The Pāñcarātra Āgamas: A Brief Study

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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 scholars. However, Yāmunācārya (918-1038 AD) in his scholarly work Āgama-prāmāṇya has conclusively established their affinity with the Vedas. Of the three kinds of Āgamas, the Saiva, the Śakta (or the Tantra) and the Vaiṣṇava, the Pāñcarātra Āgamas belong to the last group. The other branch of the Vaiṣṇava Āgamas is the Vaikhānasā Āgama, or the Vaikhānasā Sūtras.

Derivation of the Name

The literal meaning of the word Pāñcarātra is ‘that which is connected with five nights’. Lord Keśava (Viṣṇu or Nārāyaṇa) is said to have taught this esoteric science to Ananta, Garuḍa, Viśvaksena, Brahmā and Rudra over five nights (paṇca = five; rātra = night). The word rātra also means jñāna, wisdom or knowledge. 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) and vaisayika (objects of desire). Or, alternatively, since it teaches about the five aspects of God (called Puruṣottama)—para (highest), viyuga (emanation), vihāva (incarnation), antaryāmin (indweller) and arca (form of worship)—it is called Pāñcarātra.

Pāñcarātra Literature

Pāñcarātra literature is very vast. The total number of works—generally called samhita or tantra—exceeds 200, according to 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 brief descriptive list of the works presently available.

1. Ahirbudhyāna Samhitā: This is a fairly voluminous work with 3680 verses in 60 chapters. The speciality of this work is that it deals with the four vyūhas, or emanations of the Lord, descriptions of several mantras (sacred syllables) and yantras (magical diagrams) as also rituals for curing diseases.

2. Aniruddha Samhitā: Also called Aniruddhasamhitā mahopanisad, it has 34 chapters dealing entirely with 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. Hayaśīra Samhitā: A fairly exhaustive work in 144 chapters and distributed among 4 kāṇḍas, or sections—‘Pratiṣṭhākāṇḍa’, ‘Saṅkarṣanakāṇḍa’, ‘Liṅgākāṇḍa’ and ‘Śaurakāṇḍa’—it deals primarily with rituals concerning the installation of images of various minor deities as also the methods of their preparation.

4. Īśvara Samhitā: It is a work of 24 chapters of which 16 deal with ritualistic worship. Other subjects treated in this work are descriptions 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 Melkote, a Vaiṣṇava pilgrim centre on a hillock near Mysore, Karnataka).

5. Jayākhyā Samhitā: This work is one of
the three cardinal texts of Pāñcarātra literature. It has 33 pañjalas, or chapters, and deals with the following topics: a detailed account of creation; yogābhyāsa (practice of yoga) and mantropāsana (spiritual practice through the repetition of mantras, or sacred formulas); various Vaiṣṇava mantras; puja (ritualistic worship); homa (fire ritual); dikṣā (initiation); temples and worship there; ācāras (codes of conduct) for Vaiṣṇavas; and prayāścittas, or expiations of sins.

6. Kāśyapa Saṁhitā: This is a comparatively small work in 12 chapters. It deals mainly with poisons and methods of remedy by suitable mantras, or incantations.

7. Mahā-saṁatkumāra Saṁhitā: This is a voluminous work of 10,000 verses spread over 40 sections in 4 chapters. It deals entirely with rituals of worship.

8. Pādma Saṁhitā: Dealing mainly with rituals and chanting of mantras, this work is in 31 chapters.

9. Parama Saṁhitā: A work in 31 chapters, it deals with the process of creation; rituals of initiation and worship; and yoga classified as jñāna yoga and karma yoga. It declares that jñāna yoga, which includes prāṇāyāma and samādhi, is superior to karma yoga, which seems to mean ritualistic worship of Viṣṇu.

10. Paramēśvara Saṁhitā: A short work of 15 chapters, it deals with meditation on mantras, sacrifices and methods of rituals as also prayāścittas, or expiations.

11. Parāśara Saṁhitā: A concise work in 8 chapters, it deals with the methods of japa, or the muttering of the name of God.

