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Train stations, enterprising priests and the deadly blows of *kuśa* grass: Reading the purāṇas with a magic-realist lens

Laurie L. Patton

Introduction: The train station and the sacred well

I first read a purāṇa in Banaras (Varanasi) in 1984. I had begun to read the purāṇic texts referring to the pilgrimage sites all around India with one of the major thinkers in Varanasi, the former head priest, or *mahant*, of the Viśvanāth Mandir, a temple to Śiva that stood in the centre of the city. While the *mahant* was retired by then, I understood it was an extraordinary privilege and was always nervous as I walked up the stairway to his residence. I had landed in Banaras after months of pilgrimage treks to sacred river sources, where I spoke with those on the journey with me about their motivations, hopes and dreams for climbing those mountains under harsh conditions.

I had become fascinated by the ways in which so many of the pilgrims referred to the purāṇas as points of reference. Whenever I asked anyone in Badrinath, Kedarnath or Gangotri—all sacred river sources in the Himalaya—they spoke of these authoritative texts, if not by name, then by genre. So, with

the enthusiasm and naivety usually only possible in a 23-year-old, I was determined to read as many of those purāṇas as I possibly could. In fact, after landing in Banaras, I had become fascinated with the small wells and ponds that were everywhere in the city. You could find them at almost every turn. They all seemed to have their own legends and played a major role in the lives of the surrounding neighbourhoods (see Singh 1994, among others). In response to my request, my teacher decided that we should read the *Skanda Purāṇa*, in which many of these wells were described. We went over every small well and pond as they were named in that text.¹

One afternoon, the *mabant* was going over the geographical location of a particular well and said, ‘You know, it’s near the train station.’ I asked him—perhaps with too much of a cheeky sense of humour—whether the train station existed when the *Skanda Purāṇa* was composed. To my surprise, instead of laughing at my irreverent joke, he took the question very seriously. He paused for a long time and said: ‘The train station is between the Cantonment and Chetganj.’ After a few more seconds of reflection, he said: ‘The train station exists for us now, in the Kali Yuga, as a point of reference for this *kupa* [‘well’].’

I have never forgotten this encounter. The extraordinary way in which the *mabant* phrased his response has stayed with me. He did not say, ‘No, of course not. Trains weren’t invented when the *Skanda Purāṇa* was composed.’ He could easily have said that, given he was well versed in all forms of historiography—whether Western or Indian. He understood the joke I was trying to make, as he nodded and smiled slightly before he began to think about the question in a serious way. But he took the time to answer it as a serious question, nonetheless. As I have reflected on it over the years, the *mabant* was putting two kinds of time together: the kind of time that is an idealised map of the world (including the Kali Yuga) and the kind of time that is a map of the world as we experience it in contemporary daily life. The train station was both a real referent, between the Cantonment and Chetganj, and one that participated in the sacred geography and time of purāṇic narrative.

The *mabant*’s reply suggested to me a way of reading the purāṇas—a slightly provocative way—which partly addresses some of the dilemma that many people face when reading these texts. Whether rightly or wrongly deserved, the purāṇas have a reputation for being more fantastical, more

1 Sadly, I never wrote up that research, although the conversations and conundrums from that year inform much of what I have written since.

encyclopaedic, more confusing and certainly less wieldy than their epic or literary counterparts in the Sanskrit tradition. In the extreme version of this view, they are more nonsensical for many contemporary readers, regardless of their cultural background. An example from a website chatroom might suffice. Quora is an online chat space (in multiple languages) where one can ask any question and respondents can vote the question, as well as the answers, up or down. The answer with the most votes is posted first, as the best response to the question. A reader of the purāṇas on Quora (2019) asked the following question: ‘Is believing the Puranas a mistake? Are the Puranas true?’ The answer with the most votes was given by ‘Mukunda’, who signed off ‘with an agnostic mind and a Hindu heart’:

It is not any mistake. But, you have to understand that they are just stories. They didn’t happen in real [*sic*], nor are they based on historical events. They are works of fiction. Some were written to explain some subtler concepts, and others due to various other causes. And as in any case, the cause may be a noble one or a selfish one. So, I would say don’t take them literally. However, unlike Puranas, the early hindu [*sic*] works like Vedas, Upanishads and others involve a deep and logical thought. So, one should try to learn them as well.

On the other side, Puranas are also useful. They introduce us to the rudimentary hindu [*sic*] thought. For an analogy, kids in school learn that there is no gravity in space. But, later we get to know that objects in space are actually in a state of free fall. Similarly, Puranas may be false sometimes as they are just a crude form of hindu [*sic*] thought meant for children. If you have no time/interest to know more about spiritual aspects of life, then, Puranas do definitely serve your purpose. If not learn some ancient hindu [*sic*] literature at a gurukul [SKT: *gurukul*, traditional school of Hindu learning]. And understand its depth by using your intelligence.

