

## Anecdotes in spiritual texts

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Spiritual texts usually contain various Anecdotes. One might wonder why texts such as Mahabharata, Puranas and even Upanishads have anecdotes in abundance. What purpose are they intended to serve? Don't they take away the focus off the main theme of the text? Wouldn't it be better to present only the spiritual teachings without distracting the reader with several anecdotes? In this short article we will try to answer these questions.

Anecdotes or short stories that occur in spiritual texts may have one or more of the following purposes according to Padma Purana

आख्यायिकाः प्रदर्शयन्ते सर्ववेदेषु सर्वशः  
द्योतयन्त्यस्तु महतां तात्पर्यं तत्र तत्र ह ।  
अलाभः पुरुषार्थस्य प्रोक्तमर्थमृते त्विति ।  
द्योतनाय महाराज श्रद्धावृद्ध्यर्थमेव च ॥

- Emphasizing the views of the learned
- Making it clear that results are obtained only if the prescribed procedure is strictly followed and not otherwise.
- To inculcate interest in the readers/listeners

Let us illustrate these three points with an example

In the very beginning verses of Shrimad Bhagavatam, an anecdote that took place in Naimisha Kshetra is narrated. Sage Shaunaka and others go to Namisharanya and meet Suta, the great sage, well versed in Puranas. They say "Oh Suta! – You are well versed in Puranas, Itihasa and Dharma Shastra and know their true purport. Oh the all knowing sage!, please tell us, what, in your opinion, is the utmost good for mankind."

Sri Madhvacharya, in his Bhagavata Tatparya, explains how this anecdote removes certain doubts that may rise in the minds of the spiritual inquirers.

### प्रकारान्तरेण पुरुषार्थशङ्कानिवृत्त्यर्थं आख्यायिका

The first question that comes to the mind of a spiritual aspirant is about right path to liberation. The only means of this knowledge are the scriptures. But the true purport of the entire mass of scriptures is to be understood to get to know about the right path to liberation. For, at the first glance, the scriptures seem to propound only good actions as the means to liberation.

अपाम सोमं अमृता अभूम declares the Veda. Herein, drinking the soma juice during the Soma Sacrifice is said to liberate one from the clutches of bondage and make him eternal (अमृत).

But there are also some Vedic statements – ब्रह्मविदाप्नेति परम् (तै.उ 2.2), यो वेद निहितं गुहायां परमे व्योमनि सोश्नुते सर्वान् कामान् सह ब्रह्मणा विपश्चिता (तै.उ 2.2), तदा विद्वान् पुण्यपापे विधूय निरञ्जनः परमं साम्यमुपैति (मु.उ 3.1.3) which declare that liberation is attained only after acquiring right knowledge.

This gives rise to doubt in ones mind about the true purport of the scriptures regarding the right path to liberation. Is it by right actions or by right knowledge?

Srimad Bhagavatam, at the outset, addresses this issue and removes any apprehensions through an anecdote.

Shaunaka and other sages were hermits engaged in performing Vedic Sacrifices. Still, they approach Sage Suta for the sake of knowledge. If actions only cause liberation, they need not come all the way to Naimisharanya to seek knowledge. This is indicative of the importance given by them to knowledge over actions.

By this anecdote we come to know about the views of the learned. We also learn that Knowledge only is the chief cause for liberation. Good actions play a secondary role in purifying ones mind and making it fit to receive divine knowledge. Thus liberation cannot be achieved only by good actions alone. This anecdote also inculcates interest in the inquirer about the subject on hand.

Thus anecdotes in scriptures serve a specific purpose and hence are very important portions of scriptures. They cannot be treated as distractions to the main theme of the scriptures. They clear doubts, instill interest and tell us about the views of the learned.

|| Shri Krishnarpanamastu ||