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ODYSSEY

THE PURĀNAS—PRIESTLY OR POPULAR ?

By

J. L. BROCKINGTON

Debate about the precise character of the Purāṇas has been going on for a long time—though in the past it has perhaps concentrated on their degree of historicity and their chronology, while more recently the great debate has been between the text-historical and the structuralist approaches, carried on mainly in the pages of the journal *Purāṇa* by Bedekar and Biardeau.¹ But the question of their more brāhmanical or more popular orientation has not been neglected. Let me say straightaway that I used the term “priestly” in my title for the sake of alliteration and that brāhman and brāhmanical would be more accurate. But, to stay with my title for a moment, the answer to the implicit question depends so much on definitions that it would be sensible enough to declare, according to one’s standpoint, that the Purāṇas are “priestly”, i.e. brāhman-dominated, that they are popular, that they are both and that they are neither, to follow the Buddhist tetralemma format.

One half of the dichotomy is relatively straightforward to define, at least initially, since the values and functions associated with the brāhman class are well enough known. It may not exactly correspond to the term “official” of this conference’s overall theme of “Official and Popular Religion”, which has also served as the title for volume 19 in Mouton’s Religion and Society series,² but its overtones are similar. However, are we to define “popular” then, as I think is often implicitly done in Indian culture, as non-brāhman or more specifically as belonging to the lower levels of society and the tribal groups ?

Though composed and edited by brāhmins, the Purāṇas are nevertheless very much a manifestation of popular religion; they bear witness to the fact that the brāhmins have maintained their position as guardians and transmitters of the religious tradition only by being receptive, albeit often reluctantly, to any innovations which achieve a real popular following. So much is this the case, that the more popular form of Hinduism from the Gupta period onwards has often been called Purāṇic Hinduism, while equally they reflect the growing strength of the sects, since most Purāṇas now have a definite Vaiṣṇava or Śaiva orientation. Though often relevant to sectarian developments, they nonetheless constitute the first expression of the more synthesising strand, concentrating on simple rituals

rather than exact doctrines, which is characteristic of mediaeval and modern Hinduism. Indeed, as a class of text, the Purāṇas are largely dedicated to this task of synthesis (not only between differing religious trends but also between religious and more secular aspects of tradition) as well as of establishing a religion more accessible and less hieratic than that which prevailed in the Vedic schools.

Nevertheless, the origins of the Purāṇas are very early; the term first appears in the Atharvaveda and thereafter is often linked with the stories elaborated to form the epics as the "ancient" material which, with the Vedas, constitutes the traditional learning. Indeed, it can be argued that the oldest material in the Purāṇas is contemporary with the Vedas but was recited either in a different context from the ritual or by others than brāhmins. Such an alternative context could be the source of the *smṛti* tradition, within which both the epics and the Purāṇas arose. *Smṛti* as a whole of course—the name literally means "memory", more generally "tradition"—is that broader, less defined and more popular body of received tradition which was supplementary to *śruti*, the Vedas, and validated by its acceptance by the guardians of *śruti*, the brāhmins.

On the other hand, there is a good deal to be said for the view that others than brāhmins were involved, in particular kṣatriyas. In that case, however, is the label "popular" entirely appropriate? The evidence is strongest, of course, for the kṣatriya background of the epics, with which the Purāṇas are closely associated by tradition in the compound *itihāsa-purāṇa*, sometimes even claimed as the fifth Veda. Let me remind you, too, that a number of the debaters in the Upaniṣads are of aristocratic, kṣatriya rather than brāhmin background. It is noteworthy that the idea of rebirth, which appears as a decided novelty in the two oldest Upaniṣads, is taught by a kṣatriya; there are several other clear indications that these speculations were not the exclusive preserve of the brāhmins. Indeed, if we accept the views so cogently argued by Paul Horsch, the passages associated with the kṣatriyas may well be distinguishable from the brāhminic material by their inclusion of verses in śloka metre, the standard metre of the epics and Purāṇas.³