Lastly, I would say, whichever is not logical is not true. But, that logic should be an open and unbiased one. Hence, we should use our openminded logic to test [the] credibility of the source.²

There are many concerns a scholar might have with this response—not least the issue of making a hierarchy of texts, comparing the purāṇas to a childlike approach that is crude and thus by implication more primitive, and putting logic at the pinnacle of all the ways we might read a text. To be fair, at the end

2 Available from: www.quora.com/Is-believing-the-Puranas-a-mistake-Are-the-Puranas-true.

of his response, Mukunda does come up with an argument that one can read the purāṇas with another kind of sensibility, and I would certainly give him credit for that attempt.

What is interesting to me is not this respondent's approach to the purāṇas, with which I disagree, but rather his attempt to create a theory of reading about the purāṇas themselves. Wherever we are on the globe, the number of different books and articles about how to read a novel, or how to read an essay, is vast. However, there are very few conversations about how to read a purāṇa. This essay is one attempt to approach the purāṇic texts simply as a reader. I would suggest that, following the train station story, we think about reading the purāṇas in the twenty-first century with a lens refracted by the ideas of magic realism. Or to put it another, reversed and perhaps better way, Indian narratives such as those found in the purāṇas have inspired one of the great magic-realist writers of our time, Salman Rushdie, and that is no accident. They do indeed have something in common.

Magic realism

I use the term 'magic realism' not to impose a contemporary anachronism on the medieval texts of the purāṇas, but rather to ask what they might have in common and to awaken our approach to the purāṇas (the term 'magical realism' is also used). According to one straightforward *Encyclopaedia Britannica* definition, magic realism is a 'chiefly Latin-American narrative strategy that is characterized by the matter-of-fact inclusion of fantastic or mythical elements into seemingly realistic fiction'.³ The term was first used to describe painting, not writing. In his book *After Expressionism, Magical Realism: Problems of Recent European Paintings*, published in 1925, Franz Roh focused on the contemporary artists of Munich, who chose to paint dreamscapes and fantastic depictions of imaginary worlds. Over time, magic realism also came to describe fiction and was used more in literary circles than artistic ones. Gabriel García Márquez, Alejo Carpentier, Angela Carter, John Fowles, Jorge Luis Borges, Günter Grass, Emma Tennant and Italo Calvino have all been described as magic realists in their combination of everyday and fantastical realities.

3 'Magic realism', *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, available from: www.britannica.com/art/magic-realism.

And, of course, Salman Rushdie. Rushdie is our major point of reference for thinking about this new way of reading the purāṇas, inspired as he is by traditional Indian narratives. As A.G. Ananth (2017: 79) has put it: ‘The concept of Magical Realism and other related supernatural elements may feel alienated [*sic*] to the citizens of the various countries, but not for the Indians.’ As Rushdie himself and many others have stated, magic realism is often used to describe postcolonial realities, in that it attempts to be a literary vehicle to fuse together two worlds that are often impossible to fuse: the world of the colonised and the world of the colonisers. The only way to represent accurately the fragmented world of the colonised is through this technique, which itself fragments reality.

In a 2020 interview, Rushdie compellingly describes how magic realism works and why he chooses it as a form of narration. Rushdie believes most people think of the ‘magic’ in the term, but the term ‘realism’ has just as much weight. The approach is unlike fantasy, which divorces itself completely from the contemporary world, and unlike science fiction, which creates alternative worlds based on scientific ideas. Rather, magic realism bases itself on the reality that we know, but it is frequently interrupted by other layers of reality—such as the supernatural, the celestial, the semidivine or the divine. Magic realism also folds time—that is, it layers everyday times with other times and spaces in the past or the future, or even understandings of the past that are experienced as so ‘other’ as to be magical. For postcolonial writers and readers, magic realism marks the dual realities of the coloniser and the colonised by fusing mundane historical realities with counterintuitive events. It blends so-called natural historical progressions with supernatural moments and beings, even supernatural talents given to actors in history.

We can see this in so many different examples of Rushdie’s work. The main character in *Midnight’s Children*, Saleem, has a superhuman capacity to smell and the powers of telepathy. He reads his grandfather Aziz’s mind to tell the story of Indian independence. This is the double consciousness of those who lived in the colonial era, which continues in new ways in the postcolonial era, when traditional worlds and ideas interrupt the more Westernised ones and Westernised ideals do the same in return. For example, while the Amritsar massacre is occurring, Aziz is praying, and yet in a folding of time and space, as an ‘omen’ as it were, he sneezes blood that turns into rubies and cries tears that turn into diamonds. A historical, and sometimes even a ‘transactional’, everyday event is juxtaposed with a magical, surreal or miraculous one. The scene is also a reference to several traditional Indian motifs where body parts turn into or emerge from the body as jewels.

These are intensified images of India's independence, many of which could not be woven together except through this technique, because they do not 'belong' together in the categories of the historical world. Rushdie is trying to create and represent a world in a way that makes sense of its fragments and yet still represents an experience, both of a person and of a nation.

Yet, Rushdie's inspiration for taking this approach is not only postcolonial in its origin. Rushdie (2021: 160) states that his experience of and love for traditional Indian storytelling are what inspired him to create many of his works. We need only turn to *Haroun and the Great Sea of Stories* (Rushdie 1990) to note this influence. The book is modelled in part on the *Kathāsaritsāgara* ('*The Great Ocean of Stories*'), a collection of tales that have a great deal in common with those in the purāṇas. Tales such as those found in the purāṇas have this same juxtaposition of magical and mundane and their juxtaposition is not just 'encyclopaedic'. Rather, it has the effect of startling the reader into accepting and moving between many worlds.

