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Reappraisal of Linkages between Concepts and Ideas in Geography and the 'Puranas'

Dr. Sanjoy Saha

Asst. Professor, Department of Geography, Kaliachak College, Malda, West Bengal, India

Somenath Halder

Asst. Professor, Department of Geography, Kaliachak College, Malda, West Bengal, India

Abstract:

Knowledge of Geography had been enlightened in 'Puranas' and number of eminent thinkers or scholars studied in this respect. But instead of these there are still remain some corner to be discussed. Among these 'Puranas' most popular 'Puranas', written in 'Devnagari' language or Sanskrit, are 'Brahma Purana', 'Padma Purana', 'Vishnu Purana', and 'Shiva Purana'. This paper seeks to explore the relevance of Geographical concepts and ideas as described by the ancient sages in India. For this purpose the authors are go through the 'Puranas' to search about the aforesaid fact. The central endeavour is to establish the necessity of reappraisal of 'Puranas' to achieve the scientific knowledge, relevance of scriptures for further study.

1. Introduction

Human beings are considered as supra animal owing to their knowledge concerned to cause and effect relationship existed in the natural system. The span of human knowledge is being wider with the change of time and space. The innovative ideas of man are gathered for the well being of the human society and future civilisation. Like modern people the ancient thinkers are appreciable for the scientific analysis of the natural phenomena. India has glorious tradition of scientific knowledge regarding the Mother Earth and the Universe. Since the primordial age the Indian sages devoted themselves for the understanding of the phenomena and the natural calamities happens in the nature through their spiritual practices. After Winternitz, it is easy to understand the values of 'Puranas'. He quoted ...the 'Puranas' are valuable to the historian and to the antiquarian as sources of political history by reason of their genealogies even though they can only be used with great caution and careful discrimination. But on the other side Gop comment on the content of 'Puranas', i.e. the 'Puranas' explains about geography, physics, geology, anthropology, grammar, typology, medical-science, philosophy, economics and science. The theme of this article is affix after reading of various literatures and books. The sources of data are 'Puranas' written in English as well as Sanskrit and relevant geographical concepts in various Geography books. The information are systematically documented and cross checked after repeated reading. After that the essence of the study has been enumerated.

A number of authors worked on 'Puranas' or Historical Scriptures as well as Sanskrit literature especially focused on 'Puranas', i.e., Luders (1912); Rapson (1914); Debkumar Das (1961); S. Muzaffer Ali (1966); V. A. Smith (1981); Winternitz (1981); Ludo Rocher (1986); A. Berriedale Keith (1996); Judihistir Gop (2009); Narayan A. Bangera (2010). Whereas recently K. S. Valdiya (2012) worked on geography people and geodynamics of India in 'Puranas' and epics, but there is no work regarding relation of Geography and 'Puranas' as well as relevance of geographical concepts in 'Puranas', so the present authors trying to focus on less analysed area and seeks to explore the relevance of geographical concepts in the major 'Puranas' of India.

2. Puranas and Geography

In Sanskrit literature 'Puranas' displays significant role to convey the ideas of the sages concerning the creation, in relation to the spiritual concept (Plate 1). The dictionary meaning of 'Puranas' is the ancient story. Vedic literature use the word 'Puranas' as a synonym of history but the modern historian argued that there is a basic difference between the terms 'Puranas' and 'Itihasas' (History). In this context it may significant to recall the view of Monier William (1878) "The 'Itihasas' are the legendary histories of heroic men before they were actually deified, whereas 'Puranas' are properly the history of the same heroes converted into positive gods and made to occupy the highest position the Hindu Pantheon" (Hinduism, 1878: 82).

From the study of different *Puranas* such as 'Vayu Purana' (4/10), 'Matsya Purana' (53/66), the basic features of 'Puranas' can be summarised as—

“Sargacha Pratisargascha Bansha Mannantarani Cha.
Bansanurochitan Chiva Puranasm Panchalakshanam.”

The five features of 'Puranas' are 1) about the creation ('Sarga'), 2) re-creation after the destruction ('Pratisarga'), 3) description about the divine soul and generation-tree of the sages, 4) 'manantar', 5) stories about the different dynasties (Das, 1961: 84). Except these features other features of 'Puranas' are described by several authors. The content of the 'Puranas' are the description of pilgrims, sacrifice, ritual practices, concept of Prophets, religion, philosophy, 'vastu-vidya', physics, geography and grammar of the Sanskrit literature (Das, 1961: 84).

