An Eminent Epistle of Puranic Cosmography

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Abstract - Geography is the study of the Earth and its natural processes, natural events and people. The geographical knowledge is very necessary for a proper understanding of the ancient history and culture of a nation. The geographical knowledge is all the more essential in the case of a country like India which has a long history and a brilliant past. The geographical knowledge may not only be helpful to enable us to understand the Indian history but also to comprehend fully the import of the geographical terms used in the various religious, mythological and the literary works. The independent treatises dealing with geography are not common in ancient Indian Sanskrit literature. But many a time the geographical information is definitely found in the religious, legendary and astrological treaties of ancient India. In literary works, ancient and modern, we find a number of useful geographical references. The geographical information found in the Puranas. The Puranas which abound in geographical information can be of very great value in the correct indentification of so many geographical names, shape and extent of Bharata mentioned in Sanskrit literature. The different Puranas give us very valuable information about the geography of ancient India. Almost all the Puranas are replete with the data of cosmography. So, this paper attempts to discuss the information of cosmography on the basis of Puranas.

I. INTRODUCTION

The geography of the world is found in most of the Puranas, a genuine source of knowledge. The Puranas which belong to the class of religious literature are in fact a supplement to the Vedas. Not only Vedic metaphysics, mythology and cosmogony, not only the great legends of Brahmans, not only the accumulated religious tradition of India, not only the multiple cults but also history, culture, chronology, poetry, sociology, geography, topography, art, architecture, painting, governmental administration, agriculture, economic and social life of the people and thousand other similar topics mapping out the entire canvas of the nation’s life have gone into the making of Puranika literature. The collection and the classification of all the geographical material available in the Puranas and the indentification of each and every place name is a stupendous task. It is very very difficult if not impossible to undertake such a study. The Puranas themselves declare that –

"द्वीपभेदसहस्राणि सप्तस्वात्तर्गताः परमेष्ठि शक्यन्ते क्रमे वासुं वै सकलं जर्त्॥"

(Matsya Purana, 112/4-6)

So, the present work tries to explain of the geographical data found in the Puranas with a view to ascertaining the following :

(a) The main features of Puranic Cosmography.
(b) The description of Bharatvarsa: its different names, divisions and Indian territories.

What is Cosmography ? Cosmography is the science that maps the general features of the cosmos or universe, describing both heaven and Earth.

II. CONCEPT OF PURANIC COSMOGRAPHY

The Puranas are ancient works that represent the traditional view of Cosmogony, God and man, Social order through fables, stories, symbols and lucid style. In relation to the Vedas, the Purana is like a magnifying glass. The Puranas are key to the understanding of the Vedas. The main objective of the Puranas is to convey the ideologies of ancient thinkers and to preserve the ancient tradition. The principal Puranas are eighteen in number. These are the Mahapuranas while there are secondary ones called Upapuranas. So, the geographical information found in the Puranas is called Puranic Cosmography.

This research paper tries to provide a explanation of cosmography in terms of the Puranic outlook.

2.1 The Theory of Creation

The Creation of the has baffled mankind since time immemorial. Moreover we have a numerous questions arising in the puny minds of almost every individual such as How the universe came into being?, who created it? and what the universe was created?

All the problems are solved on a mythological basis, the origin of the universe has also been given a mythological tough. All the doctrines and the religions of the world have given priority to the knowledge of the theory of creation. The 1st chapter of the first part of the Vishnu Purana gives an answer to the query of Maitreya about the origin of...
the universe, the origin of the oceans and mountains etc., the support of the earth, the dimension of the sun and the moon. A verse in the Skanda Purana enquiring how this universe was created?

"कथुं विश्वमिति जातं कर्मज्ञति प्रक्षण्यति। (रामचरितमञ्जरी 1.2.37.52)

The authors of the Puranas also have accorded due recognition to such materials and have presented them in the Matsya, Vayu, Markendeya, Yamana, Brahmanda and the Kurma Puranas. Bhuvana-kosa is the name of a collection of stray materials describing the theory of the creation of the universe, islands, mountains, rivers and the janapadas or the states. The 5th chapter of the first part of the Vishnu Purana gives the order of the creation as plants, birds, quadrupeds, gods, men, mountains and immovable things etc. stage by stage. (Vishnu purana chap. 5, 1st part 28-67). The same description occurs in the Upanisadas and the Manusmriti also.