It is important to be clear here. Am I arguing that the postcolonial motivations for Rushdie's writing and the motivations for composing the purāṇas are the same? Absolutely not. Each purāṇa was trying to establish a primacy of a place, a deity, a temple, and in that way was motivated by understandings of the world very different from postcolonial ones. Rather, I am suggesting that there is a similarity of approach, which helps us read the purāṇas in the twenty-first century. In other words, we can get back to the purāṇas by looking at the tenets of magic realism and its insistence on putting certain forms of reality in juxtaposition to each other.

The coherence problem: The purāṇas as readable texts

Ludo Rocher (1986) and many other experts in the purāṇas have noted an encyclopaedic element to the genre. I have written about this tendency and other early Indian texts, particularly Vedic commentary on texts that used the list or *anukramanī* as an organising principle. I have argued in earlier work (Patton 1996) that the reason for this encyclopaedic approach was a totalising one, motivated by a wish to represent the world in its totality and its universalising energy.

That totalising motivation of early Indian authors is true in many ways. The logic of the Vedic text was the list; the various Vedic hymns and the order in which they occurred in the *Samhitā*, or collection of hymns, were also the order and logic of the commentarial text. In the case of the purāṇas, however, there is very little of this Vedic organising principle, yet the encyclopaedic multiplicity of topics remains. Moreover, they are accretive texts. Dimmitt and van Buitenen state the classical Indological view well:

As they exist today, the purāṇas are a stratified literature. Each titled work consists of material that has grown by numerous accretions in successive historical eras. Thus no Purāṇa has a single date of composition ... It is as if they were libraries to which new volumes have been continuously added, not necessarily at the end of the shelf, but randomly. (Dimmitt and van Buitenen 1978: 5)

These characteristics have led many scholarly as well as everyday readers, such as our Quora participant Mukunda, to think of them as fantastical, even whimsical, at best, and illogical at worst. The purāṇas have not survived very well their characterisation as ‘being about anything and everything’ (Winternitz 1981: 541; Rocher 1986: 134); such a description is not a compliment.

While he does not come to a roaring defence of the coherence of the purāṇas, Rocher does note their complexity rather than their incoherence—a necessary first step in the late twentieth century for these works to be taken seriously as readable documents. He also rightly sees the purāṇas as a living tradition, always changing and being added to. He writes against the idea that, once we find the *ur*-text, and then the right ‘layers’, we have solved the ‘riddle’ of any given purāṇa. Because each purāṇa is relevant to its own age and can remain relevant to subsequent ages, a purāṇa cannot be dispensed with once it has been mined for historical and cultural information (Rocher 1986: 8–10).

Rocher also argues that this is in part because of the role of the *sūta* (or ‘bard’) who created the living part of the living tradition and whose arrival at the edge of a sacrifice usually gives us the occasion for narration (Rocher 1986: 53–55). We can see this as early as the *Vāyu Purāṇa*, a text I will discuss below, in which Lomahaṛṣaṇa is praised for his conversational excellence and knowledge. The curiosity with which the sages question him shows that the sages, too, want to hear from him and engage in conversation.

In addition, there is a world-creating energy to the purāṇas that is just as interesting to examine. The purāṇas attempt to create a representation of a world that includes plurality. We can read purāṇic texts by thinking about them the way Rushdie did about postcolonial literature, as fragmented and yet with their own associational—even conversational—logic and intentional juxtapositions, the folding of time and space.

Some alternative principles of reading

Several modes of reading follow from this. First, rather than assume that the various topics introduced in a purāṇa do not interact with each other, what if we assumed that the parts did interact and connect in a kind of dialogical momentum between the *sūta* and his interlocutors? What if we looked at this accretive style as its own approach—not as an obstacle to dating, but as an invitation to exploration and the folding of layers? Might it be better to think about the interactions—the associational connections—between various elements in a purāṇa rather than the idea of an encyclopaedia that has failed or only partially succeeded to ‘cohere’? Purāṇas have the patterns of conversations and these patterns are not the building blocks of a planned encyclopaedia, but rather a portrayal of a visit between friends where one subject naturally flows to the next. (In fact, Rushdie’s *Haroun and the Great Sea of Stories* is a political spoof about speech and conversation.)

Second, what if the sacred geographies described in the purāṇas were intentionally juxtaposing the world of the gods and celestial beings with the world of daily realities? What if the purāṇic authors understood and featured this plural construction of the world that combined the real and the fantastical at the same time? The assumption I am making here is that any reference to a particular geography is a reference to, or an indication of, daily realities in some fashion (remember the train station in Banaras). No matter how sacralised or idealised it is, a geographical reference is still a reference to a real city and creates a mental image as well as an idealised image of that same city (remember Rushdie’s admonition that the ‘realism’ needs just as much emphasis as the ‘magic’). Perhaps that is partly why sacred geography is so interesting: it takes the supernatural, the divine and the mundane together in a single piece most of the time. Magic realism does the same. In this way, while writing a postmodern novel of a nation is of course profoundly different from establishing a regional medieval text in praise of a sacred

place, Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981) is in many ways like a large and postmodern *māhātmya* ('praise of place') for the State of India and all its ups and downs.

