

Vedantic Flavour in Puranic Literature

By PARMARTHI RAINA

THE puranas are among the most widely read religious scriptures in India. The word purana literally means "narrative of ancient times". The puranas are said to be contemporaneous with the Vedas. The *Chandogya Upanishad* calls them the fifth veda.

Eighteen major (*maha*) and eighteen subsidiary (*upa*) puranas are recognised. The authorship of all the puranas is attributed to rishi Vedvyasa, who also compiled the four Vedas, the *Mahabharata* and the *Vedanta Suktas*. The puranas deal with a variety of Gods, mainly Vishnu, Shiva and Shakti, catering to the diverse human temperaments and their varied approaches to spirituality. The puranas are sectarian in that each one glorifies its own particular chosen deity, considering him to be supreme among all the deities and whom one can worship, communicate with, pray to, love and serve. In ancient times, whereas the accessibility of the Vedas was restricted to the upper castes, the puranas were read by everyone.

The puranas present Vedanta philosophy in a simplified and attractive literary style, making it reader-friendly. Puranic ethics are founded on *dharma* or duty, which embraces all the factors that contribute to the progress and well being of the individual and society.

The *Bhagavata Purana* also known as *Srimad Bhagavatam*, containing 18,000 verses, is universally accepted as being supreme among the mahapuranas. It is wisely studied and commented upon by scholars of all Vedic sects. No other purana inculcates loving devotion with such sublimity, fervour and comprehensiveness. The conciseness of its language and the lyrical beauty of its poetry are unequaled and it is recognised as one of the greatest literary and spiritual productions of India.

The story goes that after having completed the vast range of Vedic literature, Vyasadeva was still dissatisfied and despondent, not knowing why. Sage Narada appeared before him and told him it was because he had not yet written about the transcendental glory and greatness of Krishna, the son of Devaki and Vasudeva. Thus Vyasadeva wrote the *Srimad Bhagavatam*, which, in its own words, "Glorifies Bhagavan Sri Krishna in every word of it".

The *Bhagavatam* contains Vedanta's metaphysics and philosophy of

the Upanishads. It tells us how we should follow a life of *dharma* (righteousness) in *kaliyuga*, the evil age of Kali. To the layman it is full of wonderful stories and anecdotes that unfold spiritual and philosophic truths with simplicity for them to be understood easily. To scholars and serious spiritualists, however, it is one of the most profound and difficult scriptures to understand in all its nuances and esoteric spiritual wisdom, and they deem the *Bhagavatam* to be a touchstone of their erudition.

Though *Vaisnava* and therefore sectarian, its philosophic import is neither narrow nor exclusive. It inculcates loving devotion to Lord Krishna, and extols Him and the *bhagavata dharma* propounded by him. It recognises Krishna as the Supreme Brahman (*Bhagavan swayam*), the supreme personality of godhead, depicts Krishna's majesty and greatness as Bhagavan, and narrates the Krishna saga in a wonderfully endearing manner. Because of this matchless masterpiece,

to this day Krishna remains the beloved supreme God to millions of Hindus. In India the *Bhagavatam* is

traditionally recited in the course of one week in emulation of the way Sukadeva Goswami narrated it to Maharaja Pariksit while awaiting his impending death.

The theme is pure, unalloyed loving devotion to Krishna. In its lower forms *bhakti* is based on the three *gunas* of *prakriti* or modes of material nature. Devotion in *tamo-guna* propitiates *asuric* (demonic) deities for acquiring the power to control and destroy others; in *rajo-guna* such deities are worshipped who ordain material welfare and prosperity, and in *satto-guna*, understanding the miseries associated with material existence, one worships the deity who can give *mukti* (liberation). While the *Bhagavatam* accepts these three forms of *bhakti*, it goes beyond *mukti*. Its devotee does not lose his individuality by merging with God, and, even on attaining *mukti*, continues to serve Krishna with unalloyed selfless love. Monist thinkers consider *mukti* as the highest goal of human life and *bhakti* as merely a means to this end, but the *bhakti* of the *Bhagavatam* is the highest end itself. *Bhakti* is elevated to the fifth *purusartha* (objective in life) above the four accepted *purusarthas* — *dharma*, *artha*, *kama* and *moksa*.



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