



Ashwamedha Yagya in Puran

Manisha Bhardwaj¹

¹Assistant Teacher, Shri Balbharti Prasad Shukla Public School, Chinhat, Lucknow, India

Abstract. The Ashwamedha yagya is one of the most important ritualistic practices in Indian culture and society. It was performed to uplift human consciousness and refine mass consciousness. The Puranas serve as excellent sources for understanding the history of Indian society, containing information about lineages, dynasties, and their actions. The present study aims to provide an overview of instances where accounts of the Ashwamedha yagya were performed in history. Instances of Ashwamedh yagya are ample in the Puranas. Ashwamedha Yagya in the Chandravanshi (Lunar Dynasty) (Mahabharat era), Ikshvaku Dynasty (Ramayan era), Ashwamedha Yagya in Other Great Dynasties including beyond Ramayan era, and Ashwamedha Yagya by the Great Sages are noted in the present perspective review. Furthermore, stories of the performance of the Ashwamedha Yagya abound in the Puranas, indicating that these rituals were among the most sacred and highly revered events in ancient Indian culture.

Keywords. Ashwamedh yagya, Puran

*CORRESPONDENCE

Assistant Teacher, Shri
Balbharti Prasad Shukla
Public School, Chinhat,
Lucknow, India
+91 9873881848

Email

manisha.mokshda@gmail.com

PUBLISHED BY

Dev Sanskriti Vishwavidyalaya,
Gayatrikunj-Shantikunj,
Haridwar, India

OPEN ACCESS

Copyright (c) 2024 Manisha
Bhardwaj
Licensed under a Creative
Commons Attribution 4.0
International License



Introduction

The Ashwamedha (Ashwamedha) yagya is one of the most important ritualistic practices in Indian culture and society. The Ashwamedha yagya was performed to uplift human consciousness and refine mass consciousness. The Rigveda describes the Ashwamedha yagya, where the horse symbolizes energy. This ritual is performed when universal forces or energies are united for the purpose of mass upliftment. Therefore, whenever a king achieved geographical unity in their kingdom, the next step was to culturally, spiritually, and ethically elevate society through the performance of the Ashwamedha yagya. During these ceremonies, every part of society would come together to participate and receive righteous direction, thus fostering harmony in human society and ecological balance as well [1].

The Puranas serve as excellent sources for understanding the history of Indian society, containing information about lineages, dynasties, and their actions. The symbolic writings of the Puranas contain philosophy, metaphysics, historical events, dynasties, values, and messages, requiring painstaking effort to extract justifiable meaning [2]. The present study aims to provide an overview of instances where accounts of the Ashwamedha yagya are performed in history. The timeline of kings in the Puranas is beyond the scope of this paper; rather, the study aims to obtain a view of the presence of the Ashwamedha yagya in Puranic literature. Among all the Puranas, only those that specifically mention the performance of the Ashwamedha yagya are included in this study.

Instances of Puranic References to the Ashwamedha Yagya

Upon examining the Puranas, it becomes apparent that many instances of the Ashwamedha yagya are traced through references found in the Mahabharata, which serves as an epic detailing of the history of Puranic kings and their dynasties in depth.

Ashwamedha Yagya in the Ikshvaku (Ikshvaku) Dynasty

The Ikshvaku dynasty holds a distinguished status in Indian literature, being notably referenced in the Geeta where it is mentioned that transcendental knowledge was passed to Manu's son, King Ikshvaku.

Within this lineage, King Sagara performed the Ashwamedha yagya, with Vashishtha and other revered sages serving as priests [3]. Notably, Sagara conducted an Ashwamedha Yagya at a confluence of rivers Sindhu and Gaṅgā [4]. Additionally, other kings of the Ikshvaku dynasty, such as King Ila, and even Lord Rama himself, are mentioned as having performed this ritual [5–7]. King Janaka of this dynasty is also documented as having conducted an Ashwamedha yagya, as per the Vishnu Purana [8].

During the reign of King Vahu, son of Vrika in the solar dynasty of Ikshvaku, the earth was divided into dvipas (continent), and an Ashwamedha yagya was performed on each of these regions [9]. Furthermore, Yuvanāśva, another king from the Ikshvaku lineage, gained acclaim through his multiple performances of the Ashwamedha yagya [10].

