



Itihasa-Purana tradition as literary knowledge systems

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Abstract

Itihasa-purana has been a major contributor in terms of historical, religious, and social information in the Indian literary and cultural heritage. One of the manifestations of an interwoven narrative, philosophy, and cultural memory is this tradition, which is a collective of the epics Ramayana and Mahabharata and the Purana. The following study attempts to comment on the Itihasa-Purana corpus as one of the bodies of knowledge of the native literature, which upholds and transmits the general wisdom through generations. The work is a case of unscrupulous use of qualitative and analytical methodology through textual analysis of the main sources and suitable secondary literature chosen. The article argues that the books are not mere mythological texts, but they are constructs of elaborate ethics, cosmology, social structure, and government. The results show that Itihasa tradition is a working tradition of the oral-written continuum, which guarantees continuity and flexibility. This paper concludes that the tradition is still a highly vibrant and effective knowledge system that will be relevant in the modern intellectual and cultural discourse.

Keywords: Itihasa, purana, knowledge systems, Indian literature, oral tradition, cultural memory

Introduction

Indian literature and culture have one of the greatest pillars in the form of the Itihasa-Purana tradition. This tradition is based upon the ancient oral and scriptural traditions that include the two great epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, and the long Puranic literature (Gupta, 2019) ^[4]. Itihasa translates to mean: thus indeed it was, implying a story whose content interferes with historical memory with ethical and philosophical contemplation, and Purana translates to mean ancient or one that restores the old (Bisschop, 2021) ^[2]. They are all a part of an extensive system of knowledge transmission that formed the Indian thought over the centuries. As a result of the Vedic environment, the Itihasa-Purana collection emerged as a vehicle of idea transmission to the larger population, not just the learned priest caste. These texts maintained religious doctrines, social values, and political ideals via gripping narratives, lineages, cosmological stories, and moral discourses. The tradition was passed down through oral recitation by bards, storytellers, and sages, and continued even after the universal adoption of writing. This spectrum of the oral-written tradition was loose, spread across geographical locations, and could be received again, which ensured the keeping of these stories amid time and space (Bisschop, 2021) ^[2]. An example of this body of knowledge, the Puranas, subdivided into Mahapurana and Upapurana, contributed to it further, introducing mythology, ritual life, pilgrimage movements, and local histories. They were works of encyclopedias, containing different kinds of knowledge presented in a narrative as a type of structure (Gupta, 2019) ^[4]. Similarly, the epics provided ideal examples of conduct, leadership, and piety, which enhanced social and moral norms. The Itihasa-Purana tradition is, in essence, not merely a collection of holy traditions. It is a system of an integrated tradition of literature that reveals the continuity of the mind of the Indian people, their cultural memory, and even the richness of their philosophical thought. The fact that it held on as a mode of conservation and transmission of information in Indian civilization is a

thing that highlights its dynamism as a source of knowledge (Aralikatte *et al.*, 2021) ^[1].

Although the tradition of Itihasa and Purana has a vast role in the development of Indian intellectual, cultural, and religious life, it is sometimes treated as mythological or devotional literature. Such narrow definitions are prone to ignoring their role as a system of knowledge in literature that contains historical memory, moral foundations, social systems, and philosophical ideas. In recent academia, a void is present between the conventional perception and contemporary critical evaluation, which led to piecemeal interpretation of such texts or unsatisfactory interpretations. Moreover, Western historiography has often been utilised to assess the corpus of the Itihasa-Purana, and has been controversial about when it is historically accurate and what facts it can be relied upon to tell. Since these methods are appropriate, they tend to ignore native ways of producing and transmitting knowledge. This brings about a necessity to re-examine these texts on their respective cultural and epistemological level. By subjecting the Itihasa purana tradition to an analysis as a whole literary knowledge system, the current study aims at filling this gap by examining how the purana was assembled in the form of sacred narratives. It seeks to investigate how such texts served as archives of interdisciplinary knowledge and mixed histories, philosophies, sociology, and ethics using narrative forms. This paper, though, tries to contribute to a more objective and encompassing view of the Itihasa-Purana tradition and its significance today through a contextual and interpretative approach to the tradition, and its role in classical and modern scholarly thought.

Research Objectives

1. To examine the conceptual meaning and scope of the Itihasa-Purana tradition within Indian literary and cultural history.
2. To analyses the Itihasa-Purana corpus as an indigenous literary knowledge system encompassing historical, philosophical, social, and ethical dimensions.

