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Puranas and Incarnations [Bhagavatha Vahini]

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CHAPTER 32

PURANAS AND INCARNATIONS

Answering the King's query, Sage Suka said: "If these ten characteristics of the Puranas have to be described in a few words it will be hard. For, each has to be indicated clearly, as when the processes of butter-making have to be described, each item from the milking to the churning has to be touched upon. Each step is important. The ten names relate to the attributes as marked out by their meanings. But the purpose of all is the gaining of the 'butter,' 'liberation.' It is for the attainment of that liberation that the ten characteristics are assumed. The Puranas are all designed to confer on the eager and earnest listener the support and sustenance necessary for the pilgrim proceeding to Liberation. What the Vedas (Sruthi) indicate by means of a statement here or an axiom there, or by an implied suggestion in another context, or even by a direct description of the

actual experience in some other section, is elaborated by the Puranas for better clarification and inspiration," said Suka.

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

Suka made ready to answer this question, starting the description of the ten marks of the Puranas. He said, "Listen, Oh King! I have decided to relate to you the Bhagavatha Purana. It is saturated with answers for all the doubts that arise in your mind, and all your questions. There is no Purana higher than this.

"Of its characteristics, the first one, namely, is Sarga. I shall tell you what it means. When the three Gunas or attributes—Sathwa, Raja and Thamas—are in equilibrium, it is called *Prakrithi*, the Primeval Substance, *Moola*. By the disturbances in the equilibrium, the disbalance, the five elements are produced: earth, water, fire, wind and sky. Also, the subtle attributes of these five: smell, taste, form, touch, and sound, creating also as the subtle senses that can cognise each, the nose, the tongue, the eye, the skin and the ear. The mind and the ego too arise from the same principle. This process of creation is what is meant by the expression: Sarga.

"The second mark of a Purana is Visarga, that is to say, Sarga or Creation in a special sense. The proliferation

into manifold varieties of beings through the interaction of various oddities and peculiarities in activity is what is described as Visarga. It is intimately associated with the All-embracing Super-Person in whom the Universe is immanent.

"Sthanam is the third chief content of a Purana. Everything that is originated in the Universe must have some bounds, so that it may serve some purpose. The fixation of these limits, and the processes by which the limits are honoured are all described in the section entitled Sthanam, or State. A machine, for example has a key by which alone it can be started. It has also devices by which its work is regulated and stopped. Or else, it will be a source of danger to itself and its users. The establishment of such regulatory devices is the subject, comprised under Sthanam.

"The next distinguishing mark of a Purana is the inclusion in it of a section on Poshana: Fostering, guarding, preservation from harm. To put the matter simply, all fostering, guidance, and preservation are included in the one comprehensive subject of Divine Grace. The sapling that is planted has to be fostered with love and care, all creation is thus fostered by the Grace of the Creator.

"The next is Manvanthara, the Chronology of Manu, which every Purana contains. The day is composed of 8 *yamas*; 30 such days make a month; 12 months are called a year. One year for this world is just a day for the gods. 360 such days, form a year, for them. The Kali Yuga or the Kali

Age is composed of 1,000 such years. The previous Dwapara Yuga had 2,000 such years, while the Thretha Yuga, which preceded it had 3,000 and the Kritha, which was the first of the four had 4,000 such years. Each Yuga has 200, 400, 600, or 800 contact periods or *Sandhya* periods. 12,000 such years comprise a *Maha Yuga*, 1,000 such Maha Yugas form a single Day for Brahma! Every day of Brahma sees 14 Manus, lording the Universe. So, each Manu is master for more than 70 Maha Yugas. The story of these Manus and their lineage is named Manvanthara.

"Oothi is the next sign of the Purana. Oothi means the consequence of the activity, its impact on one's nature and career. The nature of each life is determined by the impact of the activities of the entity in previous lives. It is not assigned by a wayward God. God treats all alike. Men forge their fates differently, through their own waywardness and wilfulness. Oothi deals with this aspect.

"Isanukatha is another subject dealt with in the Puranas. It means, the glories of Isa or God and the manifold ways in which men have experienced the might and majesty, the sweetness and light, that the Glory represents.

"Then, we find in the Puranas, the *lakshana* or aspect dealing with *Nirodha*, or Absorption. The Lord absorbs within Himself all the Glory that He makes manifest. He then goes into the 'sleep of Yoga,' until the Divine Impulse to manifest again, disturbs the Divine Equipoise.

"*Mukthi* is another subject all Puranas dilate upon. It means the liberation of man, from the bonds of Ignorance, Ajnana, which keep him encased. That is to say, man has to be liberated from the awareness that he is the body in which he is encased; he must be made aware that he is the Atma, the Soul which is the Reality thus encased.

