# Perception of the Past and the Purāṇas

SIBESH BHATTACHARYA

This is an attempt to explore and understand the contours of the conceptual universe of the authors of the Purāṇas regarding what they perceived as history. Till quite recently, it was accepted as a truism that the ancient Indians had no sense of, or interest in, history. Various explanations of this 'deficiency' were also offered; the most persistent being the one that Indian outlook in its philosophical and psychological makeup was anti-historical. The point has been stretched in different directions with added nuances. Winternitz and Keith may be cited as examples:

> What Indians lacked was not, however, taste for history, but taste for criticism and for historical truth. And the reason of this is that the writers of history have as a rule been either court-poets or religious-minded persons. For the former the main task has been to sing in praise of their princes, to record their and their ancestors' heroic deeds and probably also invent such ones as never took place. The saints have, above all, been all along busy either with the praise of their sect or in preaching sermons to the community and to cause it to increase . . . . The Indian historian . . . will not penetrate deep into the connected topics, set down the historical data critically and explain them psychologically; on the contrary he will entertain and instruct as a poet (*kavi*), above all teach morals, when he will explain with examples the influences of moral behaviour on the destiny of man.[1]

Similarly, Keith observed, 'in the whole of the great Sanskrit literature there is not one writer who can be seriously regarded as a critical historian.' According to him the probable causes of 'this phenomenon' were the lack of 'any sentiment of nationalism', a belief in the doctrine of *Karma*, the absence of 'the scientific attitude of mind which seeks to find natural causes for the events of nature' and the 'tendency of the Indian mind to prefer the general to the particular'.[2]

The Orientalist formulations that ancient Indians lacked a sense of history are not accepted any longer. Already in the late fifties we

find A.K. Warder reacting angrily against these. He wrote:

> It used to be said that ancient India produced little or no historical literature. It was even suggested that the ancient Indians lacked the "historical sense" possessed by other peoples: that they were too religious to be interested in such worldly matters. We need not trouble ourselves overmuch with the analysis of such superficial misconceptions.[3]

The impatience of Warder is not wholly unjustified because the proposition not only runs counter to facts but verges on absurdity even from a commonsense stand point. To say that a people did not have a sense of history amounts to saying that they had no view of the past or an awareness of time. Such an obviously untenable proposition could have been hardly seriously made about early India. Early Indian philosophical systems reflect an acute consciousness of time.[4] Thus the central contention of scholars like Winternitz and Keith seems to have been that the way the discipline of history developed in the West is found practically absent in early Indian literary tradition. Ghoshal and Warder have succeeded in demonstrating that even this contention is not fully maintainable.[5] The proposition may also be approached and evaluated from another perspective. We may try to understand the kind of past events that occupied or engaged the interest of ancient Indians and how they viewed those events and in what manner they related themselves to those events.[6]

A large number of terms denoting past events were in continuous vogue in ancient India right from the Vedic age. It is true that the exact connotations of these terms are debatable and that it is not possible to ascertain how far these terms referred to the actual historical past and to what extent to mythical time. But all the same they do represent certain attitudes to the past. It is important to understand these attitudes for gaining some insight into the ancient Indian 'idea of history'.

Despite the fact that religion is the basic theme of Vedic literature, it contains references to certain forms of compositions that may be termed as historical. They merit the label of 'historical compositions' in the sense that they represent an attempt to preserve and transmit the memory of what was regarded as 'memorable' or 'significant' in the human past. Songs and verses were composed in praise of worthy deeds. The *Rgveda* states that kings were very fond of eulogies as a form of literary composition.[7] It appears that there was a class of versifiers and singers similar to the latter-day bards: *gāthin, vīṇāgāthin, vīṇāgṇagin,* etc., who specialized in the composition

and narration of this kind of eulogies.[8] In the genealogies of Vedic seers—the *vaṃśa* and *gotra-pravara* lists—the beginnings of another tradition of historical writings can be glimpsed.[9]

Various terms connoting 'historical' compositions like *gāthā, nārāśaṃsī, itihāsa, purāṇa, ākhyāna*, etc., are found referred to in Vedic literature. These compositions, it appears, became a part of the ritualistic tradition that dominated the Vedic literature. The recounting of glorious and heroic stories of the past was a part of the great Vedic sacrifices like the *aśvamedha*.[10] These were also narrated in the course of some domestic rituals.[11] Similarly, the *vaṃśa* and *gotra-pravara* lists harked back to divine ancestors and mythical sages.[12] The dominance of religion and ethics over history in varying degrees remained a permanent feature of the Indian view of history and the two were never fully de-linked. That *itihāsa* was called a *Veda* is a testimony of its very strong ethico-religious association.[13]

However, there are certain indications that these historical compositions originated independently of the ritual tradition in a secular *milieu* and later got incorporated into the ritual system. The term *nārāśaṃsī* signified 'verse celebrating men'.[14] The *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa* distinguished *gāthā* from *ṛk* by stating that while the former is merely human, the latter is divine.[15] Although *gāthā* and *nārāśaṃsī* had often been distinguished, they had as often been represented as kindred terms.[16] A passage in the *Atharvaveda* enumerated the following kinds of works: *ṛk, sāman, yajus, brāhmaṇa, itihāsa, purāṇa, gāthā, nārāśaṃsī*.[17] The passage seems to refer to two different classes of compositions, the one religious (*ṛk, sāman, yajus*, and *brāhmaṇa*) and the other secular or historical (*itihāsa, purāṇa, gāthā, nārāśaṃsī*). The *Kāṭhaka Saṃhitā* describes both *gāthā* and *nārāśaṃsī* as false (*anṛtam*).[18] There is a statement in the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, which appears interesting in this context: "Twofold, verily, is this, there is no third, viz. truth and untruth. And verily, the gods are the truth and man is the untruth."[19] There is little doubt that *gāthā* and *nārāśaṃsī* was not religio-spiritual but human and secular.[20]