2.2 General features of Puranic Cosmography and the seven Island Theory

All the Puranas agree in describing the earth as comprised of seven concentric island continents (saptadvipa vasumati, vayu p.1.1.80,6.48,8.15, Vishnu p. 1, 4.49) separated by encircling seas which increase by becoming double compared with each preceding one, and on divisions of Jambudvipa, the situation and extent of Meru and the subdivisions of Bharatavarsa. (Vishnu p.). The seven dvipas of the Puranas were Jummu, Plaksa, Salmali, Kusa, Krauncha, Saka and Puskara.(Agni, 108.1-2, Garuda, 54.4-5, Vishnu,II,2.5-7, Markandeya, 56.5-7) The Jambu-dvipa is surrounded by the sea of salt water. After Lavana (salt) sea, ther is a ring of plaksa followed by a ring of Iksurasa (suger cane juice) sea, it is again followed by a ring of salmali island and the Sura (wine) sea. In this manner plaksa Salmali, Kusa, Krauncha Saka, Puskara and the each one including even the Jambudvipa which is not ring shaped is followed by the ring shaped sea of Lavana (salt), Iksurasa (suger cane juice), Sura (wine), Ghrta (processed butter), Dadhi (curd), Kshira (milk) and the svaduda (sweet water).

As Indian History has been associated with the Sakas from very early times, there is every possibility of truth in the speculation that the dvipa was named after the Sakas. Thus different regions associated woth the Sakas- Sakasthana, Tartary including Turkestan in central Asia, Sogdiana, Oxus and Jaxartes Valleys, regions to the east, north and west of the Caspian sea – have been identified with the Saka-dvipa.

From the Jambu-tree, the insular continent Jambu-dvipa derives its name. The fruits of that tree are as large as elephants. When they are rotten, they fall upon the crest of the mountains and from their expressed juice is formed the river Jambu, the waters of which are drunk by the inhabitants.

The Puranas mention the river Krumu as flowing in Plaksa-dvipa and it may point to some region immediately to the to the west of the Indus as being called Plaksa-dvipa. The Vishnu Purana refers to the Damin Brahmanas of Kusa-dvipa. (Vishnu P, II,4.38-39). Kusa-dvipa was situated in north-eastern Africa beyond Mudraya or Egypt.

2.3 Concept of the Lotus Shaped Earth and The Four Island Theory

Besides the conception that the earth is comprised of seven concentric island continents, one more was prevalent in which the earth is supposed to be like lotus, with four Mahadvipas as its four petals and mount Meru as its pericarp. (Vishnu p.II,2.9, Brahmanavaiyarta purana, Brahmakhandha, chap. 6.6).

The Meru mountain is situated in the centre. If this Cakra-samsthana is peeled into four petals indicating four sides will seem to represent the four islands.(vayu,p, 6.7.11) Bhadrasva, Jambudvipa (Bharata of the Matsya Purana), Ketumala and Uttarakuru pointing towards the eastern, southern, western and the northern directions respectively.(Matsya 113.43-44)

The idea of the Lotus Shaped Earth and the Four Island Theory was a popular one among the Puranas and was shared by other ancient Indian texts. The authors of the Puranas also have accorded due recognition to such materials and have presented them in the Matsya, Vayu, Markendeya, Yamana, Brahmanda and the Kurma Puranas. Bhuvana-kosa is the name of a collection of stray materials describing the theory of the creation of the universe, islands, mountains, rivers and the janapadas or the states. The 5th chapter of the first part of the Vishnu Purana gives the order of the creation as plants, birds, quadrupeds, gods, men, mountains and immovable things etc. stage by stage. (Vishnu purana chap. 5, 1st part 28-67). The same description occurs in the Upanisadas and the Manusmriti also.