3. To investigate the role of oral and written traditions in the preservation and transmission of Itihasa-Purana literature.
4. To evaluate the narrative techniques and structural features used in Itihasa-Purana texts for effective knowledge dissemination.
5. To assess the contemporary relevance of the Itihasa-Purana tradition in modern academic, cultural, and educational contexts.

Itihasa-Purana in Indian Literary Heritage

The words Itihasa and Purana are prominent in the conception of the classical literary and intellectual tradition of India (Khajuria, 2021) ^[6]. Itihasa is a Sanskrit term, translated as “iti ha asa,” The meaning of this Sanskrit phrase is thus indeed it happened, an attitude to tell stories based on remembered or told incidents mixed with moral and philosophical commentary. Itihasa mostly connotes the great epics, namely, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, that incorporate history, legend, and moral teachings into large-scale narrative plots (Mankad, 2024) ^[9]. Purana, or the old, or the one that carries on the old, the Purana as a body of literature signifies the traditional knowledge which is passed down to the next generations, but with a new meaning every time. The Puranas provide cosmic, lineage, mythological, ritual, and pilgrimage culture within a set narration structure to make intricate concepts available to the varying social communities (Kumar *et al.*, 2025) ^[7]. Itihasa and Purana are two separate literary traditions that are united by bridging the gap between sacred knowledge and popular culture. Their significance in Indian literature is their presence as the means of cultural survival and continuity, as the means of moral education, and as a communal memory. Such writings influenced the history of linguistics, the local literary works, and even the performing arts like drama, dance, and storytelling (Rakhi & Verma, 2025) ^[10]. They have been used as ethical and social guides as they gave examples of perfect behaviour, administration, piety, and societal reconciliation. Also, it was the Itihasa-Purana tradition that became a source of further philosophical, religious, and literary movements, guaranteeing the continuation of the tradition of indigenous knowledge systems over centuries. Therefore, besides being a narrative form of literature, Itihasa and Purana are a complete intellectual system with which Indian civilization and literature continue to flourish and be richer (Khajuria, 2021) ^[6].

Historical Development of the Itihasa-Purana Tradition

Itihasa-Purana tradition evolved slowly within a span of centuries, starting in the period of Vedism and transforming into a huge literary and cultural system (Mankad, 2024) ^[9]. It dates back to the later Vedic period when the memory, the history of the tribe, and heroic accounts were maintained in oral forms. The mention of Itihasa and Purana in the Brahmanas, Aranyakas, and Upanishads shows that such stories were already considered a great source of knowledge and teaching (Kumar *et al.*, 2025) ^[7]. These tales served as secondary literature that elaborated philosophical and ritual ideas in a language that was easy to comprehend at this time. The epic period was a significant period of the development of this tradition, and the works of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata were created and extended. These epics combined mythology, history, morality, and

political ideals into detailed plots. By the course of time, they were used continuously and with reinterpretations, as the social and cultural contexts changed. Their contribution to the collective memory and moral values increased with this dynamic process. The period of compilation of the Puranas in the form of codification of the mythological, cosmological, and genealogical content into eighteen Mahapuranas and many Upapuranas, took place in the Puranic compilation phase of the Common Era that fell between early centuries of the Common Era up to the medieval period (Malhotra *et al.*, 2025) ^[8]. These were also encyclopedic texts, with, as well as religious dogma, traditions of pilgrimage and local histories. Sutas and professional storytellers play an important role in this process as they recited and told these stories in the royal courts, temples, and other masses of people. Preservation and popularization were guaranteed by their performances. The transmission mainly took the oral recitation and memorization, and then manuscript copying, which formed an effective oral-written continuum. Local changes even further enhanced the tradition, with the local languages, practices, and beliefs giving rise to a variety of epics and Puranas. This procedure allowed the Itihasa-Purana tradition to be flexible, all-round, and culturally applicable through time and space (Rakhi & Verma, 2025) ^[10].

