CHAPTER III

PURANIC TREATMENT OF BIOGRAPHICAL MATERIAL

The word 'Purāṇa' is very old. It means originally nothing but Purāṇam, Ākhyānam i.e. an old narrative. This word refers to stories of ancient origin. It's deviation is given thus:

"Yaśmatpura hi anati idam Purāṇam"¹

(It was prevalent in ancient times)

In the Vedas and the epics, this word occurs together with the words "Itiḥāṣa", "Ākhyāna" and others. Although there is difference between these according to their definitions, it appears that Ākhyānas and Upākhyānas were included under "Itiḥāṣa" and "Purāṇas". The Purāṇas must have been composed during the Vedic period giving about the lives and activities of the warriors, kings, ascetics and others and also about the creation of the world. They undoubtedly reach back to great antiquity and are rooted in Vedic literature. In the post-Vedic period, the ancient pre-vedic materials were divided into two categories. The category which dealt with human beings was "Itiḥāṣa" (history). There was no scope for gods in this category.²

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¹ Vāyu Purāṇa 1 203
² Sukumar Sen "Bhāratīya Sāhityer' Itiḥāṣ", P. 119
The characteristics in history are human beings. The incidents on history will be based on facts. There won't be any differentiation between facts and fiction in history. So, "Mahābhārata" is history. But this was acknowledged in the ancient days. Modern history does not give this status to Mahābhārata. Even Kautilya, in his "Arthasastra" had given "Mahābhārata", the status of Veda after "Rg", "Sām" and "Yajur" Veda. Therefore "Mahābhārata" was considered as the fifth Veda.

In the ancient times, history meant tales of the past or legends and myths like the tales of Urvasī and Pururava. So, in the Mahābhārata, we come across legends and facts. In a single śloka of Mahābhārata, we come across Purāṇa tales and itibṛttā:

"Purānasamhitāḥ puṇyāḥkathā dharmārtha samśritāḥ
   Itibṛttām narendraśnam ṛṣṇānca mahātmanām" ⁴

(In the Purāṇa Saṁhitā and other religious books, there are the stories of kings, sages and great men).

Purāṇas certainly existed already long before the final redaction of the Mahābhārata. Our Mahābhārata not only calls itself a Purāṇa, but also begins exactly as the Purāṇa texts usually begin. Ugrasrava, the son of the Sūta Lomaharsana appearing as narrator.

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3 "Arthasastra", 3rd chapter, 1st Prakāraṇ.
4 "Mahābhārata", Ādiparva - 16
The main characteristics of Purāṇas are gods and demons. There are human characters also thrown sometimes. But these human characters of the Purāṇas cannot be considered in history. Let us take them to be facts only. These are completely mythological, Purāṇa, on the other hand, deals with more of gods' incarnations. "Manusmṛti" too has mentioned of history. It has said that during the obsequial rites, history of forefathers has to be recited along with the Purāṇas.

We cannot fix the date of composition with any certainty. Many of them could have been composed when the Mahābhārata was composed. They are mainly responsible for the information which they give about the royal dynasties. The periods of the dynasties were calculated by the western writers with references to the date of Maurya Chandragupta about 320 B.C. It was composed by Vyāsadeva.

The oldest Purāṇa which we have found, does not have a large contribution to history. This is "Hari Vamsā". This epic-like Purāṇa has been divided into three parts. They are:

1. Harivamśa-parva (55 chapters).
2. Viṣṇu-parva (128 chapters).

1. In Harivamśa-parva we find the history of the creator, the ancient kings and the fight between the gods and demons.
(2) **Visnu parva** is the most famous among all the Purāṇas. In it, there are the descriptions of Maurya vaṁśa. It contains 18,000 slokas. The 10th skanda is the most popular section which deals with Krṣṇa's exploits.

(3) Bhaviṣya parva: It deals with "Asvamedha jajña" of Janamejaya, Madhukaitava tales, Prthu's crownini, tales of Barāha-avatāra, stories of Bāmana avatāra, Krṣṇalīlās, killing of Vāsudeva, Krṣṇa's fight with Haṁsa and Dimbaka and Tripurā's killing. Leaving aside Harivamśa the oldest and the most culturally rich Purāṇa is Viṣṇu Purāṇa and both the Purāṇas are the oldest featuring Krṣṇalīlā.

Taking into consideration, the five factors that make a Purāṇa,

"Sargaśca , pratisargaśca , vaṁśa, mannan-taranica,
Vamsānu - caritaṁ - caiba Purānāṁ panca - jaṅkṣmaṅgam".

