

Origin of Vaishnavism

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Origin of Vaishnavism shares its attributes to many sources and religious evolution, dating back to pre-Vedic epoch.

Vaishnavism is a traditional faction of Hinduism, differentiated from other schools by its veneration of Lord Vishnu. Besides Vishnu, Vaishnavites also worship His associated avatars, chiefly Lords Rama and Krishna, who are conceived as the original and supreme God. Vaishnavism entails worshipping of different perspectives or historical traditions, yet addressing a monotheistic God under the names of Narayana, Krishna, Vasudeva or more often "Vishnu" and their related embodiments.

Though Vaishnavites are primarily monotheistic in their philosophy, they do not demand exclusivity. Vaishnavites usually don a unique 'V' shaped mark in the middle on their forehead and sometimes on their forearms. The mark is etched in white with a vertical red or yellow stroke. The marks on the forehead signify the feet of Vishnu, which designates absolute submission. Variations in this mark discriminates northern sects from southern sects of Vaishnavites. With such inspiring and stimulating principles, Vaishnavism however shared its origin with various theories besides being just espousers of Lord Vishnu. There survives no comprehensible evidence about the origin of Vaishnavism in India, but its development from the medieval period had been quick and incredible.

Though some form of worship existed during the pre-Christian era, origin of Vaishnavism and its germination into an established religion, happened only during the post-Christian era. Doctrine of Trinity, Doctrine of Avatar and the Doctrine of Fulfillment of Sacrifice are the fundamental doctrinal aspects of Vaishnavism. The literal origin of Vaishnavism is believed to have sprouted from Early Indian Christianity. Early Indian Christianity was of the habit to observe the umpteen elements and facets of Dravidian worships that prevailed during the pre-Christian era and developed eventually as Vaishnavism. With time, this separatist faction of Hinduism had begun to spread its wings to further lands, precisely in remote parts of the country. Vaishnavism hence evolved as a Bhakti movement approximately during 6th and 7th century A.D. in South India and further disseminated towards the North. However, the total camouflaged aspect of the Brahman concept under the name of Hinduism, generally led to the widespread belief that the Vedas are the basis for the development of this Bhakti Movement. By and large, Vaishnavite Vishnu is identified with Vedic Vishnu. A thoroughgoing study of the Vedas will unveil the secreted truths that Vaishnavism has nothing to do with the Vedic Rudra or Vishnu.

Origin of Vaishnavism in India owes much also to the Sanskritic ages, during the period of the epics. The monotheistic reverence of Vishnu was already well developed in the period of the Itihasas (literally meaning "so it happened", Itihasas refer to the epic poetry penned in India and originally scripted in Sanskrit). Vaishnavism is elaborated and expounded in that cardinal section of the Mahabharata known as Bhagavad Gita, which assimilates the words of Shri Krishna, one of the avatars of Vishnu. Many of the ancient rulers, beginning with Chandragupta II (hugely popular as Vikramaditya) were identified as Parama Bhagavatas, or Bhagavata Vaishnavas. Vaishnavism had also witnessed steeping rise of flourishing in South India during the seventh to tenth centuries CE. The fact that the religious faction is still absolutely espoused, especially in Tamil Nadu, owes much to the twelve Alvars, saints who had distributed Vaishnavism to the common people with their devotional hymns. The temples which the Alvars used to pay visits or founded are presently known as Divya Desams. Their poems in extolment and eulogising of Vishnu and Krishna in Tamil language are collectively recognised as Naalayira (Divya Prabandha). In comparatively later centuries, Vaishnava practices improved in popularity due to the tremendous influence of sages like Ramanujacharya, Madhvacharya, Manavala Mamunigal, Vedanta Desika, Surdas, Tulsidas, Tyagaraja and several others.