Structure and Features of Itihasa-Purana Literature

Itihasa-purana literature is remembered by its unique composition structure and a deep pool of literary peculiarities, which promote successful application as a knowledge conveyor (Gupta, 2019) ^[4]. Among its most noticeable features are its narrative style, which is both a narrative and a philosophical reflection and moral education. They tend to be lengthy and episodic, with several subplots and characters living in the environs of one common theme. Complex ideas are made interesting and easy to read through dialogues, descriptions, among others, and dramatic episodes. The Vamshavalis are a genre of genealogies, which is an important structural element of the Puranas and both epics. Such lineage records track the families of kings and sages, as well as divine beings, and therefore ensure continuity in historical records and legitimate political and social power (Varadarajan *et al.*, 2022) ^[13]. Vamshavalis are also commonly used as a means of keeping collective memory and of locating individual stories in a wider time frame. Another important aspect of this literature is cosmology and myths of creation. Cycles on time and being are evident in detailed accounts of the origin, destruction, and renewal of the universe. The parts combine metaphysical theory with mythological imagery and provide symbolic explanations of nature and world phenomena. The ethical and moral system found in the works of the Itihasa purana emphasizes such ideals as dharma, duty, rightness, compassion, and self-control. Characters and events are used as examples of morals or as a lesson to a reader to act ethically. This role is further boosted by the use of symbolism and allegory, where abstract philosophical ideas are expressed by means of tangible images, deities, and scenes of the story. These iconic features allow several layers of interpretation, which are relevant to various intellectual and spiritual abilities (Ravi, 2023) ^[11]. Last but not least, didactic touches are a figure of speech in this literature. Education is provided by means of sermons, discussions, and narrative solutions, affirms the social

norms, and spiritual values. Itihasa-Purana tradition in this integrated structure can unite literary mindfulness with the wider-ranging distribution of knowledge (Josd, 2017) ^[5].

Itihasa-Purana as Knowledge Systems

Itihasa purana is a kind of system of knowledge since it takes into account various areas of human knowledge under one narration (Gupta, 2019) ^[4]. Regarding historical knowledge, the texts are important to retain the information about dynasties and lineages in detailed genealogies that create continuity between generations and justify political power. Citations of political and royal warfare, governance, and administration give an insight into the ancient government and statecraft. Besides, social hierarchies, occupations, and life in a community are also described in terms of a dominant social structure and institutions (Varadarajan *et al.*, 2022) ^[13]. The Itihasa-Purana corpus is comprised of religious and philosophical knowledge. Dharma, Karma, and Moksha are among the concepts that constantly recur and bring people to moral accountability and spiritual freedom. Bhakti traditions are encouraged in the form of devotional stories about deities such as Vishnu, Shiva, and Devi, and to achieve personal and emotional connection with the divine. Cosmological theories describe how the universe was created, structured, and is cyclical, which is a combination of metaphysics and mythology (Roy, 2025) ^[12]. These sources are also stores of social and cultural knowledge. The Varna and ashrama system is detailed to create social responsibilities and phases of life, whereas the illustrations of gender roles and family systems portray normative views of behavior and relationships. Traditions, holidays, cults, and rites of passage are given, which add to the continuity of culture. Symbolic and narrative expression contain scientific and environmental knowledge. The mention of astronomical calculations, motions of the planets, and calendars shows scientific knowledge at an early stage. Spatial knowledge is reflected in geographical descriptions of rivers, mountains, and other sacred landscapes, whereas the attitudes to health and the environment balance, the approaches used traditionally, are included in the passages on medicine and ecology (Ravi, 2023) ^[11]. Value-oriented accounts have been used to demonstrate ethical and moral knowledge, which focuses on truth, compassion, justice, and self-discipline. The perfect behavioral patterns are depicted by heroic and virtuous figures, and the leader examples advocate the idea of responsibility and service. Justice and social harmony also result in concepts of justice and social harmony, which enhance ethical governance. Therefore, the Itihasa-Purana tradition is an incorporated and manifold system of knowledge (Josd, 2017) ^[5].

Oral Tradition and Performance Culture in the Itihasa-Purana Tradition

The performance culture and oral tradition are important aspects of the Itihasa-Purana tradition, which guarantees the preservation of the traditions, their accessibility, and cultural relevance through generations. These stories were passed down and maintained orally, by recitation and storytelling, and performatory means long before the advent of the written manuscripts. Such an oral form allowed spreading knowledge to various social groups, including those who were not provided with formal access to knowledge. Katha and Pravachan helped to popularize Itihasa-Purana stories.

