



Aspects of the Vaishnavism: A Study from the Religious Perspective

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Abstract: *The present study has been carried out to understand the philosophy of Vaishnav religion and to know about the religious discipline of Vaishnavism. Religion is the ideological reflex of the real world and its form is determined by the structure of that world. The problem of man's existence and his destiny can be solved by religion. It is also the expression of human spirit, involving in the process of growth. In the development of society, religion has great role. It is a factor of culture that helped in the development of culture, role of culture etc. Religion and its institution have an important role in establishing social harmony. Such type of institution breaks the caste barriers and establishes unity among people. Though the form and object of man's religious feelings may change over time, but religion is one of the major well springs of human behaviour.*

Keywords: *Human Spirit, Society, Culture, Religion, Development, Philosophical Perspectives.*

Introduction: Vaishnavism includes not only the religion but it has also the philosophical perspectives. Thus in Vaishnavism the Brahman of Vedānta philosophy is identical with a personal God in the name of Viṣṇu or Nārāyana. As an orthodox religious system, it advocates a way of life involving certain religious practices, sacraments and cultivation of ethical virtues. Vaishnavism also attempts to fuse religion and philosophy and reconcile the claims of revelation and reason. As a religion it has been developed primarily from the Vaishnava Āgamas, the numerous Pāncaratra treatises, more than the Vedanta texts. As a religion of devotion, the devotees of Vaishnava take devotion to Viṣṇu as their principal religious deity. In this context, "Vaishnavism alone possesses the essential elements of a genuine religion. For there can be no true religion without loving Him, without praying to Him, and indeed without obeying Him."(Kapoor, 2008)

Vaishnavism or alternately known Vishnuism is one of the major sects of Hinduism. The godhead of the Vaishnavites is Lord Vishnu and Krishna and Rama who are the incarnation of Lord Vishnu. Vaishnavism spans across the Rig Vedic period, the Gupta Period, the medieval period to the Modern period until it reaches the West and achieves a global status. The Vaishnavites believe in 'bhakti', humility, 'dharma' and 'parodharma'. Its uniqueness lies in its acceptance of traditional norms and at the same going beyond the norms; it is rooted in established social norms and at the same time transcends social borders.

Justification of the Study: The unifying force of unity of every human civilization is understood as "Dharma" from the Indian context and from the Western context, it is known as "Religion". As a human phenomenon, religion represented the transcendental concern of man along with constant interaction with the social aspect of life. The study of human society involves the study of culture and, "It includes art, music, architecture, literature, science, technology, philosophy, religion and a million other things."(Davis, 1949)

From the primitive age to the modern, religion has played a very important role in molding the socio-cultural life of people and it gave us the ways and spiritual knowledge by which one can live with balanced life. Hence the human society has need religious civilization, literature and culture. Therefore the researcher tries to understand the Vaishnavism from the religious perspective.

Objective: The present study has been carried out for the following purposes-

- To understand the philosophy of Vaishnav religion.
- To know about the religious discipline of Vaishnavism.

Philosophy of Vaishnavism: The Vaishnava theology has admitted the beloved consort of Goddess Śrī, as an additional distinguishing characteristic of Viṣṇu or Nārāyaṇa. Śrī is the beloved consort of Viṣṇu and the divine couple together constitutes the ultimate Reality. Like Viṣṇu, she too is all pervasive, and like Bhagavān, she also possesses all the six principle attributes, i.e., knowledge, strength, lordship, virility, power, splendour and is also free from all kinds of imperfection. Thus Sri Isadmitted in Vaishnavism as a unique characteristic of Viṣṇu in so far as she serves as an identity mark to distinguish Viṣṇu from other Vedic deities.

The Vaishnava theology describes that the entire Jagat (universe) is pervaded by Viṣṇu and he is also the creator. The Viṣṇu Purāna declares that there are two states of Brahman, one is Murta (with form) and it is perishable including entire world; and other is Amurta (without form) which is imperishable and the Supreme Being. Thus the entire world is nothing but the manifested energy of the supreme Brahman and is the blaze of fire burning on one spot diffuses light and heat around (Willson, 2011.p.137). According to Vaishnava theology, Viṣṇu is both the instrumental and material cause of the world. As an instrumental cause, the world is produced from Viṣṇu; and as a material cause, Viṣṇu is the world reply to the inquiry. The world is included in the Brahmānda, which is nothing but an effect of Viṣṇu. It means that the whole world is originated from Viṣṇu. In Viṣṇu Purāna it is said that all object are originated from Viṣṇu and he creates this world with the help of His power (Māyā) which is unthinkable in nature and which belongs to Him just as heat is inherent in fire(Ibid . (1.3.1-3)P.17). Like Sankara's Advaita theory the Viṣṇu Purāna also advocated the terms Māyā and avidyā (ignorance) more or less in identical scene. Regarding Kṛṣṇa's birth, Parasara indirectly mentioned about Māyā as Mahamāyā and Yoganidra. Viṣṇu has three powers, i.e., ParaShakti and it is the highest power of consciousness and it is called Laksmi, Umā, Bhārati, Girizā, Ambika, Durgā, Bhadrākālī, Candi, Kumāri, Vaisnavi etc. Ksetrajna Shakti and it sustains the selves; and avidyaShakti which creates the world. Avidya also consists five natures, i.e., tamas and it is the perception of not self; Moha consists enjoyment; tamisara is impatience or anger and andhatamisra consists in the fear of privation or death. Thus the Purānas especially Viṣṇu Purāna described Māyā as identical with Avidyā and as the cause of all sorrows and sufferings of the Jiva, and like Sankara it is unreal, or anirvacaniya. Māyā is the own Shakti of Viṣṇu, by which He creates this world. The universe is as real as Brahman and the only plausible explanation of the equation is that the universe is the Sarira (body) of the Paramatman. In this scene Vaishnavism speaks of the whole universe as Viṣṇumāyā and it is the true relation of universe to Brahman or Viṣṇu.