The word 'Geography' was first coined by the Greek philosopher Eratosthenes. Term geography stems from Greek word 'geographies' literal meaning of this word – 'geo' means earth and 'graphing' is the description. Eratosthenes thinks about geography as the description of earth surface as a home of man. Scholars of the different part of the world defined geography in several ways. Presently geography is a discipline deals with the analysis of physical and socio-economic phenomenon happening on the earth and universe in relation to time and space. Geography is the 'chorology' (multi-disciplinary) make bridge between the physical and social sciences. Focal goal of geography is human well-fare. In the ancient India although, geography was not developed as a distinct discipline but geographical views are found in the writings of the ancient sages.

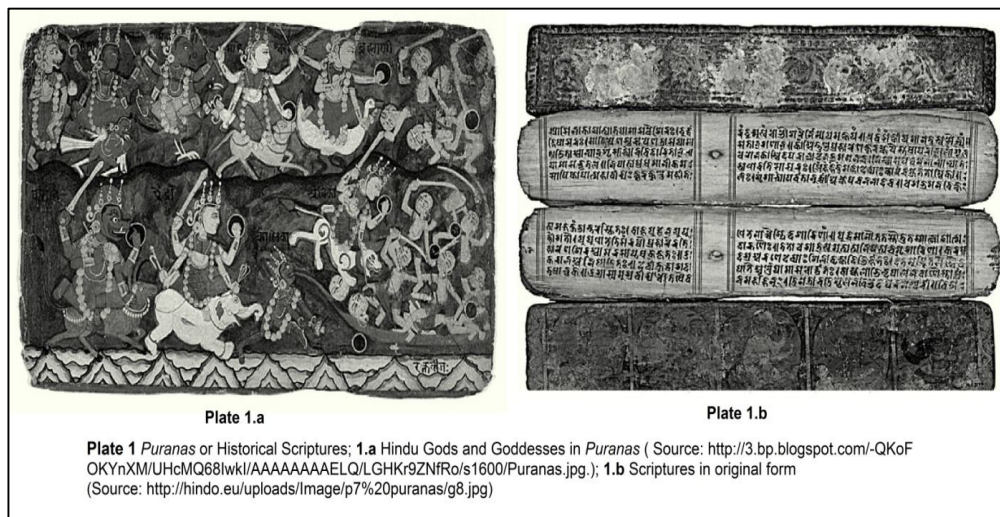


Figure 2

3. Creation of the Universe

About the origin of the Universe which has been stated by 'Brahma' in 'Brahma Purana' described as follows: The Sages appealed 'Suta' to tell about the incident when sage 'Pulastya' had visited 'Bhishma'. 'Suta' respond 'Bhishma' was doing self-punishment at a place called 'Gangadwar'. Being delighted by his austere self-punishment, Lord Brahma teaches 'Pulastya' to go to 'Gangadwar' and bless 'Bhishma'. After getting there, 'Pulastya' told 'Bhishma' that Lord Brahma was pleased by his penance. 'Ask any boon you wish for' said 'Pulastya'. 'Bhishma' show gratitude to his good fortune of getting a chance to meet Sage 'Pulastya'. He appeals 'Pulastya' to disclose how Lord Brahma had created the world. 'Pulastya' replied that during the preliminary phase of his creation, Lord Brahma created the 'Mahattatva' first of all. Afterwards he created the three types of Ego from the 'Mahattatva'—'Satva' (spirituality), 'Rajas' (enthusiastic) and 'Tamas' (ignorance). These three types of Ego are the origins of all the five sense-organs, i.e. organs of action and all the five basic elements—space, water, fire, air and earth. A massive egg came into existence with the permutation and combination of these five basic elements. Within this egg the whole universe including the mountains, islands, oceans, planets, deities, demons and the human beings exists. The layers of water, fire, air, space and darkness envelop this enormous egg. These rudiments are once again covered by the 'Mahattatva', which in turn is enveloped by the 'Prakriti' (nature). Lord Vishnu himself does creation in the form of Lord Brahma and also takes various manifestations to protect the mankind. At the end of the 'Kalpa', it is only He, who destroys in the form of 'Rudra'. After the end of 'Kalpa', he takes rest on the back of 'Sheshnag' for the full period of deluge (Brahma Purana, 5,000 BC approx.).