The kṣatriya background of the extant Purāṇas is revealed perhaps most clearly in the king-lists which form one of their topics. I do not want here to become embroiled in the question of the Purāṇas as sources of Indian history or of Pargiter's role in establishing them as such. Suffice it to say that Pargiter assigned the Purāṇas to the class of "ancient kṣatriya literature", argued that this "grew up in virtual independence of brāhminical literature", and claimed that this kṣatriya literature provided better historical data about ancient India than the brāhminical literature.⁴ His views have attracted probably more opponents than sup-

porters, generating more heat than light. Personally, I would agree with the judicious summing up by Dimmitt and van Buitenen : "It seems likely that these two traditions were never entirely distinct, for Vedic literature includes numerous stories of kings, and the epics and Purāṇas both promote the social and religious preeminence of brāhmins and their values. Thus the Purāṇas represent an amalgam of two somewhat different but never entirely separate oral literatures : the brāhman tradition stemming from the reciters of the Vedas, and the bardic poetry recited by *sūtas* that we handed down in kṣatriya circles."³

This brāhman/kṣatriya opposition is raised in a sense even more acutely by the epics, for their origins and early development belong to the kṣatriya aristocracy. Originally therefore broadly secular works, recited at courts by bards attendant on the kings, both epics grew over a long period to include much other traditional material and acquired religious significance as an important figure in each was identified as an incarnation of Viṣṇu; in the process their transmission and amplification passed into the hands of the brāhmins. Indeed, the Mahābhārata and the Rāmāyaṇa are a major source for understanding the substantial transformation taking place in the religion in the post-Vedic period. Even here, where the shift is much more clear-cut and far more work has been done, the chronology of the process is still not entirely clear.

To return to the Purāṇa king-lists, these do in fact provide us with some clues about the chronology of the Purāṇic literature. They fall essentially into two groups, of which the first series of genealogies runs from Manu, the mythical ancestor of the human race, to the immediate descendants of the heroes of the Mahābhārata, while the second series presented as prophecy (which may reflect their addition to the established texts) but undoubtedly like all the best prophecies written *ex post facto*, ends with the Guptas or another dynasty of the 4th-6th centuries A.D. The end point of the first series, corresponding to the aftermath of the supposed Bhārata war, may well represent the period early in the first millennium B.C. when this material originated. Similarly, the end point of the second series seems to mark the period at which this material began to assume its present form in the extant Purāṇas, which were compiled between the fourth and about the twelfth centuries, with additions till much more recent times in some instances.

Traditionally, each Purāṇa covers five topics (*purāṇapañcalakṣaṇa*) : the emanation of the universe, its destruction and re-emanation, the reigns and periods of the Manus, the genealogies of the gods and sages, and the genealogy of the solar and lunar dynasties (to which all Hindu dynasties trace their ancestry). The first three of the traditional topics amount to a full presentation of the developed Hindu cosmology. In their relationship to the other two topics of genealogies, these topics represent a transition from the universal to the more particular and a

balance between them; in themselves, they constitute quite as much of a secular and even "scientific" approach as a religious one; while the genealogies have certainly at least as much to do with kṣatriya values as with brāhman concepts. Thus, the impression given by the list of five topics tends to reinforce the idea that the Purāṇas in their origins were primarily connected with the kṣatriyas.

Unfortunately, the first mention of five topics is in the lexicon of Amarasimha the *Amarakośa*, of the fifth or sixth century, and they are not named until later still.⁶ Furthermore, while these five do occur in some Purāṇas they occupy only a tiny fraction of their extent and some Purāṇas omit some of them. Thus, if they do form the original nucleus, then the Purāṇas have expanded out of all recognition. There is in fact a fairly general recognition that the Purāṇas have grown by accretion. As part of this process other topics were added, such as instruction on the duties of class and stage of life (*varṇāśramadharmā*), sacred sites and pilgrimage, worship of images and construction of temples; among their characteristic themes are the greatness of the rewards which can be secured by little effort and their accessibility to women and śūdras, an obvious parallel to the emphases of the bhakti movement, in this more activity-related type of religion.

