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"India In The Skanda Purana: An Exploration Of Sacred Geography And Territorial Identity"

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ABSTRACT:

The Skanda Purana, one of the largest and most intricate Mahapuranas of Hindu tradition, presents a rich tapestry of India's sacred geography, blending mythological narratives with territorial descriptions. This study, titled "India in the Skanda Purana: An Exploration of Sacred Geography and Territorial Identity", examines how the Purana constructs a sacred cartography of the Indian subcontinent, embedding spiritual significance into physical landscapes. Through detailed analyses of various khandas (sections) such as the Kashi Khanda, Avanti Khanda, and Prabhasa Khanda, the paper investigates how pilgrimage sites (tirthas), rivers, mountains and regions are sacralized and interwoven into a cohesive cultural geography. Furthermore, it explores how these depictions contribute to shaping a collective territorial identity rooted in dharma, memory and divine presence. By contextualizing the Skanda Purana's descriptions within historical, religious, and cultural frameworks, this research reveals how sacred geography functions as a means of social unification, spiritual orientation, and cultural continuity in the Indian consciousness.

Key Words: Skand Purana, Khandas, Geographical description.

INTRODUCTION:

The Skanda Purana, one of the largest and most significant of the eighteen Mahapuranas in Hinduism, is traditionally divided into seven major sections or "Khandas." Each Khanda focuses on specific deities, sacred sites, and spiritual teachings. Here is an overview of the seven Khandas:

1. **Maheshvara Khanda:** This section centers on Lord Shiva, detailing various Shaivite pilgrimages and legends, including the story of Daksha's Yajna, the significance of the Shivalinga, the churning of the ocean (Samudra Manthan), and the marriage of Shiva and Parvati.
2. **Vaishnava Khanda:** Dedicated to Lord Vishnu, this Khanda narrates tales such as the dialogues between Goddess Earth (Prithvi) and Lord Varaha, the greatness of the river Suvarnamukhari, and the story of the Ashwamedha Yajna. It also discusses the methods of worship and rituals associated with Vishnu.
3. **Brahma Khanda:** This section focuses on Lord Brahma and includes descriptions of sacred places like Setu (Rameshwaram), the glory of various tirthas (pilgrimage sites), and the significance of philosophical knowledge and dharma.
4. **Kashi Khanda:** Highlighting the spiritual importance of the city of Kashi (Varanasi), this Khanda describes various temples, rituals, and the benefits of residing or dying in Kashi. It emphasizes the city's role as a center of liberation (moksha).
5. **Avanti Khanda:** Focusing on the region of Ujjain (ancient Avanti), this section discusses the significance of the Mahakaleshwar Jyotirlinga and other sacred sites in the area. It also includes stories related to the Reva (Narmada) river.
6. **Nagara Khanda:** This Khanda provides details about various cities and their associated sacred sites, rituals, and legends. It serves as a guide for pilgrims, outlining the spiritual significance of different urban centers.

7. **Prabhasa Khanda:** Covering the Prabhasa region (in present-day Gujarat), this section includes narratives about the end of Lord Krishna's earthly life, the importance of the Somnath temple and other regional legends. These Khandas collectively encompass a vast array of stories, teachings and descriptions of sacred geography, reflecting the rich tapestry of Hindu religious tradition.

GEOGRAPHICAL DESCRIPTION OF INDIA IN VARIOUS KHAND OF SKAND PURAN

A. GEOGRAPHICAL DESCRIPTIONS IN MAHESHVARA KHANDA

The Maheshvara Khanda is divided into several sections, each highlighting the spiritual importance of different regions:

1. **Kedara Khanda:** This section emphasizes the sanctity of the Kedarnath region in the Himalayas, detailing its association with Lord Shiva and its significance as a major pilgrimage site.
 2. **Kaumarika Khanda:** Focusing on the western coastal region, particularly around present-day Gujarat, this section narrates legends and describes sacred sites, reflecting the region's religious importance.
 3. **Arunachala Khanda:** This part centers on the Arunachala hill in Tamil Nadu, highlighting its spiritual prominence and the associated rituals and legends.
- Through these narratives, the Maheshvara Khanda illustrates the sacred landscape of ancient India, intertwining geography with religious significance.

