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THE VAYU PURANA AS AN OBJECT OF LINGUISTIC CULTURAL HERITAGE

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Abstract

Against the backdrop of globalization, which encompasses all spheres of modern culture, it is impossible to stay in a confined civilizational space in the presence of religious diversity existing in the world. In this context, research into the religious and worldview paradigms of Hinduism presented in its literary heritage as one of the sources is highly relevant, especially considering the fact that Hinduism is, in fact, an umbrella term denoting a vast array of faiths practiced by over 800 million people in the world, 96% of whom are Indian. The article analyzes the role of the Puranas in the Hindu tradition, provides an overview of the Puranic literature and its main specific features and summarizes the characteristics of the Vayu Purana as a monument of Puranic literature. The authors draw a conclusion that the Vayu Purana can be considered one of the most outstanding pieces of medieval Indian literature.

Keywords

Puranas – Vayu Purana – Hinduism – Trimurti – Maha Puranas – Upa Puranas

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Introduction

The diversity and variety within Hinduism are incomparable with the same parameters of monotheistic religions. Therefore, the tools used for the comprehension of the phenomenon of Hinduism are different from the ones applied by religious studies to the examination of other great religions¹.

The best way to comprehend Hinduism is to study a certain spiritual tradition, which is transmitted from the founder through his successors and organizes the followers of this system in a particular spiritual and institutional manner². Such research provides an insight into the essentials of various religious and worldview paradigms of Hinduism, which are represented in the first place by a corpus of religious literature.

A significant role in the whole variety of Hindu sacred texts belongs to Puranas in Sanskrit, especially 18 Maha Puranas (Great Puranas), one of which is the Vayu Purana. It should be noted that apart from Puranas in Sanskrit, which represent a part of the Smṛiti canon, there are also non-Hindu Puranas (Jaina, Buddhist, and Christian), as well as “local” Puranas — as a rule, these are literary works written in one of the local languages. While such components of the religious compendium of Hinduism as the Rig Veda and Atharva Veda mantras, the Upanishads, the Manava-Dharmashastra, and the Mahabharata, the Bhagavad Gita in particular, have been thoroughly studied by Russian researchers, the Puranas have remained underexplored, which makes this research relevant.

Role of the Puranas in the Hindu tradition

According to researchers, all sacred books of Hinduism are divided into two large groups: *śruti* (“what is heard”) and *smṛti* (“what is remembered”). The structure of such division coincides with the division of sacred books in traditional Christianity (Holy Scripture and Holy Tradition) and in Judaism (the Written Torah and the Oral Torah). While the *śruti* category includes divinely revealed texts, which contain eternal “superhuman” (*apauruseya*) knowledge, the *smṛti* literature is considered to be a product of human creative work. Thus, compared with *śruti*, it is viewed as secondary literature³. The Puranas along with the Mahabharata, the Ramayana, the Manava-Dharmashastra, and sutras comprise this type of literature. They are considered to be notes that explain the knowledge hidden in revelations. It should be highlighted here that the significance of the Puranas in Hinduism is not so univocal. On the one hand, their role as a commentary to the Vedas determines the presence of full semantic, if not conceptual, correspondence of the translations with the texts of revelations. No wonder the Puranas along with the Mahabharata were traditionally considered to be “the fifth Veda for women and the Sudra”. This is what the Devi Bhagavata Purana says about that: “Since women, sudras <...> are not entitled to listen to the Vedas, the Puranas have been composed for their benefit”⁴.

¹ N. S. Spartakian; I. G. Ryabova; E. Y. Ivanova; N. M. Dugalich y Y. A. Ermoshin, “A Study of The Moral-Ethical Views of Mohandas Karamchand (Mahatma) Gandhi Under the Influence of L.N. Tolstoy’s Nonresistance-To-Evil Philosophy”, *European Journal of Science and Theology* Vol: 15 num 2 (2019): 171-178.

² E. M. Akhmetshin; S. Dmitrichenkova y E. M. Akishina, “Study of The Literary Sources and Plots of Indian Temple Dances”, *European Journal of Science and Theology* Vol: 14 num 6 (2018): 215-224.