(Creation, re-creation, ancestral history of god and god-like men (avatāra), ancestral history of many and roral dynasty) - Viṣṇupurāṇa must be given the top slot. It is divided into six parts and the numbers of the slokas are half of the "Harivamśa".

The Purāṇas which have come down to us are eighteen in numbers.

(1) Brahma (2) Padma (3) Vaiṣṇava (4) Śaiva or Vāyavīya (5) Bhāgavata (6) Nāradīya (7) Mārkaṇḍeya
It is peculiar that this list of eighteen Purāṇas is given in each one of them, as though none were the first and none the last, but all had already existed when each separate one was composed.

(1) Brahma-Purāṇa: It is also called 'Ādipurāṇa' i.e. the first Purāṇa. The greatness of Brahmā is described here. The major portion of this Purāṇa is devoted to glorifications of sacred places. A hymn to Śiva is also inserted here. Nevertheless the Purāṇa is by no means Śāivaite, for chapter 52 ff contains numerous Viṣṇu legend and stotras of the Viṣṇu cult.

(2) The Padma Purāṇa: It is quite impossible to say anything definite as to the date of the Padma Purāṇa. It is obviously a rather loose compilation the parts of which belong to totally different periods and are probably many centuries apart. This Purāṇa is vast. It has five khandas. There are descriptions of Rāma's Aśvamedha jajña and the tales of Sakuntalā.

(3) The Vaiṣṇava or Viṣṇu Purāṇa: This is the main work of the Vaiṣṇavas or Viṣṇu worshippers because in this Purāṇa, Viṣṇu is
praised and glorified as the highest being, as the one and only god, with whom Brahman and Śiva are one, and as the creator and preserver of the world. In this Purāṇa, we meet with many legends already familiar from the epics, for example, those of Purūravas and Urvaśī of Yoyāti and others. It also contains a detailed biography of the divine cowhered Kṛṣṇa, which practically the same adventures are told in the same order as in the Harivamsā.

(4) The Vāyava or Vāyu Purāṇa: In this Purāṇa, the main God is not Viṣṇu, but Śiva. So, in some lists it appears under the name of Śaiva or Śiva Purāṇa. Like the Viṣṇu-Purāṇa, the Vāyu-Purāṇa also gives a description of the end of the world and deals with the efficacy of Yoga.

(5) The Bhāgavata Purāṇa: This is indisputably that work of Purāṇa literature which is famous in India. The work is divided into twelve skandhas and consists of about 18,000 ślokas. With the Mahābhārata, too, the work has much in common, a few verses from the Bhāgavatagītā are quoted literally. It also contains the biography of Kṛṣṇa which is here given in much greater detail than in the Viṣṇu Purāṇa and in the Harivamsā. It has been translated in almost all the Indian vernaculars.

(6) The Bhānāradīya Purāṇa: i.e., the great Purāṇa of Nārada. It is a purely sectarian text wherein the Sūta repeats a conversation

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Sukumar Sen, op.cit., P. 121.
between Narada and Sanatkumāra and Narada appears in the character of a teacher of Viṣṇu-bhakti.

(7) **The Markāṇḍeya Purāṇa**: This is one of the most important and probably one of the oldest works of the whole Purāṇa literature. The work takes the name from the ancient sage Markāṇḍeya— who enjoyed eternal youth. He is the speaker and he instructs his pupil Kraustuki upon the creation of the world.

(8) **The Agneya or Agni Purāṇa**: It describes the incarnations of Viṣṇu, among them also those as Rāma and Kṛṣṇa, where it confessedly follows the Rāmāyana, Mahābhārata and Harivamsa. It commences with Viṣṇu, gives directions for the ritual of the Viṣṇu-cult. It also mentions Tantric rites.

(9) **The Bhaviṣya Purāṇa**: The title signifies a work which contains prophecies regarding the future. The greater part deals with the Brāmāntical ceremonies and feasts, the duties of the castes and so on.

(10) **The Brahmavaivarta or Brahmakaivarta Purāṇa**: According to this Purāṇa, Kṛṣṇa is so much the god above all gods, that legends are related in which not only Brahman and Śiva, but even Viṣṇu himself are humiliated by Kṛṣṇa.