12. Pauṣkara Saṁhitā: Considered one of the earliest works of the Pāñcarātra system, this consists of 43 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 41 chapters, it deals mainly with meditation on mantras and expiations of sins.

14. Vihāgendra Saṁhitā: It is in 24 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 30 chapters, it also deals mainly with ritualistic worship. Its philosophy is akin to that of Sāṅkhya with some variations like the puruṣa (the individual soul) being all-pervading and his activating prakṛti to evolve into the world.

16. Viṣṇu-tattva Saṁhitā: Comprising 39 chapters, it deals with image worship, ablutions and the wearing of Vaiṣṇava marks, and some purificatory rites.

Philosophy of the Pāñcarātra Āgamas

The philosophy of this system has been expounded in detail in the Jayākhya Saṁhitā. A brief summary follows.

Though ṣaṁjñā (Vedic sacrifices), dāna (making 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 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 bhokty (experiencer, enjoyer) of all that is born out of the guṇas. He is sarva-jñāna (omniscient) and sarva-sakta (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 realized through the pure mind. This is called mānasika-pratyakṣa.

When they realize this Brahman or God, the jīvas appear to have become one with Him, but do maintain a subtle distinction also. Hence this philosophy can be called Bhedā-
beda or Dvaitadvaita.

As regards srṣṭi, or creation, three kinds are recognized: brāhmaṣarga, prakṛtiṣarga and śuddhasarga.

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

Prakṛtiṣarga is similar to the creation 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 ahānakāra (egoism). This is of three types: prakāśātmā or taijāsātmā, vīṭātmā and bhūtātmā. The first gives rise to the five jñānendriyas (organs of knowledge) and the mind. The second produces the five karmaṇendriyas (organs of action). From the last evolve the sūkṣmaḥštūtas or tānmatrās (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 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.

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 non-different 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 undergo śūdhānās (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 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 shackles.

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

Upāsanā, or meditation on God, has two stages. The first is called kriyākhyā. It is in the form of practice of various virtues like saucā (cleanliness), yajña (sacrifices), tapas (austerity), adhyāyana (study of the scriptures), ahimsā (not harming others), satya (truth), karunā (compassion), dāna (giving gifts), and so on. The second is called satīkhyā or jñānākhyā. It is practically the same as jñāna yoga. Purified by the practice of kriyākhyā, the mind is now able to meditate on the Atman within, which results in the experience of unitive consciousness that jñātṛ (knower), jñeya (object of knowledge) and jñāna (knowledge) are all one and the same.

The Pañcarātra Āgamas, especially the Jayākhyā Saṁhitā, describe two types of yogas: mantradhānya and yogāḥkhyāsa. 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 BC).

A special contribution of the Pañcarātra 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 emanation.

In this system, Paramātman, Nārāyaṇa, Viṣṇu, Bhagavan and Vāsudeva are the various names by which God the Supreme is known. Bhaga means sādguṇas, or the group of six blessed qualities. They are jñāna (knowledge), aiśvarya (lordship), śakti (ability, po-
tency), bala (strength), virya (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, in Pradyumna aīśvarya and virya are more prominent. Aniruddha, on the other hand, exhibits sakti and tejas to a much greater degree.

Each of the vyūhas is created 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, Ṣrīkeśa, Padmanābha and Dāmodara. These twelve are considered the māsādhīpas or adhīdevatās (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—saṅkha (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 concepts about God and devotion. Apart from srṣṭi (creation), sthiti (sustenance) and pralaya (dissolution) of the world, God discharges two more functions: nigrāha (controlling and punishing evil-doers) and anugraha (showering His blessings on those who lead a good life and are devoted to Him). If the doctrines 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.

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**Awakening**

The story goes that a fire broke out in a house in which a man was fast asleep. They tried to carry him out through the window. No way. They tried to carry him out through the door. No way. He was just too huge and heavy.

They were pretty desperate till someone suggested, ‘Wake him up; then he’ll get out by himself.’

*Only children need to be taken care of.*

*Wake up!*

*Or grow up!*

—Anthony de Mello, The Prayer of the Frog, 2.78-9