

Geographical interpretation of clouds & rain as delineated in the viṣṇu purāṇa

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Abstract

The *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* is the store house of geographical information. The author has given an attempt to bring out the geographical interpretation of clouds and rain as per the text of the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa*. The basic objective of this paper is focused on the formation, types, process and other related phenomena associated with clouds and rain. Besides, it reflects the meteorological concepts like insolation, evaporation, evapo-transpiration, condensation, precipitation, hydrological cycle and weather disturbances like cyclones, floods and draughts. Lastly, it is concluded that our ancients have sufficient knowledge about clouds and rain along with other related phenomena though they lacked in their scientific approach.

Keywords: Viṣṇu Purāṇa, Ancient Indian Geography, Clouds and Rainfall, Purāṇic Meteorology, Hydrological Cycle, Cloud Formation, Monsoon, Orographic Rainfall.

Introduction

The only species of Indian Literature next to the *Vedas* is the *Purāṇas* which are considered to be the storehouse of all branches of knowledge. In this regard, the *Vaiṣṇava* or *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* is considered as one of the eighteen *Mahāpurāṇas* in which Lord *Viṣṇu* is praised and glorified as the Supreme Being, as the one and only one God with whom also *Brahma* and *Śiva* are identical. He is considered to be the creator as well as the protector of the world. According to Ramānuja, this is the best work of *Vaiṣṇavas* or *Viṣṇu* worshippers. The essence of all the *Purāṇas* elevates its position and dignity amongst the important *Purāṇas* for which it is popularly known as *Purāṇa Samhitā*. In the context of *Mahāpurāṇa* as the *Viṣṇu* has occupied the third position in the list next to the *Brahma* and the *Padma*¹. However, from the historical point of view, the *Viṣṇu* should be given the statuesque of the first and foremost position among all the *Purāṇas* as because it has been composed by *Parāśara*, the grandson of *Vasiṣṭha*, contrary to which, all other *Purāṇas* have been attributed to *Vyāsa*² the son of *Parāśara*. Besides, the *Viṣṇu* is perhaps the only *Purana* whose contents can give the reader the best idea of the contents and significances of *Purāṇas* in general. Hence, this *Purāṇa* is claimed to be the best by the *Vaiṣṇavites* which is indicated by the following verse:

*bhārate bhagavadgītā dharmasāstreṣu mānavah
vedeṣu Pauruṣaṁ sūktam Purāṇeṣu ca Vaiṣṇavam.*

However, various literature surveys and discussions conclude that the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* is perhaps the only work which not only spells out the *Pancalakṣaṇa* of a *Purāṇa* i.e., “*sargaśca pratisargaśca vaṁśo manvantarāṇi ca, vaṁśānucaritam caiva purāṇam pañcalakṣaṇam*”³ but also confirms to the definition of a *Purāṇa* almost exactly. Each of the six books (*aṁśas*) of the *Viṣṇu* presents a sequence of material essential to a *Purāṇa*. Besides, the geographical description of this *Purāṇa* is rather quite concise and condensed and omits the details as being found in case of other *Purāṇas*. Despite such store house of knowledge, this *Purāṇa* has not yet been explored properly for the common uses, for which, the authors have taken an attempt to give the geographical interpretation of ‘Clouds and Rain’ in a systematic and scientific manner basing on the description of the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa*.

Database & Methodology

The Present paper is purely based on primary as well as secondary sources of Information all of which are available in the published form. However, the primary sources of Information are mainly based on the description of the *Viṣṇu* along with the descriptions found in the *R̥gveda*, the *Yajurveda*, the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, the *Taittiriya Āraṇyaka*, the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the *Mahābhārat*, the *Vāyu Purāṇa*, the *Brahmaṇḍa Purāṇa*, the *Matsya Purāṇa* and the *Meghadūtam* of Kālidasa. Contrary to this, the secondary sources of information are the works of earlier researchers belonging to different disciplines of knowledge not only from India but also from abroad.

Scope & Limitations

Despite, several conflicts, confusions and differences of opinion due to lack of clarities, the authors have given due regards to the opinions of the earlier researchers and attempted to give a clear-cut picture with suitable references of the ‘Clouds and Rain’ (*Megha & Varṣā*) as described in the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* and interpreted these scientifically on the system of modern geography.