(11) **The Laiṅga Purāṇa**: The main theme of this work is the
worship of Siva in his various forms especially in the Linga symbol. Corresponding to the Avatāras of Viṣṇu, legends of twenty-eight incarnations of Siva are told in the Linga Purāṇa.

(12) **The Varāha Purāṇa:** It is related to the goddess Earth (Prthivi) by Viṣṇu in his incarnation as a wild boar (Varāha). It contains a few legends relating to Siva and Durga. We also find the story of the birth of Gaṇeśa.

(13) **The Skanda Purāṇa:** This Purāṇa is named after Skanda—the son of Siva. It contains all manner of legends of Siva, especially of his battles with Andhaka and other demons.

(14) **The Vāmana Purāṇa:** This begins with an account of the incarnation of Viṣṇu as a dwarf (Vāmana). Several chapters deal with the Avatāras of Viṣṇu in general. It also tells us about the marriage of Siva & Uma, the origin of Gaṇeśa and the birth of Kārttikeya.

(15) **The Kūrma Purāṇa:** This work begins with a hymn to the incarnation of Viṣṇu as a tortoise (Kūrma). It consists of four Samhitās.

(16) **The Matsya Purāṇa:** This is one of the older works of the Purāṇa literature. It commences with the story of the great flood out of which Viṣṇu, in the form of a fish (matsya) saves only Manu alone. It might be called Śivaite with just as much as it is classed as Viṣṇuīte. Both sects used the work as a sacred book.

(17) **The Garuḍa Purāṇa:** This is a Viṣṇuīte Purāṇa. It takes the name from the mythical bird Garuḍa, to whom it was revealed by
Viṣṇu himself. It treats some of the five themes but far more attention is given to the worship of Viṣṇu, Viṣṇuite rites and festivals and glorification of sacred places etc.

(18) The Brahmāṇḍa Purāṇa: In the list in the Kūrma Purāṇa, the eighteen Purāṇa is called Vāyavīya Brahmāṇḍa the "Purāṇa of the Brahman - egg proclaimed by Vāyu" and it is possible that the original Brahmāṇḍa was but an earlier version of the Vāyu Purāṇa.

Among the above Purāṇas, Bhāgavata Purāṇa played an important role during that period. Because in this Bhāgavata Purāṇa, we get a detailed biography of Kiśṇa, the biography of Prahlāda, myths of Lā, Hariscandra, Sagar etc. But inspite of these, it has no value as a 'itibṛtta' or 'biography'. Other Purāṇas also have no historical or geographical value though in Viṣṇu and Vāyu Purāṇas, we get the information of Maurya & Gupta dynasties. These were not dependable from the point of view of biographical literature. Though they proclaimed to be at par with Vedas, too much of supernatural and unnatural incidents have made them into unreliable sources of literature, because their main objects were to propagate the ideas of Brahmanism among the females, Śūdras and the common people and also in the expedition against the anti-Veda Buddhists and the Jainas.
In Bhāgavata Purāṇa also, the way and the life of Kṛṣṇa has been portrayed with supernatural and unnatural incidents. Therefore, if we judge Bhāgavata from this angle, then we see that in cannot be recognised as a biography. It is seen that the Purāṇas described the royal families with many unnaturalities and therefore they too fail to qualify themselves as biographies. The five signs of Purāṇa set up by Amar Sinha show that Vamsā and Vamśānucarit have been given the same status.

These Purāṇas are valuable to the historian and to the antiquarian as source of political history by reason of their genealogies, even though they can only be used with great caution and careful discrimination. They are of inestimable value from the point of view of the history of religion, and on this head alone deserve far more careful study than has hitherto been devoted to them. They are in every respect regardless of form and proportions. They afford us far greater insight into all aspects and phases of Hinduism - its mythology, its idol-worship, its theism, its love of God, its philosophy, its ethics than any other works. As literary productions they are by no means a pleasing phenomenon. The compilers of the Purāṇas who collected their materials from anywhere and everywhere without choice, received into their texts many a dialogue, in form and contents recalling the Upaniṣads, as well as some profound legends, taken from the old ascetic poetry.

Therefore, it is proved that in ancient India, there were no biographies because history was not used then properly. Due to the
scarcity of the biographies of the ancient period, the modern writers such as Krishna Mohan Banerjee and Rajendralal Mitra etc. expressed a deep anguish, but after considering the whole fact, Bankim Chandra came to the conclusion that its main reason is that in that period, man was placed in a low position. So there was no system of praising them. And mainly for this reason pure biographical literature was less in number in the Puranic age.