
The Pāñcarātra Āgamas: A Brief Study

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Agamas 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 *Āgamaprāmānya* 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 Vaiṣṇava Āgamas is the *Vaikhānasa Āgama*, or the *Vaikhānasa 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 (*pañca* = 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 *vaiṣayika* (objects of desire). Or, alternatively, since it teaches about the five aspects of God (called Puruṣottama)—*para* (highest), *vyūha* (emanation), *vibhava* (incarnation), *antaryāmin* (indweller) and *arcā* (form of worship)—it is called Pāñcarātra.

Pāñcarātra Literature

Pāñcarātra literature is very vast. The total number of works—generally called *samhitā*

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. *Ahīrbudhnya Samhitā*: 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, descriptions of several *mantras* (sacred syllables) and *yantras* (magical diagrams) as also rituals for curing diseases.

2. *Aniruddha Samhitā*: Also called *Aniruddhasamhitā-mahopanīṣad*, 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. *Hayaśirṣa Samhitā*: A fairly exhaustive work in 144 chapters and distributed among 4 *kāṇḍas*, or sections—'Pratiṣṭhākāṇḍa', 'Saṅkarsanakāṇḍa', 'Liṅgakāṇḍa' and 'Saurakāṇḍa'—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. *Jayākhya Samhitā*: This work is one of

the three cardinal texts of Pāñcarātra literature. It has 33 *paṭalas*, 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*; *pūjā* (ritualistic worship) and *homa* (fire ritual); *dīkṣā* (initiation); temples and worship there; *ācāras* (codes of conduct) for Vaiṣṇavas; and *prāyaścittas*, 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-sanat̐kumāra 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. *Parameśvara Saṁhitā*: A short work of 15 chapters, it deals with meditation on *mantras*, sacrifices and methods of rituals as also *prāyaścittas*, 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. *Vihagendra 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 *yajña* (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 *bhoktr* (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 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 Dvaitādvaita.

As regards *śṛṣṭi*, or creation, three kinds are recognized: *brahmasarga*, *prakṛtisarga* 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 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* and *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 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 *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 *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 *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.

Upāsana, or meditation on God, has two stages. The first is called *kriyākhyā*. It is in the form of practice of various virtues like *śauca* (cleanliness), *yajña* (sacrifices), *tapas* (austerity), *adhyayana* (study of 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 *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 *jñātr* (knower), *jñeya* (object of knowledge) 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 BC).

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 emanation.

In this system, Paramātmān, Nārāyaṇa, Viṣṇu, Bhagavān and Vāsudeva are the various names by which God the Supreme is known. *Bhaga* means *śaḍguṇas*, or the group of six blessed qualities. They are *jñāna* (knowledge), *aīśvarya* (lordship), *śakti* (ability, po-

tency), *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, in Pradyumna *aīśvarya* and *vīrya* are more prominent. Aniruddha, on the other hand, exhibits *śakti* 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, Hṛṣīkeśa, Padmanābha and Dāmodara. These twelve are considered the *māsādhīpas* or *adhīdevatās* (tutelary deities) of the twelve lunar months. They are also offered *arghya* (ceremo-

nial 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 concepts about God and devotion. Apart from *sr̥ṣṭi* (creation), *sthiti* (sustenance) and *pralaya* (dissolution) of the world, God discharges two more functions: *nigraha* (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. *

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