Vedic Origin of Vaishnavism

Although Vedic Age is not attributed with the successful origin of Vaishnavism in India, yet it cannot be denied that the Vedas and its time-period had impressed upon the Vaishnavites profoundly. Lord Vishnu is one of the Gods which were worshipped by the Vedic Aryans. He was not one of the more authoritative ones, yet he outlasted all his Vedic rivals to reign supreme amongst the Aryan Religion. This was possible because of his features of incarnation. Most other Vedic gods like Indra or Brahma, were adjudged as incarnations of Vishnu, as were several other minor non-Vedic Aryan tribal deities, like the deified king Rama and Krishna. In the same way, many local pre-Brahmanic gods were adjudged as incarnations of Vishnu, leading to the incredible circularisation of Vaishnava religion. Soon, the original Vedic religion was divided into two faiths: Vedism and Vaishnavism. Pockets of pure Aryan Vaidiks, who declined to adopt the Puranas and other Vaishnava scriptures, remained. Vaishnavism and Vedism are however still classed under the term of `Brahmanism`. Two pre-Aryan gods although could not be integrated into this Vaishnava pantheon, consisting of Lord Shiva (the Dravidian God) and Mahadev (the Tibetic God of Tantrism).

As Vedism worsened down, the Vaishnavism cult egressed potently and revolved around Vasudeva, the exalted Vrsni hero. Origin of Vaishnavism again comes face to face with contrasting visions; there exists evidence that worship of Vasudeva and not Vishnu had arrived at the offset of Vaishnavism. This earliest chapter was established from the sixth to fifth centuries BCE, during the domination of Panini, who in his Astadhyayi had delineated the word `vasudevaka` as a bhakta, devotee of Vasudeva. Another cult that

flourished with the declination of Vedism was pivoted around Krishna, the exalted tribal idol and religious leader of the Yadavas. The Vrsnis and Yadavas came nearer to each other, leading to the unification of Vasudeva and Krishna. This occurrence had initiated early as the fourth century BCE, according to evidence in Megasthenes and in the Arthashastra of Kautilya (also admired as Chanakya).

North India had also witnessed significant origin of Vaishnavism through its umpteen Vaishnava movements under venerated luminaries, like: Nimbarka in the fourteenth century with the cult of Radha; Ramananda and the cult of Rama in the same century; Kabir during the fifteenth century, whose Lord was Rama; Vallabha in the sixteenth century with the worship of the boy Krishna and Radha; and Chaitanya in the same century with his worship of the adult Krishna and Radha. In the Maratha territories poet-saints like Namdev and Tukaram from the fourteenth to the seventeenth centuries had also worshipped Vishnu in the form of Vithoba of Pandharpur.

Concept of Paramapada

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Concept of Paramapada refers to the Divine abode of the Lord Vishnu. Though the actual physical description is often questioned, it is believed that the religious concept behind describing the Paramapada in such great detail is that such a vivid description of the Lord's abode would incite in the followers a strong desire to attain the Supreme spiritual goal.

More on Concept of Paramapada

- Nature of Paramapada

Concept of Paramapada or Vaikuntha loka is referred to in the Pancharatra Sarhhitras as the abode of Lord Vishnu. It consists of beautiful castles with towers, halls with a thousand pillars etc. It is also laid out with enchanting flower gardens, trees, streams, lakes etc. Thus, the Kausitaki Upanishad mentions the existence of a lake named Ara, a river by the name Viraja and a tree known as Tilya and an impenetrable residence. Chandogya Upanishad speaks of two seas Ara and Nya and a lake named Airammadiya in the Brahma loka. It also describes the city of Brahman as aparajita (unconquerable) and refers to a golden hall built for the Lord. Another scriptural text says: "In that mansion constructed with one thousand pillars, there lives the Lord of all the devatas". The Mahabharata, Vishnu Purana and other Vaishnava Puranas also contain references to the Paramapada. The hymns of Nammalvar describe

vividly the way the individual souls soon after release from bondage are received with warm welcome by the celestial beings (God's personal attendants) at the entrance of God's mansion. Presumably based on these ideas Ramanuja in his prose work named Vaikuntha Gadya, gives a highly picturesque description of the Vaikuntha loka using such expressions as are beyond anybody's imagination. Following the same line of thought, Vedanta Desika excels Ramanuja in presenting a graphic account of the ascent to the abode of God in his Paramapada sopana, a work written in Manipravala language (Sanskritised Regional prose).

