

Puraanaa-s
By His Holiness Sri Kanchi Paramaachaaryal

Magnifying Glass of the Vedas.....	2
Puranas and History	2
Are the puranas a lie or are they metaphorical	5
Meaningful even if Imaginery	9
Vyasa’s priceless gift to us	11
Upa-puranas and others.....	13
Itihas and Puranans	13
The Epics and their greatness	14
Why differences among the Gods.....	16
The One as Many	18
Many Paths to one Goal.....	20
Who taught the Puranas?	21
They Speak like a friend	21
Puranic discourses and films.....	23
Sthala Puranas	24
The Authenticity of Sthala Puranas.....	25
Interconnected stories	27
Importance of Sthala Puranas	34
Preserving the puranas	35
Palm-leaf Manuscripts in Libraries.....	35
Realising the ideals of the puranas.....	38
From the Dharmasastra.	38
Smritis and allied works.....	40
Vaidyanatha Diksitiyam.....	41
Freedom and Discipline	42
Signs and Marks.....	43
Smritis – Not independent works.....	44
The source of smritis is the Vedas	45
Sruti-smriti – Srauta-smarta.....	47
Samskara	49
Paradise or the path of atmajana	49
Three types of worlds.....	51

Magnifying Glass of the Vedas

The Puranas are the magnifying glass of the Vedas. The principles and rules of dharma that are briefly dealt with in the Vedas are enlarged or elaborated upon in them in the form of stories. A subject briefly touched upon may not make a deep impression on the mind. If the same were told as an absorbing story it would at once make an impact on the mind of the listener or reader.

The Vedas urge us to speak the truth ("Satyam vada"). How one becomes exalted by remaining truthful at all costs is illustrated by the story of Hariscandra. "Dharmam cara" (Follow dharma, live a life of dharma) is a Vedic injunction consisting of just two words. The importance of the pursuit of dharma is explained through the long story of Dharmaputra [Yudhisthira] in the Mahabharata. "Matr-devo bhava" and "Pitr-devo bhava" ("Be one to whom the mother is god" - "Be one to whom the father is god"): these two admonishments are enlarged on, as it were, through the magnifying glass in the story of Sri Rama. Such dharmic virtues as humility, patience, compassion, chastity, which are the subject of Vedic ordinances, are illustrated through the noble examples of men belonging to ancient times, women of hallowed reputation. By reading their stories or listening to them we form a deep attachment to the virtues and qualities exemplified by them.

All these men and women whose accounts are contained in the Puranas had to undergo trials and tribulations. We keep committing so many wrongs. But consider these Puranic characters who had to suffer more than we suffer. Indeed some of them had to go through terrible ordeals. However, by reading their stories we do not form the impression that adherence to dharma means suffering. On the contrary, etched in our minds is the example of men and women of great inner purity who in their practice of dharma stood like a rock against all difficulties and challenges. At the same time, we moved by their tales of woe and thereby our own inner impurities are washed away. Finally, the glorious victory they achieve in the end and fame they achieve help to create a sturdy bond in us with dharma.

Puranas and History

Our nation, it is often alleged, does not have a sense of history. In my opinion the Puranas are history. But to our educated people today history means the history of the past two thousand years since the birth of Christ. They do not believe that the events of earlier eras, including those mentioned in the Puranas, are history. Some of them admit, though, that there is an element of truth in Puranic stories as shown by recent researches. But these relate to theories like the division of the Indian people into races like Aryans and

Dravidians, theories they fancy are supported by the Puranas. The rest, like the miracles or accounts of supernatural occurrences, they dismiss as fables or as a tissue of lies. Since they are unable to comprehend matters that are beyond our senses they treat the Puranas as mystery.

Now children have no choice but to read the textbooks of history written by such people. But I believe that it is not a good to keep children ignorant of the Puranas. It is not my purpose to say that you should not read history, but I should like to mention that the puranas are also history and that our youngsters have a great deal to learn from them, a great deal that will help in moulding their conduct and character. No such purpose is served by the history taught in schools.

One reason why they say history must be read is their belief that "history repeats itself". The idea is that the lessons of the past would be helpful to us in the future. We learn from history about the circumstances that usually lead to war and about how great civilizations rise and fall. We can be on guard against a repetition of these circumstances and this, we are told, is one of the "uses" of history.

The same events are repeated kalpa after kalpa. According to our sastras, the Ramayana, the Mahabharata, the Bhagavata, the Dasavatara (the story of the ten incarnations of Visnu) and the Puranas are re-enacted kalpa after kalpa. Here too we see history repeating itself.

Have we in reality learned any lesson from history, I mean from the history taught in schools? No. We learn how such men as Cenghiz Khan, Timur, Ghazni, and Malik Kafur appeared from time to time and caused devastation in various countries and how they massacred innocent people. But by reading accounts of their infamous deeds have we been able to prevent the appearance of such scourges again? Hitler and Mussolini rose to perpetrate the same kind of outrages on people.

We are witness in our own times to governments losing their support because of charges of bribery and corruption made against them and other malpractices ascribed to them including partisanship and nepotism. When one such government falls, another group forms a new government and they too lose the support of the people in the subsequent elections for the same reasons. Here is an example of our failure to learn any lesson form history.

History must be taught along with lessons in dharma; then alone will it serve the purpose of bringing people to the right path. The Puranas do precisely this.

History contains no more than accounts of monarchs and other rulers in chronological order. It does not give importance to their moral character : whether wicked rulers suffered an ill fate or whether just and righteous rulers earned a high place. According to the law of Karma, Isvara determines the fate of people on the basis of their actions, meritorious and sinful. Such justice is not necessarily meted out during the lifetime of a person. The fruits of a man's action are reaped in subsequent births. It is not the task of

Puraanaa-s
By His Holiness Sri Kanchi Paramaachaaryal

history to deal with such questions, nor do historians have the capacity to inquire into such matters. Whether a wicked ruler like Hitler was consigned to hell on his death and whether he had a lowly rebirth is a subject for the Puranas. Those who composed these texts had the requisite insight to deal with such questions; indeed the very purpose of these stories is this, to impart moral lessons. From history we do not derive any edification.

The Puranas are also, as I said before, history. Besides, they contain lessons in papa and punya (demerit and merit). In fact, their choice of stories and narration are such as to bring people closer to the path of dharma. Again, the Puranas contain accounts of individuals who by virtue of their steadfast adherence to dharma attained to an elevated state in this birth itself. At the same time, they also tell us about persons who, by their acts of adharma, came to harm in this very birth itself. There are in fact no Puranic stories that do not contain some moral lesson or other.

"The experience of the past narrated in history are a pointer of future events. The stories of good men who performed virtuous deeds and benefited from them should be a source of inspiration for us. In the same way, the stories of wicked men who brought evil to the world and themselves suffered on account of their acts contain a warning for us". Is the study of history really useful in this way? It is not. To improve ourselves morally and spiritually we must turn to the Puranas.

The purpose of the Puranas is not to give [as history does] a chronological account of kings or their quarrels without imparting lessons on good and evil. We do not need such history since it does not contain any guide for the conduct of our life. History must be capable of bringing us Atmic rewards.

The Puranas too deal with the lineages of various ruling houses. They give accounts of dynasties descended from the moon and the sun (candravamsa and suryavamsa) and contain list of successive rulers of various kingdoms. But in most cases only the names of rulers are mentioned or only brief references made to them. Detailed accounts are given only of rulers whose lives have a lesson for us. For instance, the Bhagavata tells the story of Uttanapada, the father of Dhruva, and of Dhruva's son, but only very briefly. However, the story of Dhruva himself is told in detail, Dhruva who is an example for all of us in devotion, determination and courage.

English historians dismiss the Puranas as false. But on the pretext of carrying out impartial research they twist history to suit their ends like, for instance, their "divide and rule" policy. It is in this way that they have propagated the Aryan-Dravidian theory. If the Puranas are a lie, what about the history written by these Englishmen? Efforts are going on to reconstruct our history. But prejudicial accounts cannot be ruled out in these new attempts also. Whatever claim the historians make to impartiality, it is hard to say how far the new history (or histories) are likely to be truthful.

Vyasa, who composed the eighteen Puranas, the great men who wrote the various Sthala Puranas, and the Tamil author Sekkizhar were unbiased in their accounts.

It is not right to view history merely as an account of the rise and fall of empires or of wars, invasions, dynasties and so on. Each and every subject has a history of its own. But we find that political history is given a dominant place. The emphasis in the Puranas is on dharma and, incidentally, they also deal, in a subsidiary manner, with the ruling dynasties, with holy men as well as with ordinary folk. They contain details also of cultural life, the arts and the sciences. The thrust of the Puranas, however, is dharmic and Atmic.

Are the puranas a lie or are they metaphorical

Those who distrust the Puranas maintain that they contain accounts that are not in keeping with day-to-day realities. The stories in these texts refer to the arrival and departure of celestials and of their awarding boons to devotees. To the critics such accounts seem false. A woman is turned into a stone because of a curse, then the curse is broken with the grant of boon; or the sun is stopped from rising - such stories seem untrue to us because they are beyond the realms of possibility and refer to acts beyond our own capacity.

Since such things do not happen these days, is it right to argue that they could not have occurred at any time? In the past the mantras of the Vedas had their own vibrant power because of the exemplary life led by those who chanted them. Then people practised severe austerities and cultivated yogic power of a high order. These facts are borne out by ancient books. Through their mantras, austerities and yoga, people then could easily draw to themselves powers of a divine nature. Where there is light there is shadow. So with divine powers there also existed demonic forces that could be seen in their gross form during those times. Today the war between the celestials and the demons is still being waged (the combat between good and evil). Eons ago people could perceive these forces of good and evil because of the special vision gained from their austerities. Scientists say that all light waves and sound waves cannot be grasped by the human sense organs. Some of them go step further to observe on the basis of their researches, that there are indeed "good and evil dieties".

Even today there are present in this world any number of yogins and siddha-purusas. They are unscathed by fire or snow, they can produce rain or stop it, and have powers that cannot be comprehended by our senses. But we do not have faith in such phenomena and we keep doubting everything. In the past there must have been more people than we find today with such abilities or "siddhis". The Puranas contain accounts of many a miracle.

Historians dismiss miracles as not part of history. Jnanasambandar cured Kun Pandyan of his fever with the sacred ashes that had the potency imparted by his muttering of the Pancaksara. The Pandyan was made upright with his hunch removed ("kun" in Tamil means "hunch" or "hump"). Historians disbelieve such stories. Mahendra Pallava bound Apparsvamigal with ropes to a stone and threw him into the Kadila river. The saint

remained floating down the stream. It was this phenomenon that persuaded the Pallava king to return to the Vedic religion from Jainism.

Again, historians refuse to accept such accounts as true. There is, however, circumstantial evidence to show that a Pallava and a Pandyan king were restored to Saivism from Jainism. Historians agree that in the sixth and seventh centuries Jainism declined in Tamil Nadu and that the Vedic religion (particularly Saivism) came to be on the ascendent. If such a big change was to happen, that is if two important monarchs of the time felt it necessary to change their religion, the sort of miracles mentioned in the stories of Jnanasambandar and Appar must have occurred. The fact that these rulers did not record the incidents in stone or copper-plate does not mean that they (the incidents) did not take place at all.

There is a story told in the tradition relating to gurus about Ramanujacharya. He exorcised a ghost from the daughter of the Jaina king Pittideva who ruled Hoysala [in Karnataka]. Thereupon the monarch embraced Vaisnavism. Historians do not lend credence to such stories of exorcism. Ramanuja lived in the 11th century. Jainism languished in the Hoysala kingdom and Vaisnava worship and temples prospered. Pittideva himself came to be called Visnuvardhanadeva. This is now confirmed as a historical fact. How can you deny that these changes occurred as a result of the incidents narrated in the story told above? English-educated people dismiss such accounts in the Puranas as lies since they cannot be proved scientifically. This attitude is not right.

Even today human skeletons that are ten or twelve feet long are found here and there. Also are discovered the skeletons of huge animals which are extinct today but which agree with the descriptions contained in the Puranas. From such discoveries it seems likely that in the hoary past demons as tall as palm-trees must have existed, also animals like yalis with the body of a lion and trunk of an elephant. A human skeleton of which the legs alone measure 16 feet and the remains of an animal ten times bigger than an elephant have been discovered in the Arctic region.

It has been determined that the animals belonged to many hundred thousand years ago. If we take the help of mythology also it would be seen that our Puranic stories are not untrue.

Man, who was as tall as a palm, is now only six feet; at another time he was only the size of our thumb. The physical characteristics of creatures changes from age to age. This is stated in the Puranas.

The Puranas are ridiculed because they contain references to vanaras, monkeys akin to humans, to creatures with the face of a man and the body of an animal; and then to a character with ten heads. It is all lies, critics say. Some however, believe that the Puranic stories are all "symbols", that they are allegorical representations.

It is true that in the Puranas certain principles, certain truths, are conveyed in the form of stories. But, for that reason, the stories themselves cannot be called false. Even in modern

Puraanaa-s
By His Holiness Sri Kanchi Paramaachaaryal

times we read in the papers about the birth of a child with two heads and four hands or one that is neither human nor animal. They called such children freaks. A freak is the product of an error in nature, nature in which we do not usually meet with an error. What are called freaks today could have been created in the past in larger numbers for a special purpose. People in those days had supernatural powers and, in keeping with the same, the birth of such unusual children would not have been impossible. We cannot claim that what we know now is all that is to be known and that there could not have existed anything different from the existing orders of creatures.

It does not stand to reason to treat what we do not know and what we cannot know as untrue. In our own times we see that what we normally regard as unbelievable happens now and then. We read reports of children and older people recalling their past births. In recent years such reports seem to have become more common than before.

We distrust the Puranic story, according to which, Kasyapa had a wife called Kadru who gave birth to snakes. But many of you must have read a newspaper report last year (1958) of a snake born to a Marwari woman. When I read it I was reminded of another story.

It refers to a family I had heard about before I became Svamigal. In that family neither the daughters nor the daughters-in-law wore screw pine flowers in their hair. When asked the reason for it they told a "story" - but by story is not meant anything made up.

"Ten or fifteen generations ago", one of the family members, a woman, said, a snake was born in our family. The family was ashamed of its birth and concealed the fact from others, but, all the same, it was brought up in the home, fed milk, etc. This wonder child could not be taken out. The mother went out only when she had some work of the utmost importance. There is a saying: if you are married to a stone, well, the stone is your husband. Likewise, if a snake is born to you, the snake is your child. One day the mother had to go to the wedding of a very close relative.

There was an old woman in the house. We do not know who she was, whether she was the grandmother of the snake child. In those days the family cared for even distant relatives who were otherwise helpless. Nowadays children are over-anxious to leave their parents to set up their own households. The joint family was then still a strong institution. A great-aunt or a distant cousin of the grandfather's was looked after by the family. The old woman in our story was blind. The mother of the snake child left it in the care of this woman when she went to the wedding.

What have you to do to a snake child? You don't have to bathe it or do up its hair. Do you have to dress it? Or carry it in your arms? But it had to be fed at fixed hours. Before leaving, the mother had told the woman: 'Feed it boiled milk. Feel around for the stone mortar and pour the milk in the cavity. The snake will feed on it.' She had probably trained the snake to feed in this manner.