It may perhaps be surmised that right from the early Vedic age there was a floating tradition of historical compositions, originally non-Vedic and non-ritualistic, which celebrated the heroic and noble deeds of men. These were mainly eulogistic songs and their main patrons were kings who were fond of such compositions.[21] In consequence of the growth of big Vedic sacrifices historical narratives acquired a place in the ritual system because the kings who were the

clients of these elaborate Vedic scarifiecs were also the patrons of historical narratives. This paved the way for the inclusion of secular heroic narratives as parts of the religious sacrificial lore. *Nārāśaṁśa,* from which *nārāśaṁśī* was derived, was associated with rites devoted to deceased fathers.[22] The recounting of the glories of departed ancestors or past generations thus formed an important component of what was regarded as historical narratives. The recitation of the lore of the past became an important element in the performance of *rājasūya, aśvamedha,* etc.[23] There were experts, *ākhyānavid, purāṇavid,* etc., in the narration of historical lore, whose services were utilized in the rituals.[24] In fact, Yāska hints at the fact that there was a school of *aitihāsikas* who specialized in interpreting Vedic hymns through *itihāsa,* in contrast to the *nairuktas* who relied on etymology for Vedic interpretation.[25]

*Gāthā, nārāśaṁśī, ākhyāna,* etc. seem to have been predominantly legends celebrating heroic and noble deeds. In them the line separating the human and superhuman was not important. Thus there were *indrāgathās* and *yajñagāthās,* and the *ākhyāna* of the union of a divine nymph with a mortal hero and its inevitable tragic consequences.[26] These narratives in Vedic literature were considered as having a mystical aspect which facilitated their way into the ritual system.

Among the various history-denoting terms current in early India, the central space was occupied by the twin terms: *itihāsa* and *purāṇa,* often joined together in a compound. It is not easy to define these terms precisely and to bring out the precise relationship between the two. Both the terms apparently were very old; *itihāsa* clearly and unambiguously had made its appearance already in the *Atharvaveda.*[27] Then in the Brāhmaṇas and Upaniṣads, it is a frequently occurring term and usually in association with *purāṇa.*[28] In the Vedic period *itihāsa* and *purāṇa,* jointly or separately, had already acquired the status of a Veda.[29] It is clear that *itihāsa* and *purāṇa* had a very intimate relationship; their subject matter must have covered a great deal of common ground and must have often overlapped. The points of distinction between the two—the use and continuation of both the terms over a very long period suggest that they were not regarded as synonymous to begin with—got blurred and confused. This confusion is strikingly illustrated by the contradictory positions taken by such famous authorities as Medhātithi and Śaṅkarāchārya on the one hand and by Sāyaṇachārya on the other. Whereas Śaṅkarāchārya and Medhātithi describe the

creation account (*sṛṣṭiprakriyā*) as constituting *purāṇa* and the Urvaśī-Purūravā legend as *itihāsa,* Sāyaṇa regards the creation account as *itihāsa* and the Urvaśī-Purūravā legend as *purāṇa*.[30] In the *arthavāda* (i.e., explanatory) portions of the Brāhmaṇas, however, the *ākhyānas* of Urvaśī-Purūravā and that of Śunaḥśepa have been given as examples of *itihāsa* and the creation account as that of *purāṇa*.[31]

But our main concern here is to understand the way in which the past was viewed in early India and thus, the elucidation of the elusive boundary between *itihāsa* and *purāṇa* is not central to our objective. In the *Arthaśāstra* of Kauṭilya there is a passage that gives us a fairly accurate and broad idea about the perspective in which *itihāsa* was viewed. The *Arthaśāstra* perspective is also interesting because it is the product of an age in which Puranic literature was receiving its standardized form.[32] The passage occurs in connection with the training programme designed for the prince in equipping him for rulership. The passage seems extremely significant and merits detailed review.

The *Arthaśāstra* passage occurs in the chapter on the training of the prince. The training programme had a clearly structured character. The training started at a very early age immediately after the tonsure ceremony (*caula*) was performed. At this primary stage the prince was first introduced to the alphabet and numbers as a foundation for the more rigorous intellectual training to follow. After the sacred thread ceremony (*upanayana*) began the study of the three Vedas, the philosophical systems and the management of economic and political affairs. After gaining a thorough grounding in these when the prince attained manhood he was asked to cultivate constantly the association of wise and knowledgeable people 'for the sake of improving his training'.[33] It is in this context that Kauṭilya prescribed that the prince should spend the second half of everyday in 'listening to *itihāsa*'.[34] Then comes the passage describing the scope and constituents of *itihasa*: "The *purāṇas, itivṛtta, ākhyāyikā, udāharaṇa, dharmaśāstra* and *arthaśāstra*—these constitute *itihāsa*".[35]