³ V. P. Kanitkar (Hemant) y W. O. Cole, *Religions of the world. Hinduism* (Moscow: Fair-Press, 2001).

⁴ G. M. Bongard-Levin, *Drevneindiiskaya tsivilizatsiya* (Moscow: Nauka, Izdatelskaya firma “Vostochnaya literatura”, 1993), 306.

On the other hand, such semantic equality suggests that the Puranas are not inferior to the Vedas (i.e., *śruti*) either in terms of their sacredness or the level of their authority. *Śruti* texts often mention the Purana (in the singular, frequently in the combination with the words “Veda” or “Itihasa”, which in the Hindu tradition, as a rule, refer to the Mahabharata and the Ramayana) as a text on a par with the Vedas and even an equally important source. For instance, the Atharva Veda narrates that the Purana originated from the remains of sacrificial offering together with Rishi, Śramaṇas, Chhands (meters), and Yajus⁵.

According to the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, the Rig Veda, Yajur Veda, Sama Veda, Atharva Veda, Itihasa, and Purana appeared from Mahabhuta’s breath, whereas in the Gopatha Brahmana, after creating four Vedas, Brahman created five more Vedas: the Sarpa, Pishacha, Asura, Itihasa, and Purana Vedas. Lastly, the Chandogya Upanishad calls the Itihasa Purana “the fifth Veda and the Veda of Vedas”⁶. The Gautama Dharmasutra says that in the course of implementing the law, a king should be guided by the Veda, legal codes, the Vedanga, and the Purana⁷. In addition, when the Puranas list their narrators, they begin with the names of Brahma, Vishnu, or Shiva. It should also be noted that the Puranas were treated with respect by representatives of the Hindu philosophical commenting tradition: such renowned philosophers as Shankara (the 8–9th centuries) and Ramanujia (the 12th century) often used quotations from the Puranas to support their points.

It is hardly possible to equate the texts mentioned in *śruti* with the corpus of the Puranas known today. There are several reasons for that. As it has already been mentioned before, the word “Purana” was first used in the Atharva Veda in combination with the word “Itihasa” (*itihāsapurāna*) and might denote a certain type of text. Moreover, like in other mentioned sources, it is used in the singular (i.e., there are no clear indications of the existence of several separate references to the genre of Purana). On the other hand, it would be wrong to think that in this case, the term “Purana” denotes one certain text. Rather, the matter in question is a particular tradition of ancient translation.

Overview of the Puranic literature

The first reference to a certain Purana (the Bhavishya Purana) appears in the Apastamba Dharma Sutra dating back approximately to 600–300 BC⁸. However, none of the four quotes it contains coincides with the texts of the Puranas known today.

In the Mahabharata, there is a reference to the existence of 18 Puranas (book 18, 6:97). However, considering the notes of Nilakantha (the 16–17th centuries) suggesting that the whole of this section was borrowed from the Harivamsa, these data belong to the period not earlier than the 3rd century AD⁹.

According to M. Winternitz, the connection between the Puranic and epic literature is so obvious that it cannot be denied by any researchers. Interestingly, even the structure of narration in the Mahabharata is totally equivalent to the structure of a typical Purana.

⁵ T. Ya. Elizarenkova, *Atkharaveda: Izbrannoe* (Moscow: Nauka, Glavnaya redaktsiya vostochnoi literatury, 1989).

⁶ P. D. Sakharov, *Mifologicheskoe povestvovanie v sanskritskikh puranakh* (Moscow: GRVL “Nauka”, 1991).

⁷ M. Winternitz, *A History of Indian Literature*, vol. 1: Introduction, Veda, epics, Purānas and Tantras. (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publ, 1996), 495.

⁸ P. D. Sakharov, *Mifologicheskoe povestvovanie...* 19.

⁹ P. D. Sakharov, *Mifologicheskoe povestvovanie...* 23.