The old woman did as she had been told. But one day she probably overslept and it was past the time to feed the snake. When the snake screept up to the mortar it didn't find any

milk in it. It waited for some time but soon fell asleep crouching in the mortar itself. It was now that the old woman brought the milk. It had not been cooled and was piping hot. She could not naturally see the snake lying coiled in the mortar as she poured the hot milk into it.

Alas, the milk was too hot for the snake and it died.

The mother who had gone to attend the wedding had a dream in which the snake child appeared and said to her: Mother, I am dead. You come and cremate me amid the clump of screwpine. Hereafter no daughter or daughter-in-law in your family shall wear screwpine flowers in the hair.

"From that day, no one in our family has worn screwpine flowers, " the woman said concluding her story.

When I heard this account first I was astounded and wondered whether such things really happened.

Many years later, after I had become Svamigal, people belonging to that family [in which the snake child was born] came to see me. It was not to speak about the snake child of the past. There was an old copper-plate inscription in their family. They had come to know about my interest in old inscriptions and they brought the copper-plate for me to see.

The inscription on it belonged to the time of Acyutaraya who reigned after Krsnadevaraya. According to it a Brahmin had donated lands to 108 fellow Brahmins. He had done so on behalf of his king. I will tell you why. The Brahmin's time is taken up by chanting the Vedas and performing rituals. He is not expected to earn a salary or do any work other than practising Vedic dharma (today of course Brahmins work in offices and other establishments). But he had to maintain his family. That is why the sastras permit him to receive gifts, and that is how in the past kings and wealthy citizens honoured Brahmins with donations. But, contrary to present-day allegations, Brahmins did not extort such offerings, but maintained their self-respect, receiving only the minimum needed for their upkeep. They would accept gifts of land only from Ksatriyas belonging to a high lineage.

Some kings were unhappy that Brahmins did not accept gifts from them and so were denied the opportunity of earning merit. A way out presented itself to them (and to affluent citizens who were in a similar predicament). They prevailed upon an indigent Brahmin to accept a large gift, say, an entire village. But the gift was not wholly intended for him. He was expected to keep only a small plot of land to himself and divide the rest among other Brahmins. These latter did not incur "pratigraha-dosa" (the taint of receiving gifts) by accepting charity from a fellow Brahmin. This was how the affluent donor managed to earn punya.

But would not such a practice bring demerit to the Brahmin who first receives the gift of land? It is not wrong on the part of a wealthy man to honour a Vedic scholar with a

donation. But what about the Brahmin who receives it? Legally the property becomes his, and when he keeps only a small part of the land to himself and gives away the rest to others not a trace of papa sticks to him.

It is however, bad to receive charity from a king. Great men like Tyagaraja spurned the gifts offered them by rulers like Sarabhoji. Tyagaraja sang in anger: "Nidhi cala sukham. . .?" (Is it money that brings happiness?)

The Nattukkottai Cettis (Nagarattar) built many cattirams (dharmasalas) but Brahmins were reluctant to eat in them. So the Cettis made over the cattirams to a Brahmin and thereby it was made to appear that he was feeding the other Brahmins.

According to the copper-plate inscription I mentioned earlier, a Brahmin had distributed the land received from Acyutaraya among 108 fellow Brahmins. All their names and gotras are mentioned in it, together with the subjects in which they were proficient. Among them figures the names of the ancestor of the people who came to see me, people descended from the family in which the snake child was born. The copper-plate had come as a family heirloom through so many generations. An interesting fact emerging from the inscription was that the name of the ancestor mentioned on the copper-plate was Nagesvara. I was told by my visitors that the family had a Nagesvara every successive generation.

I could guess at once that the name was associated with the snake child. It seemed to answer my doubts about its story. When I heard the news last year of the birth of a snake to a woman, I had more reason to believe the earlier story of the snake child.

It is wrong on my part to blame you for not having sufficient faith in the Puranas. I myself had doubts about the story of the snake child - it had all the character of a legend. It was only when I read the newspaper report of the birth of a similar snake child that I believed it to be fully authentic.

Today we are prepared to believe any story however bizzare it be if it is printed in the papers. But we treat the Puranas as no more than fables. "Those who composed the Puranas had nothing worthwhile to do. They had the stylus and palm-leaves and they went on inscribing story after story. Some of the stories seem ingenious enough but most are absurd, " such is our way of thinking.

Meaningful even if Imaginary

There is perhaps an element of the imaginary in the Puranas. It is also possible that they contain interpolations. But who is to determine what parts are imaginary and what passages constitute the interpolations? And who is to separate the authentic from the

Puraanaa-s
By His Holiness Sri Kanchi Paramaachaaryal

spurious? If each one of us removes what seems interpolatory, nothing will be left of the stories in the end. So it would be better to preserve the Puranas in the form in which they have been handed down to us notwithstanding the apparent errors and distortions.

If there are stories in the Puranas that read like fables, let them be so. Do they not bring us mental peace and take us nearer to the Lord? We go shopping and make good purchases. Are we to be happy on this score or are we to be unhappy that there was something wrong with the shop or the shopkeeper? There may be mistakes in the Puranic accounts of the earth and the heavens. After all, we can have accurate knowledge of such matters from our books on geography and astronomy. The point to remember is that the Puranas contain what geography, astronomy and history do not: the truth of the Ultimate Reality. Besides, they speak about devotion and dharma.

It is argued that Rama could not have lived hundreds of thousands of years ago, i. e., in the Treta yuga, that it is not likely that the sort of civilization described in the Ramayana would have obtained in that distant period. Similar criticisms are made about stories in the Puranas and the epics. I do not accept them. But, for the sake of arguments, let it be that Rama did not live in the Treta age. And let us also presume that all those stories that happened, according to the Puranas, in the earlier Krta yuga, did not really belong to that age let us suppose that they date back to a comparatively recent period to 7, 000 or 8, 000 years ago. But for that reason would the story of Rama or others be less valuable? And would the lessons we learn from such accounts be less meaningful?

The Puranas mention the ages in which the stories recounted in them really happened. According to critics it is not these ages alone that are wrong but also the date(s) traditionally ascribed to the Puranas themselves.

According to the sastras, Vyasa composed the Puranas 5, 000 years ago, at the beginning of the age of Kali. But they must have existed before him also. In the Chandogya Upanisad Narada speaks about the subjects learned by him and they include the Puranas. From this we infer that they must have existed during the time of the Vedas and the Upanisads. Just as Vyasa divided the Vedas into a number of branches for the benefit of people of later times with their diminished capacity to learn, he also composed the Puranas, which are detailed in their treatment, with the same purpose in view.

Western-educated people think that the Puranas are not very ancient. So let them be. Devotees throng the Kandasvami temple in Madras. They feel the presence of the deity there. If they think that there is an end to their sorrows by worshipping at this shrine, what else is required of a temple? Is there any purpose in conducting an investigation into the origin of the temple, whether it had existed during the time of Arunagirinathar and whether he had sung his Tiruppagazh in it? Carrying out research into the Puranas is similarly futile. If we bear in mind that their purpose is the cleansing our mind there should be no need to harbour any doubts concerning them.

There is no bigger superstition than the belief that the results of [historical] investigations represent the absolute truth. Much of today's research is hollow, much of it faulty.

However, even the view of modern research scholars that the Puranas are imaginary serves to show up the purpose for which they are intended: to demonstrate that one who does good prospers, that another who does evil suffers - or is raised up by the compassionate Lord.

Somehow the Puranas are regarded as of secondary importance not only by people who claim to have a "modern" outlook, but also by those proficient in the sastras. Also pauranikas (those who have made a thorough study of the Puranas and give discourses) are regarded as inferior to those who give talks on other branches of learning. However, scholars who have earned the title of "Mahamahopadhyaya" like Yajnasvami Sastri and Kabe Ramacandracar have given puranic discourses. Today Srivatsa Somadevasarma is devoting himself fully to the printing of all the Puranas in Tamil (eventhough in an abridged form).

Vyasa's priceless gift to us

Vyasa divided the Vedas to make them easier for people to learn. It was to help mankind similarly that he composed the "astadasa Puranas" (the eighteen Puranas).

I regard Vyasa as the first journalist, the ideal for all newspapermen of today. He composed the Puranas and made a gift of that great treasure to humanity. How have they (the Puranas) benefited us? They encompass stories, history, geography, philosophy, dharma, the arts. Vyasa's narration holds the interest not only of intellectuals but of ordinary people, even the unlettered. Is this not the aim of journalists, holding the interest of the general reader? However, most of them stop with this, exciting the interest of people or pandering to their taste. But Vyasa had a loftier purpose: he made the Puranas engrossing with the Purpose of taking the reader(or listener) to the goal of dharma and the Supreme Being. If holding the interest of people somehow is their sole objective, the papers are likely to propagate subjects or views that are contrary to the ideals of dharma. If journalists keep Vyasa as their forerunner and ideal, their writing will assume a noble character and contribute to the good of the world.

Vyasa composed the Puranas in 400, 000 "granthas". A grantha is a stanza consisting of 32 syllables. Of these the Skanda Purana alone accounts for 100, 000. It is perhaps the world's biggest literary work. The remaining 17 Puranas add up to 300, 000 granthas. Apart from them Vyasa composed the Mahabharata, also nearly 100, 000 granthas.

Each Purana is devoted to a particular deity. There are Saiva, Vaisnava and Sakta Puranas. The 18 Puranas : Brahma Purana (Brahma), Padma Purana (Padma), Narada Purana (Naradiya), Markandeya Purana, Visnu Purana (Vaisnava), Siva Purana(Saiva), Bhagvata Purana, Agni Purana (Agneya), Bhavisya Purana, Brahma-Vaivarta Purana, Linga Purana, Varaha Purana (Varaha), Skanda Mahapurana, Vamana Purana, Kurma

Puraanaa-s
By His Holiness Sri Kanchi Paramaachaaryal

Purana (Kaurma), Matsya Purana (Matsya), Garuda Purana (Garuda) and Brahmanda Purana.

Our Acarya in his commentry on the "Visnu-Sahasranama" cites many passages from the Visnu Purana. This Purana, composed by Vyasa's father Parasara, is an important source of Ramanuja's Visistadavita (qualified non-dualism).

One of the precursors of qualified non-dualism was Alavandar. Ramanuja wanted to meet him but as he arrived at his place he saw him lying dead. Alavandar had wanted to entrust Ramanuja with three important tasks. When he passed away three fingers of his right hand were seen bent in. Ramanuja understood the meaning of this phenomenon, that he had three tasks to perform. When he spoke out what they were, the three fingers unbent. One of the three tasks was to write a commentry on Brahmasutra from the standpoint of qualified non-dualism. The second was to do a commentry on the Tiruvaymozhi and the third to perpetuate the memory of Parasara and Vyasa. As the author of the Visnu Purana, Parasara occupied a high position. It was with this in mind that Ramanuja named the two sons of his chief disciple, Kurattazhvar, Parasarabhatta and Vedavyasabhatta. The first grew up to be an important teacher of Vaisnavism.

Though Parasara was the original author of the Visnu Purana it was Vyasa who wrote it in the present form. The sage who had divided the Vedas now composed the Puranas so that the truths embedded in the Vedas would make a deep impression on the minds of the common people. There was also another reason. Not all people have the right to learn the Vedas. It is believed that Vyasa composed the Puranas to enlighten such people (as have no access to the Vedas) on the scriptural truths.

If Vyasa's father was the author of the original Visnu Purana, his son Sukracaraya it was who instructed King Pariksit in the Bhagavata. There is a difference of opinion about the Bhagavata, whether the term should refer to Visnu-Bhagavata or Devi-Bhagavata. The former is devoted to the incarnations of Visnu, particularly Krsna, while the latter deals with the divine sport of Amba. We need both and both are great works. In the systems propagated by Caitanya, Nimbarka and Vallabhacarya, the Visnu-Bhagavata has a place no less important than that of the Vedas. At the same time, non-dualists who are opposed to their ideas also treat this Bhagavata with the utmost respect.

Though there is a seperate Siva Purana, three-fourths of the Skanda Purana is devoted to Siva. It also includes the story Skanda or Muruga. Kacciyappa Sivacariyar of Kancipuram has written a Kanda Puranam in Tamil: it is devoted [as the name itself suggests] mainly to Subramanya or Skanda. "Durga-Saptasati" is a part of the markandeya Purana. "Candi-homa", in which oblations are made to the goddess Candi, is performed with the recitation of the 700 stanzas of this hymnal work: each stanza is regarded as a mantra.

"Bhavisya" means the future. The Bhavisya Purana contains many matters including the evil doings of the age of Kali. In the Puranas, apart from the story of the Mauryas and others rulers, there is also a reference to the advent of the white man. Critics discount

such accounts believing that they could not have written by Vyasa at the beginning of the Kali yuga. "Somebody must have written them recently. " they argue, " and put the name of Vyasa to them. " Admittedly, there must be interpolations here and there in the Puranas but it is not correct to say that the Puranas were all recently written. Men with yogic power can see past, present and future. Sitting in one spot they can see happenings all over the world. It is not easy for people to write works like the Puranas and ascribe their authorship to the great men of an earlier era.

The Garuda Purana deals with the world of the fathers and related matters. It is customary to read it during the sraddha ceremony.

"Lalitopakhyana", the story of Lalitambika, occurs in the Brahmanda Purana, so also the "Lalita-Sahasranama" (The one thousand Names of Lalita). The reading of the 18 Puranas is to be concluded with this Purana which contains a description of the coronation of Rajarajeshvari. Devotees of the goddess take special pride in this fact.

The Puranas contain many hymns, hymns that include the one hundred and eight or the one thousand names of various deities. But the "Visnu Sahasranama" (The one thousand names of Visnu) and the "Siva-Sahasranama" (The one Thousand Names of Siva) are part of the Mahabharata. The "Pradosa-stotra" is in the Skanda Purana.

Upa-puranas and others

Apart from the 18 major Puranas there are an equal number of Upa-puranas. Among them are the Vinayaka Purana and the Kalki Purana. There are also, in addition, a number of minor Puranas. The Puranas that speak of the glory of various months such as the Tula Purana, the Magha Purana and the Vaisakha Purana are parts included into the 18 major Puranas or Upa-puranas. There are also what are called Sthala Puranas, some of them part of the Puranas mentioned above and some existing independently. The puranas that sing the glory of the Kaveri and the Ganga exist both separately and as part of the major Puranas or of the Upa-puranas. In the Tula Purana, for instance, the importance of the Kaveri is the theme. It mentions how auspicious it is to bathe in that river in the month of Tula (October-November).

If there are Puranas devoted to the deities there are also those dealing with devotees. The Tamil Periyapuranam tells the story of the 63 Saiva saints called Nayanmars. The same is available in the Sanskrit as Upamanyu Bhaktavilasa. Bhakta-Vijaya deals with poet-saints like Tukaram and Namadeva who were specially devoted to the deity Panduranga of Pandharpur.

Itihas and Puranans

For the learned and the unlettered alike in our country the Ramayana and the Mahabharata have for centuries been like their two eyes, pointing to them the path of dharma. The two poetic works are not included among the Puranas and are accorded a special place as "itihasas".

"Pura " means "in the past". That which gives an account of what happened in the past is a "Purana", even though it may contain predictions about the future also. The term can also mean what was composed in the past. The genre called "novel" written in prose came after a long period in literature dominated by poetry and drama. When the novel was introduced into India it came to be called "navinam". If "navinam" means new, purana means old.