Despite sharing certain common elements, the *purāṇa, dharmaśasātra* and *arthaśāstra* represented distinct classes of literature. And each has a distinctive personality. It may be surmised that the other three, i.e., *itivṛtta, ākhyāyikā* and *udāharaṇa,* too must have had their separate existences and distinctive characters. Again, *purāṇa, itivṛitta, ākhyāyikā* and *udāharaṇa* appear to have shared a common family trait; all of them seem to have been narratives of old

events. They differed from one another not so much in character as in scope and range. *Udāharaṇa,* as the term suggests, probably signified a collection of separate events exemplifying success and failures. Kauṭilya apparently gives us a few samples of *udāharaṇa* in the chapter entitled, 'Casting out the Group of Six Enemies' dealing with the necessity of controlling the evil impulses and passions of the prince. [36] The *udāharaṇa* narratives did not seem to have any temporal order or sequential unity. The incidents in an *ākhyāyikā* had internal relatedness and unity. *Ākhyāyikā* was a variant of, or derivation form, *ākhyāna.* This form of narrative appears to have been popular since the Vedic period for their dramatic quality and for their morals and was given a place in the ritual system.[37] Generally, *ākhyāna* dealt with a particular story. Sometimes, however, a number of *ākhyānas* were strung together as in the *pāriplavaṇi* cycle.[38] Even the whole of the *Mahābhārata* was sometimes called an *ākhyāna* although it contained within itself numerous independent *ākhyānas.*[39] *Ākhyāyikā* later appeared to have acquired a standardized narrative form pertaining to the lives and activities of rulers.[40] Anyway, this seems clear that *ākhyāna-ākhyāyikā* had for its theme a single thread: an 'event' or a string of events constituting a 'story' with a beginning, middle and end. *Itivṛtta* and its synonym *purāvṛtta* perhaps signified events covering a longer period and range than *ākhyāyikā*; the suffix *vṛtta* suggests a sequential order. *Itivṛtta* also seems to hint at a circular or cyclical concept of history. *Itivṛtta* or the variant *purāvṛtta* perhaps meant a cycle of events.

It is not possible to trace the evolution of the term *purāṇa* with precision. That it referred to accounts of the 'olden past' is obvious; the very expression *purāṇa* is a sufficient indication. Whether Puranic traditions antedated the Vedas, whether they were anti-Vedic and anti-Brahmanic are questions that await final answers.[41] It seems clear that by the time the *Arthaśāstra* was composed and the Puranic literature was formalized, the scope of the theme of the *purāṇas* had acquired a truly vast sweep. It included the entire process of creation and evolution and accommodated within this frame a number of secondary beginnings, the disintegration of the world, the succession of the *yugas* and the accounts of all significant beings and events. It is not only the sumptuousness of the marvelous elements in these accounts, but also the vastness of the scope that disagrees with our contemporary sensibilities. The point that we are trying to make here is that *udāharaṇa, ākhyāyikā, itivṛtta* and *purāṇa* represented a series of graded perspectives in history; the scope of *ākhyāyikā*

was wider than *udāharaṇa, itivṛtta* was wider than *ākhyāyikā,* and *purāṇa* was wider than *itivṛtta.* According to Kauṭilya, *itihāsa* included all of the above and even more; it also included *dharmaśāstra* and *arthaśāstra.* The inclusion of *dharmaśāstra* and *arthaśāstra* appears particularly interesting as it seems to underline the social perspective of history.[42] Events ought to be situated against the *dharma* and *artha* perspectives.

*Itihāsa* in the light of the *Arthaśāstra* passage appears to have been considered as a wholesome study of the affairs of this world preparing man to comprehensively meet his social obligations. Its study seemed to have an especial value for a ruler. It ranked in importance next to the three *Vedas* and *āṇvikṣakī.* These two were geared predominantly to the realization respectively of *mokṣa,* and economics and politics.[43] *Itihāsa,* in contrast, put equal emphasis on all of the *caturvargas.*

The *Arthaśāstra* passage would also allow us to form an idea about the way an 'event' in history was conceived. Any narrative was not necessarily historical; to acquire the status of history a narrative had to be instructive.[44] It is the ability to teach and instruct that invests an event with significance. The notion of significance from this point of view is essentially ethical because only that has the ability to instruct which can contribute to well-being and happiness and because the attainment of well-being hinges on the ability to make the distinction between right and wrong. It is noteworthy that although Kauṭilya's *Arthaśāstra* was a text that predominantly dealt with the secular matter of success of royal policies; the way history (*itihāsa*) was perceived by Kauṭilya had a strong ethical underpinning.[45] This is clear from the narration of events of excesses committed by the rulers of yore that led them to their doom. Kauṭilya narrated those events as part of instructions to the prince as illustrations of conduct to be abjured.[46]

Normally an event was also regarded as one with a fulsome story. It usually contained one or more of *ākhyāna/ākhyāyikā* characterized by different parts that succeeded in sequential order. V.S. Pathak has described and illustrated these parts in his work.[47] These parts were: beginning (*prārambha*), the efforts (*prayatna*), the hope of achieving the objective (*prāptyāśā*), the certainly of achievement (*niyatāpti*) and the achievement (*phalāgama*). A book of *itihāsa* could consist of a single *ākhyāna/ ākhyāyikā* like *Harṣacarita.*[48] It could also include many *ākhyānas* sewn around a central theme as in the *Mahābhārata*

that was also called *Bhāratākhyāna* though it contained a large number of other independent *ākhyānas*.[49]

The *Arthaśāstra* passage also sheds some light on the relationship between *itihāsa* and *purāṇa*. In Kauṭilya's view, we have noted above, *purāṇa* was a part of *itihāsa*, and the two were thus intimately related. The scope of *itihāsa* was perhaps wider than *purāṇa,* for *purāṇa* was only one of the various elements or forms of *itihāsa*. Although the *Arthaśāstra* passage has been interpreted as indicating that *purāṇa* was only one among the several elements which together constituted *itihāsa*, the passage is also liable to interpretation to the effect that *itihāsa* had many forms or variants as specified by Kauṭilya and that these variants separately or together merited the name of *itihāsa*. We have also noted above that the relation between *itihāsa* and *purāṇa* and the scope and content of these were matter on which famous authorities disagreed and took opposite positions. Thus it is not possible to decide whether the passage in the *Arthaśāstra* represented merely Kauṭilya's personal view of *itihāsa* or it reflected the commonly perceived perception of his time. That Kautilya included *dharmaśāstra* and *arthaśāstra* in *itihāsa* may help us to understand why the Epics and *purāṇas* included didactic material and *dharmaśāstra* and *arthaśāstra* matters in such abundance.