Religious Discipline of Vaishnavism: Vaishnavism is a monotheistic faith that places equal importance on following a religious and ethical code in order to reach nirvana. Distinctive to the Vaishnava faith and more significant than its theory is its practical focus on the accomplishment of certain key religious obligations. One must have a very competent Acarya or guru (teacher) in order to live a holy life as a Vaisnavite. Only under the supervision of a preceptor is emancipation possible. Additionally, the Upanisads stress the need of seeking out the right guru in order to understand the philosophical reality. 46 However, in Vaishnavism, Nārāyaṇa, the ultimate lord, is considered the foremost and first among all Acaryas. Everyone looks up to Him as their guru, yet He has no one to teach him the ropes (Willson, 2011.p.91). The philosophic wisdom was revealed via His incarnations as Matsya, Hayagriva, Nara, Nārāyaṇa, and Kṛṣṇa. An act of reverence for

the instructor by the student is a universal principle shared by all faiths. Vaishnavism stands apart, however, since its adherents revere not only their own acaryas but all of the acaryas, beginning with God as the first Acarya from whom all spiritual wisdom flows.

To become a completely certified Vaishnava, one must also undergo the religious discipline of Panca-Samkara, a fivefold sacrament unique to Vaishnavism. In order to be able to worship Viṣṇu properly, one must undergo an initiation ritual that is to be led by an experienced preceptor. This process consists of the following sacraments:

- 1) Tapa, which involves wearing the conch mark and discussing
- 2) Putting a mark on the forehead that resembles the footprints of Vishnu, also known as Pundra.
- 3) The initiate is referred to as Viṣṇu dasa or Nāma.
- 4) The transmission of the secret Vaishnava mantras and
- 5) Ijya, or the established method of worshipping God.

There is religious and spiritual importance to every rite.

Worship: In Vaishnavism, the image and rituals are considered actual realities. For gaining the grace of God, it is necessary to lying stretched out with face on ground with offerings of incense and light. Again material objects are considered a necessary means for communion with Viṣṇu and so it is necessary to touch the image of the deity. Vaishnavism believe that there is only one Supreme God, which is both immanent and transcendent. This religious system acknowledges the existence of many lower Gods under the Supreme one. One main character of Vaishnava religion is its belief on a personal being. Many Vaishnavas emphasize Viṣṇu consort Lakshmi as “Śrī” means “auspicious one”, which is not another God, but another aspect of the Supreme God. Thus the follower of Vaishnava religion also worships Śrī or Lakshmi in the temple and also at house. Viṣṇu is also worshipped via natural phenomena such as the Tulasi plant and the Sālagrama, a granite pebble. “Another aspect of Viṣṇu worship is the mantra-Japa, the practice of repetitive prayer. One popular mantra of Vaishnavism is Viṣṇu mantra, which involves repetition of the name of Viṣṇu. Another function of Viṣṇu worship is the singing of Viṣṇu’s name’s (Bhajan), known as Sanskirtana and performance of hymns which focused the mythological feast of Viṣṇu and His avatārs”. All these are performed for the grace of God (Viṣṇu) who is the only means of liberation.

Festivals of the Vaishnavas: The festivals of Vaishnavism celebrated each year and it can be separated into two loose categories, one is orthodox pan Indian festivals and other is local festivals that may only be celebrated in one particular state. Within pan Indian festival, the Kṛṣṇa’s Janmāstami was celebrated by the Vaishnava follower. The identity of Viṣṇu, with Vāsudeva, Nārāyana and Bhagavān as well as with Kṛṣṇa is established in the Mahābhārata. The birth day of Lord Kṛṣṇa, i.e, the 8th day of Sāon (July-August) is celebrated as Janmāstami of Kṛṣṇa. The main items of the worship are feeding Brahmins, listening to sacred stories and performing worship in honour of Kṛṣṇa. Janmāstami is also known as Gokulastami, because Gokul being the birth place of Kṛṣṇa.