Third, and relatedly, there is also no reason irony and humour cannot be intrinsic to purāṇas, even though we may not be in a cultural position to understand or even appreciate it. The essence of humour is intentional incongruous juxtaposition—and while many of us have read purāṇas as solemn tales with heavy world views, what if that was not always the case? What if, as Paul Veyne (1988: 84) also argues about the Greeks, the purāṇas were to be read with the same combination of credulity and suspicion with which we read journalism today? What if, in our attempt to read the purāṇas only as weighty, 'sacred' texts, we have missed some of the wit that is present?

With these principles of reading, what would it look like to try to read a purāṇa differently? In the following sections, I will attempt to do just that. I have chosen the *Agni Purāṇa*, one of the most 'complex' and 'accretive' texts, to emphasise the conversational, associational logic as well as the unexpectedly descriptive power of sacred geography. I also use one of the oldest purāṇas, the *Vāyu Purāṇa*, to show that this way of reading can illuminate even our most ancient purāṇic tradition.

Agni Purāṇa I: The coherence question revalued as conversation

The *Agni Purāṇa* is, in some ways, the archetype of the complex purāṇa. Its chapters number 382 or 383, depending on which version one quotes. Correspondingly, it has either 12,000 or 15,000 verses. Scholars have long been fascinated by discovering and outlining its layers. Their conjecture is that, since the Persian writer al-Biruni mentions it in his eleventh-century *Kitāb al-Hind*, it must have existed before that. Many argue that its earliest version was likely to have been from about the seventh century and its latest layer was as late as the seventeenth (Rocher 1986: 134–35).

As Gangadharan (1985: vii), a translator of the *Agni Purāṇa*, puts it, this purāṇa, like most of the others, is encyclopaedic in character, containing 'topics of diverse nature'. Nevertheless, he argues that there is unity under diversity. Sections are organised by topics that cohere in themselves, such as architecture in relationship to temple edifices; house building and town planning; creation and the cosmographical accounts of the universe; the

sacred places of pilgrimage on the Ganges and the Narmadā; the obligations of a king; atonement for various offences; prayers to Śiva; the king's coronation and duties; the discourse of Rāma to his brother at the battle of Lañkā; policy and statesmanship; the physiognomy of men and women; royal fans, bows and swords; gems; and the science of archery. Gangadharan names a very 'purāṇa-like' list indeed. A reader encountering the text for the first time could be excused for thinking it is a grab-bag of subjects. However, Gangadharan ends by stating that the wide range of subjects is 'most interesting and informative' and, most importantly for our purposes, that 'the treatment of each topic comprising one or more chapters is lucid and unitary in expression and thought' (1985: viii). I would go further in arguing that the transitions from one topic to another make sense from a conversational point of view and, like magic realism, follow a movement of dialogical narrative.

While it would be possible to make this argument with any of the chapters, the somewhat random example of several chapters of the *Agni Purāṇa* to which Gangadharan refers (Chapters 101–200) is a good place to start our reading process. It begins, as do so many epics and other purāṇas, with a conversation after a bard has visited a sacrifice in the forest hosted by the revered ṛṣi Śaunaka. The *sūta* is asked by those attending the sacrifice what are the most important things in the universe. The *sūta* begins with Viṣṇu—certainly not an unpredictable answer. In a first move in this conversational or associational logic, he begins with the avatars of Viṣṇu, then turns to the more extensive avatars of Rāma in the *Rāmāyaṇa*, Kṛṣṇa and the Buddha, and Kalki as the final avatars. The next move—to that of creation—also makes a certain associational sense. The bard notes that in every age (*kalpa*) and era (*manvantara*) Viṣṇu appears. Therefore, it would make sense that the next topic would be that of creation itself. In other words, Viṣṇu appears as needed in different ages and at different times depending on the created world of that moment.

During the narration of the topic of creation, the *sūta* describes the world and the activities of humans in it—in particular, the first king, Pṛthu. His kingdom is the first human activity. A natural next conversational step would be to ask the questions: What does one do in these kingdoms? What is appropriate human activity in relationship to creation? A natural answer to the latter query would be: praying and building temples and sacred images. In this section, the *sūta* says, 'What is the point of gaining money and wealth

if one is not going to pray and build temples?’ Indeed, there is a mirror logic between this section and the previous one: because Brahmā creates the world, the person attains Brahmāloka in the performance of these activities.

Then, in an elaboration of the topic of prayer, the *sūta* describes the gods to whom one prays, as well as the other gods, just as he described the avatars in the previous chapter. There are more than just prayers, temples and images as forms of holy activity, however. There is also sacred travel, or pilgrimage, as an appropriate human activity in creation. The next chapter is appropriately on pilgrimage places or *tīrthas*. Not only are they listed, but also one of the most sacred, Gayā, is described and the reason for its sacredness is given in a story.

