

Chapter 32. Puranas and Incarnations

When Parikshith heard Suka's consoling and satisfying words, he queried, "Master! what are the *Puranas*? What are their contents? How many are there?"

Suka replied, "The texts that elaborate the terse truths that are enshrined in the *Vedas* are called *Puranas*. They are numberless in extent. But at present, 18 of them are outstandingly famous. These were collated and edited by my father, Vyasa. They have ten common characteristics. The supplements to these *Puranas*, called *Upapuranas*, have only five.

The ten marks of the Puranas

"You may ask what those ten are. I'll tell you even before you ask! They are: creation, proliferation into manifold varieties of created beings, setting of boundaries, protection, consequences of one's actions, the ages of Manu, the glories of the Lord, absorption, freedom, and the support of the universe (*sarga*, *visarga*, *sthana*, *poshana*, *uthi*, *manvanthara*, *Isanukatha*, *nirodha*, *mukthi*, and *asraya*). The support (*asraya*) is the most important of these ten."

"It would be hard to describe these ten characteristics of the *Puranas* in a few words, for each has to be indicated clearly, just as a description of the processes of butter making has to touch upon each item from the milking to the churning. Each step is important. The ten names relate to the attributes as marked out by their meanings. But the purpose of all is the gaining of the 'butter', liberation. It is for the attainment of that liberation that the ten characteristics are assumed. The *Puranas* are all designed to confer on the eager and earnest listener the support and sustenance necessary for the pilgrim to proceed to liberation. What the *Vedas*, the sacred revelations (*sruthis*), indicate by means of a statement here or an axiom there, or by an implied suggestion in another context, or even by a direct description of the actual experience in some other section, is elaborated by the *Puranas* for better clarification and inspiration," said Suka.

A question arose in Parikshith's mind as he listened to these words, and he gave utterance to it. "Master! You said that you would be relating a *Purana* to me. Therefore, I would like to hear more of these characteristics. That will make the listening happier and more beneficial."

Suka made ready to answer this question, starting the description of the ten marks of the *Puranas*. "Listen, O King! I have decided to tell you about the *Bhagavatha Purana*. It is saturated with answers for all the doubts that arise in your mind and all your questions. No *Purana* is higher than this one.

Creation, proliferation, and limitation

"Its first characteristic is creation (*sarga*). Here's what it means. The three energies (*gunas*) are purity, passion, and sloth (*sathwa*, *rajas*, and *thamas*). When they are in equilibrium, creation is called the primeval substance (*prakriti* or *mula*). The five elements are earth, water, fire, wind, and sky. They are produced by disturbances or unbalances in this equilibrium. Also produced are the subtle attributes of the five—smell, taste, form, touch, and sound—as well as the subtle senses that can cognise each—the nose, tongue, eye, skin, and ear. The mind and the ego also arise from the same principle. This process of creation is what is meant by the expression *sarga*.

“The second mark of a *Purana* is proliferation (*visarga*), i.e. creation (*sarga*) in a special sense. By this is meant the proliferation into manifold varieties of beings through the interaction of various oddities and peculiarities in activity. This is intimately associated with the all-embracing Super-Person in whom the universe is immanent.

“The fixing of boundaries (*sthana*) is the third chief content of a *Purana*. Everything that is originated in the Universe must have some bounds, so that it can serve some purpose. The fixation of these limits and the processes by which the limits are honoured are all described in the section titled state (*sthana*). For example, a machine needs a key to start it. It also has devices by which its work is regulated and stopped. Otherwise, it would be a source of danger to itself and its users. The establishment of such regulatory devices is the subject this characteristic.

God’s grace and man’s nature

“The next distinguishing mark of a *Purana* is the inclusion of a section on protection (*poshana*)—guarding, fostering, preserving from harm, etc. To put the matter simply, all fostering, guidance, and preservation are included in the one comprehensive subject of divine grace. The sapling that is planted has to be fostered with love and care. All creation is thus fostered by the grace of the creator.

“The next sign of the *Purana* is consequence of activity (*uthi*), its impact on one’s nature and career. The nature of each life is determined by the impact of the activities of the entity in previous lives. It is not assigned by a wayward God. God treats all alike, and people forge their fates differently, through their own waywardness and wilfulness. *Uthi* deals with this aspect.

