

Each sacred place is described in the Purāṇas by special names (such as Bhṛgu Kṣetra, Vālmīki Parvata, Prayāga). These names are attached to the holy place because of its association with a great saint or deity. Pilgrimage is considered a means of attaining heaven.

The main purpose of tīrthayātrā is to free a person from negative tendencies such as lust, anger, and greed, and to destroy all sins.

Tīrthas are of two types:

1. Movable (Cara) – such as rivers.
2. Immovable (Sthāvara) – such as land, mountains, and forests.

The Skanda Purāṇa also describes two additional classifications:

Kṛta Tīrtha – places considered sacred because people associate them with great individuals; these are human-created.

Akṛta Tīrtha – places recognized as sacred since ancient times through scriptures, such as Gaya and Kashi.

Another classification divides tīrthas into:

Daiva (divine)

Ārya (created by sages)

Mānuṣya (created by humans)

Asura (associated with demons)

Major Tīrthas Mentioned in the Purāṇas

Four Dhāms:

1. Badrinath
2. Jagannath Puri
3. Rameshwaram
4. Dwarka

Seven Sacred Cities (Sapta Purī):

1. Ayodhya
2. Mathura
3. Maya (Haridwar)
4. Kashi (Varanasi)
5. Kanchī (Kanchipuram)
6. Avantika (Ujjain)
7. Dwarka

Seven Sacred Fields (Sapta Kṣetra):

Kurukshetra, Harihara Kshetra, Prabhasa Kshetra, Bhṛgu Kshetra, Purushottama Kshetra, Naimisha Kshetra, Gaya Kshetra

Twelve Śakti Pīṭhas:

Kamākhyā, Bhṛāmarī, Kanyākumārī, Ambā, Mahālakṣmī, Kālīkā, Lalitā/Ālopī, Vindyaṽsinī, Viṣhālākṣī, Maṅgalāvatī, Sundarī, Guhākeśvarī.

Five Sacred Lakes:

Manasarovar, Bindusarovar, Narayana Sarovar, Pampasarovar, Pushkar Sarovar.

Major Sacred Forests:

Daṇḍakāraṇya, Viṇdhyāraṇya, Puṣkārāraṇya, Kuruajāṅgala, Naimishāraṇya, Dharmāraṇya, Vedāraṇya, Saundhavāraṇya.