A Purana must have five characteristic features - (laksanas). The first is "sarga" (creation of the cosmos); the second is "prati-sarga" (how eon after eon it expanded); the third is "vamsa" (the lineage of living creatures beginning with the children of brahma); the fourth is Manvantara (dealing with the ages of the 14 Manus, forefathers of mankind during the 1, 000 caturyugas); and the fifth is "vamsanucarita" (genealogy of rulers of the nation including the solar and lunar dynasties). Besides there are descriptions of the earth, the heavens the different worlds.

"Itihasam"="iti-ha-sam" (it has happened thus). The "ha" in the middle means "without doubt", "truly". So an itihasa means a true story, also a contemporary account. Valmiki composed the Ramayana during the lifetime of Rama. Vyasa, author of the Mahabharata, lived during the time of the five Pandavas and was witness to the events narrated by him in his epic.

In the Puranas Vyasa has dealt with the stories or events of the past which of course is in keeping with their name (that is " Puranas"). But how? Vyasa could see into the past as he could into the future. So what he has written of the past must be an eyewitness account. However, his contemporaries would not have known about them. The Mahabharata and Ramayana are different. When these works were first made known to the world most people must have been familiar with the characters and events described in them. There is thus no reason to doubt their authenticity. The "ha" in "itihasa" confirms this.

The word "itihasa" can also mean "thus speak they" (that is "great men say that it must be so").

"Aitihya" is not an account of what is directly witnessed: it is to be accepted as a matter of faith. It is also derived from "iti" (thus great men have spoken "). What we actually observe is "this"; what is told by others is "thus".

The Epics and their greatness

If the Puranas are described as constituting an Upanga of the Vedas, the itihisas(the epics) are so highly thought of as to be placed on an equal footing with the Vedas. The Mahabharata is indeed called the fifth Veda ("pancamo Vedah"). Of the Ramayana it is said: "As the Supreme Being, who is so exalted as to be known by the Vedas, was born the son of Dasaratha, the Vedas themselves took birth as the child of Valmiki [in the form of the Ramayana]. "

Vedavedye pare pumsi.

Jate Dasarathatmaje

Vedah Pracetasadasit

Saksadramayanatmana

(As the son of Pracetas Valmiki is called Pracetas.)

The stories of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata are in the blood of our people, so to speak. Today not many read these epics, but forty or fifty years ago it was not so. If our people were then known in the rest of the world for their truthfulness and moral character, the most important reason for it was that they were steeped in the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. In the old days Tamil rajas made gifts of land to learned men to give year-round discourses on the Mahabharata in the temples. Until thirty or forty years ago people gathered in their hundreds to listen to the pusari tell stories from the Mahabharata through song to the accompaniment of his drum udukku. For common folks then the pusari's performance was both "cinema" and "drama". Cinema and drama have their own ill effects but not the art of the pusari. By listening constantly to stories from the Mahabharata people remained guileless, respecting such virtues as truthfulness and morality. The esteem in which the Mahabharata was held in the Tamil country may be known from the fact that the temple of the village deity was called "Draupadai Amman koyil".

The bigger Puranas contain a number of independent stories, each highlighting a particular dharma. In the itihasa or epic it is one story from beginning to end. In between there are episodes but these resolve round the main story or theme. In the Puranas, as mentioned above, each story speaks of a particular dharma, while in the itihasa the main or central story seeks to illustrate all dharmas. For instance, "Hariscandra Upakhyaana" illustrates the dharma of truthfulness alone; the story of Sravana speaks of filial affection; that of Nalayani of a wife's chastity and uncompromising loyalty to her husband; the story of Rantideva speaks of self-sacrifice and utter compassion. But in the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, based on the life of Rama and the Pandavas respectively, all dharmas are illustrated through the example of the different characters portrayed in them.

Why differences among the Gods

Each Purana is in the main devoted to a particular devata. In the Siva Purana it is stated: "Siva is the Supreme Being. He is the highest authority for creation, sustenance and dissolution. It is at his behest, and under him, that Visnu functions as protector. Visnu is a mere bhogin, trapped in Maya. Siva is a yogin and jnana incarnate. Visnu is subject to Siva and worships him. Once when he opposed Siva he suffered humiliation at his hands". Stories are told to illustrate such assertions.

In the Vaisnava Puranas you see the reverse. They contain stories to support the view that Visnu is superior to Siva. "Is Siva a god, he who dwells in the burning grounds with spirits and goblins for company?" these Puranas ask.

In each Purana thus a particular deity is exalted over others. It may be Subrahmanya, Ganapati or Surya. Each such deity is declared to be the Supreme God and all others are said to worship him. When, out of pride, they refuse to worship him they are humbled.

Doubts arise in our minds about such contradictory accounts. "Which of these stories is true?" we are inclined to ask. "And which is false? They cannot all of them be true. If Siva worships Visnu, how does it stand to reason that Visnu should adore Siva? If Amba is superior to the Trimurti (Brahma, Visnu and Mahesvara), how is it right to say that she remains submissive to Parameswara as his devoted consort? The Puranas cannot all of them be true. Or are they all lies?"

Logical thinking seems to point to the conclusion that all Puranic stories cannot be true. But, as a matter of fact, they are. A deity that suffers defeat at one time at the hands of another emerges triumphant on another occasion. And a god who worships another deity is himself the object of worship at other times. How is this so and why?

The Paramatman is one and only one. He it is that creates, sustains and destroys. And it is he who exfoliates as the many different deities. Why does he do so? He has not cast people in the same mould. He has created them all differently, with different attitudes, the purpose being to make the affairs of the world interesting by imparting variety to them. The Paramatman himself assumes different forms to suit the temperament of different people so that each worship him in the form he likes and obtain happiness. This is the reason why the one and only Paramatman manifests himself as so many different deities.

Everybody must have firm faith in, and devotion for, his chosen deity. He must learn to believe that this deity of his is the Paramatman, that there is no power higher. That is the reason why each manifestation or form of the Supreme Godhead reveals itself to be higher than other forms or manifestations. It is thus that these other forms are shown to have worshipped it or suffered defeat at its hands. Altogether it means that each deity worships other deities and is in turn worshipped by others. Also each god suffers defeat at the hands of other gods and, at the same time, inflicts defeat on them.

Puraanaa-s
By His Holiness Sri Kanchi Paramaachaaryal

In the Saiva Puranas all those aspects that proclaim the glory of Siva are brought together. Similarly, in the case of the Vaisnava Puranas that deal with Visnu. Amba, Subrahmanya and other deities are each of them dealt with in such a way as to show him or her to be the highest among the devatas.

The purpose of exalting a particular deity over the another is not to depreciate the latter. The underlying idea is that a person who worships his chosen god has unflinching faith in him and becomes totally devoted to him. Such exclusive devotion is called "ananya bhakti". The idea here, however, is not to regard other devatas as inferior to one's own chosen deity- an example of "nahi ninda nyaya".

Those who are capable of looking upon all deities as the manifestations of the one and only Paramatman have no cause for exclusive devotion to any one of them. It is only when we think that one deity is separate from- or alien to- another that the question arises of giving up one for another. If we realise that all are the different disguises of the One Reality, the various gods and goddesses portrayed in the Puranas, with all the differences among them, will be understood to be nothing but the lila or sport of Supreme Being. It is the One alone that seems divided into manifold entities. This is to help men of various attitudes and temperaments. If this truth is recognised we shall be able to see the stories in the Puranas- stories that seem contradictory- in the true light.

In the story of Banasura we see that Siva is vanquished by Krsna. But in the story of Tiruvannamalai, Visnu meets with failure in finding the feet of Siva. Both stories must be treated as truthful. The first is to make devotees of Krsna worship him as the Paramatman and the second to make devotees of Siva adore him similarly. Although we think that one is winner and the other the loser or that the one is superior to the other or inferior to him, the two know themselves to be one. Does one triumph over oneself- or does one inflict defeat upon oneself? So all this is play. The Parmatman indulges in sport assuming multifarious forms.

The purpose of the Puranas is to show people the right path. Pativratiya is a virtue that is of the utmost importance. Amba herself exemplifies it. The Parasakti, the Supreme Power that she is, remains subject to her husband. Faith and devotion must grow in the world and for it the Lord himself must show the way. This is why in some temples Visnu is represented as a worshipper of Siva and in some other shrines Siva is seen as a devotee of Visnu. The same with other deities. I have spoken more about Siva and Visnu since Saivism and Vaisnavism are the two major divisions.

To sum up, if a deity is glorified in the Puranas, and stories told in support of it, it is to create exclusive devotion to him as the Paramatman. And, if any god is portrayed as inferior to another, the true purpose of it is not to denigrate him but to develop unflinching faith in the latter.

The One as Many

As already emphasised, the one and only Paramatman is revealed as so many different deities. If one person develops a great liking for a certain deity, another chooses to have a liking for some other. To make a man a confirmed devotee of the form in which he likes to adore the Lord, the Paramatman on occasion diminishes himself in his other forms.

Tirukandiyur is in Tanjavur district, Tamil Nadu. In the temple here Siva is seen to be a lesser god than Visnu. He once plucked off one of Brahma's heads, became thus the victim of a curse and was freed from it through the grace of Visnu. In the same district is Tiruvizhimalai where it is Visnu who is seen to be a lesser god than Siva. Reciting the "Siva-Sahasranama"(The One Thousand Names of Siva), Visnu offers lotuses at the feet of Siva. When he is nearing the end of his worship he finds that he is short of one lotus. What does he do now? Visnu, the lotus-eyed, digs out one of his own eyes and offers it at the feet of Siva. The latter is pleased and gives him the cakra or discus. Siva is called here "Netrarpanesvara"(Siva to whom an eye has been offered); at Tiruakandiyur Visnu is "Hara-sapa-vimocana"(one who freed Siva from a curse). When we listen to the story of Tirukandiyur we learn that Visnu is a god of great compassion who frees his devotees from the most terrible of curses. Similarly, from the Tiruvizhimalai story we realise that no sacrifice is too great for a devotee- Visnu offers one of his own eyes to the god he worships, that is Siva. The question here is not who is the greater of the two, Siva or Visnu.

In the old days we used to have the lanterns in our homes. There were lanterns with glass on all the four sides- or three sides. Let us take the latter type. The wick inside the glass is lighted. The three sides made of glass are painted in three different colours [or only two sides are painted]. The light burning inside will be seen to be a different colour from each side. We may take these three sides to represent creation, protection and dissolution, the three functions performed by the Paramatman. It is the one Light that is responsible for all the three, like the wick burning inside the lamp with the three sides.

One side of the lantern, let us assume, is painted red. It symbolises creation. If we remove red from the pure light of the spectrum, the other six colours also will be separated. This is what is meant by the one becoming the many of creation. Brahma, the Creator, is said to be red in colour. Another side of the lantern is painted blue. The first and last colours of the spectrum are violet and red. The beginning is red (or infrared) and the end violet (or ultraviolet). Mahavisnu, during the very act of sustaining all creation, demonstrates through jnana that this world is not the whole self-fulfilling truth but the disguise of the Paramatman, his sport. In the fire of jnana the cosmos is charred. This is the state in which an object, without being entirely disintegrated, retains its form but loses its colour: it is like a lump of charcoal. Such an entity as the world still exists, but its own quality, Maya, is burned out and is suffused with Visnu- "Sarvam Vishnumayam jagat". In Tamil Visnu is called "Kariyan, Nilameniyan"(one who is like charcoal, one whose body is

blue). Blue, black and violet are more or less similar colours. The light coming from the blue side of the lantern is Visnu.

The third side of the lamp is not painted. We saw that when all is burnt in jnana the residue is a lump of charcoal. But if this charcoal is burned further the ultimate product is ash. It has no form and is just powder or dust. Now the colour also changes from black to white. White is the colour close to pure light. All the colours are inherent in that light, which means all the cosmic functions and activities emanating from the Paramatman are made extinct, are burned out. Now the Paramatman alone remains. That is the ashes remain when everything is burnt out- that is what lasts in the end. It is indeed Paramesvara otherwise called Mahabhasma. Samhara, destruction, may seem a cruel function. But what Siva does, though seemingly cruel, is truly an act of compassion because he goes beyond destruction to unite us with the Truth. When Visnu sportingly bestows jnana on us the cosmos seems like a lump of charcoal. "Sarvam Vishnumayam jagat, "we say. But now all the sport has ended and we have come to the state of supreme jnana: there is neither "sarvam"nor "jagat". Now it is all "Sivamayam". It is the one lamp that is the light of the Brahman. When it is seen through the red side of the lantern it becomes Brahma; through the blue side it is Visnu; and through the unpainted side it is Siva.

Our great men have in the past sung of the One manifesting as three("Oruware muvuruvay"). There were great poets in our country who were not interested in propagating any philosophy or any system of thought- they were men possessing a broad outlook and an open mind who expressed their views freely. These poets have said that it is the same entity that is manifested as the Trimurthi(Brahma, Visnu and Mahesvara) and indeed as the 33 crore devatas. Bana says that the same Object becomes three to perform three functions, "sarga-sthiti-nasa-hetave". Kalidasa clearly states, "Ekaiva murtirbibhide tridha sa" (The Paramatman is One; it is this One that divides itself into three for the three different functions).

If we were divided into two schools, the one insisting that the Saiva Puranas alone are authoritative among the Puranas and the other claiming that only the Vaisnava Puranas are to be relied upon, we would keep quarelling without ever being able to take a clear and dispassionate view of things. "The Truth is One. The wise speak of it by different names". There is no greater authority for us than this Vedic pronouncement. So all of us, without making any distinction between the Saiva and Vaisnaiva systems, must listen to the stories of all deities and be rewarded with freedom from worldly existence.

Tiruvisanallur Ayyaval was a great man. His real name was Sridhara Venkateswara. But out of respect people referred to him as "Tiruvisanallur Ayyaval". He lived some three hundred years ago and was the senior contemporary of Bhagavannama Bodhendra. Bodhendra propagated devotion to Rama and Govinda, that is he taught people to sing these names of the Lord. At the same time Ayyaval spread the glory of Siva by singing his names. Neither of the two respected any distinction between Siva and Visnu. So the two of them jointly propagated the "nama siddhanta" in the Tiruvisanallur. They had respect and affection for one another and established the doctrine that in the age of Kali

repeating the names of the Lord[nama japa] is the sovereign remedy for all ills. Whenever a bhajana is held obeisance is paid to these two (first Bodhendra and then Ayyaval) before singing the praises of the deities.

During a sraddha ceremony Ayyaval fed an untouchable. The village headman gave the ruling that he had to bathe in the Ganga in expiation. Ayyaval made the sacred river rise in the well in the backyard of his house. This story is well known. The incident took place on the new moon of the month of Karttigai (November-December). Even today devotees in large numbers bathe in the water of this well in the belief that it is as good as taking a dip in the holy Ganga.

Ayyaval gives his own account of how Sri Rama broke the bow of Siva. "Svakara pratipadita svacapah, "this is how he put it. That is Rama broke his bow with his own hands. The story usually told is that the bow of Siva was cracked by Narayana and that later Narayana who descended to earth as Rama broke it completely. Ayyaval does not like the idea of Siva being represented as inferior to Rama. He does not make any distinction between Siva and Visnu and believes that Siva is Visnu and Visnu is Rama (so Siva and Rama are the same). Logically, in his view, the bow of Siva is the bow of Rama. That is why he says Rama broke his own bow with his hands. All such acts are needed for his sport, he declares.