Katha is storytelling with the use of music and theatrical performance, whereas Pravachan is the interpretative discourses presented by the learned and spiritual gurus. The two forms were used to elaborate on philosophical and ethical ideas in a simplified and interesting style. Harikatha, a devotional music, narration, and commentary performance, added more weight to this tradition, creating an emotional and spiritual relation to divine tales. Likewise, Kathakali, or the classical form of dance drama, reshaped the epic and Puranic episodes into visual expressions in the form of elaborate costumes, gestures, and facial expressions (Mankad, 2024) ^[9]. These performances were supported by temple and court traditions. Temples became big organizations of religious and cultural activity, and the recitations and enactments were components of the ritual life. They were supported by royal courts where scholars, poets, and performers were honored and encouraged to consider methods of preservation and perfecting these traditions. This kind of patronage guaranteed artistic perfection as well as social status among storytellers (Khajuria, 2021) ^[6]. Transmission in the community was one of the primary ways of the tradition. Narratives were common within the village, household entities, and group events, which led to experience in memory and belonging. The role of memory and improvisations was quite significant, as, according to the local context and the contemporary concerns, the performers depended on memorizing the stories and adjusting them to local needs. The interactive aspect was further enhanced by the involvement of the audience (in terms of response, singing devotional songs) and interacting with the audience (emotionally). This was an active oral and performance tradition through which, by means of this dynamic and active culture of Itihasa-Purana, knowledge became a living and growing tradition (Kumar *et al.*, 2025) ^[7].

Contemporary Relevance of the Itihasa-Purana Tradition

The Itihasa-purana tradition still poses a deep impact on the modern Indian society, proving its timeless applicability in the modern intellectual, cultural, and social realities. In the literature of the contemporary world, the ideas of the Ramayana, Mahabharata, and Puranas as the basis of the plot, characters, and motifs are often present in novels, poems, and drama. Authors reformulate classical tales to suit current problems like identity, ethics, sex, and social justice to update the old tales for new readers. The Itihasa choir of Purana is a valuable source of education on moral code, cultural history, and philosophy in the education sector. They are being taught in schools and higher education, as well as in informal settings of religious institutions and societies. The storyline used is the one that enables them to get acquainted with learning in an experiential and value-based manner; thus, they can learn complex concepts easily (Rakhi & Verma, 2025) ^[10]. The digital preservation made the tradition reach a lot further. Online archives, digital libraries, and mobile applications can now provide manuscripts, critical editions, translations, and audio-visual recordings. Scholarly collaboration and access to different parts of the world are also due to this technological integration, as it protects delicate materials. It is the popular culture that has significantly contributed to keeping the population entertained with Itihasa-Purana

stories. The epic and Puranic tales have been transformed into television serials, graphic novels, animation, and online storytelling platforms, the re-enactments of which have become available to modern audiences. These narratives have been converted by media and cinema, especially, into strong visual images, increasing their emotional interest and the impact on the masses. Moreover, the tradition of Itihasa-Purana helps to build national and cultural identity. It offers common symbols, values, and past that encompass a sense of unity and continuity. These texts still influence the cultural consciousness of India by strengthening the ethical doctrines, spiritual heritage, and shared memory. Therefore, with remodelling and invention, the Itihasa-Purana culture constitutes an empirical and significant body of knowledge in the contemporary world (Malhotra *et al.*, 2025) [8].

Challenges and Criticisms of the Itihasa-Purana Tradition

The Itihasa purana tradition, characterized by its enormous literary and cultural value, has come under different questions and critical discussions, especially in modern academic and intellectual publications (Bisschop, 2021) [2]. Among the great issues is that of historical accuracy. There is a long-standing debate among scholars on whether the texts could be considered credible historical sources or not, since at times they tend to mix factual occurrences with mythological and supernatural elements (Gupta, 2019) [4]. This has given a divergent understanding of their ability to date back to ancient Indian history, as far as their value is concerned. Another crucial field of criticism is the differentiation of myth and history. Whereas the conventional view prefers that these narratives make sense about cultural truth, the contemporary historiography usually requires factual materials and accuracy in the identification of time. Consequently, symbolic and allegorical levels of the Purana literature of Itihasa are misconceived or underestimated. Interpolations and variants of text also pose additional problems. During centuries of oral tradition and book reproduction, numerous passages were either added, edited, or taken out, and in so doing, several different versions of the same text emerged (Josd, 2017) [5]. They are not easily analyzed and interpreted by a scholar because they introduce the difficulty of creating an original or authoritative version. In various puranas, sectarianism is also present and encourages certain religious practices like Vaishnavism, Shaivism, or Shaktism. These sectarian inclinations can lead to biased representations of gods, doctrines, and practices and restrict the universality of some texts. Also, the political readings have played an important role in shaping the way these stories are received in modern society. The ideological agendas are sometimes branded using ecics and puranas, resulting in selective reading and historical falsification. Accessibility and comprehension are also complicated by translation problems. Translating complicated Sanskrit phrases, metaphors, and cultural allusions into contemporary languages normally leads to perceived degradation of connotation and contextual meaning. Wrong or prejudiced translations can support false impressions and distort purposes. The above challenges define the necessity of critical, contextual, and interdisciplinary methods in the exploration of the Itihasa-Purana tradition (Aralikatte *et al.*, 2021) [1].