It is worth trying to understand why the expression *purāṇa* stood both for ancient lore as well as for a specific class of literature. Winternitz has surmised that a mass of ancient lore and traditions existed as a floating body which served as a common storehouse from which various forms of literary expressions like *gāthā, nārāśaṁśi, vaṁsa, ākhyāna*, etc., drew their material. [50] The Puranic form seems to have developed by absorbing many of these forms within itself. The *Viṣṇu Purāṇa*, for example, tells us that there were three constituent elements of the *purāṇas: gāthā, ākhyāna* and supplementary *ākhyāna*.[51] They were collated within the framework of the *vaṁsas* to produce the *vaṁsānucharita* to provide the *purāṇas* with some of its so-called distinctive marks—the *pañchalakṣaṇas*.[52] The development of *purāṇas* through adaptation, absorption and integration of earlier mass of historical traditions and compositions represented a process of growth of historical narratives. It represented growth even in physical terms in the sense that the *purāṇas* came to constitute a collection of an enormous corpus much larger in scope and volume than the earlier forms of historical narratives. However, the growth of the *purāṇas* reflected more than mere physical expansion; it also marked the broadening of the scope and subject

matter of history as new elements and aspects were added by *puāṇṇakāras*. *Puranas* thus also represented a widening of the perspective in the conceptual framework of history. Since *purāṇas* became the repository of diverse aspects of the past, the expression *purāṇa* came to signify both the old lore as well as the class of literature preserving the old lore.

From another perspective also, *purāṇas* may be considered as marking a continuous and dynamic growth of the historical narrative. Through the process of *upabṛṁhaṇa* new material covering immediate past was continuously added to the existing corpus updating the narrative and keeping it attuned to contemporary requirements and tastes.[53] This saved the narrative from getting stale investing it with a certain evergreen quality. This, moreover, also underlined the relevance of past to the present by relating the past to the contemporary.

It is thus abundantly clear that the custom of documenting the past in India had a very long and old history; the earliest recorded traces of this custom are available in Vedic literature. There existed a definite tradition of preserving the memory of memorable and significant events of past. This tradition was generally called *itihāsa-purāṇa* tradition. There were bards and minstrels whose business was to compose, narrate and preserve glorious and heroic deeds. It seems that a class of specialists arose who developed expertise in preserving records of past; these experts constituted the 'school of historians' for the society. We have noted above that originally they did not form an integral part of the Vedic ritualistic tradition. The matter that was of primary concern to the preservers of heroic lore, the school of the *aitihāsika-purāṇika*, was mainly secular and was disapproved of by the orthodoxy on that count. Even if one does not wholeheartedly agree with Pargiter's view[54] that *purāṇa-itihāsa* tradition represented Kṣatriya tradition in contrast to the Vedic Brahmanical—the two might not have been as antithetical as Pargiter contends—there is no denying the fact that they originally belonged to two distinct traditions.

A large number of terms for these specialists are found. Some of the more frequently used terms in Pauranic literature were *purāvid, purāṇavid, purāṇajña, purāṇika, vaṁśavid, vaṁśacintaka, vaṁśa-purāṇajña, anuvaṁśapurāṇajña*, etc. It is not possible to locate and demarcate specific areas of specialization associated with these terms that were often used loosely without adhering to a fixed meaning.[55] From the *purāṇas* it appears that these specialists were also known

by a common and broader term, the *sūta*. The duties and functions
of a *sūta* can be sketched with certain amount of definiteness. "The
*sūtas* special duty as perceived by goodmen of old was to preserve
the genealogies of gods, *ṛiṣis* and most glorious kings, and the
traditions of great men, which are displayed by those who declare
sacred lore in the *itihāsa* and *purāṇas*."[56] It was thus *sūta's* function
to preserve the memories of 'glorious kings', 'the traditions of great
men', 'the eulogies' of famous people and 'the genealogies.' The
*sūta* was a *paurāṇika*, a specialist in ancient lore, a *vaṁśakuśala*, an
expert in genealogies.[57]

The *paurāṇika sūtas* were different from the *varṇa saṁkara sūtas*
mentioned in the *smṛiti* literature. Kautilya makes a clear distinction
between the two.[58] The *paurāṇika sūtas* appear to have been learned
people and apparently they belonged to the cultivated class. Pathak
has drawn the attention of scholars to the fact that the Bhṛgvāṅgirasa
families had shown special aptitude and interest in the preservation
and propagation of historical lore. [59] The close relation between the
Bhrgvāṅgirasas and *itihāsa-purāṇa* has been recorded especially in
the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*. At one place it states that the *Atharvaveda*
bears the same relation to *itihāsa-purāṇa* as the *Ṛigveda* to *ṛik*,
*Sāmaveda* to *sāman*, *Yajurveda* to *yajus*. At another place we find a
clearer statement: "Atharvāṅgirasas are the bees, the *itihāsapurāṇa*
is the flower." At yet another place it states that the hymns of the
Atharvāṅgirasas brooded over the *itihāsapurāṇa*.[60] It is possible that
the *paurāṇika sūtas* belonged to the Bhṛgvāṅgirasa extraction and
the antiquity of the *itihāsapurāṇa* was not very much shorter than
that of the Vedas.[61]

An account of the compilation of *purāṇa* is found in the *Vāyu,
Brahmāṇḍa* and *Viṣṇu Purāña*. There the compilation is attributed
to Veda Vyāsa. After accomplishing the stupendous task of
systematization and division of the Vedas into four, the *Ṛk, Sāman,
Yajus* and *Atharva* and entrusting them to four of his disciples—
Paila, Vaiśampāyana, Jaimini and Sumantu, respectively, Maharṣi
Kṛṣṇa Dvaipāyana complied a *purāṇa saṁhitā* and entrusted it
together with *itihāsa* to his fifth disciple *sūta* Lomaharṣaṇa or
Romaharṣaṇa. After that he composed the *Bhāratākhyānaṁ*.[62]