At the beginning of the text, Ugrashravas acts as the narrator — he is the son of the sage Lomaharshana, who is characterized as “knowledgeable about the Puranas”¹⁰. Lomaharshana Suta (or Romaharshana) and his son Ugrashravas are traditionally considered to be the narrators of the Puranas. According to one Orientalist, when the Mahabharata and the Puranas were evolving, such words as “Purana” (“a fairy tale of old times”), “Itihasa” (“a true story”), and “Akhyana” (“translation”) were used to define the subject and genre of epic literature¹¹.

It is worth considering the narrators of the Puranas. It has already been mentioned that gods are traditionally believed to be the authors of the Puranas. The legendary wise man Vyasu, whose name can be translated as “a distributor”, is called the arranger of these texts (as well as the Vedas and the Mahabharata). The role of Lomaharshana Suta is to convey the texts to broad audiences. The word “*sūta*” means “a chariot driver” and univocally points at non-Brahmin descent of this person. Surely, no one in the academic world tries to attribute the retelling or ascribe the authorship of the whole corpus of Puranas to one historical figure. However, the connection between the development of the Puranic genre (as well as the Mahabharata) and the social group of Suta is very illustrative. F. Pargiter, one of the founders of Puranic studios in Europe, was the first person to research the issues of the social environment in which the Puranas originated. He concluded that the Puranic tradition started in the Kshatriya varna and was later assimilated by the Brahmins. Although this idea was criticized by many other Indologists, nowadays, the majority of researchers have no doubt that the first authors of the Puranas were chariot drivers — royal panegyrists, who belonged to the Kshatriya varna. Apparently, later the monopoly on telling the Puranic stories was taken over by the Brahmins and the term “Suta”, which is often used in the Itihasa and Purana tradition as a proper name, subsequently started to denote the job of a professional storyteller¹².

The Puranas themselves contain the criteria according to which a certain text can be classified as a Purana. These are five topics that must be covered in each Purana, also widely known as “five signs”. This is what the Vishnu Purana and the Matsya Purana say in this respect:

Creation of the universe (*sarga*) and its recreation after destruction (*pratisarga*),

As well as genealogy (*vaṃṣa*), *manvantara* (*manvantarāṇi*),

And the history of royal dynasties (*vaṃṣānucarita*) — these are five attributes of a Purana¹³.

Therefore, it seems fair to say that the Puranas represent the first example of historical and chronological literature in the Indian culture, despite the presence of a very significant mythological element. The list of royal clans and descriptions of their actions, even considering certain documentary inaccuracies, are in fact a very valuable source for researching the political history of India in the Kushana and Gupta epochs (the 1–6th

¹⁰ M. Winternitz. A History of Indian Literature, vol. 1: Introduction, Veda, epics, Purānas and Tantras. (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publ, 1996).

¹¹ S. L. Neveleva, Makhakhkhara. Izuchenie drevneindiiskogo eposa (Moscow: GRVL “Nauka”, 1991), 39.

¹² P. D. Sakharov, Mifologicheskoe povestvovanie... 18.

¹³ P. D. Sakharov, Mifologicheskoe povestvovanie... 13

centuries AD) and later historical periods. The Puranas also contain a lot of information about scientific knowledge, philosophical movements, iconography, music theory, customs, daily life, the social and varna structure, etc. However, first and foremost, the Puranas represent a treasury of mythology and the very first source telling us about the history of an extremely complex set of diverse religious beliefs, to this day commonly called by a single term of Hinduism in the European tradition of religious studies. All of the above-mentioned factors make the Puranas highly significant in terms of studying the history and culture of medieval India.

At this point, some remarks about the usage of the term “Hinduism” should be made. This term originated and gained widespread use at the turn of the 19th century. It was used by the British colonial authorities to denote all religious and cultural phenomena existing in Hindustan that did not fall under the concept of Islam. As a result of the introduction of this term, European Indologists used to consider all religious movements that were not associated with Islam, Jainism, or Buddhism as a single religion. However, nowadays, the development of religious studies in the sphere of Indology has reached such a level that this trend can be perceived only as a curiosity¹⁴. Speaking of the essential characteristics of Hinduism in very basic terms, we must mention such cornerstones as the doctrine of Trimurti, the concept of Bhakti, and the establishment of such popular (but not necessarily widespread) ideologemes as karma, moksha, and dharma. Actually, all these characteristics are reflected in the Puranas, which allowed M. Winternitz to argue that they are as important for Hinduism as the Vedas are for Brahmanism¹⁵. Some Puranas serve as sacred writings for individual cults, for instance, the Vishnu Purana and the Bhagavata Purana lie at the core of Vaishnavism while Devi, Kalika, and Devi Bhagavata-Puranas form the foundation of Shaktism and the Vayu Purana — of Pashupata Shaivism.