However, the title of the paper indicates its limitation i.e. the content should be confirmed purely to the descriptions of the *Viṣṇu* focusing on the formation, nomenclature, types as well as activities of ‘Clouds & Rain’ (*Megha & Varṣā*) in connection with the weather and climatic phenomena with respect to the references taken from the earlier literature survey starting from the *Vedas* to the *Meghadūtam* of Kālidasa for their identification, comparison and interpretation which clearly reflects the accurate

knowledge of our ancients about its genesis and types having close proximity to modern sciences.

Description and Interpretation of Clouds and Rain

With the aforesaid background the authors have tried their best to give the geographical interpretation of the 'Clouds and Rain' (*Megha & Varṣā*) which are as follows: Clouds may be defined as masses of small water drops or ice crystals being formed by condensation of water vapour in the atmosphere, usually at a considerable height above earth's surface, the water vapour being created through evaporation of surface water i.e., oceans, lakes, rivers etc.. In other words, clouds are formed out of minute particles of water. These particles are held by the rising air and cannot fall down unless they grow large enough.

The concept of insolation, evaporation, moisture, clouds and rainfall are referred to be mentioned in the *R̥gveda* as explained by *Sayanācārya*⁴. It has also been mentioned in the same Veda that winds (air in motion is called as wind, contrary to which, air is simply a mixture of different gases) are the chief instruments which not only cause rainfall but also carry clouds⁵ from one place to another. However, there is no clear-cut mention of the monsoon to be found in the *R̥gveda*, though the *Marut* hymns have given quite good and satisfactory descriptions about weather and climate conditions. Later on, the *Yajurvedasamhitā* clearly refers to *Salilavata* i.e., moist wind⁶ which probably signifies the monsoon i.e., wind system which is not only seasonal but also reversal in their direction from season to season. It will however, not be unreasonable, if the south-west and north-east monsoons are traced in the *R̥gveda*, where there is also better reference to rain bearing winds⁷. The Mantra of the *R̥gveda* describes the winds ascending mountains which can signify to the cause of Orographically rainfall (i.e., mountain rainfall). Very scientific descriptions of clouds i.e., stone like solid, down hanging and water laden are found in the *R̥gveda*. In a versa⁸, Macdonell explains the word 'Miha' as mist, with which one cannot differ easily, though at other place miha signifies rainfall.

J. Eggeling, in his introduction to English translation of the *Śatapathabrāhmaṇa*⁹ purposefully says that the Vedic Literature mythically describes the Indian atmospheric phenomena, especially those of the monsoons and rainy season and the violent thunder storms by which they are usually accompanied. In two Mantras there are references to sixty-three and forty-nine types of winds respectively whose climatological and meteorological implications are still unravel and they are mostly treated as merely mythologies.

The *Taittirīya Āraṇyaka*¹⁰ spells out that there are seven types of air currents or winds in the atmosphere which produce seven types of clouds of the same appellations. These are (i) *Vārāhavā*, (ii) *Svātapasa*, (iii) *Vidyunmahāsa*, (iv) *Dhūpaya*, (v) *Svāpaya*, (vi) *Gṛhamedha* and (vii) *Asimividviṣa*.

According to the commentary of Sāyaṇācārya, the *Vārāhavā* creates circumstances which are responsible for condensation and good rainfall, contrary to which, the *Svātapasa* is that whose temperature condition is little affected by insolation or the sun and perhaps occur at a higher altitude and is responsible for precipitation. Similarly, the *Vidyunmahāsa* (strong ascending air current) gives rise to thunderstorm, the *Dhūpaya* possesses some latent property which is responsible for the discharge of latent heat of clouds, the *Svāpaya* possesses the property of permeating or expanding quickly and the *Gṛhamedha* affects the humidity or moisture content of the atmosphere. These six categories belong to a single genus and have a single or similar region of activity, contrary to which, the *Asimividviṣa* belongs to another genus whose geographical realm or region is different from the preceding six though it is highly favourable for the purpose of agriculture. As per Sāyaṇa, these seven winds give rise to seven classes of clouds which bring rainfall.

The same *Āraṇyaka* also mentions two other types of clouds, namely *Samvarta* and *Bahusomagī*. While *Samvarta* is associated with torrential rainfall, *Bahusomagī* is described by Rājendralāla Mitra, the editor of the *Taittirīya Āraṇyaka*¹¹, as “the moving nimbus full of water”.