Many Paths to one Goal

The Azhvans sing the glory of Visnu and the Nayanmars of Siva. In the Vedas all deities are hymned in the same way. The Upanishads do not speak much about deities; they are concerned with truths of the Self. Tiruvalluvar speaks about God and philosophical matters and his views are in keeping with the Vedic tradition. But the emphasis in his work is on morals and ethics. As for Tirumular, he does not deal so much with God, devotion, etc, as he does with aspects of yoga like pranayama, dhyana, dharana and samadhi. "Each great man, like each great work, speaks about a particular system, a particular path. Which of these is to be followed? " such a question arises in the minds of people. Whatever system or path you follow, follow it with faith. Do not give it up midway. In the end it will lead you to the Paramatman. In the beginning the paths may seem different but all of them take you to the same goal.

Devar kuralum Tirunanmarai mudivum

Muvar Tamizhum munimozhiyum--Kovai

Tiruvacakamum Tirumular sollum

Oruvacakam en(ru)unar.

The same idea is expressed in the "Sivamahimna-stotra". This hymn glorifying Siva is by Pushpadanta. He was a gandharva who, under a curse of Isvara, was condemned to live on earth. One stanza in his hymn says: "Trayi(the three Vedas), Sankhya(philosophical inquiry), yoga, the Pasupata system, Vaisnavism- people follow any of them according to their different dispositions. Like the rivers merging in the ocean all these paths have one meeting point, the Paramatman. "

It is this spirit of catholicism that Englishmen exclaim: "Jevhovah, Jove or Lord!". Jehovah is the Semitic God of the region of Israel, the home of the Bible. Jove is another name of Jupiter. The word "Lord" applies to the God of any faith; it is common to all religions. Realised people in the West also speak that the one Being is the same, call him by any name you like.

If the Puranas are read in an attitude of respect and humility and with the honest intention that we should benefit by reading them, there will be no cause for any confusion. We will gain the wisdom to treat them as works meant for our ultimate well-being.

Who taught the Puranas?

In the Puranas themselves it is mentioned that they were narrated by Siva to Parvati or to Visnu. It is also said that Visnu taught them to Narada or some other sage. Thus the stories told by the gods were later passed on from one sage to another sage or to a king. In the end of Puranas were narrated by Vyasa to Suta, and by Suta to the sages in Naimisaranya.

It was from a high seat offered by the sages of Naimisaranya that Suta taught the Puranas. We may gather from this the esteem in which the Puranas were held. Also that knowledge was respected more than birth. We also realise that caste was no consideration when it came to learning noble subjects. The learned man, whatever his caste, was listened to with respect.

They Speak like a friend

There are three ways in which a good task may be accomplished. The first is by issuing an order or a command backed by the authority of the government. This is called "prabhusammitta". A rich or powerful man orders his servant to do some work: it is also "prabhusammitta". Whether or not the servant likes the work, he is compelled to obey the order for fear of punishment. Without occupying any seat of authority a friend asks us to do something and we do it- not out of fear but out of affection. A friend who is well disposed towards us is a "suhrd". His order given as a companion, as a sakha, is "suhrd-sammitta". If there is any means by which you will do a work more willingly than in this

manner, it is the loving words of your wife. The job your employer asks you to do is felt to be a burden, but the same is made lighter if it is a friend who asks you to do it. But if it is the wife who asks you to do the same it will be still lighter. This is "kantasammita".

The injunctions of the Vedas are "prabhusammita", the teachings of the Puranas are "suhrd-sammita" and the works of poets are "kantasammita".

Yadvedat prabhusammitadadhigatam

sabdapramanacchiram

Yaccharthapraavanat-Puranavacanadistam

suhrdsammitad

Kantasammitaya yaya sarasatamapadya-

kavyasriya

Kartavye kutuki budho viracitas-tasyai

sprham kurmahe

-Prataparudriyam, stanza 8

The Vedas ask you to "do like this" or "do like that". They do not say why. To question them, it is believed, is to dishonour them. The Puranas, however, tell you in a friendly manner: "If you do like this you will benefit in such and such a manner. If you do the same in some other way you will suffer. . . "Such lessons are driven home to people through stories. Yes, the special feature of the Puranas is that they not only tell you why you should do a work, they also state the reason for the same through absorbing stories. "Hariscandra acted like this. Nala did like that. That is why they were happy in the end though they had in between to suffer much. Besides, they earned such fame for their virtuous life and noble character that they will be remembered for all time. "The moral derived from the stories of Hiranyakasipu, Ravana, Duryodhana and so on are the opposite. They occupied high positions and wallowed in pleasure but in the end they were ruined and are remembered today for their wickedness and the evil they did. Such stories are a source of inspiration as well as a warning for us: they encourage us to do good and pull us back from evil. The Puranas tell us true stories. A suhrd, a sincere friend, will not tell us false tales. He will speak to us only the truth and what is good for us in a persuasive manner.

What about poetry? What does the poet do? He mixes fact with fancy and invents stories with his power of imagination, exaggerating one thing, playing down another and repeating a third. He has the licence to do all this. The function of the poet is to invest reality with the imaginary or the fanciful so as to make his narrative compelling. The

friend is unlike the wife. In trying to impress upon you your duty, he is persuasive but does not go beyond stating the facts. The wife is different. She is anxious to correct her husband and take him to the right path. She exaggerates a fact or plays down another, she adds and subtracts. By being "nice" to her husband she will somehow make him do the right thing. So goes at least the legend. Poetry, in the place of the wife; the Vedas, in the place of superior authority; and the Puranas, in between, in the place of a friend: the three teach us dharma in different ways.

Puranic discourses and films

In the days gone by Mother would rise with birdsong and go about her household chores. As she sprinkled the house and surroundings with cowdung water, as she decorated the courtyard with kolam and as she churned the curds, she recited tales from the Puranas. Children got to know such stories by listening to their mother or grandmother. A deep impression is made on their youthful minds by listening to narratives that contain lessons in dharma, stories told with such art that the characters come to life. When the boys and girls grow up they add to their knowledge of the Puranas by reading or by listening to the pauranikas.

Today all such good practices are forgotten. From childhood itself people become addicted to film songs, politics, fiction, newspapers. It is true that puranic themes are enacted on the stage or portrayed on the screen and may be some people benefit a little. But it is doubtful whether they will have the right kind of knowledge of the Puranas from them. More often than not the impact made by puranic films is unhealthy since the producers usually attempt to make them as spicy or as exciting as possible with the addition of undesirable features for, after all, the purpose of making movies is popular entertainment, not providing moral or spiritual instruction. Cinema does not come under the category of kanta-sammitta because the producers or directors abuse their licence, so much so that the original story is changed in an objectionable manner.

Those who frequently go to see a film or a dramatic performance become more interested in the qualities of the actors and actresses than in those of the characters of the stories itself.

You must listen to puranic discourses given by great men of virtuous conduct who are also steeped in the qualities of the high-souled characters whose stories they tell. Only then would you be drawn to the virtues exemplified by these characters and to the dharma practised by them. To listen to discourses given by pauranikas who are after money and fame and who do not practise the dharma that they ostensibly uphold is no better than seeing a drama or a movie. Dramatic (and cinematic) performances are likely to do good if they are based on the principles of drama enunciated in our canonical texts. For instance, only a couple married in real life can performance the roles of the a hero and a

heroine [husband and wife] in a play. The sastras have also restrictions with regard to the enactment of erotic scenes [portrayal of srngara].

Nowadays puranic and other religious discourses are held almost every day in the towns and cities. I myself am amazed to see so many listed in the engagement columns of newspapers. Talks are given on religious themes, on stories, on the Puranas, in fact subjects I myself am not familiar with. People flock to them, educated people who may be said to be "modern" or "sophisticated". It seems as if there is a religious awakening.

But a point to consider is how far discourses given by pauranikas are in good taste. Adding a few stories on their own to the main theme is all right so as to enhance audience interest. Similarly, a little bit of humour and brief references to politics also seem to be not altogether improper. But these should not be far removed from the main story, the main theme, and must be without prejudice to the truths to be driven home to the listeners. Otherwise the whole exercise will be in bad taste ("rasabhasa"). That which calls the Lord to mind is "rasa", a true flavour. The puranic stories must be told without straying too far from the text and a healthy impression must be made on the minds of the audience. The narrator must have faith in Isvara, must adhere to traditional customs and must firmly believe in dharma and in the principles he himself expounds in the course of his discourse. If he has profound knowledge of the subject of his talk he will not be tempted to depart from the main theme to tell irrelevant stories or make tangential references to current happenings. Puranic discourses will serve no purpose if they are treated as a pastime like films and fictions.

In the villages and the smaller towns not so many discourses and bhajans are held as in the cities and bigger towns. It is in places where more and more people have taken to the modern style of living (and perhaps as a reaction to it according to the Newtonian law) that you see a growth of interest in subjects related to our religious and cultural traditions. Religious or puranic discourses must be held in every village, also bhajans, at least on every Ekadasi

Sthala Puranas

Even those who respect the Puranas are not prepared to accept that the Sthala Puranas, that is the short Puranas pertaining to particular places, are authentic. If educated people think the [major] Puranas to be nothing but lies, they go so far as to treat the Sthala Puranas as nothing better than rubbish. "It was here that Indra was freed from his curse. . . " "It was here that Agasthya witnessed the marriage of Siva and Parvati ". Such statements give rise to scepticism about the Sthala Puranas. "How are such things possible? " they ask. " These Puranas must have been made up. They must have originated in the desire of some individuals to give a certain importance to places to which they belong. "

People with faith who are acquainted with our traditions will tell you; "Kalpa after kalpa, the same stories are repeated, but sometimes with slight differences. Astory associated with one place in one kalpa may recur in another place in a different kalpa. "

It is natural for people to take pride in claiming that their birthplace is associated with the great men mentioned in the Puranas. This is a fact that all of us must recognise. Ordinary unlettered folk like to believe that Rama or Krsna had once visited their village, also great sages, and that they were freed from terrible sins. Encouraged by such belief they conduct the festivals of the local temples with great enthusiasm and are rewarded with faith and devotion. We should view this attitude with sympathy and understanding. Why should we who claim to be "intelligent" disturb the faith of these people of innocence and deprive them of their sense of fulfillment? The Lord himself says in the Gita that in such matters you must not produce some information as "fact" and create agitation in the minds of ordinary people. "Na buddhibhedam janayed ajananam karmasanginam. "

By this you should not take it that I am one with the critics who hold that the Sthala Puranas are not true, nor should you think that I accept them [these Puranas] only for the reason that, notwithstanding the fact that they are not true, they do some good to the people. I believe that the Sthala Puranas are by and large authentic. Some of the stories told in them may not be so, but for that reason I would not maintain that all Sthala Puranas are false.

The Authencity of Sthala Puranas

We ought to have implicit faith in the Vedas, so too in the statements made in the Tamil Vedas of Saivas and Vaisnavas- the Tevaram and the Divyaprabandham. There are places whose glory has been sung in the Tevaram of the Nayanmars and in the pasurams of the Azhvars. These songs allude to what is said about such places in the Sthala Puranas. That there are such references in these Tamil devotional works, which are 1, 500 years old, is proof of the antiquity of these Puranas.

For instance, take the Perumal of the Srirangam temple (Tamil Nadu). The idol is unique in the sense that it faces south. There is an explanation for this in the Sthala Purana pertaining to the temple. When Vibhisana was returning to Lanka after attending the coronation of Sri Ramacandra, Rama gave him the idol of Ranganatha that he himself had been worshipping. On his way the idol somehow got installed on the island skirted by the two arms of the Kaveri. Vibhisana was sad that he could not take it with him to his capital Lankapuri. So, out of compassion for him, Sri Ranganatha lay facing south. This incident is described in detail in the Sthala Purana of Srirangam. It is also mentioned in the songs of the Azhvars.

If the reason for Vishnu facing south in Srirangam was known during the time of the Azhvars, the Sthala Purana of that place must surely predate the work of these Vaisnava saint-poets.

Puraanaa-s
By His Holiness Sri Kanchi Paramaachaaryal

The linga in the Ekamranatha temple in Kancipuram was shaped by Amba herself. At the time she was worshipping it the Lord created a flood, but she kept embracing the linga and it was thus saved from being carried away in the flood. The Lord then appeared from the linga. This Sthala Purana episode is told in the Tevaram also. Sundaramurtisvamin's poems sing the glory of Amba performing puja here.

In Jambukesvaram (Tiruvanaikka), near Srirangam, a great sage called Jambu was transformed into a jambu tree. Siva enshrined himself under it in his linga form. There a spider wove a canopy of web over the linga and worshipped the Lord. An elephant destroyed this canopy and performed abhiseka to the linga. The spider, naturally enraged, crept into the elephant's trunk, ascended up and bore into its head. The animal then dashed against the jambu tree and it was killed along with the spider. The spider was reborn as KoccenkotCola who built the Jambukesvaram temple. This story occurs in the Sthala Purana- and it is referred to in the Tevaram also. In the sanctum sanctorum of the temple, the Kaveri wells up all the time. This wonderful phenomenon is mentioned in the Tevaram of Appar and in the Pattupattu.

At midday, in Tirukkazhukunram, two eagles descend on the hill and receive sweet rice offered by the temple priest. After consuming the rice the birds fly away. Some people have doubts about the antiquity of this phenomenon. From the time of the Tevaram itself the place is known as (Tiru)kzhukkunram. What better evidence is needed?

In Tiruvidaimarudur (in Tanjavur district) bathing on the occasion of Taippusam is specially auspicious according to the Ksetra-mahatmyam. Appar and Sambandhar have spoken about the festival in their songs dating back to 1, 500 years ago.

Srirangam, Jambukesvaram, Kancipuram, Tirukkazhukunram and Tiruvidaimarudur are great holy places. So it may be argued, there is nothing remarkable about their being mentioned in the old Tamil texts. But it is noteworthy that puranic stories associated even with smaller places are referred to in old Tamil religious works.

The Sthala Puranas have it that in certain places that are not so famous sages and celestials appeared as bees to worship the deities there. Even today we see huge honeycombs before the sanctum itself. One such place is Nannilam. It is also called "Madhuvanam". Sittambur, near Tirutturaippundi, is called Tiruccirremam in the Tevaram. Here too there is a honeycomb before the sanctum. The story goes that siddhas come here as honeybees to worship the Lord. Puja is performed to the honeycomb also everyday. Similarly, there is a honeycomb in the Vaisnava temple of Tirukkannamangai. There are references to such places in both the Tevaram and the Divyaprabandham.

The antiquity and authenticity of the Sthala Puranas are supported by such stories (stories relating even to minor incidents associated with not so big places) occurring in the Tevaram, Tiruvacakam and the Nalayira-Divyaprabandham.

Interconnected stories

The events described in one Sthala Purana are linked to those mentioned in another. Thus the strand of the same story is taken through a number of Puranas. We have to read them together to learn the entire story. That one Sthala Purana begins where another ends is one proof of their authenticity. Another proof that could be adduced is that it is these Sthala Puranas that fill the gaps in the 18 main Puranas and Upa-puranas.

Once Siva and Amba(Parvati) played dice in Kailasa. "I have won the game, " said Amba. "No, I am the winner, " said Siva. The two played thus to impart lessons in dharma to mankind. If now their game of dice ended in a quarrel it was because the divine couple wanted the world to learn that playing for stakes was an evil, that it leads to disputes and misconduct.