This account of the systematization of the *Vedas*, the compilation
of the *purāṇa* and the composition of the *Mahābhārata* is highly
interesting. Even though scholars have treated this account with
skepticism generally, no really valid argument can be advanced for
completely dismissing off its authenticity. If Vedic literature is silent

about this tradition of Vyāsa's dividing the Veda into four; there is nothing surprising about this omission. Vyāsa had merely organized the *Vedas*; there is no reason why the texts should contain any reference to him, he only arranged the Vedic texts without, presumably, any kind of interference with the texts themselves which were already in existence before his own time and which were traditionally regarded as of non-human (*apauruṣeya*) origin. It is also natural that the language, culture and the universe reflected in the *Vedas* on the one hand and the *purāṇa* and the *Mahābhārata* on the other should be quite distinct because the methods followed by Vyāsa in regard to the *Vedas* and *purāṇa-Mahābhārata* were quite different. In the case of the *Vedas*, Vyāsa's work was limited merely to arrangement and organization, in the case of the *purāṇa* and the *Mahābhārata* he was not just an organizer but also a composer author. It is interesting further to note that whereas for the *Vedas* he divided a single text into four divisions, for the *purāṇas* he collected a large number of existing traditions and accounts into a single whole. As for the *Mahābhārata*, Vyāsa is credited with composing it.

That the later history of the development of Vedic Literature and *purāṇa itihāsa* should take on different lines was also natural; the reason for the same was inherent in the very nature of the texts. *Vedic* texts were finished products, they dealt with things 'become', the *purāṇa* on the other hand dealt with things 'becoming', there was scope for continuous addition of new material to it as new historical facts kept piling up. When looked at from this point of view, Vyāsa's work with regard to the arrangement of the *Vedas* proved much more enduring than his compilation of the *purāṇa-saṁhitā*; the *Veda-saṁhitās* as arranged by Vyāsa have remained intact, the *purāṇa-saṁhitā* compiled by Vyāsa has got buried under later growth.

The traditional number of the *purāṇas* is considered eighteen, although the extant numbers of *purāṇas* greatly exceed this traditional number. These different *purāṇas* appear to have branched out of the original *purāṇasaṁhitā* compiled by Vyāsa. This original *purāṇa* could hardly have condensed all the existing past traditions, there must have been other existing ancient traditions leading to its augmentation and later proliferation into a number of *purāṇas*. The *purāṇas* by their very nature easily lent themselves to augmentation and adaptation. According to Pargiter, the later Brahmana editors of the *puranas*—the custody of the *purāṇa* passed from the hands of professional *sūtas* into those of sectarian Brāhmaṇa priestly class—

—took full advantage of the situation to introduce a great deal of extraneous matters, particularly religious and didactic, besides the fresh historical material that was accumulating over time and stamp the *purāṇas* with their sectarian views and attitude. Thus the handiwork of Vyāsa got lost.[63] The Brahmanical embellishments led to a change in the nature of the *purāṇas* by giving the original secular Puranic accounts a religious character and thus narrowing the gulf that divided the theological Vedic traditions and the non-religious Puranic heritage.[64]

Let us now consider the constituent elements, which had gone into the formation of the *purāṇas* to get an idea of the kind of the historical material found in them.

The traditional account of the compilation of the original *purāṇa-saṁhitā* by Vyāsa tells us that he had collected *ākhyāna, upākhyāna, gāthā* and *kalpa-jokti* for the same.[65] In this connection it may also be noted that traditionally the *purāṇa* was regarded as a class of literature that contained the following five characteristics (*pañca-lakṣaṇa*): original creation (*sarga*), dissolution and re-creation (*pratsarga*), genealogy (*vaṁśa*), transition of Manus (*manvantara*) and accounts of persons mentioned in the genealogies (*vaṁśānucarita*).[66] These give us a fair idea about the kinds of materials originally used for the composition of the Puranic literature. Same kinds of materials must have also constituted the basic raw material of the *itihāsa*. The subject matter of the original *purāṇa* thus seems to have consisted mainly of traditions about gods, about ancient *ṛṣis* and kings, about ancient genealogies and biographies.

No great distinction seems to have been made between *itihāsa-purāṇa* and *ākhyāna*; they were often treated as synonymous:

> As collective terms *itihāsa* and *purāṇa* are often mentioned as distinct, and yet are sometimes treated as much the same; thus the *Vayu* calls itself both a *purāṇa* and an *itihāsa*, and so also the *Brāhmāṇḍa*. The *Brahma* calls itself a *purāṇa* and an *akhyāna*; the *Mahābhārata* calls itself by all these terms."[67]

An *ākhyāna*, however, does not seem to constitute just any kind of old tales. It seems to have been a tale of special nature, a tale to illustrate a moral or a lesson. It was generally didactic. It is important to remember that the concept of history in ancient India generally had always been strongly didactic in nature. However, according to Pargiter, the didactic *dharma* matter which looms very large in the extant *purāṇas* were added later by the Brahmanas into whose hands the task of preservation of the *puranas* had passed from their original custodians, the *sūtas*.[68] It is significant that *dharma* does not directly

figure at all among the five characteristic features of the *purāṇas* (the *pañcalakṣaṇa*). Neither does it figure in the list of the materials used by Vyāsa for his compilation of the original *purāṇasaṁhitā*. *Upākhyāna* obviously belonged to the same *genre* as *ākhyāna*, the difference being perhaps in size and dimension.[69] *Gāthā* meant a song in praise of noble and heroic deeds.[70] Besides the *kalpajoktis*, thus the heroic traditions, lore and tales of past embodied in *ākhyāna, upākhyāna, gāthā*, etc., constituted the main Puranic material.