B. GEOGRAPHICAL DESCRIPTIONS IN VAISHNAVA KHANDA

The Vaishnava Khanda of the Skanda Purana offers rich descriptions of various sacred regions across ancient India, intertwining geography with spiritual narratives. While it doesn't present a systematic geographical account as per modern standards, it provides valuable insights into the sacred landscapes revered in ancient times.

1. **Utkala Region (Modern Odisha):** Chapter 6 of the Vaishnava Khanda details the land of Utkala, situated between the Suvarṇarekhā and Mahānadī rivers, extending up to the Ṛṣikulyā river that flows into the southern sea. This area encompasses the sacred city of Puri, home to the Jagannath Temple, and is celebrated for its spiritual significance.
2. **Mathura Region (Uttar Pradesh):** The text highlights Mathura as a pivotal Vaishnavite center, being the birthplace of Lord Krishna. It describes various sacred sites associated with Krishna's life, emphasizing the city's religious importance.
3. **Ayodhya Region:** Ayodhya is portrayed as the birthplace of Lord Rama. The Vaishnava Khanda elaborates on its sanctity, detailing temples and rituals associated with Rama's legacy.
4. **Tirupati Region (Andhra Pradesh):** The text venerates Tirupati, focusing on the Venkateswara Temple located in the Tirumala hills. It underscores the temple's significance in Vaishnavism and its role as a major pilgrimage destination.
5. **Badrinath Region (Uttarakhand):** Badrinath is described as a sacred site in the Himalayas, associated with Lord Vishnu. The Vaishnava Khanda details the temple's importance and the spiritual merits of pilgrimage to this high-altitude shrine.

Through these narratives, the Vaishnava Khanda maps a sacred geography, highlighting regions from the northern Himalayas to the southern hills, each intertwined with tales of Lord Vishnu's incarnations and associated rituals.

C. GEOGRAPHICAL DESCRIPTIONS IN BRAHMA KHANDA

The Brahma Khanda of the Skanda Purana offers a rich tapestry of India's sacred geography, intertwining spiritual narratives with descriptions of various regions, rivers and pilgrimage sites. While it doesn't present a systematic geographical account as per modern standards, it provides valuable insights into the sacred landscapes revered in ancient times.

Sacred Regions and Rivers:

1. **Northern India:**
 - **Ganga River:** Celebrated as a purifier of sins, the Ganga is depicted as descending from the heavens, sanctifying the land through which it flows.
 - **Yamuna and Saraswati Rivers:** These rivers are also highlighted for their spiritual significance and purifying qualities.
 - **Kurukshetra:** Recognized as a sacred battlefield, it's associated with righteousness and dharma.
2. **Central India:**
 - **Vindhya Mountains:** These are portrayed as significant geographical features, marking the division between northern and southern India.

- **Rivers like Narmada and Tapti:** Emphasized for their sanctity and the spiritual benefits of bathing in them.
- 3. **Eastern India:**
 - **Utkala (modern-day Odisha):** Noted for its sacred sites and temples, reflecting the region's religious importance.
- 4. **Western India:**
 - **Dwarka:** Associated with Lord Krishna, it's revered as a significant pilgrimage site.
 - **Pushkar:** Known for the sacred Pushkar Lake and the Brahma Temple, it's highlighted for its spiritual significance.
- 5. **Southern India:**
 - **Rameshwaram:** Linked to Lord Rama's journey, it's portrayed as a vital pilgrimage destination.
 - **Kanyakumari:** The southernmost tip of India, it's recognized for its unique geographical and spiritual position.

