

Pāñcarātra āgamas

Preface

The Bhāgavata cult is based on several scriptural works like the *Nārāyaṇīya* section of the *Śāntiparva* (Ch. 334 onwards) of the *Mahābhārata*, the *Bhagavadgītā*, the *Viṣṇupurāṇa* and the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*, apart from the *Sutras* of Śāṇḍilya and Nārada.

It is divided into two streams: the Pāñcarātra and the Vaikhānasa. The former is more popular, with a large mass of āgama-literature and widely followed in most of the Vaiṣṇava temples. A cursory knowledge of the same will help the students of general Hinduism. Hence this booklet.

It is hoped that a perusal of this little book will give at least some basic ideas about this important, but less known, aspect of Hinduism.

Introduction

Āgamas are a special class of Hindu religio-philosophical literature handed down through a succession of teachers from the most ancient days.

Whether they represented a system parallel to and separate from the Vedic traditions or a continuation of the same and rooted in them, has been a subject of discussion among the scholars.

However, Yāmunācārya (A. D. 918-1038) in his scholarly work, the *Āgamaprāmāṇya*, has conclusively established their affinity with the Vedas.

Of the three kinds of āgamas-the Śaiva, the Śākta (or the tantra) and the Vaiṣṇava-the *Pāñcarātra āgamas* belong to the last group.

The other branch of the Vaiṣṇavāgamas is the *Vaikhānasa āgama* or the *Vaikhānasa Sūtras*.

Derivation of the Name

The literal meaning of the word 'Pāñcarātra' means 'that which is connected with five nights'.

Lord Keśava (Viṣṇu or Nārāyaṇa) is said to have taught this esoteric science to Ananta, Garuḍa, Viṣvaksena, Brahmā and Rudra, over five nights (pañca = five; rātra = night).

The word rātra also means jñāna, knowledge or wisdom. Since it teaches five kinds of knowledge it is called Pāñcarātra. These are: tattva (cosmology); muktiprada (that which gives mukti or liberation); bhaktiprada (that which confers devotion); yaugika (yoga); vaiṣayika (objects of desire).

Or, alternatively, since it teaches about the five aspects of God (called Puruṣottama) viz., para (highest), vyūha (emanation), vibhava (an incarnation), antaryāmin (in-dweller) and arcā (form for worship), it is called 'Pāñcarātra'.

Pāñcarātra Literature

The Pāñcarātra literature is very vast, The total number of works-generally called 'saṁhitā' or 'tantra'-exceeds two hundred, as per the lists given in various works, though only a few have been printed. Quite a few are in the form of manuscripts preserved in oriental libraries. Many others are not available in any form though their names are mentioned in other works.

The following is a list of the works as available now, along with a very brief summary of each.

1. Ahirbudhnya Saṁhitā

This is a fairly voluminous work with 3880 verses in 60 chapters. The speciality of this work is that it deals with the four vyūhas or emanations of the Lord, description of several mantras (sacred syllables) and yantras (magical diagrams) as also rituals for curing diseases.

2. Aniruddha Saṁhitā

Also called *Aniruddhasaṁhitāmahopaniṣad*, it has 34 chapters dealing entirely with the descriptions of various rituals, methods of initiation, prāyaścittas or expiations for sins, rules for making and installing the images of gods and other similar topics.

3. Hayaśīrṣa Saṁhitā

A fairly exhaustive work in 144 chapters, distributed among four Kāṇḍas or sections - *Pratiṣṭhākāṇḍa*, *Saṅkarṣaṇa-kāṇḍa*, *Liṅgākāṇḍa* and *Saurakāṇḍa*-it deals primarily with the rituals concerning the installation of images of various minor deities as also the methods of preparing them.

4. Īśvara Saṁhitā

It is a work of 24 chapters of which sixteen deal with ritualistic worship. Other subjects treated in this work are: description of images, methods of dīkṣā or spiritual initiation, practice of meditation, details regarding mantras, methods of self-control and the greatness of the Yādava Hill (now known as 'Melkoṭe', a Vaiṣṇava pilgrim centre on a hillock near Mysore, Karnataka State).

5. Jayākhya Saṁhitā

This work is one of the three cardinal texts of the Pāñcarātra literature. It has thirty-three paṭalas or chapters and deals with the following topics: detailed account of creation; yogābhyāsa (practice of yoga) and mantropāsanā (spiritual practice through the repetition of mantras or sacred formulae); various Vaiṣṇava mantras; pūjā (ritualistic worship) and homa (fire ritual); dīkṣā (initiation); temples and worship therein; ācāras (the codes of conduct) for the Vaiṣṇavas; and, prāyaścittas or expiations for sins.

6. Kāśyapa Saṁhitā

This is a comparatively small work in twelve chapters. It deals mainly with poisons and methods of remedy by suitable mantras or incantations.