Of the original five characteristics of the *purāṇa*, the *pañcalakṣaṇa*, (original creation, dissolution and recreation, the *manvantaras*, ancient genealogies and accounts of persons mentioned in the genealogies) Pargiter writes:

The first three subjects that *purāṇas* should treat of, are based on imagination, are wholly fanciful, and do not admit of any practical examination, hence it would be a vain pursuit to investigate them.... The fourth and fifth subjects are, however, genealogies and tales of ancient kings, profess to be historical tradition and do admit of chronological scrutiny, hence they are well worth considering.[71]

Not questioning the validity of Pargiter's observation it may be pointed out that although it is true that the first three subjects are not valuable for empirical history, nevertheless they provide a grand sweep to the concept of history. Such sweeps form one of the chief characteristics of some of the most influential schools of historical interpretations. An obvious example is the Christian idea of history, which encompasses all empirical events within a single all comprehensive framework of the divine plan.[72] Similarly, the Puranic framework of creation and dissolution, within which the *vaṁśa* and *vaṁśānucarita* have their existence, give all empirical events a meaningful perspective and from that point of view these three subjects *sarga, pratisarga, manvantara* are highly valuable. They provide a synthesist framework and try to look at empirical events from the point of view of totality and not piecemeal.

This grand cosmological scheme that provides the comprehensive framework for empirical events is exemplified in the theory of *yugāntara* and *manvantara* (*kalpajokti* seems to have denoted the same thing): the transitions of the vast cosmic-time cycles.[73] *Yugāntara* denotes a cycle of four great successive ages (*yugas*): *kṛta, treta, dvāpara, kali*, charting a course of progressive decline, moral as well as biological. Seventy-one of such four-age periods (*kṛta* to *kali*) made up a *manvantara*.[74]

The Puranic theory of the decline from the pristine golden age of

*kṛta* through *treta* and *dvapara* to the *kali* is generally similar to the Buddhist theory of the origin of civil society[75] and it probably points to a common original source from which both the Buddhist as well as the Puranic theories have developed.[76] The general pattern is the same; the decline begins with the beginning of avarice, selfishness, conflict and violence. It is not only a moral degeneration but also physical; even the physical stature of men dwindles.

The Puranic view of progressive decline is found in several works but the most elaborate accounts are found notably in the *Vāyu Purāṇa.*[77] The *Sānti Parvan* in the *Mahābhārata* gives practically the same account. [78] The *Sānti Parvan* explains how in the *kṛta* age there was at first no state, but eventually passion and greed developed among men, consequently Brahmā invented the state and government. The Puranic tradition places the beginning of corruption and division of society not in the *kṛta* but after its end in the early *tretā.* According to the *Vāyu Purāṇa* account after the development of agriculture during the *tretā* which led to the appropriation of property, Brahmā created state and gave Kṣatriyas the right to rule.

A. K. Warder finds in this account an echo of the transition from the food gathering to food producing economy. Warder further feels that the original version of the theory placed the beginning of agriculture and state during the *tretā.* This was later modified by Brahmanical editors in order to place the beginning of kingship in the most perfect age, the *kṛta* itself and accommodate a number of kings in that age. On account of their bias against kingless republican societies, the royalist authors, according to Warder, were unable to bear the idea that the most perfect age in human evolution should have been the age when there was no king and no state.[79]

Historical time in the *purāṇas* was conceived of at two levels. Level one comprised of *'sarga'* and *'pratisarga'*, the cycle of 'creation' and 'dissolution and re-creation'. Time works havoc with the world making it old, dirty and polluted. It can be regenerated only by calling into existence the beginning of time, the re-creation of the world anew (*pratisarga*) after the dissolution of the old.[80] The cycle of *sarga* and *pratisarga* keeps on recurring weaving the fundamental pattern of history, the succession of a series of remorseless decline from *kṛta* to *kali* to *pralaya.* Running through these cycles of *sarga* and *pratisarga* exists the second level, the time spanning the *vaṃśas* and *vaṃśānucaritas*, the genealogies of gods and sages and the accounts of royal dynasties. It is the *vaṃśas* and *vaṃśānucaritas*, which provide focal points and centres to the

drifting sands of time lending the process it's meaning and significance. In the overarching theme of drift and decline, the *vaṁśa, manvantara* and *vaṁśānucarita* provide some footholds, however, precarious and transitory they may be, in the total scheme. At the second level, periodization is made on the basis of *manvantaras* (cycles of *manus*) and *vaṁśānucarita* (dynastic accounts).The frame here is predominantly political.

History in the *purāṇas* is also divided into the 'history of the past' and the 'history of future', the *kaliyuga* being the dividing line.[81] The coupling of the past and future is not a feature typical of the Puranic perception alone. It is also found, for example, in the *jātakas* where stories are divided into those pertaining to *atitavatthu* and to *paccupannavatthu*.[82] The comparison may be extended further. In the early Christian concept, history is divided into two halves, the birth of Christ constituting the dividing line, the history of 'Old dispensation' and the history of 'New dispensation', the first being the preparation for the coming of Christ and the second embodying the consequences of the birth of Christ.[83]

By the time the Puranic literature developed and proliferated, the old Vedic suspicion of and hostility towards historical concerns seem to have gone down substantially. In fact, the prestige and authority of the *purāṇas* came to rank next only to the *Vedas*. The *purāṇas* came to be regarded as complementary and aid to the proper understanding of the *Vedas*.