Later, the *Rāmāyaṇa*¹² classifies clouds into three types - *Brahma*, *Āgneya* and *Pakṣaja*. The *Mahābhārata*, on the other hand, categorizes clouds into four types, namely *Samvartaka*, *Vālākā*, *Kundadhara* and *Uttanka*, the last being associated with rainfall in arid or desert regions¹³.

The phenomena of evaporation, cloud formation, classification of clouds and their relationship with winds or regions of the atmosphere are quite satisfactorily discussed in several *Purāṇas*, like the *Vāyu*, the *Matsya* and the *Brahmāṇḍa*, in which a full-fledged separate chapter has been devoted to these topics, which positively indicates that due importance had been given to this branch of geography or meteorology during the age of *Purāṇas*¹⁴.

In this connection, the *Vāyu*, the *Matsya* and the *Brahmāṇḍa* deserve special mention. In the

context of general genesis of clouds, the *Vāyu Purāṇa* says that there is moisture content in all the movable or immovable objects of the world and this moisture evaporates causing increase of humidity in the atmosphere owing to insolation which subsequently leads to the formation of clouds because of condensation. Thus, it may be concluded that huge water bodies, winds or atmosphere and sun rays or insolation play the dominant role in causing evaporation, condensation and rain. Winds determine the distribution of the rainfall.

However, details about clouds in *Purāṇas* like the *Vāyu* and *Brahmāṇḍa* are found to be more or less similar. They say that these clouds give or sprinkle water are called *megha* as against those do not bring any rainfall are known as *abhra*. As per their descriptions, there are three types of clouds, such as (i) *Āgneya*, (ii) *Brahmaja*, and (iii) *Pakṣaja*. According to the above mentioned two *Purāṇas*, (i) *Āgneya* occurs during the winter season (*śīta-durdina-vāta*) and it assumes the forms of a buffalo, boar or elephant being devoid of lightning and thunder (*vidyud-guṇa-vihīnāḥ*). These are of immense expanse (*mahākāyāḥ*) and found in mountain foot (*parvatāgranitambeṣu*) which brings rainfall within the radius of a mile or two. This description approximates mostly to the nimbus clouds of the modern meteorology, (ii) The *Brahmaja* are produced due to respiration of *Brahma*, perhaps symbolically implying convection currents. These are the clouds accompanied with lightning and thunder and bring rainfall over an area of radius nearly one *Yojana* (five or eight miles). Most probably these are cumulonimbus clouds. Contrary to this, (iii) *Pakṣaja* clouds are those which originate from or in the wings of mountains (*pakṣasambhavāḥ*). In other words, these are the clouds originate on the windward slope of the mountain due to their forceful rise towards the mountain top which ultimately lead to condensation. They assume various forms and produce deep rumbling sounds. They are full of profuse water and bring excessive rainfall which are at times extremely destructive. This description confirms to a large extent that *Pakṣaja* clouds are the same as the alto-stratus clouds of the modern meteorology.

The clouds *Puṣkarāvarta*¹⁵ have been born from the wings of mountains and these wings are named *Puṣkara* and hold a huge volume of water, hence the clouds are known as *Puṣkarāvarta*.

In *Meghadūta*, Kālidāsa has clearly spelt out the process of cloud formation (*dhūma-jyotiḥ-salila-marutām saṁnipātaḥ kva meghaḥ*)¹⁶. He has discussed the route of the cloud messenger in his *Meghadūta* which appears to be parallel to the present Monsoon routes. The *Meghadūta* comprises the descriptions of more or less all cloud types now recognized by modern meteorology. His *Puṣkara* and *Āvartaka* clouds

passing over Āmrakūṭa (Amarkantak hills) are virtually the cirrus and cirrostratus clouds having white in colour occur at an elevation of 6 to 10 kms. in the atmosphere. The *Varṣāmegha* (Nimbus) are picturesquely described by Kālidāsa in his *Meghadūta*. These clouds which give heavy down pour (*Saliloddhāra*) and torrential rain (*vāri-dhāra-sahasraiḥ*) fairly possess the characteristics of cumulonimbus clouds.