Traditionally there are 18 Great Puranas (Maha Puranas) and 18 Minor Puranas (Upa Puranas), although in fact there are actually some more¹⁶. Apparently, the criterion for differentiation between them is the age and, correspondingly, the degree of authority of a particular text. However, as it has already been said above, many Upa Puranas have authority with followers of certain cults as main religious books.

The Vayu Purana and Puranic literature

The Vayu Purana is traditionally considered to be one of the most ancient Puranas. According to G. Bongard-Levin, the ancient age of this text is confirmed by the fact that it is narrated by Vayu, the god of wind, who had an outstanding role in the Vedic pantheon, but later, when Hinduism was formed, lost his significance¹⁷.

A famous Indian puranologist R. Hazra prepared a list of Puranic texts that can be classified as the most ancient sources that had undergone minimal changes and the Vayu Purana was included in this list¹⁸.

¹⁴ G. D. Sontheimer, Pyat komponentov induizma i ikh vzaimodeistvie, in: Drevo induizma (Moscow: Izdatelskaya firma “Vostochnaya literatura” RAN, 1999).

¹⁵ M. Winternitz, A History of Indian Literature, vol. 1: Introduction, Veda, epics, Purānas and Tantras. (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publ, 1996), 495

¹⁶ S. Krishnananda, Short History of Religious and Philosophic Thought in India. India: The Divine Life Society, Rishikesh. 1994. Available at: https://www.swami-krishnananda.org/hist/Short_History.pdf

¹⁷ G. M. Bongard-Levin, Drevneindiiskaya tsivilizatsiya... 309.

¹⁸ P.D. Sakharov, Mifologicheskoe povestvovanie... 27.

Yet, it should be noted that we can hardly view the text with which we are acquainted now as identical to the ancient text that took shape in the 4th century AD at the latest. According to M. Winternitz, the political rule depicted in the Vayu Purana is quite a precise description of the Gupta dynasty reign in the 4th century AD¹⁹.

The text of the Vayu Purana also contains some later additions:

1) sections 43–50 (the Gaya Mahatmya), the narrators of which are neither the god Vayu or Lomaharshana Suta, but the wise men Narada and Sanatkumara;

2) sections 41 and 51–112 — later appendixes added by editors of this text appealing to the audience to adore gods and the act of transfer of the Purana from one teacher to another (from Brahma to Suta), as well as description of the “fruits of hearing the Purana” and glorifying the goddess Maheshvari²⁰;

3) according to Bongard-Levin, such additions also include sections 7–9, which contain some historical data referring to the period not earlier than the 3rd century AD²¹.

On the whole, the Vayu Purana is dated back to the period not later than the 5th century AD. The arguments that speak in favor of this date are citations from its text and references to it provided in the works by a famous Sanskrit writer Bana, who supposedly lived in the 7th century AD. In the Harshacharita, Bana remembers how he read the Vayu Purana in his home village. The Vayu Purana was also mentioned in Kadambari²².

The Vayu Purana is a Shaiva text, although it lacks the sectarian nature (according to many researchers, the lack of well-defined sectarianism is another sign of the antiquity of this literary monument). In the text of the Vayu Purana, there are sections devoted to Vishnu. The differences between the conflicting Shaiva and Vishnu movements are muted due to proclaiming the unity of these two gods²³.