Ashwamedha Yagya in the Chandravanshi (Lunar Dynasty)

The Mahabharata accounts for a prominent lunar dynasty featuring great kings.

Notably, King Bharata performed thirty-three Ashwamedhas on the banks of the Yamunā river [11]. Moreover, King Santanu is mentioned as having conducted the Ashwamedha yagya and one hundred rājasūyas, as documented in the Adi Parva of Mahabharata [12].

The Ashwamedha yagya was thrice performed by Yudhiṣṭhira and thrice by Parīkṣit, the grandson of Arjun and son of Abhimanyu [13, 14]. Additionally, Janamejaya, the son of King Parikshit, performed the Ashwamedha yagya twice [15].

References in the Mahabharata also include accounts of Krishna performing the Ashwamedha yagya at Dvārakā [16]. Furthermore, a hundred such yagyas were performed by Pṛthu, although in the final one, the horse was stolen

by Indra [17]. Instances of the Ashwamedha yagya being performed by Aṅga, when the Gods did not respond to his call, are also documented [18]. The Droṇa Parva and Shanti Parva of Mahabharata provide additional mentions of the Ashwamedha yagya [19]. Finally, after Pṛthu's land became prosperous, he performed an Ashwamedha yagya [20].

Ashwamedha Yagya in Other Great Dynasties

King Bali performed one hundred Ashwamedha yagyas; one notable instance was at Ambariṣa, where Vasiṣṭha and Gautama were present [21]. Additionally, a king from Ratnanagara conducted seven Ashwamedha Yagya [22]. Rukmakavaca, born in the dynasty of Ikshvaku according to the Harivaṃśa, also performed the Ashwamedha yagya [23]. Furthermore, Aṣṭaka, son of Viśvāmitra, undertook an Ashwamedha Yagya [24]. Vāli, after defeating the lord of the Rākṣasas at Puṣkara, performed the Ashwamedha yagya along with various other Yagya [25]. The lineage of King Śaśabindu, including King Uśanas, witnessed the performance of a hundred Ashwamedha yagyas [26]. Brave Rukmakavaca, son of King Kambalabarhiṣ, also conducted the Ashwamedha yagya [27]. King Abhijit sought a son through the Ashwamedha yagya, resulting in the birth of the virtuous scholar Punarvasu [28]. Additionally, Somadatta performed one hundred Ashwamedha yagyas, considered as efficacious as reading the Viṣṇu Purāṇa [29].

Ashwamedha Yagya by the Great Sages

According to scripture, Lord Himself created the rituals, including the Ashwamedha yagya [30]. The Taittirīyasamhitā mentions that even the Gods Themselves performed the Ashwamedha yagya to absolve Themselves of sins [31]. Indra also conducted the Ashwamedha yagya [32]. The Agni Purana delineates different forms of Agni, among which the Ashwamedha form is considered the excellent [33]. Chapter 11 of the Padma Purana is dedicated to the Ashwamedha yagya, titled "The Ashwamedha Horse Is Let Loose" [34]. Addition-

ally, Paraśurāma is recorded to have performed the Ashwamedha yagya [35]. Naimisharanya, an ancient Teerth, witnessed 88,000 rishis performing the Ashwamedha Yagya for thousands of years [36]. Sage Kaśyapa once conducted an Ashwamedha yajña [37], and Rishi Kasyapa performed the Ashwamedha yagya at the sacred pilgrimage site named Puskarā, presently in Rajasthan, India [38]. Other sages also undertook the Ashwamedha yagya [39].

Discussion & Conclusion

Well-described chapters in scriptures on the Ashwamedha Yagya are found in the Ramayana, where it was performed by Lord Rama, and in the Mahabharata, performed by Yudhisthira under the guidance of Lord Shri Krishna. In the Puranas, aside from these two prominent events, other performances are mentioned anecdotally but lack a full dedicated chapter.

One intriguing observation from the study is that whenever the significance of a certain event or practice needs to be established, it is often compared to the results of the performance of the Ashwamedha Yagya. Scriptures not only glorify the Ashwamedha Yagya but also emphasize the importance of maintaining a sound ecosystem and developing harmony with nature. For example, the significance of constructing a lake is likened to the performance of the Ashwamedha Yagya, where it is stated that "a person who constructs a lake attains 100 million times more excellence than those who perform the ritual of Ashwamedha Yagya and goes directly to heaven" [40].