In another straightforward transition, the *sūta* moves from the sacred geography of *tīrthas* to the sacred geography of the entire world and Jambūdvīpa and Mount Meru, the ‘Rose-Apple Island’ and mountain at the centre of the cosmos. In other words, he moves from the smaller (pilgrimage) to the larger (cosmos) sacred geography. In the last part of his sacred geography, the *sūta* describes the skies and the realm of the stars, ending with that which is above Jupiter, the constellation of the Great Bear and the world of Dhruva, the Pole Star.

From this ending in the constellations, it makes sense for the bard to move to the realm of astrology, which is in fact the next chapter. Appropriately, in the section on astrology, the *sūta* discusses how astrology governs human behaviour: when one should be married, the day on which one should have a naming ceremony and so on. These astrological times are also related to the *manvantaras* (or human eras) on a larger scale. As we saw in the smaller and larger forms of sacred geography, in this section, the smaller periods of astrological time are expanded to the larger ones. And, as the *sūta* moves to the next chapter, he reminds the listener that all the Manus who ruled over the *manvantaras* practised *dharma* (‘sacred duty’). Their sacred duties are then described. Relatedly, the next chapter focuses on *dharma*’s opposite: the various human sins and how they are atoned for. Again, following a kind of conversational logic, one way to atone for sin and sustain *dharma* is through the performance of vows, and that is the topic of the subsequent chapters.

One could go on showing these transitions for the entirety of the purāṇa. While the specific reasons for moving from one topic to another may not be explicitly given, one can see the conversational sense of the sections of the *Agni Purāṇa* and the implicit transitions the *sūta* makes. Let me describe the transitions in terms of dialogical questions:

- Q: What is the most important thing in creation?
- A: Viṣṇu.
- Q: What are the avatars of Viṣṇu?
- A: Here they are and here are some of their stories. They appear in every age and era.
- Q: How are the ages and eras created?
- A: Here are their stories, including those of the first gods and the first human kingdoms.
- Q: What did people do in those first human kingdoms?
- A: They worshipped gods and built temples, and here is how to make both temples and images of those gods to create sacred places.
- Q: Where were the sacred places on Earth?
- A: Here are the sacred pilgrimages of the Earth.
- Q: What about the sacred places in the larger universe, mentioned above?
- A: Here are the most sacred places in the larger universe, including the Earth and the realm of the stars.
- Q: How do we relate to and interact with the realm of the stars?
- A: Through astrology, and here are some of the rules of astrology, including the ways in which we observe smaller units of time such as the days of the week under those rules.
- Q: What about the larger units of time, such as the eras spoken of earlier?
- A: Each of those areas has a particular *Manu* or human who is the incarnation of the era.
- Q: What did the *Manus* do in each of their eras?
- A: Each of the *Manus* practised *dharmā* or their sacred duty and here is a description of the different kinds of sacred duties.
- Q: What happens if you do not follow your sacred duty?
- A: You must atone for that straying from *dharmā*. You can also keep *dharmā* by the following of vows, or *vratas*, which I describe here.

Put conversationally, or even in terms of associational logic, as I have above, none of this looks random. In fact, it looks quite straightforward as a natural conversation that would be driven by many of the kinds of questions that people would want to ask as each topic is introduced.

Agni Purāṇa II: Praise of place as ironic juxtaposition

Second, let me turn to the idea of sacred geography and the ways in which these descriptions also embody certain tendencies similar to magic realism. As mentioned above, I want to argue that any reference to a particular state or city, even in its sacred or auspicious form, also implies a *particular* place with *particular* challenges. Sacred geography is therefore a combination of the event-like quality of the transactional world and the transcendental quality of the purāṇic divine world.

A story about Gayā, also from the *Agni Purāṇa*, is a wonderful example. *Agni Purāṇa* 114.1–41 tells the following story, which I summarise for the purpose of concision and argument:

The demon Gayā practised penance and the gods were tormented by the heat (*tapas*) of his penance. They approached the god Viṣṇu, who was lying in the Milky Ocean and asked for protection. Viṣṇu went to the demon Gayā and asked him to request a boon. The demon requested of Viṣṇu that he would become the holiest of all places (*pavitro haṁ bhaveyam sarvatīrthataḥ*), and Viṣṇu granted the wish. Meanwhile, the gods saw that the Earth had become deserted since the demon Gayā had taken it over. Viṣṇu then said to the god Brahmā, ‘In order to solve this you should go to the demon Gayā along with all the other gods and ask for his own body in order to be sacrificed’ (*yāgārtham daityadeham tvam prārthaya tridaśaiḥ saba*). Brahmā did exactly as Viṣṇu asked, and said to Gayā, ‘I am your guest and I would like your pure body in order to offer it in a sacrifice’ (*atithiḥ prārthayāmi tvāndeham yāgāya pāvanam*). The demon Gayā answered his request and fell down. Brahmā sacrificed him on his skull. Viṣṇu asked Brahmā to offer the final oblation as the skull was moving. But even in this final act, the demon Gayā was still moving. Viṣṇu then called Dharma and said, ‘All of you gods, you all need to support this divine stone. In my club-wielding form along with all the gods, I will be present on the slab of stone.’⁴ Dharma then came, responded to Viṣṇu, and supported the slab of stone.