Discussion

The existing paper outlines various facets of the Itihasa-purana tradition to clarify why it is a relevant undertaking as a literary work. One can observe that such writings are not mere mythological, devotional narratives, but also complete archives of historical memory, philosophy, the organization of the society that produced them, and ethics (Gupta, 2019) [4]. The paper exposes how these modes of their oral transmission, their narrative aspects, and their culture allow them to contribute to the survival and propagation of indigenous knowledge across generations. The interpretation of results refers to the fact that the tradition of Itihasa-Purana is rather efficient since it has different sorts of knowledge which are integrated with the assistance of the interesting scheme of narration. Mythology, history, symbolism, and moral education make these texts report complex concepts in formats that are easy to use. This aspect of multi-faculty is important because it is still relevant and monumental in both conventional and contemporary meanings. As a response to the research questions, the study confirms the fact that the Itihasa-Purana corpus is constructed as the system of systemic and dynamic knowledge, rooted in cultural memory and on the experience of collective memory. It demonstrates the contribution of the oral and written tradition, performance practice, and regional adaptation to the survival of these tales in modified forms (Aralikatte *et al.*, 2021) [1]. As well, the analysis concludes that these writings played a significant role during the formation of the moral codes, religion, and social frames of reference. Theoretical implications of the study are that there should be an appreciation of the indigenous literary traditions as valid epistemological systems. With cultural memory, narrative, and oral tradition theories, the study propagates a Eurocentric paradigm maliciously, and in that case, the non-Western knowledge base is marginalized (Bisschop, 2021) [2]. It brings out the importance of contextual and interdisciplinary methodology in literary and cultural studies. However, the limitations of the study are also present. It is primarily grounded on the selected texts and secondary literature, which may be too restrictive for the analysis. There are also language barriers and the absence of local manuscripts, which also play a role in the comprehensiveness. The future extension of this framework is facilitated with the assistance of comparative research, empirical results, and digital humanities to receive a more sophisticated approach (Gadesha *et al.*, 2022) [3].

Conclusion

This paper has considered the Itihasa tradition of the Purana as a holistic literary knowledge system blending all the historical, religious, social, scientific, and ethical aspects within a unitary narrative. The great discoveries include the fact that the Ramayana, Mahabharata, and Puranas are more than merely mythology or devotional literature but are living archives of general history, a memory store of the native wisdom. These texts made cultural knowledge continuity and adaptability across centuries through oral transmission, performance practices, and written preservation. The study makes a contribution to the existing literature because it identifies the epistemological importance of the Itihasa-Purana corpus. Placing such readings in the context of indigenous knowledge systems, the study opposes the temptation of this kind of interpretation in terms of either the religious or fictional

sphere. It shows the work of narrative, symbolism, and moral discourse as the efficient means of knowledge dispensation and social ordering. The fact that the interdisciplinary approach has been taken in carrying out this research also supports the fact that the research has academic relevance. The importance of this work is that it tries to reconcile the classical attitudes with the contemporary critical ideas. It promotes a moderate comprehension that avoids any manner of cultural blindness in the undertaking of academic scrutiny. The research advances understanding of the Indian literary and philosophical tradition in world literature by showing the thoughtfulness of the Itihasa-Purana tradition. Further studies can be directed towards comparative analysis with other ancient knowledge systems, local and vernacular versions, and implementation of digital humanities in order to analyse and preserve manuscripts. Empirical research on the modern performance customs and reception could also contribute. To sum up, Itihasa-purana tradition is a very dynamic and alive system of knowledge and remains influential in the way of cultural awareness and morality. Its timelessness testifies to the fact that it is a strong support of the Indian civilization and literature.

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