Again, there is a similarity to the epics, for there are many parallels to verses of Manu, probably the oldest of the *dharmaśāstras*, in both epics, especially in the Śānti and Anuśāsana parvas, the twelfth and thirteenth books of the Mahābhārata, and the Mahābhārata contains an important section on pilgrimage in its third book (the Tīrthayātrāparvan); in both cases this material has been added in later stages of the epics' growth. The difference is that, whereas for the epics considerable progress has been made in identifying the stages of this growth, far less coherence has been achieved so far in the picture of Purāṇic development. One of the reasons is of course the sheer bulk of material; whereas tradition ascribes a lakh (a hundred thousand) of verses to the Mahābhārata, it assigns no less than a crore (ten million) to the Purāṇas. Inflated as the figure probably is, it still gives an idea of the scale of the problem.

One of the few overall schemes is that suggested by Dimmitt and van Buitenen who declare :

In the course of their long history the Purāṇas have become truly encyclopedic in content. They contain four principal types of material which ... have accrued in an identifiable, if not precisely datable, order : the *pañcalakṣaṇa*, or "five characteristics"; *bhakti*, or devotional theism; *dharma*, or social duty; and practical matters, derived from both arts and sciences.⁷

However, as soon as one looks at the details, this scheme becomes a good deal less plausible. Pilgrimage, if we are to judge by the evidence of the Mahābhārata, was a popular practice at a relatively early date; after all, its description of *tīrthas* starts with the one major cult spot still associated with Brahmā, making hyperbolic claims about its sanctity, and so suggests that Brahmā was much more important than subsequently. Although Hacker has demonstrated that there is some evidence for Brahmā's importance in the earliest levels of the Purāṇas,⁸ in most of them Brahmā has given way to Śiva and Viṣṇu. He retains a place only in the *trimūrti*, which perhaps reflects a transition phase in the relationship of the three gods but becomes fossilised and retained mechanically later. Incidentally, as I have suggested elsewhere,⁹ it may be that one reason for Brahmā's ultimate eclipse is that he had become too closely identified with the interests of the brāhmanas as a class. If so, this provides another interesting slant on our theme.

Alongside Brahmā's eclipse, the Purāṇas also indirectly attest the rise of the Goddess. Devī, in whom are fused various local and more or less "popular" female deities (the warrior goddess, Durgā, conqueror of the buffalo demon, Maṇiśāsura-mardīnī, the blood thirsty Kālī the mothers or mātṛkās, Ambikā, Caṇḍikā and so on) and who is sometimes Viṣṇu's consort (Viṣṇumāyā, Śrī, Lakṣmī), more often Śiva's (Umā or Pārvatī), and often also independent.

Again, if the bhakti element is the second group of material after the "five characteristics", this implies that the Purāṇas as they were redacted during the Gupta period lacked the elements which presumably they classify under this heading, and this seems an unduly restrictive view of the Purāṇas at that period. Nevertheless, it is with the bhakti material that we come to anything which can definitely be labelled "popular" in the sense of belonging to the masses rather than to the elite. So far, our discussion has been in terms of brāhman and kṣatriya and of the links between the Purāṇas and the epics, which are in origin pre-eminently kṣatriya literature. The rise of the bhakti movement proper in south India from about the 7th century A.D. was truly a movement of the lower levels of society. Yet even before its influence reached the north, elements were being incorporated into the Purāṇas which must reflect a broader and to that extent more popular attitude to religion.

Indeed, much of the dharma material is probably a great deal less brāhman-oriented than might be thought, since, while there is an acceptance of the *varṇāśramadharma*, far less emphasis is placed on the disabilities attaching to the lower varṇas than on the means by which they can achieve religious merit. Pilgrimage is one of these means, which must have a popular background, for such a cult of localities is at variance