The *dvija* who may know the four *Vedas* with the *angas* and *upaniṣads*, should not really be (regarded) as having attained proficiency, if he should not thoroughly know the *purāṇa*. He should reinforce the *Veda* with the *itihasa* and *purāṇa*. The *Veda* is afraid of the little learned man thinking 'he will injure me.[84]

The heavy theistic embellishments in the Puranic literature might have also contributed to the melting away of the old hostility towards historical compositions.

Judged by modern canons of historical study, the *purāṇas* are found wanting in cogency and reliability as historical works. However, it should be noted that even even such a skeptical scholar as V. Smith[85] has accepted the value of *purāṇas* as historical document for certain ruling houses. Pargiter and Morton Smith made praiseworthy endeavour to vindicate Puranic dynastic accounts as genuine history. [86] The *purāṇas* may be judged to be poor history by modern measure, but they embody a philosophy of history, which may serve as an interesting foil to the modern notion of history.

After all, a philosophy of history in the deepest sense is nothing but a philosophy of life, a vision, a search for the essence of the universe and man's place and destiny in that universe. This quest naturally has to go beyond mere empiricism. The *purāṇas* were avowedly not history in the modern sense where history is regarded as a product of empiricism, a record of empirical facts. The *purāṇas* represent a world view manifesting itself through the narration of past events, events that are worth remembering and recording, events where men attained heroic proportions and achieved practically the stature of the divine and thus sublimated the remorseless wheel of time from *kṛta* to *kali*.

## NOTES AND REFERENCES

1.  M. Winternitz, *A History of Indian Literature*, Vol.III, Pt.1 trans. Subhadra Jha, Delhi 1977, p. 103.
2.  A.B. Keith, *A History of Sanskrit Literature*, Delhi 1973, pp. 144-47.
3.  A.K. Warder in *Historians of India, Pakistan and Ceylon*, ed. C.H. Philips, London 1961, p. 44.
4.  Nyāya-Vaiśeshika systems can be cited as obvious examples.
5.  See U. N. Ghoshal, *Studies in Indian History and Culture*, Calcutta 1965, Part One; A.K. Warder, *Introduction to Indian Historiography*, Bombay 1973.
6.  A noteworthy endeavour in this direction is the work of V.S. Pathak, *Ancient Historians* of India, Gorakhpur 1984.
7.  *Ṛgveda* IX. 10.3.
8.  Macdonell and Keith, *Vedic Index*, Delhi 1967, I, p. 225, II p. 316.
9.  Ghoshal, *Studies in Indian History and Culture*, pp. 2-6.
10.  *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, XIII, 4.2.8-11, 4.3.15; *Kātyayana Śrauta Sūtra* XX.2.7-8.
11.  *Āśvalāyana Gṛhyasūtra*, 1.14.6-7.
12.  *Śatpatha Brāhmaṇa*, X. 6.5.9; *Bṛihadāraṇyaka Upanishad*, VI.3.14.
13.  The word *itihāsa* was formed from *iti ha āsa*, this is what it was and etymologically signified *puravritta*, E. Seig, *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, VII, p. 461; *itihāsa/itihāsa-purāṇa* was called *Veda*, usually the fifth *Veda, Satapatha Brāhmaṇa*, XIII. 4.3.12; *Chāndogya Upaniṣhad*, VII. 1.2, the *Milindapañha*, ed. V. Trencker London 1928, p. 10 uses the expression *itihāsapañcama*.
14.  *Vedic Index*, I. p.445.
15.  *Aitreya Brāhmaṇa*, VII. 18.
16.  *Vedic Index* I, p.224 s.v. *gāthā* notes 3,4.
17.  *Atharvaveda*, XV.6.3.4.

18. *Kāṭhaka Saṁhitā* XIV, 5.

19. *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, I.1.1.4.

20. V. S. Pathak, *op.cit.*, p. 2

21. *Ṛgveda*, IX. 10.3; also see note 7 above.

22. V.S.Pathak, *op. cit.*, pp.4-5.

23. *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa*, VII. 18. 10; *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, XIII. 4.3.2.15.

24. *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa*, III. 25.1.

25. *Vedic Index*, I, p. 122.

26. Ghoshal, *op. cit.*, p.8; *Ṛgveda*, X.95 for Urvaśī-Purūravā legend; Winternitz, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, trans. S. Kelker, Delhi 1972 p. 100ff.

27. *Atharvaveda*, XV. 6.4 *et. seq.*

28. *Vedic Index* I, pp. 76-78.

29. *Chāndogyaupaniṣhad*, VII 1.2 combines *itihāsa* and *purāṇa* to constitute the fifth Veda. *Gopatha Brāhmaṇa*, 1.10 speaks both of *itihāsaveda* and *purāṇaveda*. cf., *Sāṅkhāyayana Srauta Sūtra*, XVI. 2.21.27; *Satapatha Brāhmaṇa*, XIII. 4.3.12.13.

30. S.N. Roy, *Historical and Cultural Studies in the Puranas*, Allahabad 1978, pp. 9-10.

31. Ghoshal, *op. cit.*, p. 17. The general opinion of early authorities thus identifies creation accounts with *purāṇa*.

32. Winternitz, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, p. 519. Date of Kautilya's *Arthaśāstra* continues to be debated. Many scholars accept the tradition that Kauṭilya was the Chancellor of Chandragupta Maurya.

33. The training programme is detailed in *Arthśāstra* 1.5-7. For the text and translation of the *Arthaśāstra* we have used R. P. Kangle, *Kauṭilīya Arthasastra*, Pt. I & II, Bombay 1969, 1972.

34. *Arthaśāstra*, 1.4.13.

35. *Arthaśāstra*, 1.4.14.

36. *Arthaśāstra*, 1.6.