Furthermore, stories of the performance of the Ashwamedha Yagya abound in the Puranas, indicating that these rituals were among the most sacred and highly revered events in ancient Indian culture.

Compliance with ethical standards Not required.

Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest. **Financial support and sponsorship** None

References

- [1] Sharma B, editor. Akhand Jyoti. Dev sanskriti Digvijay ank November. Akhand jyoti sansthan mathura. 1992;1(22). Available from: awgp.org

- [2] Sharma, PT Shriram. Padma Puran Khand-I, Puran bhumika. 1968. Sanskriti Sansthan Vednagar Bareilly. Available from: archive.org
- [3] Wilson HH. The Vishnu Purana. London: Trübner Co; 1864. Chapter IV - Ashvamedha sacrifice of Sagara; p. 457. ISBN-10: 8171102127.
- [4] Veṭṭaṃmāṇi. Purāṇic Encyclopaedia: A Comprehensive Dictionary with Special Reference to the Epic and Purāṇic Literature, Story of Kapila. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass; 1975. ISBN-10: 0842608222.
- [5] Wilson HH. The Vishnu Purana. London: Trübner Co; 1864. Comment 5 - Dynasties of the kings, p. 457. ISBN-10: 8171102127.
- [6] Gangadharan N. The Agni Purana. South Asia Books; 1954. Chapter 10 - Manifestation of Viṣṇu as Rāma (part 6). ISBN-10: 8120803590 | ISBN-13: 9788120803596.
- [7] Geetapress. Valmiki Ramayan, Sarg 6, Chapter 128, Shloka 95-96. Geetapress Gorakhpur; 2015.
- [8] "Shatadhanu and Shaivya." Wisdomlib.org, 25 May 2013, <https://www.wisdomlib.org/hinduism/book/the-vishnu-purana/d/doc57608.html>. wisdomlib.org
- [9] Tagare, Ganesh Vasudeo, translator. The Narada Purana. Motilal Banarsidass; 1998.
- [10] Buck, William. Mahabharata, Araṇya Parva Chapter 126. University of California Press; 1982.
- [11] Veṭṭaṃmāṇi. Purāṇic Encyclopaedia: A Comprehensive Dictionary with Special Reference to the Epic and Purāṇic Literature, Vana Parva, Chapter 90, Verse 8. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass; 1975. ISBN-10: 0842608222.
- [12] Kisari Mohan Ganguli (Editor). Mahabharata (English), Ādi Parva, Chapter 96, Verse 2. Oriental Publishing Co, 11D, Surendralal Pyne Lane, Culcatta-12; 2007.
- [13] Geetapress. Shrimadbhagvat Mahapurana, Volume-1 and 2, With Hindi Translation, I. 8. 6; 10. 2. [1]; 12. 34. Geetapress gorakhpur. 2005.
- [14] G. V. Tagare, The Bhagavata Purana, Book I Chapter 16 Shlok 3., 1950 ISBN-10: 8120838203, ISBN-13: 9788120838208.
- [15] The Vishnu Purana, by Horace Hayman Wilson, Comment section in Chapter XXI - Narration of the kings of the future periods, London: Trübner Co; 1864. ISBN-10: 8171102127.
- [16] G. V. Tagare, The Bhagavata Purana, Book IV Chapter 89 Shlok 22-64, 1950 ISBN-10: 8120838203, ISBN-13: 9788120838208.
- [17] G. V. Tagare, The Bhagavata Purana, Book IV Chapter 16 Shlok 24, 1950 ISBN-10: 8120838203, ISBN-13: 9788120838208.
- [18] G. V. Tagare, The Bhagavata Purana, Book IV Chapter 13 Shlok 25., 1950 ISBN-10: 8120838203, ISBN-13: 9788120838208.
- [19] Veṭṭaṃmāṇi. Purāṇic Encyclopaedia: A Comprehensive Dictionary with Special Reference to the Epic and Purāṇic Literature, Drona Parva Chapter 68. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass; 1975. ISBN-10: 0842608222.
- [20] Geetapress. Shrimadbhagvat Mahapurana, Volume-1 and 2, With Hindi Translation, 4th skand. Geetapress gorakhpur. 2005.
- [21] G. V. Tagare, The Bhagavata Purana, Book VIII Chapter 15 Shlok 34 and Book IX Chapter 4 Shlok 22., 1950 ISBN-10: 8120838203, ISBN-13: 9788120838208. 15. 34, Ib. IX. 4. 22
- [22] Veṭṭaṃmāṇi. Purāṇic Encyclopaedia: A Comprehensive Dictionary with Special Reference to the Epic and Purāṇic Literature, Story of Mayūradhvaja. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass; 1975. ISBN-10: 0842608222.
- [23] Veṭṭaṃmāṇi. Purāṇic Encyclopaedia: A Comprehensive Dictionary with Special Reference to the Epic and Purāṇic Literature, Story of Jyāmagha. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass; 1975. ISBN-10: 0842608222.
- [24] Veṭṭaṃmāṇi. Purāṇic Encyclopaedia: A Comprehensive Dictionary with Special Reference to the Epic and Purāṇic Literature, Story of Aṣṭaka. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass; 1975. ISBN-10: 0842608222.
- [25] Tagare, G. V., editor. Brahmanda Purana, section 3, chapter 7, Shloka 268, South Asia Books, 1958. ISBN-13: 9788120838246.
- [26] Tagare, G. V., editor. Brahmanda Purana, Brahmāṇḍa-purāṇa section 3, chapter 70, shloka 24, South Asia Books, 1958. ISBN-13: 9788120838246.
- [27] Tagare, G. V., editor. Brahmanda Purana, section - 3, chapter 26-27, South Asia Books, 1958. ISBN-13: 9788120838246.
- [28] Tagare, G. V., editor. Brahmanda Purana, section 3, chapter 71 shloka 119, South Asia Books, 1958. ISBN-13: 9788120838246.
- [29] The Vishnu Purana, by Horace Hayman Wilson, Comment section in Chapter IV. 1. 56 and chapter VI. 8. 28 34, London: Trübner Co; 1864. ISBN-10: 8171102127.
- [30] Tagare, G. V., editor. Brahmanda Purana, section 3, chapter 72 shloka 28, South Asia Books, 1958. ISBN-13: 9788120838246.
- [31] "Concept of Expiation and the Term Prāyaścitta." Wisdomlib.org, 11 Jan. 2023, <https://www.wisdomlib.org/hinduism/essay/expiatory-rites-in-keralite-tantra/d/doc1150744.html>. wisdomlib.org
- [32] Tagare, G. V., editor. Brahmanda Purana, section 2, chapter 30 shloka 10, South Asia Books, 1958. ISBN-13: 9788120838246.
- [33] Gangadharan N. The Agni Purana. South Asia Books; 1954. Chapter 10 - Chapter 32 - Narration about the purificatory rites. ISBN-10: 8120803590 | ISBN-13: 9788120803596.