7. Mahā-sanatkumāra Saṁhitā

This is a voluminous work of ten thousand verses spread over forty sections in four chapters. It deals entirely with rituals of worship.

8. Pādma Saṁhitā

A work dealing mainly with rituals and chanting of mantras, this work is in thirty-one chapters.

9. Parama Saṁhitā

A work in thirty-one chapters, it deals with the following topics: process of creation; rituals of initiation and worship; yoga classified as Jñānayoga and Karmayoga.

It declares that Jñānayoga which includes prāṇāyāma and samādhi is superior to Karmayoga. Karmayoga seems to mean ritualistic worship of Viṣṇu.

10. Pārameśvara Saṁhitā

A short work in fifteen chapters, it deals with meditation on mantras, sacrifices and methods of rituals as also prāyaścittas or expiations.

11. Parāśara Saṁhitā

A concise work in eight chapters, it deals with the methods of japa or the muttering of the name of God.

12. Pauṣkara Saṁhitā

Considered as one of the earliest works of the Pāñcarātra system, the *Pauṣkara Saṁhitā* consists of forty-three chapters. Apart from dealing with various kinds of image-worship, it also contains certain philosophical views. It is interesting to note that some funeral sacrifices also find a place here.

13. Sudarśana Saṁhitā

A treatise comprising forty-one chapters it deals mainly with meditation on mantras and expiations for sins.

14. Vihagendra Saṁhitā

It is in twenty-four chapters. Apart from meditation on mantras, it deals with sacrificial oblations. In the twelfth chapter, the topic of prāṇāyāma, as a part of the process of worship, is also described extensively.

15. Viṣṇu Saṁhitā

A work in thirty chapters, it also deals mainly with ritualistic worship. Its philosophy is akin to that of Sāṅkhya Darśana with some variations like the puruṣa (the individual soul) being all-pervading and that he activates the prakṛti to evolve into the world.

16. Viṣṇutattva Saṁhitā

Comprising thirtynine chapters, it deals with image-worship, ablutions and wearing of the Vaiṣṇava marks and some purificatory rites.

Philosophy of the Pāñcarātra āgamas

The philosophy of this system has been expounded in the *Jayākhya Saṁhitā* in detail. A brief summary of the same will be given here.

Though yajña (Vedic sacrifices), dāna (giving gifts), svādhyāya (study of the Vedas) and other similar religious disciplines are useful in spiritual life, it is only jñāna (knowledge) of the paratattva or the Highest Reality that can really give mokṣa.

This paratattva (God) is the same as the Brahman of the Vedas and the Upaniṣads. He is of the nature of pure consciousness (cit) and bliss (ānanda). He is anādi and ananta (without beginning or end). He is the substratum and support of the whole universe. Though he is beyond all guṇas, he is also the bhoktṛ (experiencer, enjoyer) of all that is born out of the guṇas. He is sarvajña (omniscient) and sarvaśakta (omnipotent). He is both transcendent and immanent with regard to this created universe. Hence he is too subtle to be perceived by the senses or the mind. However he can be realised through the pure mind. This is called `mānasika-pratyakṣa'.

The Jīvas, when they realise this Brahman or God, appear to have become one with him, but do maintain a subtle distinction also from him. Hence this philo-sophy can be called 'bhedābheda' or 'dvaitādvaita'.

As regards sṛṣṭi or creation, three kinds of it are recognised: Brahmasarga, Prakṛti-sarga and Śuddhasarga.

Brahmasarga is the projection of the four-faced Brahmā from Viṣṇu and the creation of the world by Brahmā.

Prakṛtisarga is similar to the creation as described in the Sāṅkhya philosophy. Prakṛti or pradhāna comprises the three well-known guṇas-sattva, rajas and tamas.

The first product of the evolution of pradhāna when sattva is predominant, is buddhi (cosmic intellect). The second product when rajas has gained the upper hand, is ahaṅkāra (egoism). This is of three types: prakāśātma or taijasātma; vikṛtātma; bhūtātma. The first gives rise to the five jñānendriyas (organs of knowledge) and the mind. The second produces the five karmendriyas (organs of action). From the last evolve the sūkṣmabhūtas or tanmātras (the five subtle elements). These then create the five gross elements. The whole creation comes out of a combination of these basic products.

The puruṣas or jīvas (souls) get associated with the bodies in accordance with their karma, due to the will of God. Their association with the inert bodies make the latter appear as conscious even as an iron piece acts like a magnet in the vicinity of a powerful magnet.