The extracted rational knowledge about the origin of the Universe which was once narrated by Sage 'Markandeya' in 'Vishnu Puranas' described as follows:

First of all, the 'gunas' (quality) enter into the atoms and create the seven basic elements which are a must for procreation. The seven basic elements then establish themselves in 'Purusha' (Universe) and 'Prakriti' (Nature). The union of 'Purusha' and 'Prakriti' results into the creation of Egg, almost similar to 'Brahma Purana'. This Egg keeps expanding in its size while being in water. In another comment 'Markandeya' expressed, the nature is nothing else but 'Kshetra' (space, area) and Brahma is also known as 'Kshetranya'. This way, the whole creation came into being just like lightning.

The extracted rational knowledge about the origin of the Universe which was once narrated by 'Suta' in 'Shiva Puranas' described as follows:

According to 'Suta' Lord Shiva is the manifestation of Almighty God (Brahma) himself and for this very reason he is known as 'Nishkal'. Because of his divine beauty, Shiva is called 'Saguna' (God with form). The term 'Saguna' is also expressed in another

way, which is 'Sakal'. 'Shivalinga' is worshipped since it symbolises the form of Shiva. Lord Shiva is also considered to be 'Nirguna' (without any qualities). Brahma and Vishnu were very surprised to see the pillar of fire, which was so enormous in size that it reached the sky and penetrated down the earth. Vishnu transformed himself into a boar and went to the 'Patal' (nether world) to find the base of that Pillar of fire. But he was unsuccessful in his attempt and came back (Shiva Purana, 5000 B.C. approx.).

The most contemporary scientific theory concerned to the creation of the Universe is the Big Bang Theory postulated 1950s and 1960s validated in 1972 through convincing evidences received from COBE (Cosmic Background Explorer). This theory explains the origin of the Universe and everything in it including ourselves on the premise that the universe contained many millions of galaxies, each one having thousands of millions of stars and each star having numerous planets around them. According to this theory everything in the Universe emerged from a point known as singularity, 15 billion of years ago. This singularity has enormous density and pressure mainly in the core, termed as Dark Matter. After havoc explosion the singularity is continuously expanding till now as universe.

There might have similarity between the enormous Egg in the several 'Puranas' with the prelude-time-scale. In the 'Shiva Purana' this Egg described as Ball of Fire. It is also mentioned in the Big Bang theory that after the explosion the singularity become a fire of ball. The 'Puranas' explains all matters and anti-matters were existed within the single point or it called as 'vindu'. Similarly the foresaid scientific theory explains that the singularity was not come in existence within the universe rather universe was existed within the singularity. The Big Bang theory could not explain what was before the singularity, but the 'Puranas' convey that the Supreme Soul that is mighty God in the name Brahma, Visnu and Maheswara. The Big Bang theory did not consider the existence of creator. In the 'Puranas' it also mentioned that there are creation, destruction and re-creation of the Universe by the will of God. Time and space both in the 'Puranas' and the Big Bang theory explained as infinity. It is so surprising that even paucity of modern technology the ancient sages were able to such speculative ideas regarding the mystery of creation through deep spiritual visions. The modern science cannot deny the contribution of the ancient Indian Sages.

4. Earth and other Celestial Bodies

Indian theological concept of the Universe revolves around some divisions. These divisions are mostly seen as physical ones, i.e. geographical. In a mystic thinking, it is understood on spiritual planes as is conveyed by Indian 'Puranas' (Historical Scriptures). So this division could be related to either terrestrial or astral matter. When we talk about our Universe, i.e. a cluster of stars and planets in our Milky Way, we come across 'Dharani Mandala' (Earth Planet), the Planet we live in. After Indian 'Puranas', above the 'Dharani Mandala' (Earth Planet), that part of the sky which is lit up by sun-rays is known as 'Nabha'. Above the earth is the sun, above the sun the moon, above the moon the stars, above the stars Mercury, above Mercury Venus, above Venus Jupiter and above Jupiter the constellation of the Great Bear ('Saptarshimandala'). Beyond this constellation is the world of 'Dhruva' (Universe).