with the mobile character of Vedic ritual. The cult of pilgrimage to sacred places, *tīrthas*, became fairly widespread by the mediaeval period and was a popular way to remove sins and accumulate merit; the merit acquired in visiting them was commonly reckoned in terms of the performance of so many Vedic rituals, but, unlike the sacrifices that they thereby replace, the sacred sites were open to all. As their name *tīrtha* suggests, such pilgrimage centres are usually (though not invariably) associated with rivers and especially with the Gaṅgā. However, the city of Vārāṇasī on its banks is a particularly sacred city (and is celebrated, for example, by its older name of Kāśī in the Kāśīkhaṇḍa of the Skanda Purāṇa).¹⁰ Gradually other rivers and sites came to be centres of pilgrimage, or in several cases no doubt older traditions of pilgrimage associated with local, tribal cults were granted orthodox recognition. To mark this, passages eulogising these *tīrthas* were inserted in one or another of the Purāṇas. Some Purāṇas even deal mainly with *tīrthas*, such as the Padma, Skanda and Bhaviṣya Purāṇas, and occasional minor Purāṇas are little more than extended *māhātmyas*, eulogies of such sacred sites, of which an example is the Sarasvatī Purāṇa, a local Purāṇa from Gujarat which describes the *tīrthas* on the banks of the Sarasvatī there.

There is in fact a definite regional element to some of the Purāṇas, to judge by the *tīrthas* and the temples mentioned. Would it be going too far to say that this reflects one pattern, even the main pattern, of their transmission after the decline of the Gupta dynasty? Possibly the Purāṇas were preserved in the local literature of certain temples and shrines, which would help to account both for the regional emphases and for the increasing openness to popular attitudes and beliefs. If so, the *smārta* brāhmins, who are particularly associated with the group of five deities which replaced the earlier synthesis of the *trimūrti* and who certainly played quite a significant ritual role for several groups, may well have played an important part in this.

This question of regional variation is obviously a significant one in our understanding of the development of the Purāṇas in general, as well as to the popular origin of particular features. However, the inadequate textual basis for many—indeed most—Purāṇas severely inhibits its exploration as yet. As an example, let me quote a point that Ludo Rocher makes in his recent book on the Purāṇas:

In their descriptions of the Durgāpūjā the *nibandhakāras* quote numerous verses from a variety of purāṇas—Bhaviṣya°, Liṅga°, etc.—, which do not appear in the editions of these texts. We may therefore assume that the place of Durgāpūjā in the purāṇas of northeast India was and probably still is—far more important than their written versions seem to indicate.¹¹

Further study of the variant versions of different Purāṇas could well yield significant new material on regional and popular developments.

Apart from their emphasis on pilgrimage, the Purāṇas are even better known as the great storehouses of Hindu mythology, and in this too they have played a synthesising role, bringing into relationship with the two major deities, Viṣṇu and Śiva, many local deities and cults by means of a particular myth. One major element of this is the provision of the deities with their individual mounts (*vāhanas*), thus bringing into relationship with each deity an appropriate animal symbol of his particular nature or activity. Thus Brahmā is provided with a goose (because of its lofty migration to remote distances, a symbol of the soul's quest for release), Viṣṇu rides on Garuḍa (the mythical bird who in Vedic literature is entirely independent of Viṣṇu) and during the dissolution of the universe he reclines on the cosmic serpent Śeṣa or Ananta ("remainder" and "infinite"), and Śiva has his bull, Nandin. Of course, deities in animal form have been taken directly into the developed pantheon, in particular the monkey Hanumān (who has a wider significance than just his aid to Rāma) and Śiva's elephant-headed son, Gaṇeśa. Interestingly, Gaṇeśa himself is furnished with a mount, the apparently incongruous rat which in reality symbolises another aspect of Gaṇeśa's ability to overcome obstacles.

This system of the deities' mounts represents, therefore, another mechanism, alongside the proliferation of Viṣṇu's avatāras and Śiva's ever-enlarging family circle, by which the Purāṇas have contrived to assimilate the multiplicity of local cults, which have always been a feature of Indian religion, into the framework of a developed religion. Certainly, while for example such a figure as Varāha, Viṣṇu's boar incarnation, can be traced back as far as the Brāhmaṇas, in most cases such theriomorphic figures stand outside the Vedic tradition. Undoubtedly in this there has been an element of deliberate manipulation of the material by its brāhman redactors to achieve the desired end. But another significant feature of the use of myth is its employment as a kind of meta-language, a method of presenting religious concepts in a symbolic form which is open-ended. A myth can be endlessly reinterpreted to suit the needs of the individual or the period in a way that is impossible to achieve with doctrinal formulations. The Puāṇas provide countless examples of the narration of essentially the same myth from a Vaiṣṇava or a Śaiva angle and, in the case of Śaiva mythology, with unlimited scope for exploiting the ambivalence inherent in the nature of a deity who represents in so striking a fashion the totality of the universe.