Meanwhile another event occurred. During the same time, Dharma’s daughter Dharmavratā was a devoted person who did a lot of penance. She was married to the sage Marīci, son of Brahmā. They

4 *devamayīm śilām dbārayadhvam surāḥ sarve yasyāmupari santu te gadādbaro madīyātha mūrtiḥ sthāyatisāmaraiḥ*.

lived together happily until one day Marīci came home very tired and asked Dharmavratā to massage his feet. She did so and he fell asleep. At that very moment, Brahmā came to visit. Dharmavratā was torn between whether she should worship and honour Brahmā (her father-in-law) or whether she should continue to massage her husband's feet. Marīci woke up and was upset that his wife was honouring Brahmā. He cursed her to become a stone (*śilā bhaviṣyasi*). Dharmavratā protested and said, 'After I stopped massaging your feet, I turned to your father (lord). You have cursed me and I am faultless. As a result, you will be cursed by Śiva.'⁵ She then performed a long-term penance. As a result, Viṣṇu appeared in front of her and asked her to request a boon. She said, 'Please, let my curse come to an end.' The gods responded that the curse given by Marīci would not end. Instead, they told her, 'You will become a sacred stone bearing the marks of the footprints of Lord Viṣṇu. Dharmavratā, you will be a stone of the gods, the dwelling place of all the gods, with the forms of all the gods, and you will have the spiritual merit for making the demon motionless.'⁶ And Dharmavratā accepted this, saying, 'If you are happy with me, then may all the gods stay in me forever' (*yadi tuṣṭāstha me sarva mayi tiṣṭhantu sarvadā*). The divine stone slab of the demon was supported by even more gods as a result.

But the demon still moved on the stone slab and it required one more round of killing, of the demon Gaḍā, and from his bones, a mace was made to kill other demons. Then, after these deaths, the stone was finally steady. Gayā was angry at this and said that the gods had tormented him unnecessarily. But because of all the effort of all the deities to create the steady stone, Gayā was even more sacred than any other place. All the gods and goddesses remain there, and all the sacred places of other parts of India were also there. The sacred place of Gayā extended 5 *krośas* (10 kilometres) and Brahmā gave fees to the priests after performing the sacrifice.

The brahmins at Gayā were cursed by Lord Brahmā when they, on account of their greed, received gifts of money and other benefits of the sacrifice. Brahmā said to them, 'You will be deprived of learning, you will be greedy, the rivers will be bereft of milk and other things, and the mountains will become mere rocks' (*vidyāvivarjitā yūyam tṛṣṇāyuktā bhaviṣyatha dugdhādivarjitā nadyaḥśailāḥ pāṣāṇarūpinah*). The brahmins said to Lord Brahmā, 'Through this

5 *pādābhyāṅgam parityajya tadgurūpūjitomayā adōṣāhaṃ yatastvam hi śāpaṃ prāpasyasi śaṅkarāt.*

6 *datto maricīnā śāpo bhaviṣyati nacānyathā | śilā pavitrā devāṅghrilakṣitā tvaṃ bhaviṣyasi devavratā devaśilā sarvadevādīrūpiṇā sarvadevamayī punyā nīcalāyāsurasya hi ||.*

curse, all has been lost! Please be kind to us for the sake of our life.’ And Brahmā replied to the brahmins, ‘You will be dependent on the pilgrims to the sacred place as long as the Moon and Sun exist’ (*tīrthāpajivikā yūyaṃ sacandrākam bhaviṣyatha*). He goes on to say how the pilgrims who come to honour the brahmins at Gayā, through all the right offerings, will elevate their ancestors from Hell into Heaven.

This is a fascinating story that describes the divine origins of a place and its wonders in a multilayered way. Gayā has golden hills, flowing with rivers of milk and honey, reservoirs of curd, clarified butter, plenty of food, the divine tree, the wish-giving cow and a bow made of gold and silver. The city is an idealised place that would be consistent with expected descriptions of sacred geography.

However, the origin story is also fraught with many other more transactional tensions that tend to go with a more political history. First, the result of the sacredness of the stone is because of an ongoing contest with the demons that takes many attempts for the gods to resolve. The stone never becomes steady and the deities never seem to be able to steady it (there is a comical element to the gods all gathered, trying to steady the stone on which they are sacrificing). It takes both the willingness of the demon Gayā to sacrifice himself, the willingness of Dharmavratā to accept her own curse and allow the gods to occupy her as a stone and the final killing of the demon Gaḍā to steady the stone. Like the building of any city, the construction of Gayā proceeds in fits and starts, with anger and misunderstanding, and requires several attempts to get it right.

In addition, in a transactional statement, Gayā is dependent on pilgrims’ fees for the brahmins to survive. The purāṇa has no problem stating that the city had fallen from its original state when the area did not suffer such oppressive conditions. So, the sacredness of the city of Gayā is based on multiple tries by the demons and gods, multiple modes of domestic unrest and finally a fall from its original graciousness into a lesser geography and a more desperate priesthood that is dependent on pilgrimage economies and the generosity of the pilgrims who go there. This is a *māhātmya*, yes (and is so indicated in the Sanskrit text as *gayāmāhātmya*), but it is not the effulgent praise of a land with rivers of milk and honey. Gayā is born of struggle and an open description of some decay. Think, too, of the juxtaposition of the economic need of the brahmin priests with their exalted status. It is the same kind of juxtaposition that we see in *Midnight’s Children*—of supernatural beings, miraculous events and difficult moments of desperation.