The Vayu Purana is traditionally believed to belong to the group of the Great Puranas, although in some lists, it is substituted with the Shiva Purana. These are the lists of Great Puranas provided in the Bhagavata, Linga, Brahmavaivarta, Markandeya, and Vishnu Purana. The known today Shiva Purana cites the medieval author Vasugupta (ca. 825 AD) and is unambiguously dated back to no earlier than the 10th century AD²⁴. M. Winternitz does not at all think that there is any problem with that: he assumes that it is the Vayu Purana that is meant by the Shiva Purana since it represents a Shaiva text²⁵.

Different editions of the Vayu Purana contain different numbers of verses. The number of verses indicated in the Puranas — Bhagavata, Matsya, Narada, Agni, and Vayu

¹⁹ M. Winternitz, *A History of Indian Literature*, vol. 1: Introduction, Veda, epics, Purānas and Tantras. (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publ, 1996), 529.

²⁰ G. V. Tagare, Introduction. *Vayu Purana*. P.I. (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publ, 1984).

²¹ G. M. Bongard-Levin, *Drevneindiiskaya tsivilizatsiya...* 309.

²² D. Feller, *The Sanskrit Epics' Representation of Vedic Myths* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Private Limited, 2004).

²³ Z. Stipl, *The Imagery of a Road to Hell in the Puranic Eschatology*, in: *Journeys and Travellers in Indian Literature and Art* (Warszawa: Dom Wydawniczy Elipsa, 2018).

²⁴ G. V. Tagare, Introduction...

²⁵ M. Winternitz, *A History of Indian Literature*, vol. 1: Introduction, Veda, epics, Purānas and Tantras (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publ, 1996), 529.

Puranas — varies from 12,000 to 24,600. However, the text that was used to translate Puranas into English in the series “Sacred Indian Mythology and Tradition” contains 10,991 verses.

This text consists of four parts: *Prakriyā* (“The Action”, “The Process”) — sections 1–6, *Upodghāta* (“The Beginning” or “The Plan”, “The Intention” — sections 7–64, *Anuṣāṅga* (“The Consequence”, “The Immediate Result”) — sections 65–99, *Upasamhāra* (“The Summary”, “The Conclusion”) — sections 100–112²⁶.

The content of the Vayu Purana is very diverse, which is typical of the whole Puranic genre. In the first place, it is important to specify the topics that correspond with the Pancha-Lakshana characteristics. The first subject to be covered by a Purana is *sarga* (creation of the world). The Vayu Purana includes several stories about creation of the world based on different cosmogonic theories: purely mythological (involving the mythologeme of the cosmic egg), the Sankhya Darshana theory (where cosmogony is viewed as a result of agitation of three gunas), the theory that can be conditionally called Vedic — it proclaims Brahman the source of the universe — eternal, without a beginning and without an end, unborn, and inconceivable²⁷.

The second topic covered by a Purana is *pratisarga*, i.e. destruction of the universe and recreation of the world. The Vayu Purana differentiates a few types of destruction, portraying an impressive apocalyptic picture without any light, which disappears as a result of individuals obtaining spiritual knowledge. This type of *pratisarga* is called *atyantica*, i.e. final and total destruction²⁸.

The third topic featured in a Purana is a list of Manvantaras, i.e. large periods of time started by a Manu — a primeval forefather. The same category includes genealogies of all Manus and characteristics of four Yugas, where the description of the last one, Kali Yuga, is presented as a prophecy (this way, this Purana claims to belong to dateless antiquity)²⁹.

The *vamsa* and *vamasanucharitam* categories (“genealogy” and “further acts”) describe genealogies of gods Agni, Varuna, and others, as well as such wise men as Kashyapa, Atri, Vasishtha and some royal dynasties³⁰. Sections 24 and 24 stand out among the other sections since they are devoted to music theory.

The central deity of the Vayu Purana is the four-handed and four-faced Maheshvara³¹, who exists in a certain correlation with Parabrahman from the Upanishads. The doctrine of Trimurti, a triad of deities, can also be found here, which is a typical feature of mature Hinduism. However, in the Vayu Purana, the three participants of this triad, Brahma, Vishnu, and Rudra, with their usual functions, are proclaimed subordinates to Maheshvara and constitute the first level of their own creation, i.e. they are of a created nature. The name of Shiva is mentioned along with Rudra and also denotes a deity of a lower level. Overall, the following names of Shiva can be found in the text: Rudra, Bhava, Shiva, Pashupati, Isha, Bhima, Ugra, and Mahadeva. Such names as Ugra, Rudra, and

²⁶ G. V. Tagare, Introduction...