- [34] N.A. Deshpande. The Padma Purana. Chapter 11 - The Ashwamedha Horse Is Let Loose. Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Pvt. 1951. ISBN-10: 8120838297, ISBN-13: 9788120838291.
- [35] Buck, William. Mahabharata, drona parva Chapter 70. University of California Press; 1982.
- [36] Pathik P. The Historical and Philosophical Exegesis on Yagya in Ancient India. Interdisciplinary Journal of Yagya Research. 2019;2(1):20-28. doi.org.
- [37] Veṭṭammāṇi. Purāṇic Encyclopaedia: A Comprehensive Dictionary with Special Reference to the Epic and Purāṇic Literature, Story about the name Hiranyakaśipu. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass; 1975. ISBN-10: 0842608222.
- [38] Tagare, G. V., editor. Brahmanda Purana, section 3, chapter 5 shloka 7, South Asia Books, 1958. ISBN-13: 9788120838246.
- [39] Bhatt, G. P., editor. The Vayu Purana:. Translated by Ganesh Vasudeo Tagare, 20. 16; 32. 52; 30. 291; 50. 221; 57. 52; 60. 23; 67. 50, 53-8; 71. 77. Motilal Banarsidass, 1987. Vāyu-purāṇa.
- [40] Ramchandra, T. V., Subhas Chandran, M. D. and Joshi, N.V., 2014, Water bodies of Uttra Kannada, ENVIS Technical Report: 81, pp. 1-109. ces.iisc.ernet.in