Building upon the foregoing literature survey, the present study attempts to examine the descriptions found in the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* concerning various phenomena associated with clouds and rainfall. First, the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* states that the Sun draws up water during eight months of the year, which constitutes the essence of all fluids, and subsequently returns it to the earth in the form of rain during the remaining four months. The relevant passage reads:

“*vivasvān aṣṭabhir māsair ādāya āpo rasātmikāḥ,*
varṣaty ambu tataś cānnaṃ annād apy akhilaṃ jagat .”¹⁷

This passage presents a cyclical conception of water in which solar activity, atmospheric moisture, rainfall, vegetation, food, and the sustenance of the entire world are interconnected.

Further, *Viṣṇu Purāṇa*¹⁸ provides a detailed account of the processes associated with the formation and retention of clouds. According to the text, the Sun, through its powerful rays, draws moisture from the earth, by which the Moon is nourished. The Moon subsequently communicates this moisture to the clouds through channels of air. The clouds are described as being constituted of smoke (*dhūma*), fire (*agni*), and wind or vapour (*vāyu*), and as possessing the capacity to retain the water with which they are charged. They are consequently designated *Abhra*, a term explained in relation to their ability to hold or retain water without allowing it to disperse.

This mythological description of the *Viṣṇu* simply implies to the process of modern convection currents through which water vapour from different sources on the surface of the earth move towards the upper level of the atmosphere and subsequently forms in to clouds due to the process of condensation.

Similarly, the text of *Viṣṇu*¹⁹ has also given due importance to the role of forests and mountains in connection with the formation of clouds and rains, otherwise, the inhabitants of *Vraja* would not have come forward to worship the forests and mountains (i.e. Govardhana) instead of worshipping the Indra, the God of rain. The geographical significances of worshipping the forests as well as mountains may be as

follows:

1. First of all, forests are those spatial units on the surface of the earth having thick natural vegetative cover whose species normally supply a considerable amount of water-vapour (i.e., moisture) to the atmosphere by means of evapotranspiration which ultimately enhances to the process of cloud formation and rain.
2. Secondly, mountains stand to be the barriers on the path of wind driven clouds, as a result of which, the later is forced to ascend to great heights along the wind ward slope of the mountains causing the clouds to burst in to rain because of rapid condensation due to decrease of temperature with increase of height (i.e., the lapse rate) and this type of rain is known as “Orographic rain” which is very common in case of India.

The *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* employs several terms for clouds, including *Megha*²⁰, *Abhra*²¹, *Ghana*²², *Ambuda*²³ and *Payodhara*²⁴, among others. These terms are significant in understanding the Purāṇic conception of clouds and their relationship with rainfall. The term *Megha*, for instance, is associated with clouds that release or bear water, whereas *Abhra* is explained in the relevant context in connection with the retention of water within clouds. From the perspective of comparative meteorology, *Megha* may broadly be associated with rain-bearing cloud formations, including certain forms of nimbus and nimbostratus clouds. The comparison with altostratus or other middle-level clouds, however, should be regarded as interpretative rather than as an exact identification. Similarly, *Abhra* should not be categorically identified with cirrus clouds merely on the basis of the terminology, since the Purāṇic classification and modern altitude-based cloud classification belong to different conceptual systems. The *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* also recognizes the significant role of wind (*vāyu*) in relation to rainfall and the distribution of rain over the surface of the earth. Thus, the text presents an interconnected understanding of clouds, water, wind, and rainfall within its broader cosmological and geographical framework.

Like other Purāṇas, the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* also classifies clouds into three categories, namely (i) *Samvartaka*, (ii) *Vālākā*, and (iii) *Śītābhra*. On the basis of the detailed description found in the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa*, the *Samvartaka* clouds may be interpreted as rain-bearing clouds associated with heavy and torrential downpours, accompanied by storms, thunder, and lightning. These clouds are described as appearing in different colours, including black, white, red, yellow, brown, deep blue, and bright red. They are also said to assume various forms resembling enormous elephants, towns, mountains, houses, huts, and columns. According to the text, these clouds originate from the respiration of Janārdana in the form of

Rudra. This description may symbolically be interpreted in relation to atmospheric processes such as convection. In terms of comparative meteorology, the characteristics of the *Samvartaka* clouds may broadly be compared with certain low- and vertically developed cloud formations, including stratocumulus, nimbostratus, cumulus, cumulonimbus, and stratus. However, such identifications should be regarded as comparative interpretations rather than exact equivalents of modern cloud classifications.