²⁷ G. V. Tagare, Introduction... 1.

²⁸ G. V. Tagare, Introduction... 7.

²⁹ G. V. Tagare, Introduction... 26.

³⁰ G. V. Tagare, Introduction...

³¹ G. V. Tagare, Introduction... 42.

Bhima indicate the terrible and destructive aspects of his nature, while the other names refer to his gentleness. Both these groups of contradictory qualities are combined in Maheshvara, who is identified with Parabrahman and the sacred syllable Om³².

The Vayu Purana is a version of the famous myth about obtaining amrita, in the course of which Shiva drinks the poison that emerged during the churning of the ocean and thus saves the world from destruction³³. Shiva's sons, gods Skanda and Ganesha, are also mentioned in the Vayu Purana. Their images are endowed with features suggesting that the Vayu Purana is one of the primary sources where these images were formed. In line with the dominant Shaiva tradition, the Vayu Purana contains a reference to the sun cult, the cult of Shiva's bull (the name Nandi is not used here yet) with a certain correlation with worshipping cows, as well as Vishnu with enumeration of his ten avatars³⁴. The Vayu Purana also features Gaya Mahatmya, i.e. "glorification of the grove", which is univocally recognized as a later addition, since at present time Gaya is a place of Vishnu pilgrimage in Bihar.

The majority of researchers associate the Vayu Purana with Pashupata Shaivism. An assumption has been made that the Vayu Purana was a sacred text for the Pashupati's cult followers. Pashupati is the oldest known sect of ascetic monks, one of the distinguishing features of which is preaching bhakti — devotion to Shiva³⁵. Sections 11–15 are also closely connected with the cult of Pashupati, representing a brief yoga treatise³⁶.

The philosophical system of Pashupata is mentioned in the Mahabharata as one of five religious schools. Its ideas are also considered in the Sarva-Darsana-Samgraha (review of different systems of Hindu philosophy) by Madhava Acharya and Shankara criticizes this theology in his commentary on the Brahma-sutra³⁷. The followers of Pashupata took up a marginal position in relation to orthodox Brahmanism. Moreover, their religious beliefs inclined them towards demonstrative antisocial behavior. Bearing in mind that the Hindu tradition treats the Vayu Purana with great respect, it can be argued that the history of this text brightly illustrates how marginal movements (which were previously considered to be heretical) fell into the orthodox course of religion.

Conclusions

The authority of the Vayu Purana among Indian commentators on Hinduism can be proved by the fact that they often cite it as a credible source. Such medieval commentators of Dharmashastra as Apararka (ca. 1125 AD) and Kulluka Bhatta (ca. 1150 AD) refer to this Purana. Shankaracharya also refers to the Vayu Purana in his commentary on the Brahma Sutras a few times. Apart from Indian writers, Buddhist authors mention the Vayu Purana as well. Finally, it should be noted that the Vayu Purana is mentioned by an outside observer — Al-Biruni, who did not belong to the Indian cultural space. In our opinion, the results of this research suggest that the Vayu Purana can be considered one of the most outstanding pieces of medieval Indian literature. Historians, ethnographers, specialists in religious studies, and philosophers can all find invaluable information for their research in this source.

³² G. V. Tagare, Introduction...

³³ G. V. Tagare, Introduction...

³⁴ G. V. Tagare, Introduction...

³⁵ S. Sh. Subramuniasvami, Tanets s Shivoi. Sovremennyi katekhizis induizma (Moscow: Gelios, 2001), 496-499.

³⁶ G. V. Tagare, Introduction...11-15

³⁷ M. T. Stepanyants, Indiiskaya filosofiya: Entsiklopediya (Moscow: Institut filosofii RAN, 2009), 415.

One of the possible directions of further research can be an analysis of the hypothetical possibility of mutual influence between Christianity and the Puranic literature.

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