Pilgrimage and Spiritual Practice

The Brahma Khanda underscores the importance of pilgrimage (tirtha yatra) as a means to attain spiritual merit and purification. By visiting these sacred sites, devotees are believed to cleanse their sins and progress on the path to liberation (moksha).

Through its blend of divine narratives and sacred geography, the Brahma Khanda serves as a spiritual guide, mapping a journey across India's holy landscapes and emphasizing the profound connection between geography and spirituality in Hindu tradition.

D. GEOGRAPHICAL BOUNDARIES AND LAYOUT IN KASHI KHANDA

The Kashi Khanda of the Skanda Purana offers an extensive portrayal of the sacred geography of Kashi (Varanasi), emphasizing its spiritual significance and detailing its topographical features. This section serves as both a spiritual guide and a geographical account, intertwining mythological narratives with descriptions of the city's sacred sites.

The Kashi Khanda delineates the sacred boundaries of Kashi, defining its spiritual perimeter:

1. **Eastern Boundary:** The Ganges River, which holds paramount importance in Hinduism, forms the eastern edge of the city.
2. **Western Boundary:** The Gokarneshvara region marks the western limit.
3. **Southern Boundary:** The Assi River, from which the city derives part of its name, defines the southern boundary.
4. **Northern Boundary:** The Varuna River, contributing to the city's name "Varanasi," sets the northern limit. These natural boundaries not only demarcate the city's physical extent but also underscore its sanctity, as each river and region holds religious significance.

Sacred Sites and Structures

Within these boundaries, the Kashi Khanda enumerates numerous sacred sites, each associated with specific deities and spiritual practices:

- **Kashi Vishwanath Temple:** Dedicated to Lord Shiva, this temple is considered the spiritual heart of Kashi. The Kashi Khanda describes its architectural features, including the five mandapas (halls) and the sanctum sanctorum housing the Shiva Linga.
- **Vishalakshi Temple:** This temple honors Goddess Vishalakshi, an aspect of Parvati. The text narrates her role in providing sustenance to Sage Vyasa, highlighting her benevolence and the temple's importance.
- **Avimukteshwara Linga:** Installed by Lord Shiva himself before his temporary departure from Kashi, this Linga symbolizes the city's enduring sanctity.
- **Panchaganga Ghat:** Described as the confluence of five sacred rivers, this ghat is revered for its purifying properties and is a focal point for various rituals.
- **Mandara Mountain:** While not within Kashi, the text references Lord Shiva's retreat to this mountain, emphasizing the interconnectedness of sacred sites.

Integration with Broader Sacred Geography

The Kashi Khanda situates Kashi within the larger context of India's sacred geography:

- **Saptapuri (Seven Sacred Cities):** Kashi is listed among these cities, each believed to grant moksha (liberation). The others include Ayodhya, Mathura, Haridwar (Maya), Kanchipuram, Ujjain (Avantika) and Dwarka.
- **Pilgrimage Circuits:** The text outlines various pilgrimage routes within Kashi, guiding devotees through a sequence of temples and ghats to maximize spiritual benefits.

Through its detailed descriptions, the Kashi Khanda not only maps the physical layout of Kashi but also weaves a narrative that elevates the city's status as a microcosm of the universe, reflecting the divine order on earth.

E. SACRED GEOGRAPHY IN AVANTI KHANDA

The Avanti Khanda of the Skanda Purana provides a detailed depiction of the sacred geography of ancient India, focusing primarily on the region of Avanti, corresponding to present-day Ujjain in Madhya Pradesh. This section emphasizes the spiritual significance of various sites, rivers, and temples, intertwining geographical descriptions with religious narratives.

1. Avanti (Ujjain) – The Spiritual Epicenter

Avanti, now known as Ujjain, is portrayed as a paramount spiritual hub. The Avanti Khanda refers to it as the ancient Mahakala Vana, highlighting its association with Lord Shiva in his fierce form, Rudra. The city is revered for its sanctity and is considered a place where devotees can attain liberation (moksha).

