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Akhyana- The Narrative System of the Puranas.

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Introduction

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Even in the oldest texts of Sanskrit literature, the narrative method is seen to have been adopted. This method can be found in epics and Puranas. This paper attempts to provide a brief discussion of the Akhyana system in Puranic literature. It is generally accepted that the Puranas in their extended form with Pancalaksana or Dasalaksana could not have taken shape earlier than the third century A.D. But at the

same time it is clear that by the time of Dharmasastras itself, this separate class of texts called Puranas had originated. The earlier Puranas like Vishnu and Brahmanda give the puranalaksana as follows.

आख्यानैश्चोपाख्यानैर्गाथाभिः कल्पशुद्धिभिः।

पुराणसंहितां चक्रे पुराणार्थविशारदः॥

(*Brahmanadapurana*, p. 2, 34, 21.)

S.N. Roy stated that the four elements enumerated in the above verse such as Akhyana, Upakhyana, Gatha, and Kalpasudhi echo the original character of the Puranas. This indicates a special technique adopted by the Purana authors to form a new literary genre. It is called Samhitakarana, which means collation, collection or compilation of matters centring around a common tradition but subjected to a variety of texts. Akhyana, Upakhyana, Gatha and Kalpasudhi are four different literary units, the juxtaposition of which in a single founded place gives a synthetic nature to the Purana texts. Greg Bailey also states that the above-mentioned verse implies the synthetic nature of the Puranas (Historical and Cultural Studies in the Puranas, p.16.). He has elaborately discussed the nature and motif of the four constituent elements and how they are effectively in the body of the Purana Texts. (Ganesapurana, Part-1 Upasanakhanda, Introduction, Translation, notes, and Index. 1995. pp.19-31.)

Akhyana

The Akhyana form the back bone of the Puranic literature and they occupy a position of supreme importance in the compilation of these texts. The definition of this term follows thus:

स्वयं दृष्टार्थकथनं प्राहुराख्यानकं बुधाः॥

(Quoted by Unni, Dr. N.P., p.48).

What has been observed or experienced by the narrator is an Akhyana. These Akhyanas, if they are independently taken, have neither a meaning nor a motive of their own. The traditional authors of the Puranas took them from various sources, from Vedas and Brahmanas, and incorporated them giving their interpretations according to the social and cultural trends. The wide popularity of these Akhyana is clear

from the fact that even after becoming part of the Puranas the tendency to recognize them as a separate entity had not altogether gone. The main intention of incorporating such popular Akhyanas to the Puranas is to win popular appeal to the maximum extent.

The Akhyana style of the Puranas, characterized by its storytelling format and embedded narratives, can be illustrated through specific examples from the Puranic texts. One of the most exemplary cases of the Akhyana style is found in Bhagavata Purana, particularly in the narrative of the life and exploits of Lord Krishna.

Some Examples of Akhyana:

The Story of Lord Krishna in the Bhagavata Purana.

Bhagavata Purana, also known as the Srimad Bhagavatam, is a prime example of the Akhyana style. It uses a dialogic and layered narrative framework to convey its stories and teachings. The story of Lord Krishna, which spans several books (Cantos) of the Bhagavata Purana, is one of the most celebrated narratives in Hindu literature.

Narrative Framework

The overarching narrative of the Bhagavata Purana is framed as a dialogue between King Parikshit and the sage Shuka. This primary dialogue is set up to introduce various sub-stories and teachings. The immediate context of this dialogue is King Parikshit's impending death, which leads him to seek spiritual knowledge and liberation.

Dialogic and Embedded Structure

Primary Dialogue: King Parikshit, cursed to die within seven days, renounces his kingdom and sits on the banks of the Ganges to fast until death. He is approached by the sage Shuka, who begins narrating

the Bhagavata Purana in response to Parikshit's questions about the ultimate purpose of life and the nature of the divine.

Sub-Narratives:

Within this main dialogue, Shuka recounts numerous sub-stories. One of the most significant is the story of Lord Krishna, which is divided into various episodes, each narrated with rich detail and moral lessons.

Episodes from Krishna's Life

Birth of Krishna: The narrative begins with the prophecy of Krishna's birth and the tyrannical rule of King Kamsa, who is destined to be killed by Krishna. The story of Krishna's miraculous birth in prison and his clandestine transfer to Gokul is told with dramatic flair.

Childhood Leelas (Divine Play):

Krishna's childhood is depicted through a series of charming and miraculous events, such as his playful antics with the gopis (cowherd girls), his taming of the serpent Kaliya, and the lifting of the Govardhan Hill to protect the villagers from torrential rains sent by Indra. These episodes are narrated through dialogues and songs, highlighting Krishna's divine nature and his role as a protector and beloved deity.

The defeat of Demons:

The Bhagavata Purana narrates Krishna's heroic deeds, including the defeat of various demons like Putana, Shaktasura, and Arishtasura. Each encounter is not just a display of Krishna's prowess but also carries deeper symbolic meanings and moral teachings.

Rasa Lila:

One of the most celebrated portions is the Rasa Lila, the divine dance of love between Krishna and the gopis. This episode is rich in theological and philosophical significance, emphasizing themes of divine love and the soul's yearning for union with God. It is narrated with poetic beauty, making it one of the most cherished parts of the Bhagavata Purana.

Krishna's Role in the Mahabharata:

The narrative also delves into Krishna's role in the Mahabharata, including his guidance to the Pandavas and the delivery of the Bhagavad Gita to Arjuna. These stories are recounted within the larger framework, linking the Bhagavata Purana to the epic traditions.

Moral and Philosophical Teachings

Throughout these narratives, the Akhyana style ensures that each story is imbued with moral and philosophical teachings. The dialogues between characters often pause to reflect on the meaning and lessons of the events described, making the narratives both entertaining and didactic.

Conclusion

The Bhagavata Purana's narration of Krishna's life exemplifies the Akhyana style with its layered narrative structure, engaging dialogues, and embedded sub-stories. This style not only makes the text captivating but also serves to convey profound spiritual and moral teachings in an accessible manner. Through the Akhyana style, the Puranas have effectively preserved and transmitted the rich cultural and religious heritage of Hinduism, ensuring their enduring appeal and influence.

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