Vāyu Purāṇa: Reading for incongruity

The final magic-realist form of reading involves the possibility of irony and humour. I choose the *Vāyu Purāṇa* due to its age and status as one of the oldest purāṇas. Like the *Agni Purāṇa*, al-Biruni also mentions it in his *Kitāb al-Hind*. Scholars note that it is also mentioned much earlier by the seventh-century thinker Bāṇabhaṭṭa, as a text that he heard in his childhood village. They suggest that, given its mention in 3.191 of the *Mahābhārata* and 1.7 of the *Harivaṃśa*, it could have taken shape in the first half of the first millennium CE, from 300–500 (Rocher 1986: 245).

The *Vāyu Purāṇa* is a compelling text with which to think through the principle of reading for irony (or even humour) that we may not otherwise be predisposed to recognise. Like the *Agni Purāṇa*, the *sūta* plays a very important role. In the *Vāyu Purāṇa*, he is named Lomahaṛṣaṇa, the person who makes one's hair stand on end because of his exciting narration. Lomahaṛṣaṇa is known for being in command of all the different arenas of the purāṇas, and he knows the epics, the theories of *dharma*, *kāma* ('desire'), *mokṣa* ('liberation') and *artha* ('worldly gain'). The sages had gathered for a long-term sacrifice in the holy land of Kurukṣetra in the precincts of the Naimiṣa Forest. Their ruler was the great-grandson of Janamejaya, himself the great-grandson of Arjuna.

After Lomahaṛṣaṇa describes the deities and various accounts of creation and the nature of Brahman, the monistic principle animating the universe, the sages remain deeply curious (*paraṃ kautūhalam*) about the story of the earlier sages at the 12-year sacrifice, where Vāyu the wind god recounted the purāṇa to them.⁷ Lomahaṛṣaṇa replies with a story (*Vāyu Purāṇa*, 2.4–41) that I will summarise here:

In the Naimiṣa Forest, the sages created the universe out of desire and performed a sacrifice for 1,000 years. In that cosmogonic sacrifice, the householder supporting the sacrifice was not a human, but *tapas*, or sacrificial heat itself, personified. The priest who directed the action was no-one less than the god Brahmā, and the goddess Ilā had the status of the consort of the sponsor of the sacrifice. The god of death, Mṛtyu, performed the killing of the sacrificial animal. Naimiṣa was the holy forest where many other sacred events occurred after the universe was created, and Lomahaṛṣaṇa recounts several of them.

7 *pratyabruvan punaḥ sūtam ṛṣayas te tapodhanāḥ | kutra sattram yeṣāṃ adbhutakarmanām |*
kiyantaṃ caiva tat kālām | katham samavartata ācakaṣa purāṇam ca | katham prabhañjanaḥ tebhyaḥ.

It was in this forest, during the reign of the brave king Purūravas, that the sages decided to perform a sacrifice for 12 years. Even though the king reigned over 18 continents, he was never content, because he was always longing for precious stones (*tutoṣa naiva ratnānām lobhād*). The king was accompanied by Urvaśī, the *apsaras* who loved him.⁸ The king himself wanted to perform the sacrifice. During his reign when the sacrifice was being performed, it so happened that the brilliant, shining embryo⁹ that the goddess Gaṅgā received in her womb from Agni, the fire god, was put in place on the mountain, and it was transformed into gold. The great divine craftsman Viśvakarman himself made the gold into the sacrificial hall of the sages—literally, the enclosure for the sacrifice. When King Purūravas saw this hall when he was out on a hunting expedition, he lost his senses and was overwhelmed with desire. He tried to take it for himself.

The sages became frustrated at this turn of events. Out of extreme devotion for the success of the sacrifice, at the end of the night, they killed King Purūravas with the *kuśa* grass (which is used in sacrificial procedures) that had become as hard as diamond (*kuśavajra*). Pounded by the diamond-like *kuśa* grass, the king left his mortal body (*vyajabhāt tanum*). The sages then made the king's son, who was born of the nymph Urvaśī, the ruler of the Earth. This King Āyu was virtuous, devoted to *dharma* and behaved well with the sages. After honouring the new king, the sages resumed their sacrifice to increase their merit.

In their resumption of the sacrifice, the sages became as wonderful as those who conducted the first sacrifice and thereby created the universe. Many illustrious divine beings attended this new sacrifice, singing hymns and honouring the deities. They were eloquent; they argued philosophy of the mantras and debated with other schools of philosophy. The demons did not perpetuate any misdeeds, nor were there any other aggressors who tried to destroy or plunder the sacrifice. There was no need for correction or expiation due to mistakes in the sacrificial procedure. All the injunctions of the sacrifice were carried out. They paid 10,000 coins as a fee to all the priests.