Although the Purāṇas do contain sectarian materials and indeed constitute excellent sources for the study of Hindu sects, their sectarianism is by no means exclusive, favouring one god to the detriment of all others, but rather in them a measure of respect is shown to all the major deities.

Inevitably, as with any such generalisation, there are passages which constitute an exception but as a whole this is undoubtedly the case. While attempts are made to link a third each of the traditional number of eighteen with each deity of the *trimūrti* (or alternatively or in addition with the three *guṇas* of *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*), the procedure is rather artificial. For example, the Kūrma Purāṇa, though named after an avatāra of Viṣṇu, is classified by this scheme in the Padma Purāṇa as being Śaiva, but in fact it presents an intriguing combination of Vaiṣṇava and Śaiva elements. More specifically still, its opening chapters show a clear Pāñcarātra outlook, while the rest often shows a Pāśupata viewpoint but among those includes the Īśvaragītā (Kūp 2. 1-11), a Śaiva adaptation of the Bhagavadgītā, which is in itself an excellent example of this relatively eclectic approach. While the Kūrma Purāṇa is probably a Pāśupata adaptation of an earlier Pāñcarātra work, the Matsya Purāṇa (again named after an avatāra of Viṣṇu) places Vaiṣṇava and Śaiva material side by side in an apparently random manner. I could go on adducing examples.

The point I am making, however, is that in thus placing Vaiṣṇava and Śaiva material alongside each other the Purāṇas are not exhibiting the type of theological outlook that one might expect of religious specialists, that is of brāhmins, but rather the broad tolerance which seems always to have characterised the mass of the Indian population. On the other hand, it is quite clear that the composition of the Purāṇas and in large measure their transmission was, as I have been suggesting, in the hands of brāhmins, so that this is an example of their responsiveness to the needs or desires of their clientele, the mass of the people. But then, as I have noted elsewhere,¹² within the relatively unstructured mass of Hinduism, brāhmins as a class exercise a leadership by consent rather than a dictatorial control. They need to give their sanction to any innovations that achieve a real popular following, if they are not to be left out on a limb.

At times it seems as if this desire to be inclusive, to anticipate the vagaries of popular belief, has led the compilers of some Purāṇas to make them into repositories of almost any traditional learning that may have any bearing on religious practice. It is natural enough that they should include, as well as the pilgrimage aspect that we have already glanced at, material on the worship of images and construction of temples. Here again they provide evidence of a trend which has become characteristic of Hinduism in more modern times. In fact, the first extant examples of Hindu temple architecture come from the Gupta period and thus are more or less contemporary with the compilation of the earlier Purāṇas, except for a very few shrines connected, perhaps significantly, with popular cults such as that of the Nāgas, the snake deities. Although temples and image worship were to replace the Vedic ritual, their earliest

symbolism was derived from it. The Purāṇas give the first clear prescription of the cult of images, beginning with methods of manufacture, then their installation in the temple, followed by the bathing, perfuming, adorning and consecrating of the statue. Although canons of proportions are given, the concern is not artistic but purely iconographic.

However, some Purāṇas, or rather their latest compilers, have gone very much further, until a few have become positively encyclopaedic, notably the Matsya, Garuḍa and Agni Purāṇas. The iconographic teachings of the Agni Purāṇa have in fact been the subject of a major study by Marie-Thérèse de Mallmann¹³. Less obvious topics treated in its 380-odd chapters include politics (218-31), trees and water reservoirs (247 and 282), medicine in two chapters (280 and 370—the subject of studies by R.F.G. Müller),¹⁴ metrics (328-35), literary ornament (*alaṃkāra*; ASS 337-47/Bib. Ind. 336-46) and lexicography (360-7/359-66). But an Upapurāṇa, such as the Viṣṇudharmottara Purāṇa, can include a major work on mathematical astronomy, the Paitāmahasiddhānta (2.166-74), and sections on painting (*citrāsūtra*, 3.35-43) and image making (*pratimālakṣaṇa* 3.44-85); in this case the topics are not so surprising but the scale of their treatment is somewhat out of proportion. In the case of the Agni or Garuḍa Purāṇas, the logic of the inclusion of much of this material is not apparent.

