

**THE LALITHA SAHASRANAMAM  
FOR  
THE FIRST TIME READER**

**PREFACE**

The first time reader of any text of the ancient Vedic tradition must be prepared for an encounter with the most massive, comprehensive and incisive of all human explorations of the human thought and experience. It would be useful for the reader, at the outset get some measure of this statement, in respect of just one segment of the mind-boggling corpus of these ancient texts, referred to as the Puranas. This has relevance here as it is one of the Puranas which provides the background of the subject of this book, the Lalitha Sahasranama.

History in the ancient Indian tradition was addressed in two different perspectives. The Itihasas – the Ramayana and the Mahabharata -addressed the history in conventional terms of the human setting of kings and nations. The Puranas, on the other hand were set in a larger mind-boggling canvas. They set out ancient legends of gods and their doings within a vast setting of cosmic time and space. But they were presented in a humanistic context for the understanding and enlightenment of ordinary, simple people, who are not burdened by rationalistic, intellectual or spiritual pretences. To such folk, what is considered super-natural is accepted as easily as what is considered natural and their understanding rests on the simple faith in an omnipotent, omnipresent and omniscient God for whom nothing is impossible. On the other hand, people who consider themselves rational, would appear to inevitably limit their understanding or imagination by what they consider possible.

The Puranas consist of narratives of the history of the Universe from creation to destruction, kings, heroes, sages, and demigods and their genealogies in an astonishing depth of detail, and descriptions of Hindu cosmology and philosophy. The Puranas often focus on specific deities and make weave vast webs of religion and philosophy around them. They are usually written in the form of stories related by one person to another. Vyasa, the narrator of the Mahabharata, is traditionally considered the compiler of the Puranas, stories obviously belonging to even more ancient tradition. The mind-boggling range of his compilations and his own compositions, virtually covering a near totality of the ancient scriptural text corpus of India, gives him a super-human, indeed a divine status sometimes given to him of being considered an avatar of Vishnu.

The Puranas are categorized under the following heads : The Mahapuranas, the Upapuranas, or supplementary Puranas, the Sthala Puranas covering histories of temples, the Kula Puranas covering the history of Castes and Tribes and the Jain and Buddhist Puranas dealing with the lore of those religions. The Brhadaranyaka Upanishad refers to the Itihasas (human histories) and Puranas

as the Fifth Veda : “*itihāsapurāṇaṃ pañcamaṃ vedānāṃ*” , reflecting their predominant religious intent and emphasis. According to Matysa Purana, they are said to be distinguished by the Pancha Lakshanas or concern with five subjects, namely, Sarga: the creation of the universe; Pratisarga: secondary creations, mostly recreations after dissolution; Vamśa: genealogy of the gods and sages; Manvañtara: the creation of the human race and the rule of the first Manus; and the Vamśānucaritram: the histories of the patriarchs of the lunar and solar dynasties.

The Puranas also lay emphasis on keeping a record of genealogies. The Vayu Purana says: "in ancient times the suta's duty was to preserve the genealogies of gods, rishis and glorious kings and the traditions of great men". The Puranic genealogies indicate that Manu Vaivasvata lived 95 generations before the Mahabharata War. Although these texts are related to each other, and material in one is often found in another, serving as cross linkages, they nevertheless each present a world view from a particular perspective. They must not be seen as random collections of old tales, but as highly selective and crafted expositions and presentations of world views, compiled by particular groups of scholars to propagate a particular vision, focused on Viṣṇu, Śiva, or Devī, and many other deities.

Of the many texts designated 'Puranas' the most important are the *Mahā Purāṇas*. These are said to be eighteen in number, though in fact they are not always so counted. One scholarly listing indicates the following to comprise this group : Agni (15,400 verses) ; the Bhagavata (18,000 verses) the most celebrated and popular of the *Puranas* telling of Vishnu's ten Avatars. Its tenth and longest canto narrates the deeds of Krishna, introducing his childhood exploits, a theme later elaborated by many Bhakti movements; the Bhavishya (14,500 verses); Brahma (24,000 verses); Brahmanda (12,000 verses which includes the Lalita Sahasranamam, considered one of the holiest compilations; Brahmavaivarta (18,000 verses); Garuda (19,000 verses); Harivamsa (16,000 verses); Kurma (17,000 verses); Linga (11,000 verses); Markandeya (9,000 verses which includes the Devi Mahatmyam, an important text for the Shaktas; Matsya (14,000 verses); Narada (25,000 verses); Padma (55,000 verses); Shiva (24,000 verses); Skanda (81,100 verses, the longest Purana, which is an extraordinarily meticulous pilgrimage guide, containing geographical locations of pilgrimage centers in India, with related legends, parables, hymns and stories; Vamana (10,000 verses); Varaha (10,000 verses); Vayu (24,000 verses); and the Vishnu Purana (23,000 verses)