To resume the story. In his anger Siva cursed Amba thus: "You shall be born a cow and shall keep roaming the earth. " Siva is Pasupati, lord of animals. Yes, he is the Lord that controls the animal senses(the indriyas) that are in a frenzy. It is to demonstrate that he does not bless people with a big ego that he cursed even Parasakti(the Supreme Power). Though she is Mahasakti herself she realised her error and, the great pativrata that she is, she became submissive to her husband. She roamed the earth as an ordinary cow.

In her One Thousand Names ("Sahasranama") Amba is extolled as "Gomata, Guhajanmabhu. " She came to the earth as Gomata(Mother Cow).

Visnu is Amba's brother, is he not? He is very much attached to her and, as soon he knew that his brother-in-law(Siva) had "driven her out", he thought to himself:"Let him not protect her, lord of animals though he be. I will have my sister under my protection. " So taking the guise of a cowherd he accompanied the divine cow. He was not the victim of any curse that he should roam the earth thus. It was to demonstrate to the world the dharma of filial affection that he came down to the world of mortals with her. (He developed a liking for the job of the cowherd now. That is how he took delight in grazing cows in his incarnation as Krsna. He then came to be called Gopala which name also means "Pasupati". If you reflect on these two names of Siva and Visnu you will cease to make any distinction between the two gods.)

Tiru-Azhundur is the place to which sister and brother came as cow and cowherd. It is the same as "Terazhundur". It also happens to be the birthplace of Kambar and in fact there is a locality here called "Kambarmedu". Tirumangai Azhvar performed the "mangala sasanam" in a temple here. Visnu is in the sanctum sanctorum as Gopala with the cow. Since he came as a companion of the cow he is called "Gosakha". "Gosakhaksetra" is another name for Terazhundur. "Gosakha" in Tamil is "Amaruviyappan", the initial "a" in the name meaning cow. There is a temple to Siva also here. According to our ancient system of town-planning there must be a temple to Siva at one end of a village or town and one to Visnu at the other. If the Visnu temple at Terazhundur is associated with the

Puraanaa-s
By His Holiness Sri Kanchi Paramaachaaryal

songs of the Azhvans the Siva temple is associated with the Tevaram hymns of Jnanasambandar. The places sung by the Azhvans are said to have had "mangalasanam", while any place associated with the Tevaram is called "patal perrasthalam" [place that has been sung]. Many places in the South have had both types of distinction. Terazhundur is one of them. Near it is a village called Pillur where Visnu, as the cowherd grazed the cow that was Amba. ("Pillur" means a place where grass grows, pil meaning grass. In the Tanjavur region pul is known as pil.) Mekkirimangalam also is one of the places where Visnu grazed the cow and An-angur another(an=cow).

For brother and sister to worship Siva, Visnu installed Vedapurisvara(Siva) in Gosakhaksetra. (Both the Vedapurisvara and Amaruviyappan temples are today under the same management.)

The cow as well as the Brahmin is essential to the practice of Vedic dharma. Milk and ghee are indispensable to sacrifices, while without the Brahmin the sacrifices cannot be performed. This fact is underlined in the prayer, "Gobrahmanebhyo subhamastu nityam" [May cow and Brahmin ever prosper].

The one (that is Siva) who had cast a curse on Amba came as Vedapurisvara to the same place where Amba had also come. Until recently there were many Brahmins in this place learned in the Vedas and sastras. Sambandar often refers to them as "Azhundai Maraiyor"(Vedic scholars of Azhundur). The Azhvans call Visnu by these names: "Chandoga", "Pazhiya", "Taittiriya", "Samavediyane".

One day, when the cow (that is Amba) was grazing, her hoof dug into the earth and a stone was revealed. It proved to be a Siva linga. The cow, thinking that she had committed an offence against Siva, ran about in bewilderment. Visnu pacified her and brought her back. The place where this incident occurred is "Tirukkulambiyam". Visnu was pained by all these developments and regretted that his sister had shown herself to be egoistic, albeit playfully, and that this fact had led to such unfortunate consequences.

It was Visnu who had married Minaksi to Sundaresvara. Wishing to unite them again he now performed puja to propitiate Siva. The latter was pleased and he said to Visnu: "Keep grazing the cow until you come to the river Kaveri. Bathe her in the river and she will be restored to her original form. I shall tell you later when I will marry her. "

Visnu, as bidden by Siva, bathed the cow in the Kaveri. The place where the cow was seen after she had bathed in the river is "Tiruvaduturai". (It is also important for the reason that it was here that Tirumalar composed his Tirumantiram.)

Amba was restored to her original form and Siva himself appeared on the scene. But he wanted to play a game again. There is a place called Kurralam. (It is not the same as the Kurralam in Tirunelveli district that is famous for its waterfall. This Kurralam is near Mayuram in Tanjavur district. It was once called Tirutturutti. This is one of the 44 places which Appar, Sambandar and Sundaramurti have sung.) A sage was performing austerities here for Amba herself to be born as his daughter. Siva thought that this was the

Puraanaa-s
By His Holiness Sri Kanchi Paramaachaaryal

opportune moment to grant his wish. He said to Amba: "Go and be born the daughter of the sage at Tirutturutti. I will come and marry you at the appropriate time. "

Siva made his appearance as promised. There is proof for the fact that the one who gave his word at Gosakhaksetra appeared here also in that in this place too the deity is called Vedesvara. The sage and Visnu- the latter had been waiting for the day his sister would be married again to Siva- received Siva and took him to the place of marriage. The spot where Siva was received came to be called "Etirkolpadi". The "vrata" before the marriage was performed by Siva in a nearby place which later came to be called "Velvikkudi". The spot where he saw Amba as the bride and performed the palika ceremony is called "Kurumulaippali". The marriage pandal was spread over two or three villages. The one in the middle came to be called "Tirumananjeri". It was here that Visnu married Parvati to Paramesvara and it was an occasion of great joy for him.

From this account you will realise how wrong it is to dismiss Sthala Puranas as of no significance. The present story contains a warning against the evil consequences of ahamkara and gambling and tells us how a wife should be dutiful towards her husband and how a brother should be affectionate towards, and concerned about, his sister. Actually I did not tell the story with this idea in mind. I wished to demonstrate how a number of Sthala Puranas fit into one another, how the incidents narrated in different Sthala Puranas are woven together- those of Terazhundur, Pillur, Anangur, Tirukkulambiyam, Tiruvaduturai, Kurralam, Etirkolpadi, Velvikkudi, Kurmulaippali and Tirumananjeri. The interconnected narrative also shows that the story must be authentic.

A story with which people of Tanjavur should be more familiar links Kumbakonam with places in its neighbourhood.

During the great deluge Brahma prepared himself for the next creation. He put all the seeds in amrta(the elixer of immortality) and kept them together in a mudpot to the chanting of Vedic mantras. With due ceremony, he placed a coconut with mango leaves on it and invested the same with the sacred thread. Now he placed the pot on the summit of Meru. When it came floating in the waters of the deluge, Paramesvara wished to recommence creation. Then the coconut on the pot was dislodged in the storm and fell into the water. At once the water receded revealing the land there. This spot is four miles north-west of Kumbhakonam. The deity here is even today called "Narikelesvara", ("narikela" means coconut). Then the mango leaves fell off. The water receded there too revealing land. This is Tiruppurambayam, four miles north-west of Kumbhakonam. "Payam" [or bayam] is "payas", that is water, but in this context deluge. "Puram" means outside or beyond something: the name of the place [Tiruppurambayam] thus means "outside the waters of the deluge". Now the sacred thread(sutra) also got loosened from the pot and fell off. The deity in the place where the sutra fell is "Sutranatha", "sutra" meaning the "sacred thread".

The kumbha(pot) had a "nose" in addition to a "mouth"- it was like a gindi or kamandalu. My pot too has a nose in addition to its mouth. Water is filled in the pot through the mouth and poured out through the nose. The pot with the amrta was also similiar.

Puraanaa-s
By His Holiness Sri Kanchi Paramaachaaryal

Paramesvara watched the scene. Since the pot with the elixer and the seeds in it were not overturned on their own, he decided to break it with his arrow so as to bring out its contents. The place where he discharged the arrow is called "Banapuri"- now it is known as "Vanatturai". The deity here is "Banapurisvara" and the spot where the mouth of the pot fell in pieces is "Kudavayil"("Kudavasal"). Paramesvara wanted the amrta to be discharged in the sastric manner, from the nose of the pot. The place where the nose broke and the elixer or ambrosia fell is holier than other places. It is called "Kumbhakonam", "kon"("konam") meaning nose. In the Tevaram the place is referred to as "Kudamukku". Here the mudpot itself came to be the linga and even today it is so. The linga is ceremonially bathed along with a protective wear outside. "Kumbhesvara" is the name of the deity. The Mahamagham pond is the spot where the amrta first fell.

Since the place is hallowed by the fact that it was here that the amrta fell, the Vaisnava deity here, Sarngapani, is called "Ara-amudan" by the Azhvars. To Vaisnavas Kumbhakonam itself is "Kudandai".

Thus there are many sacred places that are interconnected, which fact also confirms that the Sthala Puranas are authentic. Tiruvazhundur, Kumbhakonam, etc, are situated within a radius of four miles. There will be further confirmation of the authenticity of these Puranas if we note how the places mentioned in them and which are far apart are connected together. Ramesvaram, Vedaranyam and Pattisvaram are not near one another. Ramesvaram, in Ramanathapuram district, is on the seacoast. Vedaranyam is in a corner of Tanjavur district and is also on the seashore in the taluqa of Tirutturaipundi. In the same district, but by no means close by, is Pattisvaram which is near Kumbhakonam. These places which are far apart are connected by the same thread of a story. Would you call such a story baseless?

In all these three places there are great Siva temples and the name of the deity in each is "Ramalinga", suggesting that they are connected with Rama. That he installed lingas in these places strengthens the concept of Saiva-Vaisnava unity. These places have some other special features too. Of the four great religious centres, known as "car-dham", Ramesvaram alone is in the South. In the North is Badrinath(a), in the west Somanath(a), in the east (Puri)Jagannath(a) and, of course, Ramesvaram in the south.

Vedaranyam is associated with the salt sathyagraha during the freedom movement. The place is mentioned in the Tevaram as "Tirumaraikka"(Tamil for Vedaranyam). Here the temple door was closed after the Vedas had worshipped the deity Siva. Appar sang his patigam here and the door flung open. Tirujnanasambandhar made the door shut again when he sang before the deity.

Pattisvaram is the place where Siva was worshipped by Patti, one of the four daughters of Kamadhenu. Like Tiruvaduturai mentioned before there are many places where the cow has performed worship. Tiru-Amattur is near Panrutti. It is connected with Appar. Here too the cow has performed puja. Pattisvaram is a similiar place. When Jnanasambandhar was a child he sang the praises of Siva and went dancing before the deity in the hot sun. The Lord was moved by the sight and ordered his attendants to build a pandal to protect

his devotee from the sun. Jnanasambandhar was an incarnation of Subrahmanya. Govinda Dikshita was a minister to the Nayaka kings of Tanjavur. He was very much drawn to Pattisvaram and made additions to the temple there. Images of Dikshita and his wife may be seen before the sanctum of Amba.

Where did Agastya witness the marriage of Siva and Parvati? Three places are mentioned, that is three places are associated with the same event. As mentioned before, the Ramalinga was installed in three places, but in each place a different reason.

Rama committed a threefold sin by slaying Ravana. Ravana, the son of the sage Visravas, was a Brahmin. By killing him Rama incurred the sin of "Brahmahatya". To wipe away the same he installed the linga at Ramesvaram.

Some people today describe the war between Rama and Ravana as a quarrel between Aryans and Dravidians. Such a view is totally baseless and there is no better proof of this than the fact that Ravana was a Brahmin. If the Ramayana is a lie so must be the battle between Rama and Ravana. It cannot be claimed that there is a historical basis for this battle alone. If the Ramayana is accepted as true the account of Ravana contained in it must also be taken to be so. It is said again and again in the epic that Ravana was the son of a sage, that he was conversant with the Vedas, that he pleased Siva by chanting the Samaveda and that it was for this reason that he was saved from being crushed under Kailasa. It does not stand to reason to accept only that part of the Ramayana which suits you and reject the rest.

Leave aside the Ramayana and what it says about Ravana: the temple of Ramesvaram is there for all of us to see. It has the biggest corridor in the world ("prakara", ambulatory). All India worships Ramanathasvamin in the form of the linga Rama installed for the removal of the sin he had incurred by killing the Brahmin Ravana. For centuries our forefathers in Tamil Nadu never thought of Ravana as belonging to a caste other than that of Brahmins.

Apart from being a Brahmin, Ravana was also a great warrior. All the worlds trembled before him. He fought successfully all the powerful rulers of the time except two- Kartaviryarjuna and Vali. By killing such a warrior Rama committed the sin of "virahatya". It was in expiation of it that he installed the linga(Ramalinga) at Vedaranyam.

In addition to the qualifications already mentioned, Ravana had another; he was an ardent devotee of Siva and proficient in playing the vina, besides being a singer. Excellence such as this comes under the term "chaya": it means both light and shadow. The goddess Minaksi is addressed as "Marakatachaya" (emeraldine in radiance). By killing Ravana who possessed chaya, Rama also earned the sin of "chayahatya". To expiate it he installed the linga at Pattisvaram.

From the sastric point of view, by slaying Ravana Rama brought on himself the threefold sin of Brahmahatya, virahatya and chayahatya. Actually Rama is patita-pavana and he

Puraanaa-s
By His Holiness Sri Kanchi Paramaachaaryal

cannot be tainted by any sin. By uttering His name a man is freed from the most terrible of sins. So Rama has no need to perform any prayascitta (he does not have to do any expiatory rite)- he is "Taraka Rama". But he had descended to this world to serve as an ideal for all mankind and so he acted strictly according to the canons even with reference to matters that might be considered trivial. In the observance of dharma according to the sastras no one excelled Him. Throughout the Ramayana we see this remarkable trait in His character. He regarded himself as an ordinary individual, observed all the rules of the sastras; in this way he also performed the prayascitta according to them. This is not mentioned in the Ramayana of Valmiki; but the Sthala Puranas of Ramesvaram, Vedaranyam and Pattisvaram fill the gap.

"The Ramayana does not contain these incidents. They must some old wives'tales. " To think so is not correct. The incidents described in the Sthala Puranas are in keeping with Rama's character. He must have performed the three types of penitence. What is left out in the Ramayana of Valmiki is mentioned in the Sthala Puranas.

Ravana had caused suffering to all mankind and it was with an evil intent that he had stolen Sita, the mother of the world. Rama killed such a wicked character and made all the world happy. At a time when there was a universal rejoicing over his victory, Rama thought himself to be a sinner because he had killed an enemy eminent in three different ways. The loftiness of His character is further enhanced by these acts. That he installed the linga in three different centres goes to demonstrate the unity of Hari and Hara (Visnu and Siva).