Divisions of time

“Next is the chronology of Manu (*Manvanthara*), which every *Purana* contains. The day is composed of 8 three-hour periods, 30 days make a month, and twelve months are called a year. One year for this world is just a day for the gods, and 360 such days form a year for them. The *Kali* age (*yuga*) is composed of 1,000 such years. The previous *Dwapara* age had 2,000 such years, while the *Thretha* age, which preceded it, had 3,000 and the *Kritha*, the first of the four, had 4,000. Each age (*yuga*) has 200, 400, 600, or 800 contact periods (*sandhya*) periods. 12,000 such years comprise a great age (*Maha-yuga*), and 1,000 such great ages form a single day for Brahma! Every day of Brahma sees 14 Manus lording the universe. So, each Manu is master for more than 70 great ages (*Maha-yugas*). The story of these Manus and their lineage is named *Manvanthara*.

Divine manifestation and equipoise

“Another subject dealt with in the *Puranas* is the glories of God (Isa), or *Isanukatha*—and the manifold ways in which people have experienced the might and majesty, the sweetness and light, that the glory represents.

“Then, we find in the *Puranas* the aspect of absorption (*nirodha*). The Lord absorbs within Himself all the glory that He manifests; then He goes into the ‘sleep of *yoga*’ until the divine impulse to manifest again disturbs the divine equipoise.

The basic prop for achieving liberation

“Liberation (*mukthi*) is another subject all *Puranas* dilate upon. This means liberation of man from the bonds of ignorance (*a-jnana*), which keep him encased. That is to say, man has to be liberated from the awareness that he is the body in which he is encased. He must be made aware that he is the *Atma*; he is the soul that is the reality thus encased.

“The support, help, or prop (*asraya*) is the final aspect dealt with in *Puranas*. Without help, liberation can’t be attained. The Absolute is the prop for the universe. The Absolute (*Paramatma*) from which all this has emanated, in which all this exists, and into which all this merges is the prop for achieving liberation.

Matter, being, and spirit

He who knows the primordial matter (*adi-bhauthika*) the Supreme Divinity (*Adi-daivika*), and the Supreme *Atma* (*Adi-atma*) also knows the support (*asraya*) or the supreme *Atma* (*Paramatma*).”

Parikshith interrupted the sage and pleaded, “Master! Tell me then, what the primordial matter, the Supreme Divinity, and the Supreme *Atma* are.”

Suka was happy with this question and prepared himself for answering it. “O King, I see a thing. That thing is the divine aspect of material objects (*adi-bhauthika*). But what exactly is seeing it? You may say that the eye sees it. But where does the eye get the capacity to see things? Think of that! The deity presiding over the eye is the Sun (*Surya*). He gives the eye the power of vision. Without the Sun, the eye can’t see in the dark, can it? Therefore, the Sun is the Supreme Divinity (*Adi-daivika*).

“But there is one more basic factor in this process: the individual (*jivi*) behind all the senses, behind the eye, the ear, and the rest. That individual is the Supreme *Atma* (*Adi-atma*). The *Atma*, the deity, the senses that bring knowledge of things —without these, the process cannot continue. The *Atma* is the witness.

“Now, I have told you of the ten characteristics of the Bhagavatha and other *Puranas*. Tell me what else you want to know from me, and I’ll gladly tell you the same. I am ever ready,” said the sage.

The divine manifestations and advent

Parikshith said, “Master, I could understand the ten marks of the *Purana*; and I learned that the supreme *Atma* (*Paramatma*), who is in everyone as *Atma*, is the witness of time, space, and causation. This eternal witness has assumed many forms for the sake of the world and has upheld morality and righteousness. I wish to listen to the divine narratives of these incarnations —of Rama, Krishna, and other manifestations and of the deeper mysteries of these appearances. Do not feel that time is short. Let me sanctify every moment that is available, intently listening to the inspiring narration of these incidents. I pray that my thirst may thus be quenched and that my heart may be gifted with contentment, by your grace.”