Another aspect of the regional element that I was referring to earlier is the translation and adaptation of Purāṇas into the regional languages. There are actually two types of vernacular Purāṇas: those that have been translated, however freely, from Sanskrit originals and those that originated independently. It is indeed a mark of both the popularity and the importance of the Purāṇas that such vernacular versions constitute a major part of the earliest literature in most of the NIA languages. Among the Dravidian languages, Tamil is particularly rich in works called Purāṇas, among which the Periya Purāṇam is particularly significant, especially for its association with the bhakti movement, for it was composed in the 11th century by Śekkiḷār, the minister of the Cōla ruler, and describes the lives of the 63 Nāyanmārs. It is thus even more directly linked with the bhakti movement than the monumental Bhāgavata Purāṇa which, though in Sanskrit, was clearly composed in south India, most probably in Tamiḷnāḍ, and is, of course, of paramount importance for the devotional sects worshipping Kṛṣṇa. There are incidentally Tamil versions of the Bhāgavata and many early European references to this Purāṇa were in fact taken from a French translation of one Tamil version.¹⁵ In these two works, the Sanskrit Bhāgavata Purāṇa and the Tamil Periya Purāṇam, we do now see the full-scale influence of the bhakti movement and—which is probably not coincidental—a fully coordinated plan for each work.

I am not really qualified to comment in any meaningful way on these vernacular Purāṇas and so will not attempt to go beyond the brief remarks I have just made. However, this does bring us back to the issue of the transmission of the Purāṇas, which I briefly touched on earlier in relation to their links with the epics and their common oral background, as well as in their possible connection with particular temples and shrines as an explanation for local emphases. Now that we have examined the content and purpose of the Purāṇas in some fashion, perhaps I could finish with some examination of their transmission, in so far as it reveals attitudes towards them.

Although the Purāṇas do seem to share a common background of oral, bardic composition with the epics, it is likely in my view that written texts had become the main means of their composition and preservation at least by the Gupta period from which the earliest extant Purāṇas date; thus, the repetitiousness of their style is less a survival of the formulaic style typical of oral poetry than a symptom of their method of compilation. However, recitation of the Purāṇas to an audience drawn from all segments of society seems always to have been prevalent and specifically to have distinguished them (and other parts of *smṛti*) from the Vedic literature, for which the audience was carefully restricted; in this context, of course, their oral nature or otherwise is irrelevant. Inscriptional and literary evidence in north India shows that endowments were made for the popular recital of the epics and the Purāṇas from about the 7th century onwards. And V. Raghavan, in a paper significantly entitled "Methods of Popular Religious Instruction in South India",¹⁶ gives numerous examples of endowments by the Pallavas, Coḷas and Pāṇḍyas for the same purpose and goes on to state: "Thus the practice of popular exposition of the epics and the *purāṇas* has been handed down to the present day in an unbroken tradition." It is perhaps not altogether too fanciful to see in such recitation, usually in a temple, a direct continuity with the claimed first recital of the various Purāṇas by the *sūta* at the sacrificial sessions (*sattra*s). In any case, it is clear that such public recitation was a regular, even the main, means of their dissemination from an early period onwards.