According to modern science the entire space surrounding and including the earth, whether seen or unseen, is called Universe. The observable Universe contents about hundred billion of galaxies. A galaxy may content over 100,000 million stars along with huge mass of stellar gas and clouds. In the 'Puranas' one of such galaxies termed as 'Akash-Ganga' (the Milky Way). So, in the 'Puranas' the concept of Universe was limited but has some similarity with the modern concepts and has immense value in lieu of the ancient genealogy of science. Again the positions of the known planets of solar system narrated in the 'Puranas' based on the speculation without any sound technology. Modern science explains about the planets of solar system in assistance of advanced technology. But preliminary ideas of the Indian ancient thinkers (Sages) never be insignificant.

5. Concepts about Oceans and Continents

In Indian scriptures, Earth Planet is divided into seven divisions, known as 'Khandas' (Continents). And these 'Khandas' are described as 'Dwipas' ('Dwipas' or it may say continents or big islands). Their names are 'Jambu-Dwipa', 'Plaksha-Dwipa', 'Shalmali-Dwipa', 'Kusha-Dwipa', 'Krouncha-Dwipa', 'Shaka-Dwipa', and 'Pushkara-Dwipa'. The seven 'Dwipas' are surrounded by seven oceans and the names of these oceans are 'Lavana', 'Ikshu', 'Sura', 'Sarpih', 'Dadhi', 'Dugdha' and 'Jala'. The 'Vishnu Purana' gives a vivid description of formation of 'Sapta Dwipas' (Seven Islands) of the Earth, ruled by 'Priyavrata', son of 'Swayambhuva Manu'. According to the 'Puranas', 'Dwipas' also refer to the seven continents of the Earth. Although the foresaid concept is not true that those mentioned continents of the Universe rather of the Earth but as a primitive concept it is important.

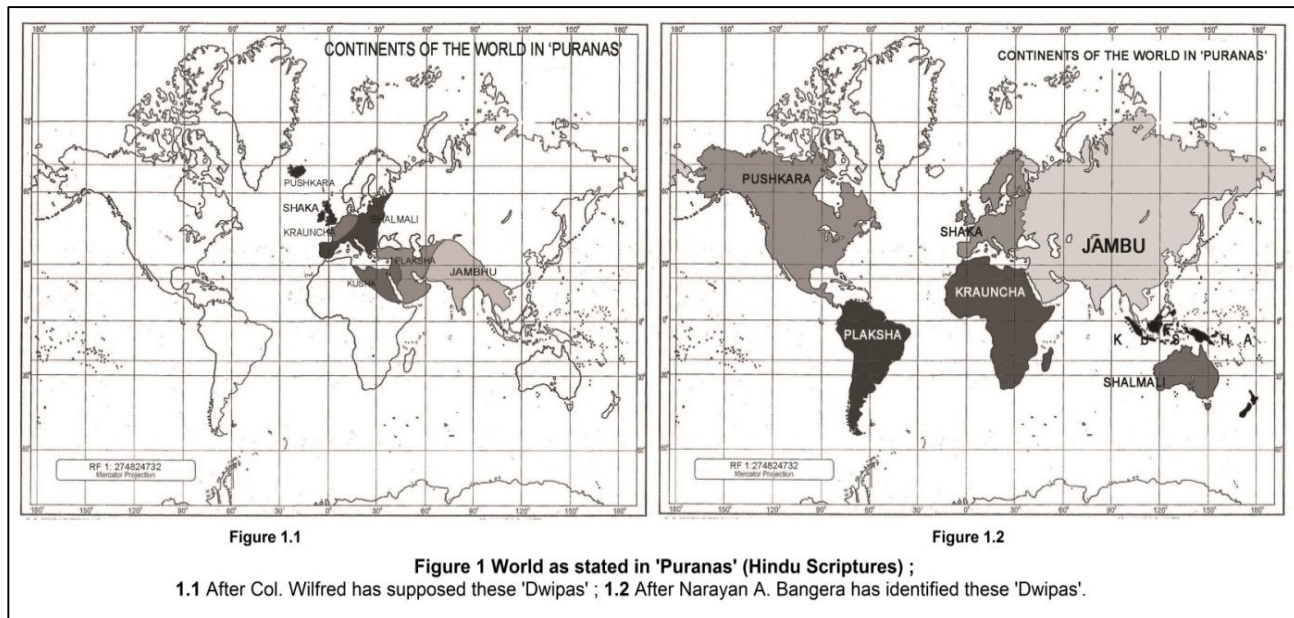


Figure2

Descriptions of 'Dwipas' in details are as follows:

'Jambu Dwipa' so named as 'Jambu' (Rose Apple) trees grew in plenty there. Area of the 'Jambu Dwipa' was about hundred thousand 'yojanas' (1 'Yojana' = 15 Km approx). And it also described the earth occupies 50 crore 'yojanas'. It was surrounded by 'Lavana Samudra' (Sea of Salt). 'Plaksha Dwipa', so called as fig trees grows on it. Its area was about twice the size of 'Jambu'. This 'Dwipa' surrounded by sea of 'Ikshu Samudra' (Molasses). This is encircled by 'Shalmali Dwipa'. 'Shalmali Dwipa', so named as 'Shalmali' (Silk Cotton) trees grew there. There are seven divisions, taking names of seven sons of 'Vapushmat' ('Sweta', 'Harita', 'Jimuta', 'Rohita', 'Vaidyuta', 'Manasa', and 'Suprabha'). In the 'Shalmali Dwipa' seven mountain ranges, seven rivers ring supreme. This island was surrounded by 'Suroda' (Wine) ocean. 'Kusha Dwipa', so called as Kush grass grew there. It was surrounded by 'Ghrita' sea (ocean of clarified butter), which is surrounded by 'Krauncha Dwipa'. The area of 'Krauncha Dwipa' was twice the size of 'Kusha Dwipa'. In the Foresaid Island along with the seven important rivers, there were number of small rivers and it was surrounded by the Sea of Curd. Sea of Curd is encircled by 'Shaka Dwipa'. 'Shaka Dwipa', so called as 'Shaka' (Teak) trees grows there. There were seven boundary mountains ('Meru', 'Malaya', 'Jaladhara', 'Raiyata', 'Syama', 'Dugdhasata' and 'Kesara'), which were excellent and charming. Identification of these 'Sapta Dwipas' (seven continents) is conceivable but it is subjective and hence at variance. Col. Wilfred has supposed these 'Dwipas' as: (1) 'Jambhu' – India, 2) 'Kusha'–Kush of the scriptures or the countries between Mesopotamia and India, (3) 'Plaksha' – Asia-Minor, (4) 'Shalmali' – Eastern Europe, (5) 'Krauncha' – Germany, (6) 'Shaka' – the British Isles and (7) 'Pushkara' – Iceland. Again the eminent scholar Narayan A. Bangera identifies them as: 1) 'Plaksha' – South America, 2) 'Pushkara' – North America, 3) 'Krauncha' – Africa, 4) 'Jambu' – Asia including 'Bharat Varsha', 5) 'Shaka' – Europe, 6) 'Shalmali' – Australia, 7) 'Kusha' – Oceania (i.e. several Pacific Ocean Islands, New Zealand, Melanesia, etc.). At an end, it may be inferred that the seven insular continents are encircled by seven seas and each ocean and island is twice the size of that which precedes it (Figure 1).

6. Conclusion

Evidences searched from Indian 'Puranas'(scriptures) are of immense importance not only in case of religious knowledge but also in various branches of science. These concepts concerning the truth of nature of sages as per brilliance are sacred truths, hidden in allegories. Enlightened souls of sages of yore could concentrate, contemplate and enjoy the unknown mysteries of the Universe. Hypotheses of these sages at different ages may differ but the fundamental truth remains the same. Those basic truths enlighten the interested minds of modern scientists. This discloses, more often than not, is a mere accident. Although some misconceptions stated by the sages to be excluded. The modern geographical views may not be appreciated without accepting the concepts and ideas of the sages which are scientifically admirable. Furthermore among all these 'Puranas' there are little bit concerning broadly about the Human Geography, especially in the field of man-nature interaction, which have to be studied by future social scientists.

7. References

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