The second category, *Vālākā*, comprises clouds that are capable of producing rainfall, as indicated by the expression “*vr̥ṣīmanto vālākāḥ*”, and are particularly associated with the rainy season, as suggested by “*prāvṛṣi vālākāḥ*”. These clouds are described as dark in colour and rich in moisture, thereby possessing the capacity to produce abundant rainfall. Their association with the rainy season makes them particularly significant from an agricultural perspective, since seasonal rainfall is essential for the growth of crops and vegetation. In comparative terms, their characteristics may broadly be related to rain-bearing nimbus and related precipitation-producing cloud systems.

The third category, *Śītābhra*, consists of clouds described as white in appearance and associated with the higher regions of the atmosphere. Their characteristics may be compared, with due caution, to cirrus and cirrostratus cloud formations of modern meteorology, particularly because these high-level clouds generally contain relatively little condensed water and are less commonly associated with heavy precipitation reaching the ground. Nevertheless, the identification of *Śītābhra* specifically with cirrus or cirrostratus clouds should be treated as a comparative hypothesis rather than a definitive correspondence.

The foregoing descriptions demonstrate that the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* pays considerable attention to the colour, form, altitude, moisture content, seasonal occurrence, and rain-producing capacity of clouds. These characteristics provide an interesting basis for comparison with modern meteorological observations. The three categories may also be considered in relation to the principal geographical mechanisms of rainfall. The storm-associated characteristics of *Samvartaka* clouds may broadly be compared with cyclonic or convective precipitation, the rain-bearing and seasonally occurring *Vālākā* clouds with widespread monsoonal precipitation, and the high-level *Śītābhra* clouds with cloud formations generally associated with the upper atmosphere. However, the traditional Purāṇic classification should not be mechanically equated with the modern climatological classification of rainfall into cyclonic, convectional, and orographic (mountain) rainfall, since the two systems employ different principles of classification.

The *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* further demonstrates the observational character of Purāṇic descriptions by referring to atmospheric phenomena such as thunder (*stanita*), lightning (*vidyut*), and the rainbow (*indradhanus*), all of which are associated with cloud and rainfall activity. The *Purāṇakāras* also recognized the variability and irregularity of precipitation. Insufficient or untimely rainfall could result in drought, while excessive rainfall could cause rivers and streams to overflow their normal courses and produce floods. This is reflected in the expressions “*svālpāmbuvṛṣṭiḥ Paijanyaḥ*” and “*jagmur unmārga-vāhinyaḥ nimnagāmbhāṃsi sarvataḥ*”²⁵. These descriptions indicate an awareness of both the deficiency and excess of rainfall and their consequences for the terrestrial environment.

Conclusion

The foregoing geographical interpretation of the descriptions of clouds and rainfall in the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* demonstrates that the Purāṇic tradition possessed a remarkable interest in atmospheric and hydrological phenomena. The descriptions of the Sun, clouds, wind, water, and rainfall reveal an integrated understanding of the natural processes associated with solar heat, atmospheric moisture, evaporation, condensation, cloud formation, and precipitation. The Sun is consistently presented as a principal source of energy in the movement and transformation of water, while the relationship among water bodies, clouds, rainfall, vegetation, agriculture, and living beings reflects an awareness of the interconnectedness of the hydrological environment. The classification and description of clouds according to their colour, form, moisture content, seasonal occurrence, altitude, and rain-bearing capacity further indicate a careful observation of atmospheric phenomena. References to thunder, lightning, rainbow, storms, drought resulting from insufficient rainfall, and floods caused by excessive precipitation demonstrate that the *Purāṇakāras* were attentive not only to normal weather conditions but also to significant variations and disturbances in the atmosphere.

Although certain Purāṇic descriptions may be compared with concepts recognized by modern climatology and meteorology, such comparisons should be made cautiously, since the traditional and modern systems developed within different intellectual frameworks. Nevertheless, the observations preserved in the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* reveal a coherent traditional understanding of the relationship between the atmosphere, water cycle, rainfall, terrestrial fertility, and human welfare. The absence of modern scientific instruments did not prevent the ancient Indian scholars from making detailed observations of natural phenomena and incorporating them into their cosmological and geographical worldview. Thus, the study of clouds and rainfall in the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* provides valuable insight into the environmental and

geographical dimensions of the Indian knowledge tradition and demonstrates the continuing relevance of Purāṇic descriptions for the historical study of Indian meteorological and climatological thought.

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