8 Their story of love in separation is told in the *Mahābhārata* and other purāṇas, as well as the famous Kālidāsa play, *Vikramorvaśīya*. The death of Purūravas because of his quarrel with the *ṛṣis* is also told in the *Mahābhārata* (Sambhava-parvan, 75), but not as elaborately as with this compelling imagery. His death is a result of the brahmins' curse in response to his hunger for power.

9 *garbhe suṣuve gaṅgā pāvakād dīptatejaśaṃ, tad ulbam parvate nyastam biranyam pratypadyata.*

Lomahaṣaṇa ends his tale by answering the sages' question about Vāyu:

After concluding the sacrifice perfectly, they asked the great-souled Lord Vāyu what I have been requested to do by you—to describe the various dynasties of kings.¹⁰ Vāyu then did so. Lomahaṣaṇa then describes Vāyu's many sacred qualities as a bard himself—all-seeing, having perfect control over his senses, sustaining all the worlds of human and non-human species, making beings sustain through his fire, and flowing through the seven regions according to the sacred order, among many others. Lord Vāyu was also expert in the rules of language (*śabdaśāstraviśaradaḥ*) and knowledgeable in the purāṇa tradition and therefore, with honeyed speech, being grounded in the refuge of the purāṇas, Vāyu pleased the sages.

Even at first glance, this is a story with many layers. First, it depicts three different sacrifices: the one at which Lomahaṣaṇa arrives, the one that creates the universe and the one that Purūravas both hosts and then interrupts by his own greed. In its very structure, the tale involves exuberant layers of time that the best of magic realists would love.

It is also an intriguing story that builds on incongruities—one definition of humour. The first incongruity is that there is something so wonderful about the sacrifice that it has become almost permanent—a kind of gold. This is due to the divine actions of Gaṅgā and Agni, as well as the spiritual merit of the sages, but it is incongruous because the king sees it as part of his collection of jewels. The *Vāyu Purāṇa* presents a story about the opposition between spiritual merit, which results in the gold, and spiritual desire, which results in the stealing of the gold.

A second incongruity is that, even though early Sanskrit literature is rife with the tensions between priests and kings, sages are not known for the murder of kings or gang activities in general. Thus, that they would become so angry as to gang up on the king in response to their sacrificial arena being stolen is not usual behaviour, even from a sage who has been upset. (This would also be a notable moment from the earlier, more basic tale in the *Mahābhārata*.)

Finally, and perhaps most compellingly, is the image of the *kuśa* grass as the murder weapon. While it is strong, *kuśa* grass is usually quite malleable. Its flexibility is what makes it such a good sacrificial substance. It is used to sweep the purified areas, to weave pure mats to sit on and so on. That

10 *samāptayajñās te sarve vāyūṃ eva mahādbhipam prapracchur amitātmānam bhavadbbir yad ahaṃ dvijāḥ.*

it would have become as hard as diamonds is a wonderful incongruity. The *kuśa* grass literally becomes like a *vajra*—the diamond weapon of Indra and later Buddhist deities. The fact that *kuśa* grass in its diamond form is the method of killing the king is fascinating. Like the gold that Purūravas himself desires, the grass becomes jewel-like, and it is only in this gemlike state that it is used to kill him. Whether people laughed at this story when it was told is impossible to tell. Yet, within its solemn exterior narration of the 12-year sacrifice, the ironies and incongruities abound.¹¹

Final thoughts

We have travelled to witness the energetic conversational patterns of the *sūta* in the *Agni Purāṇa*, the sacred yet powerfully flawed geography and economy of Gayā in that same text and the incongruous gang of sacrificing sages punishing a king with magical blades of *kuśa* grass in the *Vāyu Purāṇa*. In each example, we have found modes of literary composition that resemble the magic realism of a far different century, with far different authorial motivations. As Salman Rushdie put it in 2020, magic realism is ‘a new-ish name for a very old thing’ (Big Think 2020).

With this purāṇic journey, we return, then, to the train station in the *Skanda Purāṇa*. The year I discussed that small geographical question with the *mahant* in Banaras was during the time that Rushdie’s novel was becoming famous and beloved for its careening, joyful, literary clashes of times, minds and civilisations. We often accept an Indological approach to the purāṇas and try to find spaces of coherence or forms of logic to the multilayered narratives, while we do not ask the same of postcolonial literature, embracing it instead as pastiche, creative juxtaposition and fragmentary. The ancient world still needs to ‘cohere’ in a particular sense for us to understand it. My own thought would be: why wouldn’t the self-conscious pastiche, the joy of juxtaposition and plurality be as much a part of compiling a purāṇa as they are of a postmodern novel of magic realism? Perhaps what coheres is not the full narrative logic, but rather the intellectual traveller’s or wanderer’s logic?

11 I have written in a similar way (Patton 2005: 182) on the context of the use of mantra in Vedic sacrifice: that laughter must have been part of the performances and, given that the purāṇas originated in the ‘moments between’ the performance of the sacrifices, they, too, must have frequently involved laughter. Certainly, this was the case during all the ‘breaks’ I witnessed during late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century revivals of Vedic sacrifice.

Seen through this lens, we might read the purāṇas like the associations of the *flâneuse* who creates her world with what she finds, from the worlds of the gods and humans alike.

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