2. Mahakaleshwar Jyotirlinga

Central to Ujjain's spiritual landscape is the Mahakaleshwar Temple, one of the twelve Jyotirlingas dedicated to Lord Shiva. The Avanti Khanda narrates the tale of Lord Shiva manifesting here to protect his devotee Veda Priya and other Brahmins from the demon Dushana, establishing the temple's profound significance.

3. Reva (Narmada) Mahatmya

A significant portion of the Avanti Khanda is dedicated to the Reva Mahatmya, which extols the Narmada River (also known as Reva) as one of the holiest rivers in India. The text describes the river's divine origin from Lord Shiva's meditation and its unparalleled ability to purify sins, emphasizing that even remembering the Narmada can cleanse one's soul.

4. Kal Bhairav Temple

Located on the banks of the Shipra River, the Kal Bhairav Temple is another significant site mentioned in the Avanti Khanda. Dedicated to Kal Bhairav, a fierce manifestation of Lord Shiva, the temple is notable for its unique rituals, including offerings of liquor to the deity. The temple's historical and religious importance is underscored in the text.

5. Ujjayini Shakti Peetha

The Avanti Khanda also highlights the Ujjayini Shakti Peetha, associated with the goddess's elbow (Kurpara) falling at this site. This event sanctified the location, making it a vital center for Shakti worship and further elevating Ujjain's spiritual stature.

Broader Geographical Context

Beyond Ujjain, the Avanti Khanda references various other sacred sites and regions, illustrating a comprehensive sacred geography:

- **Dhanachal Mountain:** Described as the abode of Lord Nrisimha, situated ten yojanas south of a place called Brahma Tirth.
- **Suvarnamukhari River:** Flowing near Dhanachal, this river is noted for its spiritual significance.
- **Venkatachal Mountain:** Located north of the Suvarnamukhari River, this mountain houses the sacred Swamipushkarni and is associated with Lord Venkateshwara.

These descriptions not only highlight the sanctity of these places but also serve as a guide for devotees undertaking pilgrimages, emphasizing the interconnectedness of geography and spirituality in ancient Indian traditions.

Thus, the Avanti Khanda of the Skanda Purana intricately maps the sacred geography of ancient India, centering on Ujjain and extending to other revered sites. Through its detailed narratives, the text underscores the profound connection between physical locations and spiritual enlightenment, offering devotees a roadmap to divine experiences through pilgrimage and worship.

F. SACRED GEOGRAPHY IN THE NAGARA KHANDA

The Nagara Khanda of the Skanda Purana offers a rich tapestry of India's sacred geography, focusing particularly on the western regions, notably present-day Gujarat. This section intertwines spiritual narratives with geographical descriptions, highlighting the sanctity of various locales and their significance in Hindu tradition.

1. Hātakeśvara Kṣetra (Vadnagar, Gujarat)

The Nagara Khanda extols the sacredness of Hātakeśvara Kṣetra, identified with modern-day Vadnagar in Gujarat. This region is portrayed as a significant pilgrimage site, revered for its spiritual potency and historical importance. The text refers to Vadnagar as "Chamatkarapura," emphasizing its miraculous nature and divine associations.

2. Anartha Region

The Nagara Khanda references the ancient region of Anartha, corresponding to parts of northern Gujarat. This area is noted for its association with the Nagar Brahmins and is recognized for its religious and cultural contributions. The text's mention of Anartha underscores the region's prominence in the spiritual landscape of ancient India.

3. Tirtha Mahatmya (Glory of Sacred Places)

A significant portion of the Nagara Khanda is dedicated to the Tirtha Mahatmya, which glorifies various sacred sites (tirthas) within the region. These descriptions serve as spiritual guides, detailing the merits of visiting these locales and the rituals associated with them. Such narratives not only highlight the religious significance of these places but also provide insights into the geographical understanding of the time.