It will be of interest to the reader to take note of the extraordinary way in which the ancient texts were organized by that awesome compiler, Vyasa. specially the demarcation between the Vedas and the Puranas. The Vedas may perhaps be viewed as summarizing the essence of the philosophical and spiritual ideas of those times, while the Puranas retained the enormous wealth of background stories in which those ideas were embedded. The effort was clearly to delimit the

esoteric from the exoteric, to provide a different basis of appeal and belief, to the learned on one hand and to the common people on the other. While the Vedas sought to appeal to the learned in philosophical terms to help them distinguish between the true and the false, the Puranas sought to appeal to the common people in simple practical ethical terms to choose between right and wrong.

But both approaches rested on a common foundation of faith and devotion and this principle pervades the entire corpus of all ancient texts of the Indian tradition. And nowhere does this dual approach come through more clearly or forcefully than in their treatment of the theme of love. At one end of the approach, Kama is love that is physical; at the other it is the more generic impulse of desire directed to all purposes, and specially, higher purposes. The Rig Veda says Ichha or desire, originated as an impulse in the consciousness of the Unmanifest for manifesting as the Universe through the process of Creation. On the other hand, the Brahmanda Purana weaves a story around this and describes how It originates in the One Supreme Divine with a thought, that emerges as the Prakruthi, the Divine Mother to handle all the implementation tasks of Creation. The Mother creates Kameswara as Her Consort, to create the basic male and female principle to establish Procreation as the key to Creation. This fundamental duality of the male and the female as the starting point, then, not only starts creation, but leads to the endless phenomenal proliferation,, not only a vast number of living species, but also of psychological dualities and the three psychological forces of Sattva, Rajas and Tamas that characterize and drive all existence. The gods and the demons who are also so created, become the central characters in the Puranas personifying the forces of good and evil, the forces that are in constant conflict, to gain control not only of nature, but human nature as well. The Purana stories show dramatically to the common man where his good and well-being lie, while maintaining the implicit message that the duality of existence springs from one fundamental ultimate unity.

This background provided in this Preface will show to the reader how just one small section of just one of these Puranas presented in this book : the Lalitha Sahasranamam that is part of the Brahmanda Purana, will give him but a brief but compelling glimpse of a marvellous world view constructed by the seers of ancient India.

A final point about this book. It is the third of series I have compiled for the First Time Reader, the first two being on the Bhagavad Gita and the Rig Veda. The three together represent an effort to summarise the texts that form the very roots of ancient Indian Knowledge. The Gita emerges as an essence from the Veda, and the Veda may well be regarded as comprising an essence of the Puranas, all within a vast matrix of the highest of human experiences . One of the things that the story of Lalitha Devi symbolizes for me personally is that my own creation from my biological mother could be viewed as but a link in a long chain of love reaching back ultimately to the first act of Creation by the Universal Mother. Both these mothers indeed become part of the same Reality to whom I owe my

existence. It may be of some interest here to point out that my biological mother bore the same name as the Universal Mother, Sivakamu, while my father bore the same name as the Mother's Consort, Natesa, another name of Siva. I make this point only to indicate how the Thousand Names of the Mother live on today after thousands of years, and how deeply embedded the Purana stories are in the psyche of the Indian people.

It will be also of interest to the reader, at the outset, to learn how the ancient Rishis of India approached compositions and compilations of Knowledge as an aid to the understanding of human experience within a larger framework of existence, envisaged as a framework of three components, the Knower, the Known and the process of Knowing. The ancient Seers rested their approach on the basis that Existence was one single Reality that manifested in multiple ways, and they built a vast edifice of Knowledge on this simple premise. They went on to explain that the individual was but a tiny part of that One Reality, but endowed with faculties that could not only make sense of external world, but also manifest a whole world within himself and at the same time recognize that both were indeed part of that larger Reality. The Seers presented the edifice of Knowledge in ways that made sense to the all the levels of man's cognitive personality, the physical, mental, intellectual, emotional, instinctive, intuitive, moral, religious, philosophical and spiritual levels, always within a totally integral and comprehensive framework, and always emphasizing that these levels represented an evolutionary upward progression of man from the human to the divine.