Raghavan also goes on to suggest that, in Tamilnād at any rate, nowadays the Purāṇas are only rarely taken up and that it is the Rāmāyaṇa which is most often recited. On the other hand, other studies of contemporary practice do give the Purāṇas a larger share. For example, Filchner and Marāṭhe, in a field-work description of modern Hindu feasts, refer to the recitation of Purāṇic texts on these occasions;¹⁷ themes from the Purāṇas and the epics form the basis of the *chau* dances performed in Bhumij villages;¹⁸ and Valentina Stache-Rosen has studied local traditions of presenting Purāṇic and epic stories in shadow-plays

and popular ballads.¹⁹ Further examples could easily be found from a perusal of the anthropological and similar literature, but perhaps I could simply add one further, slightly different example by pointing to the frequency of Purāṇic material in the study of modern calendar art in North India by V.G. Vitaxis.²⁰ If we need any proof of the popular character of the Purāṇas, it is surely here.

The undoubted fact that the Purāṇas have achieved a wide popular audience does not, though, *ipso facto* make them popular works in the sense of belonging to, or reflecting the values of, the mass of society rather than the elite. There is far too much evidence of the role of the brāhman in their composition and transmission, even in some aspects of their subject-matter, to dismiss their brāhman nature out of hand. But in this, as I remarked earlier, they do not stand alone, for both the Mahābhārata and the Rāmāyaṇa originated in a kṣatriya milieu but subsequently came under the influence of the brāhmanas as the guardians and redactors of all received tradition. Yet they are clearly not brāhmanical works in the way that the Kalpasūtras and other ancillaries to the Vedic literature, or much of classical Sanskrit literature, manuals of the six systems, or even much sectarian literature is brāhmanical. To oversimplify, though written or compiled by brāhmanas, they are intended for a popular audience. However, this is not the same as is implied in a quotation which over the years I have used on my students as an examination question (for so long in fact that I have mislaid its source—if indeed it is a genuine quotation); this declares: "The Purāṇas are popular Hinduism with a priestly veneer." The brāhman element is more than just a superficial adaptation.

Dimmit and van Buitenen were certainly nearer to it when they ask "if there is any overall plan, theme or structure to these collections of old stories as they now exist. Whether intended by a compiler, or unintentional, can we discern a central thread, an inner coherence, a guiding principle to the contents of these eighteen major Purāṇas?" For their reply is that it appears that "a guarded yes can be given to the question of intention. One principle guiding every accretion to a received text of these old stories is the principle of exotericism by which less esoteric, more popular religious beliefs and practices were dignified by acceptance into the loftier Sanskrit oral tradition maintained by the class of brāhmin priests."²¹ I am not sure that this is entirely valid for the really encyclopaedic Purāṇas, like the Garuḍa and Agni Purāṇas, nor am I entirely happy about the emphasis on oral tradition, if they mean (as I think they do) oral composition rather than recitation. Nevertheless, the overall trend is towards inclusiveness and comprehensiveness; indeed, defined in those terms, it is possible to see the encyclopaedic Purāṇas, not as aberrations, but as the extreme examples of the tendency to include more and more. Nor is this tendency to make almost a library out of a particular Purāṇa

at all surprising if we accept the suggestion that their custodians may have been relatively unsophisticated temple priests—in many ways the lowliest of the brāhmanas—who in this way collected in one work whatever might be useful to them in their daily life, as they attended to the religious needs and aspirations of their clientele. This localised aspect is after all even more obvious in some of the minor Purāṇic literature—in the *sthalapurāṇas* devoted to the glorification of some particular place (as well as in the *māhātmyas* included within the major Purāṇas) and, in a different way, in the caste Purāṇas, a still insufficiently explored genre which superimpose a restriction by social grouping on to that by region. The degree of literacy of the later Purāṇa redactors may well be considered questionable, in view of the poor Sanskrit of so many manuscripts. Such unlearned brāhmanas, with their horizons limited to their own immediate area, may well be considered to have more in common with the rest of the population than with the elite to which they nominally belong. Yet they undoubtedly stand at the intersection of the divide between the “Great Tradition” and the “little traditions”, once so favoured by the social anthropologists.

“Official” and “popular”, or “priestly” and “popular”, could easily become in the same way a stereotype into which the evidence is made to fit. If the contrast is viewed as a mere either/or proposition, it will prove too simplistic, but if we regard it as a starting point—a preliminary orientation, if you like—from which to explore the vast and still inadequately charted terrain of the Purāṇas, it may well possess considerable practical utility.

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