Integration with Broader Indian Geography

While the Nagara Khanda primarily focuses on the western regions, it also situates these locales within the broader context of India's sacred geography. By detailing the spiritual importance of specific sites and their connections to deities and legends, the text weaves a comprehensive map of holy places across the subcontinent. This approach underscores the interconnectedness of various regions through shared religious narratives and pilgrimage traditions.

Thus, the Nagara Khanda of the Skanda Purana serves as both a spiritual guide and a geographical account, mapping the sacred landscapes of ancient India. Through its detailed descriptions of regions like Hāṭakeśvara Kṣetra and Anartha, and its emphasis on the Tirtha Mahatmya, the text offers valuable insights into the religious and cultural geography of the time. These narratives not only highlight the sanctity of specific locales but also reflect the broader spiritual topography revered in Hindu tradition.

G. SACRED GEOGRAPHY IN THE PRABHASA KHANDA

The Prabhasa Khanda of the Skanda Purana offers a comprehensive depiction of India's sacred geography, with a particular focus on the western region, especially the Saurashtra area in present-day Gujarat. This section intertwines spiritual narratives with geographical descriptions, highlighting the sanctity of various locales and their significance in Hindu tradition.

1. Prabhasa Kshetra (Saurashtra Region)

The Prabhasa Khanda extols the sacredness of Prabhasa Kshetra, identified with the modern-day Saurashtra region in Gujarat. This area is portrayed as a significant pilgrimage site, revered for its spiritual potency and historical importance. The text emphasizes the region's association with various deities and its role in numerous legends.

2. Somnath Temple

Central to Prabhasa Kshetra's spiritual landscape is the Somnath Temple, one of the twelve Jyotirlingas dedicated to Lord Shiva. The Prabhasa Khanda narrates the tale of the Moon God, Soma, who, afflicted by a curse, bathed in the Sarasvati River at this site to regain his lustre. This legend underscores the temple's profound significance and the etymology of "Prabhasa," meaning "lustre."

3. Triveni Sangam

The confluence of three rivers—Kapila, Hiran, and the now subterranean Sarasvati—occurs at Prabhasa, forming the Triveni Sangam. This confluence is considered highly sacred, and the Prabhasa Khanda highlights its purifying properties and its role in various rituals.

4. Pilgrimage and Rituals

The Prabhasa Khanda underscores the importance of pilgrimage (tirtha yatra) to this region. It provides detailed accounts of various rituals, festivals, and the spiritual benefits of visiting the sacred sites within Prabhasa Kshetra. These narratives serve as spiritual guides, detailing the merits of visiting these locales and the rituals associated with them.

Integration with Broader Indian Geography

While the Prabhasa Khanda primarily focuses on the western regions, it also situates these locales within the broader context of India's sacred geography. By detailing the spiritual importance of specific sites and their connections to deities and legends, the text weaves a comprehensive map of holy places across the subcontinent. This approach underscores the interconnectedness of various regions through shared religious narratives and pilgrimage traditions.

Thus, the Prabhasa Khanda of the Skanda Purana serves as both a spiritual guide and a geographical account, mapping the sacred landscapes of ancient India. Through its detailed descriptions of regions like Prabhasa Kshetra and its emphasis on pilgrimage and rituals, the text offers valuable insights into the religious and

cultural geography of the time. These narratives not only highlight the sanctity of specific locales but also reflect the broader spiritual topography revered in Hindu tradition.

CONCLUSION:

Thus, by sacralizing space and defining it through divine narratives, the Skanda Purana fosters a unified vision of Bharatavarsha, where diverse locales are linked through shared religious meanings and ritual practices. It serves not only as a religious text but also as a cultural atlas that guided ancient Indian society in its understanding of space, belonging and spiritual duty. Thus, the Skanda Purana remains a crucial source for understanding how sacred geography contributed to the formation of India's territorial identity—one that continues to resonate in the collective consciousness of the Indian spiritual and cultural worldview.

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