37. For *ākhyāna* and *ākhyāyikā* see V. S. Pathak, *op. cit.*, pp. 6-9, 36-37 and *Vedic Index*, I, pp. 52, 77. Bāṇa's *Harṣhacarita* is called *ākhyāyikā*, see Pathak, pp. 14, 26-29.

38. *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, XIII. 4.3.15.

39. Pathak, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

40. Pathak, *op. cit.*, pp. 26ff, 36-37, 84-85.

41. F.E.Pargiter, *Ancient Indian Historical Tradition*, Delhi 1972, I, XXV, XXVI.

42. The concept of history in the *Arthaśāstra* thus was surprisingly liberal and modern.

43. *Arthaśāstra*, 1.5.7-14.

44. The value of learning is not just an academic or intellectual luxury. Learning is of practical value for disciplining character and conduct. "From (continuous) study ensues a (trained) intellect, from intellect (comes) practical application, (and) from practical application (results) self-

possession; such is the efficacy of sciences", *Arthaśāstra,* 1.5.16 Kangle Pt. II, p. 11.

45.  "Control over the senses, which is motivated by training in the sciences should be secured by giving up lust, anger, greed, pride, arrogance and foolhardiness. Absence of improper indulgence in (the pleasures of) sound, touch, colour, taste and smell by the senses of hearing, touch and sight, the tongue and the sense of smell means control over the senses, or, the practice of (this) science (gives such control). For, the whole of this science means control over senses". *Arthaśāstra,* 1.6.1-3; Kangle, *op. cit.,* II, p. 12.

46.  *Arthaśāstra,* 1.6.4-12.

47.  Pathak, *op. cit.,* pp. 27-29.

48.  *Harṣhacarita, Intro.,* verse 10; Pathak, *op cit.,* p. 36.

49.  See above note 39; Winternitz, *op. cit.,* Vol. I, p. 317, n. 1 and pp. 375ff.

50.  Winternitz, *op. cit.,* Vol. I, pp. 311-316.

51.  *Viṣnu Purāṇa,* III. 6, 15. See also Pargiter, *op. cit.,* p. 21 especially note 13.

52.  Pathak, *op. cit.,* pp. 17.

53.  *Upabṛṁhaṇa* was the process through which fresh material was added.

54.  See note 41 above.

55.  Pargiter, *op. cit.,* pp. 25-28.

56.  *Vāyu Purāṇa,* 1.31-32. cf., *Padma Purāṇa,* V.1. 27-28.

57.  *Garga Samhita,* Golokakhaṇḍa, Referred by Pargiter, *op. cit.,* p. 17, n. 2; S.N. Roy, *op.cit,* p.20.

58.  *Artha.* III 7. 28-29.

59.  Pathak, *op. cit.,* pp. 9-17, 21-26.

60.  *Chandogya Upanishad,* III, 3.4; III. 4.1-2.

61.  Pathak, *op. cit.,* pp. 14-17.

62.  Pargiter, *op. cit.,* pp. 21-22.

63.  Pargiter, *op. cit.,* pp. 24, 36-37. Pargiter's line of argument that originally the *purāṇas* were the works of professional *sūtas* untouched by Brahmanical influence is not acceptable to many scholars. We have noted above Pathak's opinion that *paurānika sūtas* were originally Brāhmaṇas. Moreover, the original compiler of the *purāṇasaṁhitā,* Kṛṣṇa Dvaipāyana was a Brāhmaṇa. This would also go against Pargiter's theory.

64.  Winternitz thinks that religious and didactic matters formed parts of original *puranas* and that old traditions about creation, deeds of gods, heroes, saints, etc,. were added to the original *dharma* works to produce Puranic literature, Winternitz, *op. cit.,* Vol. I, pp. 518-21.

65.  *Brahmāṇḍa Purāṇa,* II 34.21, *Vāyu Purāṇa* 60.21, *Viṣnu Purāṇa* III. 6.16.

66.  Winternitz, *op. cit.,* I, p. 622, n. 1.

67.  Pargiter, *op. cit.,* p. 35.

68.  See above notes 63, 64.

69.  See above note 37.

70.  *Vedic Index,* Vol. I, pp. 224-25.

71.  Pargiter, *op. cit.,* p. 39.

72. For a succinct account of the Christian and its precursor, the Hebrew, view of history, see T.R. Tholfsen, *Historical Thinking*, London 1967, pp. 39-71.

73. Pargiter, *op. cit.*, pp. 33-34.

74. Pargiter, *op. cit.*, pp. 175-79.

75. Aggannasuttanta, *Digha Nikaya*.

76. A. K. Warder, *An Introduction to Indian Historiography*, Chapter II.

77. *Vāyu Purāṇa, Adhyāya*, VIII.

78. *Sānti Parvan*, LIX.

79. See note 76 above.

80. For an interesting view of Eastern attitude to history and the concept of renewal of the corrupted world see M. Eliade, *Myth of the Eternal Return*, London 1955.

81. Winternitz, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, pp. 523-24.

82. Winternitz, *op. cit.*, Vol. II trans. S. Kelkar and H. Kohn, Delhi, 1977, pp. 115-15.

83. R.G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, Oxford 1946, p. 50.

84. *Vāyu Purāṇa*, 1.200-01, Pargiter, *op. cit.*, p. 1. Rāmānuja quoted the verse, but he was of the view that although the knowledge of *itihāsa purāṇa* led to the cleansing of sin, the attainment of highest knowledge of Brahman, could be had only from the Vedas, Winternitz, *op. cit.*, Vol, I, pp. 527-28.

85. V. Smith, *Early History of India*, pp. 11ff.

86. F.E. Pargiter, *Purana Texts of the Dynasties of Kali Age*, London 1913; Idem, *Ancient Indian Historical Traditions*; R. Morton Smith, *Dates and Dynasties in Earliest India*, Delhi 1973.