7. Banyan tree
6. Fish god
5. Mahabhadra Lake
4. Savitri Forest
3. Soma river
2. Srngavata and Jarudhi mountain
1. UTTARA KURU

1. KETUMALA
2. Rsabha and Pariyatra Mountain
3. Svaraksu river

1. BHADRASVA
2. Devakuta Mountain
3. Sita river
III. DIFFERENT NAMES OF INDIA

In early Vedic times, the Aryans were acquainted only with a small portion of this vast region which they sometimes described as Sapta-Saindhava. The name for India in the Avesta is Hindu, which, is derived from the river Indus, Sanskrit Sindhu. Herodotus calls it India, which according to him constituted the twentieth Satrapy of the Persian empire.

3.1 The Nine Division of Bharatavarsha

The description of the nine divisions of Bharatavarsha is found in a number of Puranas. It is said that Bharatavarsha is cut off into nine parts separated by oceans. It is said that Satasrnga, son of Bharata and grandson of Rsabha had eight sons, viz., Indra-dvipa, Kaseru, Tamradvipa, Gabhastiman, Naga, Saumya, Gandharva and Varuna, and one daughter named Kumarika. Dividing Bharatavarsha into nine parts, Sadasrnga assigned eight to his sons and the ninth part to his daughter Kumarika. (Skanda, I,3.39-67)

Alberuni and Abul Fazl, Ramchandra Diksitar says that the "nine divisions refer to the Puranic geography divisions of ancient Indian continent which included Burma." His identification may be summed up as follows – Indradvipa (Burma), Kaserumat (eastern Bengal and Assam), Tamravarna (Ceylon), Gabhastiman (Delhi and Rajasthan), Naga (Island of Elephanta), Saumya (Bengal and U.P.), Gandharva (Gandhara), Varuna (Westernmost end of Bharatavarsa) and Kumaridvipa (South India.) (Vayu, I, 45.80-82). Since, the description of the ninth dvipa as given in the Vayu Purana leaves no place for doubt regarding its identification with India proper:

"अयुं तु नवम्मलेपा दीप: सागरस्यमून्तः।
योजनान्ता सहस्र तु दीपोऽवध देवोर्मानांरात्।
आयुं द्विकुमारितिस्मात्विभवायैः।
निविषयोदित्वितिनिष्ठतेष्वेष सवेय तु।।
दीपोऽह्नुपपियो उं म्यान्व्रेद्यमेऽनिष्ठ।।
पृथ्वीं किराता पत्ताने पञ्छिमेव चचन्तलाचाऽ।"

IV. DIVISIONS OF KUMARI-DVIPA OR INDIA INTO TERRITORIES

The fanciful description of the concentric divisions of the earth into seven seas and seven Dvipas and the subdivisions of latter into seven Varsas each could not satisfy the fastidious sense of the Puranic compilers for detail and they further divided Bharatavarsha into nine Dvipas, and Kumari-dvipa into territories. The Janapada list of Bharatavarsha is found in eleven Puranas – Vayu, Brahmada, Matsya, Markandeya, Vamana, Visnu, Brahma, Kurma, Garuda, Vrishnudharmottara and Padma. The Garuda and Vrishnudharmottara arrange the Janapadas in nine divisions – Madhyadesa, Purvadesa, Daksinapatha, Udichya, Purva-uttara, Purva-daksina, Daksina-paschima, Paschima and Uttara-paschima. (Garuda 55).

Madhyadesa located in this region, if the area lying to the east of Aravali range. The Udichya division of the Puranas may be taken to have been the region lying to the west and north-west of Madhyadesa and extending at least upto the river Oxus. The Prachya division of the Puranas may be defined as the region lying to the east of Rapti and Son extending in the east upto Burma. According to the Kavyamimansa the country that lay to the east of Varanasi was known as Prachayadesa. (K.M. page 277)

The Janapada of Kalinga which was situated between the Godavari and the Mahanadi is included in the list of Daksinapatha. In the north-west, Daksinapatha extended upto the river Tapti, to the south of which lay the Janapada...
of Vidarbha and Dandaska. The river Mahanadi and the Tapti would be drawn on the map of India, the region lying to the south of it may be called Daksinapatha. Rajasekhara speaks of Daksinapatha as the region beyond Mahismati. (K.M. page 278)

In the conclusion it is not possible for a single researcher even to do a thorough and a study of the geography of Bharata. But I tried to give information like my power.

V. BIBLIOGRAPHY