"Asraya is the final aspect dealt with in Puranas. It means, the help, the support, the prop. Without help, Liberation cannot be attained. The Absolute is the prop for the Universe. The Absolute (Paramatma) from which all this has emanated, in which all this exists, into which all this merges is the prop for achieving Liberation. He who knows the *Adhibhowtik,* the *Adhi Daivik* and the *Adhi Atma* by that very knowledge knows the Asraya or the Paramatma too." Parikshit interrupted the sage here, and pleaded, "Master, tell me then, what the Adhibhowthik, the Adhi Daivik and the Adhi Atma are."

Suka was happy that the question was put. He prepared himself for answering it. "Oh King, I see a thing. That thing is Adhibhowthik. But what exactly is seeing it? You may say, the eye sees it. Wherefrom does the eye get the capacity to see things? Think of that! The Deity presiding over the eye is the Sun (Surya). He gives the eye the power of vision. Without the Sun, in the dark, the eye cannot see, isn't it? The Sun therefore is Adhi Daivik. But there is one more basic factor in this process—the Jivi, the individual behind all the senses, behind the eye and the ear and the rest. That individual is the Atma, the Adhi Atma. The Atma, the Deity,

the senses that bring knowledge of things, without these the process cannot continue. The Atma is the witness.

"Now, I have told you of the ten characteristics of the Bhagavatha and other Puranas. Tell me what else you desire to know from me and I shall gladly relate to you the same. I am ever ready," said the sage.

At this, Parikshit said, "Master, I could understand the ten marks of the Purana. I came to know that the Paramatma who is in everyone as Atma is the witness, of Time, Space and Causation. That eternal witness has assumed many forms for the sake of the world and upheld morality and righteousness. I wish to listen to the divine narratives of these incarnations, of Rama, Krishna and other manifestations, and of the deeper mysteries of these appearances. Do not feel that time is short. Let me sanctify every moment that is available, intently listening to the inspiring narration of these incidents. I pray that my thirst may thus be quenched and my heart be gifted with contentment, by your grace."

Suka replied, "Oh King, I was also entering upon that narrative. So listen. Every concrete manifestation of God is significant. There can be no higher or lower. The story of each one of them is elevating. Each is a full manifestation. Listening to these stories may make you feel that one manifestation is grander and more sublime than another. It would appear as if you get more inspiration from one Avatar than another. But all are equally Divine and mysterious. The

manifestation is suited to the time, the task, the circumstance and the need. Its form is in accordance with the purpose.

"Listen, Oh King! God is omnipotent, He knows no distinction between the possible and the impossible. His Wizardry, His Sport, His Play, His Pranks cannot be described with the vocabulary that man commands. Though He has no *Rupa* or Form, He can assume the Form of the Universal Person, embodying all Creation in His Form. He is One but He makes Himself Many. Matsya, Varaha, Narasimha, Vamana, Parasurama, Rama, Krishna, Buddha, Kalki—people relate to each other that these are the Divine Forms He has assumed. But that is not describing Him as vast as His magnificence. We have to visualise all forms as His. The vitality of every being is His Breath. In short, every bit in Creation is He, the manifestation of His Will. There is nothing distinct or separate from Him.

"But for the protection of the world, for the upholding of Dharma, for fulfilling the yearnings of devotees, He wills specially and assumes a special Form and moves in the world. He confers joy on the devotees by His divine acts, which convince them of His Advent. They are thus confirmed in their faith and prompted to dedicate their activities to God and thus save themselves, and liberate themselves. Therefore, people consider the Forms aforesaid which were assumed with this end in view, as specially sacred and they worship God in those incarnated Forms. On certain occasions, for resolving certain urgent crisis, God has

incarnated with Forms embodying part of His Divinity, with some Divine powers and potentialities. Examples of such incarnations for the protection of the world are plenty."

When the Sage Suka spoke thus, Parikshit lifted up his face, lit with a strange joy and exclaimed, "Ah, did the charming Lord assume such Forms through a part of Himself? Of course, it is all Play for Him. Tell me about these Forms taken by Him for the preservation of the world; make me happy, listening to that narrative." Praying thus, he prostrated before the Preceptor.

Suka continued, "Listen, Oh King! Kapila, Dattatreya, Sanaka, Sananda, Sanatkumara, Sanatsujatha, and other sages, Rshabha, Nara-Narayana, Vishnu, Dhruva, Hayagriva, Prthu, Kachchapa, Dhanvanthari, Hamsa, Manu, Balarama, Vyasa and many such Divine Personages are but Name-Forms assumed by the Lord for granting boons to devotees, for saving the world from ruin, for laying down the Code of Morality and Right Behaviour for humanity, and the restoration of traditional and well-established ideals and mores among mankind. There are many more such *Amsa* (partial) *Avatharas* (incarnations). But we have no time for the detailed description of each. Moreover, they are not so important as to merit detailed consideration. I responded to your request because I felt a short review is enough."

But Parikshit intervened. He said, "Master, tell me at least very briefly the reasons for the Lord incarnating so, even though only a part of Him incarnated as Kapila, Dhruva,

Dattatreya, Hayagriva, Dhanvanthari, etc. Tell me about their achievements and the significance of each Advent. That will afford me purifying enlightenment."