Suka replied, “O King, I was also entering upon that narrative. So listen. Every concrete manifestation of God is significant; there can be no higher or lower. The story of each one of them is elevating. Each is a full manifestation. Listening to these stories may make you feel that one manifestation is grander and more sublime than another. It would appear as if you get more inspiration from one *Avatar* than another. But all are equally divine and mysterious. The manifestation is suited to the time, the task, the circumstance, and the need; its form is in accordance with the purpose.

“Listen, Oh King! God is omnipotent. He knows no distinction between the possible and the impossible. His wizardry, His sport, His play, His pranks cannot be described with man’s vocabulary. Though He has no form (rupa), He can assume the form of the Universal Person, embodying all creation in His form. He is one, but He makes Himself many. Matsya, Varaha, Narasimha, Vamana, Parasurama, Rama, Krishna, Buddha, Kalki —people say that these are the divine forms that He has assumed. But that is not describing Him as vast as His magnificence. We have to visualise all forms as His. The vitality of every being is His breath. In short, every bit in creation is He, the manifestation of His will. There is nothing distinct or separate from Him.

Avatars appear for the protection of the world

“But for the protection of the world, for the upholding of right action (*dharma*), for fulfilling the yearnings of devotees, He wills specially and assumes a special form and moves in the world; He confers joy on the devotees by His divine acts, which convince them of His advent; they are thus confirmed in their faith and prompted to dedicate their activities to God and thus save themselves, and liberate themselves. Therefore, people consider the forms mentioned above, which were assumed with this end in view, as specially sacred, and they worship God in those incarnated forms. On certain occasions, for resolving certain urgent crises, God has incarnated with forms embodying part of His divinity, with some divine powers and potentialities. Examples of such incarnations for the protection of the world are plenty.”

Parikshith lifted up his face, lit with a strange joy, and exclaimed, “Ah, did the charming Lord assume such forms through a part of Himself? Of course, it is all play for Him. Tell me about these forms taken by Him for the preservation of the world. Make me happy, listening to those stories.” And he prostrated before the preceptor.

Suka continued, “Listen, O King! Kapila, Dattatreya, Sanaka, Sananda, Sanatkumara, Sanatsujatha, and other sages, Rishabha, Nara-Narayana, Vishnu, Druva, Hayagriva, Prithu, Kachchapa, Dhanvantari, Hamsa, Manu, Balarama, Vyasa, and many such divine personages —these are but name-forms assumed by the Lord for granting boons to devotees, for saving the world from ruin, for laying down the code of morality and right behaviour for humanity, and for the restoration of traditional and well-established ideals and mores among mankind.

Partial incarnations spread wisdom and peace

“There are many more such partial incarnations. But we have no time for the detailed description of each. Moreover, they are not so important as to merit detailed consideration. I responded to your request because I felt a short review was enough.”

But Parikshith intervened. “Master! Tell me at least very briefly why the Lord incarnates so, even though only a part of Him incarnated as Kapila, Dattatreya, Hayagriva, Dhanvantari and so forth. Tell me about their achievements and the significance of each advent. That will afford me purifying enlightenment.”

So Suka said, “King! Devahuthi, the wife of Kardama Prajapathi bore nine daughters, and her tenth child was the Kapila form. The Lord, appearing as Kapila, became the preceptor and spiritual guide to the mother, Devahuthi, herself! He taught her the secret of attaining liberation and vouchsafed to her the teaching that led to final release.

“The consort of sage Athri, Anasuya by name, prayed for the Lord to be born as the child of her womb, and the Lord replied, ‘Granted (*datta*)’. Since the father’s name was Athri, He was called Dattatreya. He showered

on Karthaviryarjuna and Yadu, emperors of high renown, who were endowed with all glory, the great treasure of *yogic* wisdom. It is in this form that God, in the beginning of this age (*kalpa*), moved about as the four child sages Sanaka, Sananda, Sanatkumara, and Sanathana. They were always five years old, so innocent that they wore no clothes, so divine that they spread wisdom and peace around them.

“The Lord was born as the twins Nara and Narayana. They lived in the forests around Badari in the Himalayas, practising austerities. Their mother was Murthidevi.

“The Lord appreciated the intensity of the austerity of the boy Druva and conferred on him the blessing of His vision in concrete form He sanctified the lives of Druva’s parents. He crowned him as the Lord of the polar regions and set him in the sky as the Pole Star.