These Sthala Puranas do not contradict one another nor is there any overlapping in them. Those pertaining to Ramesvaram, Vedaranyam and Pattisvaram deal respectively with how Rama, by installing the linga in each place, was freed from the sins of Brahmahatya, virahatya and chayahatya. Rama must have proceeded north from Ramesvaram along the coast. From Vedaranyam he must have gone to Pattisvaram in the interior. It is the strand of the same story that takes us through three Sthala Puranas. The three places are 150 or 100 miles apart from one another. When there were no fast modes of transport these distances correspond to 1, 500 or 1, 000 miles today. The fact that the stories belonging to the three places fit into one another shows that the Sthala Puranas relating to them must be true.

I would like to express a view that might seem strange to modern researchers and traditional scholars alike. It is generally believed that the Sthala Puranas cannot be considered authoritative to the same extent as the Ramayana. But I think that such of them as are authentic are more authoritative than the Ramayana, the Mahabharata, the Visnu Purana and Bhagavata Purana, and so on. I have come to this conclusion from examples like the one I have cited above.

Now I am going to speak about Sthala Puranas that connect places in different parts of the country.

Puraanaa-s
By His Holiness Sri Kanchi Paramaachaaryal

There are two versions of the Kaveri Purana. One gives importance to the Amma mandapa on the Kaveri in Srirangam. It states that bathing in the Kaveri in the month of Tula (October-November) is specially meritorious. The chief character in this Purana is the Cola king Dharmavarman. He reigned from Niculapuri. The Sanskrit words "nicula", "nicola", "coli" mean a garment covering the body [or a part thereof] like a case ("urai" in Tamil). The place called "Uraiyur" is known in Sanskrit as "Niculapuri". The kingdom with its capital as Niculapuri came to be called Coladesa (Cozhadesa). What is remarkable about a corn-cob? The grains growing on the top of the stalk are encased in the "cob". It means the grains of the cereal called colam or maize wear a coli so to speak.

In the second version of the Kaveri Purana the bathing ghat called Tula-ghattam in Mayavaram [Mayuram] is given importance. It is popularly called "Lagadam": the word must be a distortion of "Tula-ghattam". This ghat has been specially built for the convenience of pilgrims who bathe in the Kaveri in the month of Tula. There are such ghats in six or seven other places on the Kaveri, all built to the same plan. While in the first version of the Kaveri Purana Srirangam and Dharmavarman figure as important, in the second, apart from Mayavaram, a Brahmin couple find a prominent place. The couple were liberated by bathing at this ghat.

The Brahmin was called Nathasarman and his wife Anavadya. They were freed from worldly existence by bathing day after day in the Kaveri in the month of Tula in the manner prescribed by the sastras.

The Brahmin couple had during their pilgrimage visited Kedara and Kasi. (This story is known only in Mayaram.) Kasi is a thousand miles from here. One of the ghats there is called "Kedarghat". The Sthala Purana of Kedarghat mentions that the Brahmin couple, Nathasarman and his wife Anavadya, bathed there.

People in our parts are not much familiar with the story of Nathasarman. He is not like Rama, Krsna, Hariscandra, Nala and so on to be known all over the land. It is amazing that the story of such a man as told in the Sthala Puranas of Mayavaram and of Kasi, a thousand miles away, tally. This story shows how wrong it is to be sceptical about the authenticity of Sthala Puranas.

Kasi, which is a thousand miles from Kancipuram, is famous for the goddess Annapurni. In Kanci too, when the World Mother observed the 32 dharmas, she distributed food among people. Opposite the doorway of the sanctum of the Kamaksi temple in Kanci is the sanctum of Annapurnesvari. It has a vimana or tower that is unlike that of any other temple in the South. It has six spires ("sikharas"). The explanation for this is the fact that the tower of the Annapurnesvari temple in Kasi too is similar. Even in such small matters there is agreement about places as far apart as Kanci and Kasi. Are Sthala Puranas then to be dismissed as of no consequence?

Importance of Sthala Puranas

In my opinion, the Sthala Puranas not only enables us to have an insight into history but also enrich our knowledge of local culture and local customs. It seems to me that if they are read together in a connected manner they will throw more light on our history than even the 18 major Puranas and Upapuranas. In fact, they fill the gaps in the major Puranas.

Local legends do help in a proper understanding of history. For instance, educated people today do not believe that Sankara Bhagavatpada visited any of the temples or that he brought the puja performed there under a certain system. "The great non-dualist that he was and exponent of the path of jnana, " they argue, "he would not have concerned himself with devotion, temple worship, the Agasmas, and the like. " But let us examine the stories that tell us that he gave new life to certain temples, temples that are thousand miles or more apart. Their connection with the Acharya is confirmed from such stories and local legends. The priest who conducts the puja in Badrinath(a) in the Himalaya is a Namputiri Brahmin from Kerala -he is called "Rawal". Here, in Madras, the puja at the Tripurasundari temple at Tiruvorriyur is also by a Namputiri. This is proof of the oral tradition according to which the Acharya was a Namputiri who engaged fellow Namputiris to conduct puja in the temples he revived.

In teaching us lessons in dharma also the Sthala Puranas are in no way inferior to the major Puranas. It is in fact these local Puranas which are a few hundred in number that throw light on the finer points of dharma. Unfortunately, even the religious-minded among the educated class today think poorly of them. But, until recently, these Puranas were treated with respect by learned men in Tamil Nadu. Distinguished Tamil scholars have written Puranas after those existing in the name of great sages and also a number of Sthala Puranas. There are works in Tamil describing the importance and significance of places and temples - they are known variously as Sthala Puranas, manmiyam, kalambagam, ula, etc. ("Mahima" means greatness or glory; manmiyam is its Tamil form.)

Tamil literature is divided into the Sangam, Tevaram-Divyaprabandham and Kambar-Ottakuttar periods. Scholars describe the 16th century as the period of the Sthala Puranas. The chief authors of such works are Kamalai Jnanaprakasas and Saiva Ellappa Navalar. We know the worthiness of Sthala Puranas from the fact that among their authors are Kacchiyappa Sivachariyar (he composed the Kanda Puranam), Paranjyoti Muni (he is the author of the Thiruvilayadal Puranam), Umapati Sivachariyar (a distinguished teacher of Saivism), Sivaprakasa Svami, the Irattai Pulavars, Antakkavi Viraraghava Mudaliar, Kottaiyur Sivakkozhundu Desigar, Trikuta Rasappakavirayar. In recent times there was Mahavidvan Minaksisundaram Pillai who was the guru of U. V. Svaminatha Ayyar. He has written a number of Sthala Puranas. We learn from this that Sthala Puranas have a place of honour in the Tamil religious tradition and literature.

A distinguished Sanskrit scholar and authority on the sastras, Karungulam Krsna Sastri, has written a Tamil work called Vedaranya Mahatmyam.

Tamil rulers gave their support to Sthala Puranas and their propagation. More than four and half centuries ago, the Puranas relating to Pancanadaksetra (Tiruvaiyaru, Tanjavur) was translated into Tamil. The translator mentions that he undertook the work as desired by Govinda Diksita who was responsible for the founding of the Nayaka kingdom of Tanjavur.

Preserving the puranas

For a thousand or ten thousand years our temples and the festivals associated with them have nurtured our religious traditions against various opposing forces. Every temple has a story to tell; every temple festival has a legend behind it. These have been preserved in the Puranas. To ignore or neglect this great heritage, this great treasure, is to cause serious hurt to the religious feelings of our people.

In the past, when there was no printing press, the palm-leaf manuscripts were jealously guarded generation after generation. Is it right to keep them in neglect when so many books are churned out by the printing presses today, the majority of them injurious to our inner advancement? It is our duty to preserve the Puranas for future generations. Not to do so is to deprive them of great source of inspiration.

Palm-leaf Manuscripts in Libraries

In the old days palm-leaf manuscripts were preserved in almost every house. They contained the texts of the epics, the Puranas, Sthala Puranas, and so on. When the palm-leaves were in danger of being damaged, their contents would be copied with a stylus on new leaves. The damaged leaves would be consigned to the Kaveri or some other sacred river, or to some pond on the occasion of Patinettam Per [see next para]

The 18th day of the Tamil month of Adi (July-August) has a special significance for the Kaveri. The river would be in spate. The swelling waters on this day are called Patinettam Perukku or Patinettam Per.

Our forefathers went on inscribing on palm - leaves with their stylus until their hands ached. They copied old texts to be preserved for posterity. This tradition lasted until perhaps the time of our fathers. People of our generation have thrown these precious manuscripts into the river without making copies of them. So much so it is doubtful whether the texts of many Puranas will ever be available to us. Not only Puranas, but also a number of sastras. However, some scholars have taken great pains to go from place to place to collect manuscripts and preserve them in libraries. The Sarasvati Mahal Library

in Tanjavur, the Oriental Manuscripts Library and the Adyar Library, Madras, have good collections of manuscripts. The Theosophical Society Library, Adyar, has done commendable work in this respect. Sarabhoji and other rulers of Tanjavur took great trouble to collect manuscripts for the Sarasvati Mahal.

The palm-leaf is called edu in Tamil. It has two sides with a rib in between - either of the two sides after the removal of the rib is called an edu. The plantain leaf also has a rib. When it is split across the rib, each part is an edu. For long the palm-leaf was our paper, nature's paper which was not easily damaged. The letters had to be inscribed on it with a stylus.

The palm-leaves containing the text of Jnanasambandhar's Tevaram compositions went upstream against the current of the river Vaigai and were laid ashore. The spot where the manuscript lodged itself is called "Tirurvedakam" ("Tiru +edu + akam"). Here the deity lord Siva is called "Patrika Paramesvara". Nowadays the word "paper" is understood as a newspaper, magazine, periodical, etc. "Patrika" means a magazine today. The lord associated with the spot where the palm-leaves, nature's paper, were laid ashore is "Patrika Paramesvara", which could be taken to mean "the Lord the journalist". "Patra" and "Patrika" mean the same, a leaf. In the past letters were written on palm-leaves. That is why a letter also came to be called "patra".

There is an interesting story about the Sarasvati Mahal. In olden days the worst injury an invader thought he could inflict on a country was to burn down its libraries. When the treasury is to the economy of the nation the library is to its culture; indeed the library represents its cultural treasury. Since there was no printing press then, there would not be many [palm-leaf] copies available of works, and of some works there would be only a single copy. To destroy the library of the nation, containing rare works, would be a greater outrage than looting its treasury or dishonouring its women. We must be proud of the fact that our sastras on policy strictly forbid the destruction of an enemy country's treasures of knowledge and its places of worship, nor do they permit the dishonouring of its women.

When Jainas like Amarasimha lost to Hindu religious teachers in argument, they themselves wanted to burn their books. But great men like our Acarya stopped them from doing so. Holding the hands of their opponents they requested them not to destroy their books. Their attitude was that no work must be destroyed whatever the philosophy or religious system it upholds.

Conquerers belonging to other countries took special delight in setting fire to the libraries of the conquered land if it was known to be culturally advanced. They perpetrated such outrages without reflecting for a moment on the fact that knowledge is common to all, even such knowledge as possessed by an enemy. They could cause anguish to the people intellectually superior to them by destroying their books. It was thus that during the 15-16th centuries Muslim invaders set fire to the library in Alexandria in Egypt (it had books collected from the time of Alexander) and the library in Constantinople (Istanbul) which had been built up over the centuries by the Greeks and the Romans. Once old Sangam

were swept off when the sea rose - it was an act of nature. But it is due to their cultural backwardness that foreign forces destroyed the libraries of the country they invaded.

The Sarasvati Mahal of Tanjavur was once under threat when Muslim forces had spread all over the south and the Nawab of Carnatic had the upper hand. For the Muslim invaders burning down the Sarasvati Mahal library was equivalent to destroying the great temple of Tanjavur. At that time there was a Maharastrian Brahmin called Dabir Pant who was a minister to the Maratha Raja (the Maratha rulers here belonged to Sivaji's family). An idea occurred to him just in time to save the library. He said to the vandals: "This library has of course Hindu books. But it also has many copies of Qur'an. " "What? The Qur'an also? " the invaders cried. " We won't set fire to the library in that case, "so saying they departed.

Then came to India Englishmen, Frenchmen and others. They had a thirst for knowledge and research and were anxious to learn even from foreign sources. The Germans came to our country and searched for palm-leaf manuscripts to take home with them. We must be grateful to some of these foreigners through whose efforts a number of our sastras were rediscovered. There was, for example, Mackenzie who was surveyor-general of India. He went from place to place to collect palm-leaf manuscripts. There was at that time no special department to deal with them but Mackenzie had them read by experts and took steps to have them preserved. Mackenzie's men even came to our Matha at Kumbakonam to gather information.

It is believed that Westerners took with them some of our science manuscripts from the Sarasvati Mahal especially those pertaining to the art of warfare. It is further claimed that Hitler made some type of weapons and aircraft on the basis of knowledge contained in these texts.

There are palm-leaf manuscripts still with us like Bhojaraja's Samarangana Sutra. From these we learn that we had long ago not only "astras" to be employed with mantras but also "sastras" that were product of science. Digests like Varahamihira's Brhatsamhita bring together the various disciplines of our land.

Some of our ancient palm-leaf manuscripts contain texts not only of our religious systems but also of various arts and sciences. Also the Puranas. But we have lost many of our Sthala Puranas. We must do our best to preserve what remains and, at the same time, continue the search for more manuscripts.

The Puranas give us instruction, in the form of engrossing stories, on the truth of the Paramatman proclaimed by the Vedas, the dharmas, and the moral and ethical codes of conduct that they lay down. The teaching they impart touches our very hearts. The lessons of the Puranas, the stories of noble men and women contained in them, have shaped our lives. The Puranas have indeed served as a source of our inspiration for our people from time immemorial. We must no longer be apathetic to them and must make a determined effort to preserve them as a treasure. Let us make a comparative study of

puranic literature and take an integrated view. This will be to our own benefit as well as to that of all mankind.

Realising the ideals of the puranas

The noble characters who figure in the Puranas serve as an ideal for all of us to follow. When we read their stories we are inspired by their example and we ask ourselves why we cannot be like them ourselves, why we should not share their qualities. But, even if we wanted to emulate their lives, would we be able to live like them without deviating at any time from the high principles that they upheld?

Man by nature is always unstill: he cannot keep his mind quiescent even for a moment. Bhagavan says in the Gita: "Not for a moment can a man remain still, without doing work". So one must know the right path for work. One must make one's mind pure, acquire the highest of qualities and, finally, transcending these very qualities, realise the Brahman.

How can we live according to the tenets of our religion? How can we wash away our sins and cleanse our Self? And what must we do to attain everlasting happiness? Is not our present birth a consequence of the sins we committed in our past lives? We have to free ourselves from them and be careful not to sin afresh. We must elevate ourselves, our mind and character, so that we are not embroiled in sin again. The purpose of religion is this, to ennoble us and turn us away from sin. But how? How do we live according to the teachings of our religion? We do not know how.

In our present condition, what do we claim to know? Perhaps a little bit of Ramayana, the Bhagavata and other Puranas. We learn about the religious life lived by the characters portrayed in these works. But neither the Puranas nor the epics deal with the rights in a codified form, nor do they contain directions for their proper performance.

The Puranas and the epics give a dominant place to devotion. Is it possible to be engaged in devotion all the time, or to keep singing the glory of the Lord day and night? Or, for that matter, to be similarly engaged in a puja and meditation throughout? No. We have a family to look after. We have to bath and eat and we have so much other work to do - all this takes time. The remaining hours cannot be set apart for puja. It would all be tiresome and we have, besides, to do other good works. How do we get such information?