The Śuddhasarga is the third creation. Here, God-called Puruṣottama Vāsudeva- evolves from out of himself three subsidiary agents or forms: Acyuta, Satya and Puruṣa. These forms in reality are nondifferent from him. The third form Puruṣa acts as the antaryāmin or the inner controller. It is he who inspires all the gods to work. It is he who binds the jīvas with vāsanās (residual impressions) and again, it is he who inspires them to do sādhanās (spiritual disciplines) to get out of the bondage of vāsanās.

The māyā (delusion) power of God makes the jīvas (through vāsanās or past impressions) get identified with the body-mind complex. This association of the vāsanās is anādi or beginningless. However, by the grace of God, the antaryāmin or the indwelling power and spirit, the jīva awakens to true knowledge and gets liberated from all the shackles.

The path to this mokṣa or liberation starts with the inspiration by God for the jīva to search out a great guru or spiritual preceptor. This guru gives the disciple mantradīkṣā (initiation with a holy name or syllable). Regular and steady practice of the mantrajapa (repetition of the divine name) results in samādhi or total absorption in God.

The upāsanā or meditation on God has two stages. The first is called 'kriyākhyā'. It is in the form of practising various virtues like śauca (cleanliness), yajña (sacrifices), tapas (austerity), adhyayana (studying the scriptures), ahimsā (not harming others), satya (truth), karuṇā (compassion), dāna (giving gifts) and so on.

The second is called 'sattākhyā' or 'jñānākhyā'. It is practically the same as Jñānayoga. The mind purified by the practice of kriyākhyā is now able to meditate on the ātman inside which results in the experience of unitive consciousness, that jñātr (knower), jñeya (object to be known) and jñāna (knowledge) are all one and the same.

The *Pāñcarātra āgamas*-especially the *Jayākhyā Samhitā*-describe two types of yogas: mantradhyanā and yogābhyāsa.

The former consists of meditation on God with form along with the repetition of appropriate mantras. The latter is almost the same as the Yoga of Patañjali (200 B.C.).

A special contribution of the *Pāñcarātra āgamas* to the religio-philosophical literature of Hinduism is the concept of the Vyūhas which are four. (Hence the name 'Caturvyūhas,' 'catur' meaning 'four'.)

`Vyūha' means a projection or an emanation.

In this system, the various names by which God the Supreme is known are: Paramātman, Nārāyaṇa, Viṣṇu, Bhagavān and Vāsudeva.

`Bhaga' means ṣaḍguṇas or the group of six blessed qualities. They are: jñāna (knowledge); aiśvarya (lordship); śakti (ability, potency); bala (strength); vīrya (virility, unaffectedness) and tejas (splendour).

Since God-more commonly known as Vāsudeva in this system-has all these guṇas or attributes in the fullest measure, he is called `Bhagavān'.

By the will of Bhagavān Vāsudeva (the first or the original Vyūha) the second Vyūha, Saṅkarṣaṇa (or Balarāma) emerges. From Saṅkarṣaṇa, emanates Pradyumna and from him, Aniruddha.

Though the latter three Vyūhas are also, in essence, equal to Vāsudeva, they manifest only two of the six guṇas prominently, the other four being in a latent condition.

If in Saṅkarṣaṇa, jñāna and bala are predominant, Pradyumna manifests aiśvarya and vīrya more prominently. Aniruddha, on the other hand, exhibits śakti and tejas to a much greater degree.

Each of the Vyūhas is credited with two activities, a creative and a moral one.

Each of the Vyūhas, again, gives rise to three more sub-Vyūhas, making a total of twelve emanations. They are: Keśava, Nārāyaṇa, Mādhava, Govinda, Viṣṇu, Madhusūdana, Trivikrama, Vāmana, Śrīdhara, Hṛṣīkeśa, Padmanābha and Dāmodara.

These twelve, are considered as the māsādhipas or the adhidevatās (tutelary deities) of the twelve lunar months. They are also offered arghya (ceremonial water) in ritualistic worship.

Iconographically, all of them are identical except for the arrangement of the four emblems of Viṣṇu-śaṅkha (conch), cakra (discus), gadā (mace) and padma (lotus)-in the four hands.

Conclusion

The *Pāñcarātra āgamas* are a continuation of the Vedic tradition. They also expand and expound the concepts about God and devotion.

Apart from sṛṣṭi (creation), sthiti (sustenance) and pralaya (dissolution) of the world, God discharges two more functions: nigrāha (controlling and punishing the evil-doers) and anugraha (showing his blessings on those who lead a good life and are devoted to him).

If the doctrine of bhakti or devotion and prapatti or self-surrender find an important place in this system, no less is the attention paid to rituals, worship, images of deities and temples as also several mantras, the repetition of which will confer many a blessing on the votaries.

Thus the *Pāñcarātra āgamas* have contributed considerably towards practical Hinduism. Even today, most of the Vaiṣṇava temples, especially in South India, follow their dictates, thus keeping its traditions alive.