“When the downward-falling wicked Vena was cursed and destroyed by the sages, and when his body was churned, the first sovereign ruler of the world emerged. Because the Lord took that form, he was Prithu, the first Lord (Iswara) of the Earth (*Prithvi*). By his austerity and good conduct, Prithu saved his father from hell. He restored prosperity and morality in the entire world. He built villages, towns, and cities on the earth and ordered men to dwell peacefully in them, each performing their assigned duties in loving cooperation with the rest.

“The Lord was born again as the child of Nabhaga and Sudeva. He manifested as a realised sage and taught the supreme remedy for all ills, viz. renunciation (*thyaga*) and the ways of cultivating it.

“Later, the Lord took form as Yajna (a name for Hayagriva) in a special sacrifice. Since He had the form of a horse above the neck, He was called horse-head (*haya-griva*). Hayagriva’s breath manifested as the *Vedas*.

“Meanwhile, the wily ogre Somaka stole the *Vedas* and hid them in the surging floods of the great dissolution (*pralaya*). So the Lord had to assume the form of a fish, search for the *Vedas* in the depths of the sea, destroy the ogre, and bring the *Vedas* over to be restored to Brahma —this reestablished on earth the ways of living laid down in the *Vedas* and the goal of life marked out therein.

Thus, the Lord has assumed many forms appropriate for each need, manifested Himself on countless critical occasions, and showered His grace on the world. He has destroyed the fear and agony of mankind and has rescued the good and the godly. Countless are the narratives of such advents. His will results in His advent, so it is foolish to investigate the reasons that prompted Him to incarnate.

“Those who seek to know or lay down the causes for the Lord willing one way and not another are really on an impertinent adventure. So also are those who assert that His power and plans have such and such characteristics, qualifications, and limits, those who claim to know that the Lord will act only in this particular mode, and those who declare that the divine principle is of this nature and not otherwise!

Lord’s power and glory knows no bounds

“There can be no limit or obstacle to His will. The manifestation of His power and His glory knows no bounds. He fructifies all that He wills; He can manifest in whatever form He wills. He is unique, incomparable, equal only to Himself. He is His own measure, witness, and authority.

“Once, the Lord was so touched by the sincerity of Narada’s devotion to Him that He assumed the form of a Celestial Swan (Hamsa) and explained to him the nature of spiritual devotion (*bhaktha*), of *Bhagavan*, and of the relation between the two, so that all aspirants might be led and liberated. He placed the wisdom and the path on a

foundation strong enough to survive the end of this present age, without any fear of defeat or decline. He rendered the seven worlds shining in purity through the splendour of His spotless renown.

“During the great churning of the Ocean of Milk, the Lord assumed the form of a tortoise, to hold up the Mandhara Mountain peak, which was the churning rod. At that very time, the Lord also took the form of Dhanvantari, to bring the divine vessel filled with immortality-granting nectar (*amritha*). As Dhanvantari, He taught how to conquer disease and enable men to cure their physical ills. He rendered many famous as physicians and doctors, skilled in diagnosis and cure.

“He did much more, O King! Until then, physicians and doctors were not entitled to receive a share of the offerings made to the gods in sacrifices. Dhanvantari laid down that they must be given a share, and thus He raised their status in society.

“Did you note the inscrutable sports of the Lord, which are so evident in these manifestations? God! God alone knows the ways of God! How can others gauge their grandeur and their glory? How can they successfully measure them with their poor equipment of intellect and imagination? Since men are bound by the shackles of ignorance (*a-jnana*), they argue and dilate long and loud on God and His attributes and flounder in the sin of sacrilege. Instead, man would win the grace of God if he would only discard doubt when he sees divine manifestations and keep his picture of God untarnished by passing moods and acts and in conformity with the manifestations of God he is privileged to witness. If he acts otherwise, he cannot hope to win grace or taste bliss.

“Among these, the incarnations of Rama and Krishna are most meaningful to mankind, since man can grasp their example, follow their solutions to problems, and derive spiritual bliss (*ananda*) through the contemplation of their excellences and teachings. These two have installed themselves in the hearts of mankind and are receiving the adoration of men. I’ll tell you about the more noteworthy incidents in the careers of these two incarnations. Listen.”