From the Dharmasastra.

Of the fourteen branches of learning (caturdasa-vidya) Dharmasastra comes last. Puranic characters, who represent our ideal, show us the goal. The path to attain that goal starts with the performance of karma, works. The Dharmasastra contain practical instructions in

our duties, in the rites to be performed by us. In the Vedas these duties are mentioned here and there. The Dharmasastra is an Upanga that deals with them in detail and in a codified form.

There is an orderly way of doing things, a proper way, with regard to household and personal matters including even bathing and eating. The ordinances of Vedas cover all aspects of life and to conduct ourselves according to them is to ennoble our Self. Whatever we do must be done in the right manner - how we lie down, how we dress, how we build our house. The idea is that all this helps our being. Life is not compartmentalised into the secular, worldly and the religious. The Vedic dharma is such that in it even mundane affairs are inspired by the religious spirit. Whatever work is done is done with the chanting of mantras and thus becomes a mean of Atmic progress. Just as worldly life and religious life are integrated, harmonised, so are the goals of individual liberation and common welfare kept together.

The devotion we imbibe from the Puranas is part of the Vedas also. But with it is associated a good deal of karma. When devotion takes the form of rite called puja there are certain rules to be observed. Apart from puja there are sacrifices and rites like sraddha and tarpana as important elements of the Vedic dharma. But these are not codified in the Vedas nor is any procedure laid down for each of them.

"Vedo khilo dharmamulam, " says Manu (The Vedas are the root of all dharma.) The work that the Vedas bid us perform for our inner well-being also serve the purpose of bringing good to the world. What is called dharma is that which fosters both individual and social welfare. The Vedas are the root of this dharma, its fountainhead.

But the rites and duties are not given in an orderly form in the Vedas, nor is the procedure for works laid down in detail. Of the Vedas that are infinite we have obtained only a very small part. And we do not comprehend fully the meaning of many of the passages even of this small part.

As we have seen the sixth Vedanga, Kalpa, contains the Dharmasutras, Grhyasutras and Srautasutras, relating to rites based on the Vedas. But the sutras are brief and do not constitute a detailed guide. The dharmasastras elaborate upon them without leaving any room for doubt.

The Dharmasutras (by Apastamba, Gautama and others) are terse statements and are so according to the very definition of the term "sutras". The dharmasastras (by Manu, Yagnavalkya, Parasara and others) are called Smritis and are in verse and detail in treatment. Their basis, however, is constituted by the Vedas. The function of Dharmasastra is to analyse and explicate the sutras of Kalpa which have to some extent systematised the Vedic rules and injunctions. If Kalpa gives instructions about the constructions of the Vedic altar, of houses, etc, Dharmasastra provides a code of conduct embracing all human activities.

We want to perform a ritual, but how do we go about it? We do not know where the propriety or otherwise of performing it is mentioned in the Vedas. Nor do we know where instructions are given about it. What are we to do then? We do not know anyone who has mastered all the Vedas. Extracting information from them about the rite we want to perform is impossible because they are like the expanse of a vast ocean. If the Vedas bid us "Do like this, " we do so. But since we do not know their ordinances well enough, what are we to do? The answers to this questions are given by Manu: "The sages who had mastered the Vedas composed the Smrtis. Find out what they have to say. "What we call Smrtis make up Dharmasastra.

"Vedo'khilo dharmamulam / Smrtisile ca tadvidam".

"Smrti" is what is remembered. "Vismrti" is insanity. Manu observes : "There is Smrti for the Vedas in the form of notes. The sages who had a profound understanding of the Vedas have brought together the duties and rites (dharma and karma) mentioned in them in the form of notes and they constitute the Smrtis. They are written in a language that we can easily understand. Read them. They tell you about your in detail, the do's and don'ts, and how the rites are to be performed. "

We have seen that the sixth Vedanga, Kalpa, contains instructions about the Vedic works. The Grhyasastras, Dharmasastras and Srautasastras of Kalpa deal with sacrifices and other rites. The Smrtis elaborate on them and contain detailed instructions with regard to the rite one has to perform through one's entire life. Actually, there are rituals to be conducted from the time of conception until death. The Smrtis also lay down the daily routine to be followed by all of us.

Smritis and allied works

Manu, Parasara, Yajnavalkya, Gautama, Harita, Yama, Visnu, Sankha, Likhita, Brhaspati, Daksa, Angiras, Pracetas, Samvarta, Acanas, Atri, Apastamba and Satatapa are the eighteen sages who mastered the Vedas with their superhuman power and derived the Smrtis from them. Their works are known after them like Manusmrti, Yajnavalkya-smrti, Parasara-Smrti and so on, and they contain all that we need to know about all the dharmas to be adhered to and all the rituals to be performed during our entire life.

Apart from these eighteen , there are eighteen subsidiary Smrtis called Upasmrtis. It is customary to include the Bhagavadgita among the Smrtis.

What we find in one Smrti may not be found in the other. There may also be differences between one Smrti and another. These give rise to doubts which are sought to be cleared by works called "Dharmasastra Nibandhanas".

There are some Smrtis which do not contain instructions with regard to all observances. For instance, some do not mention sandhyavandana. The reason must be it is such a

common rite that everybody is expected to know it. Then some omit the sraddha ceremony and some others are silent on various types of "pollution" (for instance, that due to the birth of a child in the family or death of a relative). Certain matters are taken for granted. After all, we do not have to be told about how to breathe or eat.

The nibhandanas do not leave out any rite or dharma. Differences between various Smrtis are sought to be reconciled in them.

Each region follows its own nibhandhana. In the North, it is the one authored by Kasinatha Upadhyaya. In Maharashtra, it is the Mitaksara: it has the force of law and is accepted as such by the law courts. Nirayasindhu by Kamalakara Bhatta is also accepted as an authority there. In the South, Vaidyanatha-Diksitiyam by Vaidyanatha Diksita is followed. These are the important authorities for householders. Sannyasins follow Visvesvara-samhita. In Tamil Nadu the Dharmasastra means the Vaidyanatha-Diksitiyam. The nibandhana has been translated into Tamil.

The Dharmasastras are not as difficult to follow as the Vedas and can be understood with a little knowledge of Sanskrit.

Vaidyanatha Diksitiyam

Vaidyanatha Diksita's own name for his work is Smrti-Muktaphala-Nibhandana-Grantha. We know very little about the author of this extremely useful book. Diksita must have lived some two hundred years ago; he belonged to Kandiramanikkam, near Nacciyarkoil (in Tanjavur district). It must be noted that he himself practiced the dharmas he had dealt with in his nibhandana and he is also believed to have performed big sacrifices.

Vaidyanatha-Diksitiyam is considered superior to similar works by Medhatithi, Vijnesvara, Hemadri and so on. Exhaustive in nature, it deals with the duties and rites pertaining to the different castes and asramas (the four stages of life), ritual purity, sraddha, prayascitta, stridharma, dayabhaga, dravyasuddhi. It even gives directions about the division of paternal property. When the Hindu code Bill was introduced in free India some put forward the view that the division of property must be based on the sastras. Such division is called "Dayabhaga". The division of property in Kerala, in the uncle-nephew line, is called marumakkatayam. The word "dayadi" is derived from "daya".

Diksitiyam is the last among the nibhandanas. In the preparation of this work Vaidyanatha Diksita had the advantage of making a comparative study of all the previous works on Dharmasastra. Before it the authority followed it to some extent in the South was the nibhandana of Tozhappar. Vaisnavas and Smartas alike today accept the Diksitiyam as an authority.

The nibhandanas are not like the Vedas (Sruti), the Kalpa-sutras and the Smrtis. Since they came later it is not easy to make them acceptable to all. Dikshita, it must be noted, does not show the least trace of bias in his work and has followed the Mimamsa in determining the meaning of Vedic texts. He has brought together previous sastras and arrived at conclusions only after resolving the contradictions in them. This is the reason why his work is considered as authority in the South. When the Smrtis differ in some matters, he takes a broad view and suggests: "Let each individual follow the practices of his region and the tradition of his forefathers".

Freedom and Discipline

There are a hundred thousand aspects to be considered in a man's life. Rules cannot be laid down to determine each and every one of them. That would be tantamount to making a legal enactment. Laws are indeed necessary to keep a man bound to a system. Our sastras do contain many do's and don'ts, many rules of conduct.

There is much talk today of freedom and democracy. In practice what do we see? Freedom has come to mean the licence to do what one likes, to indulge one's every whim. The strong and the rough are free to harass the weak and the virtuous. Thus we recognise the need to keep people bound to certain laws and rules. However the restrictions must not be too many. There must be a restriction on restrictions, a limit set on how far individuals and the society can be kept under control. To choke a man with too many rules and regulations is to kill his spirit. He will break loose and run away from it all.

That is the reason why our Sastras have not committed everything to writing and enacted laws to embrace all activities. In many matters they let people follow in the footsteps of their elders or great men. Treating me as a great man and respecting me for that reason, don't you, on your own, do what I do-wear ashes, perform Pujas and observe fasts? In some matters people are given the freedom to follow the tradition or go by the personal example of others or by local or family custom. Only thus will they have faith and willingness to respect the rules prescribed with regard to other matters.

Setting an example through one's life is the best way of making others do their duty or practice their dharma. The next best is to make them do the same on their own persuasion. The third course is compulsion in the form of written rules. Nowadays there are written laws for anything and everything. Anyone who has pen and paper writes whatever comes to his mind and has it printed.

Hindu Dharmasastra has come under attack for ordering a man's life with countless rules and regulating and not allowing him freedom to act on his own. But, actually, the sastras respect his freedom and allow him to act on his own in many spheres. Were he given unbridled freedom he would ruin himself and bring ruin upon the world also. The purpose of the code of conduct formulated by our sastras is to keep him within certain

bounds. But this code does not cover all activities since the makers of our sastras thought that people should not be too tightly shackled by the dharmic regulations.

You may feel that with regard to some aspects of life there is an element of compulsion in the sastras, but you may not feel the same when you follow the tradition, the local or family custom or the example of great men. Indeed you will take pride in doing so. This fact is accepted, in the large-heartedness of its author, by the Vaidyanatha-Diksitiyam. Previous works on Dharmasastra shared the same view. The Apastamba-sutra is an authority widely followed. In its concluding part the great sage Apastamba observes: "I have not dealt with all duties. There are so many dharmas still to be learned. Know them from the fourth varna. "From this it is clear that the usual criticism that men kept women suppressed or that Brahmins kept non-Brahmins suppressed is not true. In a renowned and widely accepted dharmasastra such as that of Apastamba women and Sudras are authoritatively recognised to be knowledgeable in some aspects of dharma.

Asvalayana and some other "original" authors of sutras say that the word of women is to be respected in the matter of the arati in weddings and application of paccai. The posts supporting the marriage pandal are installed to the chanting of mantras. Even so, if the servant or worker erecting the pandal has a story to tell about it or some tradition connected with it, you must not ignore it. In this way everyone is respected in the sastras and given what is called "democratic" freedom.

The dharmasastras include the samskaras and other rituals to be performed by the fourth varna. That caste has not been ignored and its duties and rituals are dealt with in the chapters on varnasrama, anhika and sraddha in the Diksitiyam.

The dharmasastras have usually chapters on "acara" and "vyavahara". The first denotes matters of custom and tradition that serve as a general discipline. The second means translating them in terms of outward rites or works.

Signs and Marks

If we call ourselves Hindus we must bear certain external marks, outward symbols.

The boy scouts have a uniform of their own. Army and navy men are distinguished by certain insignia. There are number of divisions in police force. Even though their functions will not change if they wear one another's uniforms or badges, there is a strict rule with regard to their dress and insignia. The policeman's cap must not be worn by the sailor. There is a certain discipline and orderliness among all these forces.

This discipline as well as orderliness is essential in religion also. That is why different jatis and different asramas have different functions and signs. According to the dharmasastras we must wear the dhoti or the sari in such and such a way or apply the

mark to the forehead in a particular manner. All this is not meant for social discipline alone. There is a high purpose, that of purifying our inner life.

The court attendant has a tavali. The officials do not have it. Is it sensible to why? But we do not take the same attitude with regard to the different signs and marks assigned to the people according to their vocations and family customs. We make a noise in the name of equality. Even though we remain divided in the matter of vocations-which indeed is for the welfare of the entire community-we are of one heart. This is the ideal behind the social arrangement in which different jatis are assigned different rites and external symbols, these in keeping with their natural qualities and callings. There is no high or low in all this. But we keep fighting among ourselves imagining that there is.

Now we have come to such a pass that nobody wears any of the external marks of our religion. At the same time, we are not ashamed of wearing other types of signs or badges. To wear those marks that bring uplift of the Self we are ashamed. We dismiss all religious marks and symbols as part of superstition. But those who want to proclaim themselves to be reformers don a particular type of cap or upper cloth and these external trappings are given greater importance than symbols of a divine nature.

Smritis – Not independent works

There is a wrong impression about the dharmasastras even among those who treat them with respect. They think that the rules and duties of the Smritis were formulated by their authors on their own. They call these authors "lawgivers" who, in their opinion, laid down "laws" that reflect their own views. Further they think that the dharmasastras were composed in the same way as our Constitution. Such a view give rise to another idea. We keep amending the Constitution whenever we find that it stands in the way of certain measures being introduced. It is asked, on the same logic, why the dharmasastras too should not be changed according to the beliefs and ideas of the present times.

People ask me : "Why should not the sastras be changed to suit the times? The government changes its laws, does it not? " They sing my praises and tell me: "You are like the sages, the authors of the Smritis. If only you make up your mind you can change the Smritis to suit our times. " In effect what they respectfully suggest is this: "Please change the sastras as we would like them to be changed. "

If the Smritis really represent the views of the authors there is nothing wrong in what these people think about them and about what they want me to do about them. But those who want the dharmasastras changed do not see to know that they (the Smritis) do not reflect the view of the sages who composed them. What the authors of the Smritis have done is to present us in an orderly fashion what is already contained in the Vedas. The Vedic word cannot and must not be changed at any time and on any account. The same applies to the rules and laws laid down in the Smritis.

I may not be capable enough, or worthy enough, to persuade you to live according to the sastras. But changing them is certainly not my function. I have been installed here (in the Matha) to make people perform their duties and rites. That is according to the command of the Acarya. I do not possess the authority to revise the sastras according to what is felt to be convenient to the present times or what is in keeping with the new beliefs.

If the sages had created the Smrtis on their own, to represent their own views, there would be no compulsion to accept them. If the Smrtis are not needed we could reject them outright. If their contents are not based on the Vedas and include rules and directions that reflect the views of the authors, then we can do without them. In this way so many people have written down so much about so many things. We too may write down whatever comes to our mind. The Smrtis must be looked upon as an authority for today and tomorrow and for all time because they are founded on the Vedas. But what is the proof for this claim?

The source of smritis is the Vedas

The best testimony to the claim that the Smrtis are founded on the Vedas is provided by the words of mahakavi(great poet). Sankara, Ramanuja and Madhva, the founders of our religio-philosophical systems, proclaim that our dharmasastras are in accord with the Vedas. But they had, each of them, a doctrine to establish. Besides they had also the goal before them of preserving the tradition and they would not naturally go against it. With a poet it is different. He has no doctrine to establish, no belief to promote. He speaks what he feels to be the truth since he does not have to lend his support to any particular concept or system.