Rāma Navami is the celebration of the birth day of Rāma, the seventh incarnation of Viṣṇu, who is of the nature of pure consciousness and bliss, who is the consort of Sitā, master of Śrī Hanumāna, and the lord of the three worlds. In Vaishnava philosophy Rāma was the Lord Hari himself, incarnate on earth to establish the glory of Dharma. This festival begins on the first day of the month of Chaitra (March-April) and continues till the ninth (for nine days). In all Vaishnava temples this festival is celebrated. The main feature of this festival are organizing congregations and regaling them with stories of the exploits of the great Hindu here that conquered the island of Ceylon and destroyed the demon king Rāvana(Thomas,1975.p.130). Dance and dramas are also performed which is full of Rāma’s lilā (activities) and his heroic power. These dance

and plays are known as Rāmāyana. The followers of Saiva cult also celebrate this occasion. Some observed a strict fast on the day and the holy Rāmāyana is read in the temples on this occasion.

The Indian celebration of colours, Holi, is well-known across the world. According to Vaishnava philosophy, the demon king Hiranyakashipu became haughty due to the gift that Brahma bestowed upon him and launched an assault on the celestial bodies. Lord Viṣṇu was worshipped by his son Prahlād. As a result, he was subject to many death threats from his dad. However, his dad failed miserably. After that, Hiranyakashipu enlists his sister Holikā to assassinate his son; however, Holikā is impervious to fire since she is wearing a shawl. Sitting on a fire on Holikā's lap was an instruction from Prahlād's father. In addition to obeying his father's commands, he prayed to Viṣṇu for protection. "As the fire broke out, onlookers gasped in astonishment as the shawl broke away from Holikā, who was subsequently killed by the flames, but Prahlād managed to escape unharmed as the shawl swung around to encase him." on page 256 (Verma, 2010). Holi is celebrated as the burning of Holika. Lord Viṣṇu then appeared at dark as a Narasimha, a creature with half man and half lion, and slew Hiranyakashipu.

Many tales are linked to Deepāvali or Diwāli, a significant Indian holiday. During this festival of light, candles and other lit objects represent the triumph of goodness over the inherent evil in each person. North India loves it. The return of King Rāma of Ayodhyā to his kingdom after a fourteen-year exile in the jungle is the subject of one theory. "Deepāwali, or more commonly known as Diwāli, is a festival celebrated by the people of Ayodhyā as a way to welcome Rāma." According to Verma (2010), on page 253. However, Diwali is commemorated in Southern India as the day when Lord Kṛṣṇa vanquishes the monster Narakāsura. In either October or November, people commemorate this event. The overcoming of spiritual darkness is also symbolised by this celebration. An unlimited, immortal, and untainted essence known as the Atman is posited in Hindu philosophy as existing independently of the material body and the intellect. An individual's true essence as the unchanging, infinite, immanent, and transcendent truth may be awakened by the celebration of the Atman on Deepāvali, which removes all darkness, obstructions, and ignorance. The legends surrounding Deepāvali may differ from one place to another, but the celebration of the inner light (Atman) or the fundamental truth of everything (Brahman) remains constant.

Another popular observance of this religion is the Yajña ceremony. The philosophy of Vaishnavism indicates the supreme power of Viṣṇu. According to Vedas Viṣṇu is the preserver of the world and took birth on earth time to time to establish Dharma. To satisfy Viṣṇu and for the general well being of the life, the Vaisnavite follower performed Viṣṇu Yajña. In this ceremony Viṣṇu Sahastranāma (a part of Mahābhārata, published by Bhishma to Yudhisthira, for all encompassing benefits in life), is recited which is included the reading for 1250 times of 1000 names of Lord Viṣṇu. At the time of Yajña, the priest, follow the Viṣṇu Yajña procedure with a range of balanced combinations of the elements such as fire, earth, air, water and reciting of mantras as per Vedas in Sanskrit. Like other Yajña, the Havan and aahuti is an essential part of it. The aarti is also performed at the end of Yajña with donating food, clothes, dakshinā etc. for fulfill the desire of devotee.

Conclusion:

Nearly every region of India is home to devotees of Vishnu and Vaishnava traditions. But Vaishnava literature and practice have not been limited to India. Cambodia became a centre for Vishnu devotion in the fifth century CE, and the country's temples to the deity prospered at that time. From Thailand to Japan, you may find Vishnu icons. In Japan, Buddhist mythology incorporates some of his incarnations. There are many explanations for the widespread acceptance of Vaishnavism. The Vaishnavas had a common foundation in Sanskrit texts that were known across India from at least a few centuries before the Common Era. However, the many Vaishnava traditions owe their rapid spread and survival to the local vernacular texts of fervent devotion.

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