So, Suka said, "King! Devahuthi, the wife of Kardama Prajapathi bore nine daughters; and as her tenth child, the Kapila Form was born. The Lord appearing as Kapila became the Preceptor and spiritual Guide to the mother, Devahuthi herself! He taught her the secret of attaining Liberation and vouchsafed to her the teaching that led to final release. The consort of the sage Athri, Anasuya by name, prayed that the Lord may be born as the child of her womb and the Lord replied, 'Granted' (Datta). Since the Father's name was Athri. He was called Datta-athreya, Dattathreya. He showered on Karthaveeryarjuna and Yadu, emperors of high renown endowed with all glory, the great treasure of Yogic wisdom. It is in this Form that God, in the beginning of this *Kalpa* or Age, moved about as the four child sages, Sanaka, Sanandana, Sanathkumara and Sanathana. They were ever at the age of five, so innocent that they wore no clothes, so divine that they spread Wisdom and Peace around them.

"The Lord was born as the twins, Nara and Narayana, and they lived in the forests around Badri in the Himalayas, practising austerities. They had Murthidevi as their mother. The Lord appreciated the intensity of the austerity of the boy Dhruva. He conferred on him the Blessing of His Vision in concrete Form. He sanctified the lives of the parents of

Dhruva. He crowned him as the Lord of the polar regions and set him in the sky as the Pole Star. When the downward-falling wicked Vena was cursed and destroyed by the sages, and when his body was churned, the first sovereign ruler of the world emerged. Because the Lord took that Form, he was Prithu, the first *Easwara* (Lord) of *Prithvi* (the Earth). By his austerity and good conduct, Prithu saved his father from hell. He restored prosperity and morality in the entire world. He built villages, towns and cities on the earth and ordered that men dwell peacefully therein, each performing in loving co-operation with the rest, the duties assigned to him.

"The Lord was born again as the child of Nabhi and Sudevi. He manifested as a *Paramahamsa,* a realised sage, and He taught the supreme remedy for all ills, viz., renunciation (*thyaga*) and the ways of cultivating it. Later, the Lord took Form as Yajna, in a Brahmayajna, and since, above the neck, He had the Form of a Horse, He was called *Haya* (horse)—*griva* (head). The breath of Hayagriva manifested as the Vedas. Meanwhile the wily ogre, Somaka, stole the Vedas and hid them in the surging floods of *Pralaya* (the Great Dissolution). So, the Lord had to assume the Form of a Fish, search for the Vedas amidst the depths of the sea, destroy the ogre and bring the Vedas over to be restored to Brahma and thus, re-establish on earth the ways of living laid down in the Vedas and the goal of life marked out therein. The Lord has thus assumed many forms appropriate for each need and manifested Himself on

countless critical occasions and showered His Grace on the World. He has destroyed the fear and agony of mankind. He has rescued the good and the godly. Countless are the narratives of such advents. His Will results in His advent; so it is foolish to investigate into the reasons that prompted Him to incarnate.

"Those who seek to know or lay down the causes for the Lord willing one way and not another are really on an impertinent adventure; so too are those who assert that His Power and His Plans have such and such characteristics, qualifications and limits, and those who claim to know that the Lord will act only in this particular mode, and those who declare that the Divine Principle is of this nature and not otherwise!

"There can be no limit or obstacle to His Will. There can be no bounds to the manifestation of His Power and His Glory. He fructifies all that He Wills. He can manifest in whatever form He Wills. He is unique, incomparable, equal to Himself alone. He is His own measure, witness, authority.

"Once, the Lord was so touched by the sincerity of Narada's devotion to Him that He assumed the Form of a Hamsa (Celestial Swan) and, elaborated to Him the nature of Bhaktha, Bhagavan and of the relation between the two, so that all aspirants may be led and liberated. He placed the Wisdom and the Path on a foundation strong enough to survive the end of this present age, without any fear of defeat or decline. He rendered the Seven Worlds shine in purity,

through the splendour of His spotless renown. During the Great Churning of the Ocean of Milk, the Lord assumed the Form of the Tortoise, to hold up the Mandara Mountain Peak, which was the Churning Rod. At that very time, the Lord took another Form too, as Dhanvanthari, to bring the Divine Vessel filled with *Amritha* (Immortality-granting Nectar). As Dhanvanthari, He taught the means of conquering disease and enable men to cure their physical ills. He rendered many famous as physicians and doctors, skilled in diagnosis and cure.

"He did much more, Oh King! Physicians and doctors were until then not entitled to receive a share of the offerings made to the Gods in sacrifices. Dhanvanthari laid down that they must be given a share and thus, He raised their status in society.

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

"Among these, the incarnations, Rama and Krishna are most meaningful to mankind, since man can grasp their example, follow their solutions to problems, and derive Ananda through the contemplation of their excellences and teachings. These two have installed themselves in the hearts of mankind and are receiving the adoration of men. I shall narrate to you the more noteworthy among the incidents in the careers of these two Incarnations. Listen."