The greatest of the mahakavis, Kalidasa, makes a reference to the Smrtis in his Raghuvamsam.

As all of you know, Dasaratha was the father of Rama. Dasaratha's father was Aja and Aja's father was Raghu. Rama was named Raghurama after his great-grandfather. We do not often come across "Dasarathi" among the names of Rama. Usually one is named after one's grandfather. But Rama did not take the name of Aja and is better known after his great-grandfather. Raghu had such fame and glory. The name Raghava also means one belonging to the family of Raghu.

Raghu's father was Dilipa. For long he did not have a son. The guru of Dilipa's family was Vasistha. Dilipa approached him and said to him: "Svamin, I don't have a child. Bless me that my family will continue and prosper. " Vasistha had a cow called Nandini, the daughter of Kamadhenu. The sage asked the king to look after the cow and worship her with faith. He blessed Dilipa thus: "A son will be born to you. " Think of it, a king was asked to look after the cow. How humble he must have been.

Dilipa took charge of the cow right away. Like a cowherd he took Nandini to the forest, grazed her, bathed her and looked after with devotion. He carried a bow with just one arrow to protect her from wild beasts. He scratched the cow, stopped on the way if she stopped, lay down if she lay down, walked if she walked. If we sit down our shadow too will seem to sit down, if we stand up so too our shadow will seem to stand up, if we run then too our shadow will seem to run. "Chayeva tam bhupatiranvagacchat", says Kalidasa. Dilipa followed the cow like a shadow.

Every day, as Dilipa took the cow to graze, his wife Sudhaksina would follow him to some distance and then return home. Very religiously she would send her husband out with Nandini and wait in the evening for them to return from the forest. Sudhaksina kept caring for Dilipa and, if the king followed Nandini like a shadow, she too followed him in turn like a shadow.

The duties of a Pativrata are described by Janaka during the marriage of his daughter Sita to Rama. He says to Rama: "My child Sita will follow you like a shadow (chayevanugata)". This is in Valmiki Ramayana. Kalidasa retells the story of Rama that Valmiki has told. He speaks about Lava and Kusa who came after Rama and also about Rama's predecessors. And he gives to his great poetical work the title of Raghuvamsam after Rama's great-grandfather Raghu of unsurpassed fame. Verily, to speak of this family is to sanctify one's speech.

In the passage describing how Sudhaksina followed Dilipa as he goes grazing the cow, the poet makes a reference to the sages creating the Smrtis. He does so not in pursuance of any doctrine, not also after any deliberation. He speaks spontaneously about the Smrtis, unpremeditatedly. The poet describes how Sudhaksina follows the cow to some distance. Nandini is in the front and Sudhaksina walks behind. The cow raises a little dust with her hoofs and the queen goes some distance looking at the hollowed dust. Kalidasa excels all other poets in similes. Each poet has some distinction or other. There is a saying: "Upama Kalidasasya" (For similes Kalidasa-Kalidasa excels in similes). It is in the context of Sudhaksina following Nandini that the poet brings in the simile of the queen following the cow like the Smrtis following the Vedas.

Tasyah khuranyasapavitrampsum

Apamsulanam dhuri kirtaniya

Margam manusyesvaradharmapatni

Sruterivartham Smrtiranvagacchat

-Raghuvamsam, 2. 2

"Pamsu" means dust. As Nandini goes grazing, dust is raised. "Khura" is hoof. "Khuranyasa" means placing of the hoof and "pavitra pamsu" the sacred dust.

The dust raised by the cow is particularly sacred. It sanctifies any place. Such is the case even with the dust raised by an ordinary cow, not to speak of the so sacred Nandini, Kamadhenu's daughter. Sudhaksina is a woman of spotless character - there is not a speck of dust on it - and such a woman has now cow dust on her. "Apamsu" means free of dust and refers to Sudhaksina of unblemished character. She goes step by step along the hollowed path following the dust raised by the hoofs of the cow. How? Like the Smrtis composed by the sages that follow the Vedas - "Sruterivartham Smrtiranvagacchat".

"Anvagacchat" = (she) followed. Here the upamana (that with which a comparison is made) for the cow is Sruti or the Vedas. The "hoof steps" of the cow are to be taken as the meaning of the Vedas.

So Sudhaksina followed in the "hoof steps" of Nandini like the Smrtis following the meaning of the Vedas. Also, like the Smrtis not going in the entire way with the Vedas, she did not go all the distance with the cow. The idea is that the Smrtis do not repeat all that is said in the Vedas. They are "notes from memory", but they truthfully follow the Vedas in their meaning. They do not, of course, represent all thousands of mantras of the scriptures but, all the same, they tell us how to make use of the Vedas.

"Sudhaksina with her pure antah-karana followed her husband and, without deviating even a little, walked along the path of the dust raised by Nandini's hoofs". Having said so much, Kalidasa thought he must bring in a good simile for Sudhaksina following the cow dust and it occurred to him in a flash: "Like the Smrtis following faithfully the meaning of the Vedas. "

The upamana is always superior to the upameya. If a face is compared to the lotus or the moon, the lotus or the moon must be more beautiful than the face. Here Sudhaksina, of matchless purity of character, following her husband Dilipa is likened to the Smrtis closely following the Vedas. No better authority is needed to support the view that the Smrtis are in accord with the Vedas.

Sruti-smriti – Srauta-smarta

To discriminate between Sruti and Smrti is not correct. Sruti, Smrti and the Puranas, all three belong to the same tradition. Sankara is said to be the abode of the three ("Sruti-Smrti-Puranam alayam"). If the three were at variance with one another how can they exist in harmony in the same person?

Those who follow the tradition of Acarya are called "Smartas". The word "Smarta" literally means one who adheres to the Smrtis. To say that the Acarya descended to earth to uphold the Vedas and that those who follow his path are Smartas implies that the Vedas and Smrtis are one.

Puraanaa-s
By His Holiness Sri Kanchi Paramaachaaryal

The rites that are not explicitly mentioned in the Vedas but are dealt with in the Smrtis are called Smarta karmas and those that are explicitly mentioned are called Srauta karmas. This does not mean that the Smarta rites are in anyway inferior to Srauta. The householder's Smarta works include such an important rite as aupasana; equally important are the domestic rites like sraddha and the seven pakayajnas. Vedic mantras are chanted in all these. Those who composed the Smrtis and laid down the performance of such rites must have been fully aware of the spirit of the Vedas. It is not proper to think that the Smrtis are inferior to the Vedas or that the Puranas are inferior to the Smrtis. We must learn to take an integrated view of all of them.

In Puranas the Vedic truths are illustrated in the form of stories. The Smrtis bring the Vedic dharmas and karmas in the form of instruction and injunctions and tell us how the rites are to be performed.

The sages had intuitive knowledge of the Vedas. As mentioned so often they did not compose them - they saw them. There was no intellectual effort on their part in this. "Srutim pasyanti munayah" (The sages see the Vedas). They used their intelligence to examine what they saw and, remembering it all, derived from the Vedas the duties and rites for various castes. This they gave us in a codified form called Smrti. As I said before "Smrti" means memory. For the sages the Vedas constituted an experience that just happened to them. The Smrtis or the dharmasastras are derived from their memory of it. "Samskara-janyam jnanam Smrtih", the Nyaya-sastra define Smrti thus. It means that Smrti is knowledge derived from Samskara. Here "Samskara" means "atindriya". But what exactly is it?

We go to Kasi and worship at the temple of Visvanatha there. Many days after our return home, we go to the local temple which has a sanctum of "Kasi Visvanatha". At once we remember the experience we had of seeing the deity Visvanatha at Kasi. In between for many days, that is between our visit to Kasi and to the local temple, we had no memory of this deity. We come across so many people every day but we hardly think of them later. But, when we happen to see them subsequently, we tell ourselves: "Ah, we must have seen them before somewhere." In between there was no memory of the people. This "in between state" is called "samskara" or "atindriya". In that state there is an impression of our experience within us. When this impression manifests itself as an "expression" we have "Smrti" or memory. All told, Smrti is the result of our experience and samskara an impression of that experience within us.

The experience constituted by the Vedas and manifested as the memory is the Smrti or Dharmasastra. Smrti does not become Smrti without its Vedic root. Are not the Vedas the "experience" that is the source of the Smrtis? Without such a source the name suggesting "notes of memory" would be meaningless. How can we describe as notes of remembrance" anything that is new and is not founded on something prior to it?

There is no second opinion regarding the fact that what is called "Srauta"(directly mentioned in the Vedas) is wholly authoritative. But what is not directly mentioned in Sruti but included in Smrti - that is Smarta - is not to be taken to be less authoritative.

Smarta never contradicts Sruta. In some matters Smritis may go beyond Sruti, but that too is fully authoritative being based on the inner spirit of Sruti. Just as the Sthala Puranas fill in the gaps in the major Puranas and the epics, so the Smritis speak of what is left out in the Vedas. We use terms "Sruti pramana" and "Smrti pramana"(the authority of the Vedas and the authority of the Smritis), but making such a distinction does not mean that we should treat Sruti and Smrti different or that we should think that the one is inferior to the other.

Samskara

I used the word "samskara" above [in the previous chapter - of part Fifteen]. I also explained its meaning according to the Tarka-sastra(science of logic) as "impression on memory". But this is not how the word is generally understood. "Sam(s)"=well; "kara"=making. "Samskara" means making something good, refining or purifying it.

The dharmasastras deal with such samskaras as purify a man so as to make him fit to be united with the Paramathman. From the dharmasastras we know in detail the forty samskaras that are based on the Kalpa-sutras and that are to be performed by a man during his life's journey.

Paradise or the path of atmajana

Our worldly existence is a mixture of joys and sorrows. Some experience more joy than sorrow and some more sorrow. Then there may be a rare individual here or there who can control his mind and keep smiling even in the midst of sorrow. On the other hand, we do see a quite a number of people who have much to be happy about but who keep a long face. If a man lacks for something it means he is unhappy.

All creatures long for everlasting happiness. There are two abodes of eternal happiness. One is devaloga, the world of celestials or paradise, the other is Atmajana, the state of awareness of the Self. The Atman, the Self is bliss; it is the Brahman. To realise this truth is to attain everlasting blessedness. But this state, this joy supreme, is not experienced by the mind or the senses. It is the highest, the most exalted state and it transcends the senses and the mind; it is a state in which a man becomes aware that "the body is not I, the intelligence is not I, the consciousness is not I".

Paradise is the place where happiness is always experienced by the mind and the senses. Music and dance - music of the gandharvas, dance by Rambha and Menaka - Kalpaka, the tree that grants all wishes, Kamadhenu, the cow that grants all wishes, the garden known as Nandana: devaloka means all these. It is indeed a playground and there it is always joy. But a difference exists between the joy known in paradise and the bliss experienced by the knower of the Self. It is true that there is eternal happiness in paradise

but not so far the man who goes there because he will not be a permanent resident of it. If he has earned a good ideal of merit he will be able to reside there until he is reborn. When he has enjoyed the fruits of his meritorious actions, the Lord will send him back to earth. It is true that there are accounts in the Puranas of mortals who earn a great ideal of merit and become gods themselves to reside in the celestial world. But the same Puranas also tell us that the gods themselves are not permanent denizens of paradise. There are stories in these texts of the celestials being hounded out of paradise by demons like Surapadma and Mahisasura and of Indra, their king, himself being pushed down to earth to undergo suffering there.

On a hypothetical basis, eternal happiness may be ours in svarga or paradise. But there is no instance of anyone having actually lived there permanently nor does it seem possible for anyone to do so.

Happiness gained through the senses is derived from external objects. These cannot be ours for all time. There were occasions when Indra had to suffer all by himself when he lost everything, including Kamadhenu, the Kalpaka tree, Airavata and even Indrani. So the happiness associated with paradise, which is dependent on external objects, can never be enduring. "Sadananda" or eternal bliss is for him who has neither anything external nor internal and who dwells in his Self as a sthita-prajna (a man of steady wisdom) as explained by the Lord in the Gita, one who remains nailed to his Self. The joy experienced by Indra is but a droplet of the vast ocean of Atmic bliss, so says the Acarya in his Manisa Pancakam: "Yad Saukhyambudilesalesata ime Sakradayo nirvrtah".

According to Upanisads you will have external bliss if the senses and the mind are removed in the same way as you draw off the rib from a stalk of corn and remain just the Atman. It needs great courage to pluck out the body and the senses realising that " I am not the body. Its joys and sorrows are not mine". Such courage is not earned without inner purity. Conduct of religious rituals is meant for this, for cittasuddhi (purity of the consciousness). There are forty samskaras to refine a man with Vedic mantras and to involve him in the rites associated with those mantras. These are the first steps towards the indissoluble union of the individual self with the Absolute - it is Advaitic mukti, non - dualistic release.

We must strive to become inwardly pure by the performance of works. Then, with the inner organs (antah - karana) also cleansed, we must mediate on the Self and become one with It. This is the concept of Sankara. If a man has such a goal before him and keeps performing rituals throughout (even without becoming a sannyasin) he goes to Brahmaloaka on death. During the great deluge when Brahma is absorbed in the Brahman he too attains non - dualistic liberation, so says Sankara. But if a man performs rituals for the sake of rituals without keeping before him the goal of oneness with the Brahman he will be rewarded with paradise, but not the paradise that is eternal. Though the stay be brief he will enjoy greater happiness there than on earth. It is samskaras that earn a man heaven.

Three types of worlds

We speak of three worlds: devaloka (world of the celestials), manusyaloka (this world of ours), and naraka (hell). The first has nothing but pleasure; in the second it is a mixture of happiness and sorrow; and in the third there is nothing but pain and sorrow. According to our sastras a man who has committed terrible sins goes through torments of hell before taking lowly birth again in this world.

Our sastras also have it that this world of ours is better than the others. How? From here we may make the journey to any other world. If a man is condemned to hell he cannot escape from it and will be forced to stay there until he has paid for his sins. If we go to paradise we cannot extend our stay there however much we may wish to do so. When the fruits of our meritorious acts are executed we will have to tumble down to earth. It is only here that we have some freedom and we may earn merit or demerit by our actions. We may use our hands to perform puja - or we may use them to hurt others. We may sing the praises of Isvara - or we may speak ill of people. We have the power to do good and evil in this world. For each of our faculties of action (karmendriya) God has given us this twin capacity.

There is not this kind of freedom in the other worlds. Is a cow capable of earning merit? The devas are like cows. So far as the cow is concerned there is neither merit nor sin in its life. On this earth (bhuloka) only those like us human beings can win liberation - we can do so through good actions. Other worlds are like hotels where the denizens eat what we harvest here. There you may enjoy the fruits you have merited here by your actions in proportion to the punya you have earned or the papa you have piled up. Our world alone is karmabhumi (world of works). And even in this world only human beings are capable of thinking and acting on their own. All other creatures live by instinct. Those who live in the other worlds have no right for karma.

A man's actions, his works, together with his character, determine his passage to other worlds. Only in this karmabhumi can we perfect our character by performing virtuous acts and thus qualify to go to another world.

There is a proper time and a proper place for the conduct of a religious rite. Do you think a sraddha can be performed at midnight? There is a right time for it as well as a proper place. It is in India particularly, that is Bharatavarsa, the Vedic karma must be performed, but even in this land it is not permitted during certain periods. It has to be carried out in hallowed places and during sanctified hours.