An important question that may be raised at this juncture is whether these are facts or fiction created to meet certain theological needs. The doctrine of nitya-vibhuti and the concept of suddha-sattva which are accepted by Vaishnava theology on the authority of scriptural and Smriti texts including Pancharatra treatises provide sufficient justification for the admission of a higher divine abode with all its paraphernalia. According to the Visistadvaita Vedanta, the ultimate Reality of Philosophy is a personal Supreme Being (Purusottama) which implies a concept of God with a body (yigraha). An impersonal God or an undifferentiated pure Being without any form (nirakara) does not serve the purpose of meditation and worship by the devotees. Besides, such a transcendental Being cannot have a relation to the universe and the individual souls. The yigraha or body assumed by the personal Supreme Being for the benefit of the universe and devotees should be of spiritual character as otherwise a body constituted of five elements is subject to constant change and decay. Further the individual souls (jivas) according to the Visistadvaita Vedanta, are infinite in number and also eternal. Even in the state of moksha, they do not lose their individuality and remain ever in their true form as omniscient, blissful, pure, spiritual monads enjoying the full glory of God.

Besides the released souls, Visistadvaita admits on the authority of the scriptural texts the existence of a category of souls known as nityas or those who are eternally free. These souls, like the permanent attendants of God perform divine service as part of their duty without any selfish motive. According to the Upanishads the souls released from bondage can also assume bodies, if they so desire, to perform certain divine activities at the command of the Supreme Lord either in the higher regions or in the physical universe in the form of incarnated beings. Even the Supreme Being descends to the earth assuming the form of human or other living beings for the sole purpose of re-establishing dharma, to protect the sadhus and incidentally, punish the wicked persons. The bodies assumed by God during His incarnations cannot be considered material since they would be subject to destruction or decay. God is always a perfect Being untouched by birth, old age, death, karma and suffering as the Upanishads state. In view of these considerations, the doctrine of nitya vibhuti, or the transcendent spiritual realm constituted of suddha sattva or spiritual substance stands justified.

The kind of descriptive account of the highest divine realm (paramapada) may be somewhat exaggerated. But it has a religious significance in so far as it stimulates in the mumukshu a "strong desire

for the attainment of supreme spiritual goal (moksha)." Moksha in Visistadvaita is a positive concept. It refers not merely to the total liberation of a soul from bondage but it also leads to a blissful state of existence enjoying in full measure the glory of Brahman (paripurna-brahmanubhava) leading to the kaihkarya or service to God. Bhakti or prapatti is enjoined as the means to attain that state. In order to enable an individual to develop a desire for moksha and promote the practice of bhakti yoga, the Vaishnava acharyas seem to have presented a vivid descriptive account of the glory of God and His abode. Thus, in the introductory opening verse of Vaikuntha Gadya, Ramanuja states, "I am presenting the precious topic of bhakti yoga as gathered from the works of Yamuna". Commenting on this verse, Vedanta Desika points out, that it is intended to instruct the disciples to contemplate the glory of Bhagavan as a goal in itself. Periyavacchan Pillai adds further that the narration of the divine realm to be attained, the glory of its Lord to be experienced and the consequential performance of divine service to be performed therein are all intended to create an interest in the minds of the listeners.

In order to be fair to the orthodox Vaishnavites who take the description of Vaikuntha by Ramanuja as factual, a different explanation is possible. God in Vaishnavism is the Supreme Lord (Sarvesvara) endowed with jnana (omniscience), sakti (omnipotence), bala (strength) and many other attributes par excellence. If such a Supreme Being can create a wondrous physical universe of variegated character by mere sahkalpa or will without any other aid, He should be able to create by His very sahkalpa a spiritual universe with the best of all objects of pleasure (bhogo pakarana) for His own benefit.

One need not, therefore, question the validity of the descriptive account of paramapada, the abode of God. Whether a critic accepts this explanation or not, the three Gadyas of Ramanuja, both in terms of the beauty of their language and depth of thought, have deep aesthetic and emotional appeal for the devotees of Vishnu.