Introduction

Āgamas are secondary scriptures of Hinduism, more closely connected with rituals and temple culture. Of the three main branches of the āgamas—Saivāgamas, Sāktāgamas and Vaiśṇavāgamas—the last has split into two sampradāyas or traditions. They are: the Pāncarātra Āgamas and the Vaikhānasa Āgama.

The latter derives its name from the sage Vikhānas who was the founder.

Vikhānas, the Founder

Vikhānas was a sage of great antiquity regarded as an incarnation of Viṣṇu (or an emanation from him, of Vedic wisdom) who popularized the cult of Viṣṇu in the country. He is sometimes identified with the creator, the four faced Brahmā, also. He is said to have written two treatises—the Vaikhānasa Kalpaśūtras and the Daiviśūtras.

He had four chief disciples—Marici, Atri, Bhṛgu and Kāsyapa—to whom he taught the worship of Viṣṇu in great detail.

Iconographical works prescribe that he is white in complexion, is clothed in golden coloured garments and has four arms. He holds a danda (staff) and has the ruru (antelope) as his mount. He is generally shown with his four disciples. His image has to be installed at the right side of the entrance to the mukhamandapa (front porch) in a temple of Viṣṇu.

Vaikhānasa Literature

The original, basic, work was the Vaikhānasa Kalpaśūtras which is not available now. A list of all the works composed by the four disciples may now be given:

1. By Atri (in 88,000 verses)
   Ātreyatantra; Pārvatantra; Uttaratantra; Viṣṇutantra.

2. By Bhṛgu (in 64,000 verses)
   Arcādhikāra; Citrādhikāra; Khilādhikāra; Khilatantra; Kriyādhikāra; Mānādhikāra; Niruktādhikāra; Prakīrtādhikāra; Pratigṛhyādhikāra; Purātantra; Varunādhikāra; Vāsādhikāra; Yajñādhikāra.

3. By Kāsyapa (64,000 verses)
   Jñānakānda; Satyakānda; Tarkakānda.

4. By Marici (1,84,000 verses)
   Ānandasamhitā; Jayasamhitā; Jñānasamhitā; Samjñānasamhitā; Vijayasamhitā; Vijitasamhitā; Vimalasamhitā; Vīrasamhitā.

Only a few of these works have now survived. They are:

- Ānandasamhitā and Jayasamhitā of Marici;
- Khilādhikāra, Kriyādhikāra, Prakīrtādhikāra and Yajñādhikāra of Bhṛgu;
- Jñānakānda of Kāsyapa; Uttaratantra (or Samjñārācanādhiṣṭhāna) of Atri.

Some of the other, more important, works are:

- Daśavidhahetunirūpana (of Śrīnīvāsa Makhin, A.D.1050); commentaries on the Vaikhānasa Kalpaśūtras and Sakalāgama-
sārasaṅgṛaha by Nṛśimha-Vajpeya-Yājī; Lakṣmī-Viṣiṣṭādvaita-bhāṣya on the Vedāntasūtras of Bādarāyana, Uttamabrahmavidyā and Vaikhānasa mahimamahānjarī by Śrīnivāsa Makhin; Arcanāvanī by Keśavacārīya; Prayogavṛtti (on the vaikhānasasūtras) by Sundararājā; Vīmānārcaṇakālpa by Raghunātha-cakravartī and Setumādhavacārīya.

All the treatises of the Vaikhānasa Āgama series are distinguished by their meticulous attention to image-worship and temple rituals. They also give the essential aspects of temple architecture.

The Vaikhānasa Philosophy

Based on the commentary of Śrīnivāsa Makhin on the Vedāntasūtras of Bādarāyana as mentioned above, one Raghupati Bhaṭṭacārīya (also known as Vāsudeva) composed a work called Mokṣopāyapradpīkā. Here he has systematized the philosophy of the Vaikhānasa Āgamas which is practically the same as the Viṣiṣṭādvaita of Rāmānuja (A.D. 1017-1137). It is in prose and has twelve sections.

Brahman or Paramātman is the highest and independent reality. He has two aspects: the nīskala (devoid of form and attributes) and the sakala (with form and attributes).

In the sakala aspect he (known as Viṣṇu or Nārāyaṇa) is inseparably associated with Lakṣmī, even as the moon and its light are. He is Īśvara, the supreme Lord, with the insentient prakṛti (made up of the three guṇas sattva, rajas and tamas) and the sentient puruṣas (jīvas or individual souls)—which are also eternal—under his absolute control as dependent realities.

These jīvas which are atomic in size, are of three classes: nitya (immutable or changeless like Ananta [or Ādiśeṣa], Sanaka and others); mukta(emancipated, though once in bondage); and, baddha (bound, souls bound by their prārabdha karma).

The baddha or the bound souls have been fettered, by being deluded by the māyā of Īśvara (Viṣṇu) and can get liberation only by seeking refuge in Him, through devoted worship.

The means of liberation are: jñāna (knowledge); upāsanā (worship); prapattī (surrender); karma (ritualistic action).

However, samārādhana (worshipping Nārāyaṇa with intense devotion) is projected as the most effective sādhanā. This can take any one of the following four forms: japa (repetition of divine name); huta or homa (fire-sacrifices); arcanā (iconic worship); dhyāna (meditation).

Whereas huta is the worship of God in the amūrtta (an-iconic) form, arcanā in the iconic form has been declared to be the most effective of all.

Mukti (emancipation) is of four types: sālokya (to live in the world of God); sāmīpya (to live near God); sārūpya (to have a form similar to that of God) and sāyujya (being united with or merged in God). The last is considered the real mukti.

The Vaikhānasa treatises speak of four realms of Viṣṇu with one aspect of his presiding over each. They are:

Āmoda - Viṣṇu
Pramoda - Mahaviṣṇu
Sammoda - Sadāviṣṇu
Vaikunṭha - Nārāyaṇa (or Vyāpi - Nārāyaṇa)

The four types of mukti mentioned are respectively related to these four realms. In the last state, the liberated soul enters into the supreme light and enjoys everlasting bliss.

Corresponding to the four vyūhas of the Pāṇcarātra system, Vaikhānasa too posits four aspects of Viṣṇu who is called the Ādimūrtī.
The four forms are: Puruṣa representing the quality dharma (righteousness); Satya, the quality jñāna (knowledge); Acyuta, the quality aśvārya (glory); Aniruddha, the quality vairāgya (detachment).

Some aspects of yoga like Prāṇāyāma, nādis, kuṇḍalini, and cakras are also dealt with in the treatises of this Āgama.

The Vaikhānasas are a community of temple priests. They are ordained by birth to be priests and have to follow only that avocation.

The sacramental rites that are prevalent in a Vaikhānasas household include a unique ceremony called Viṣṇubali (or garbha-cakrasaṁskāra). It is performed after the sīmanta, the ritual before childbirth conducted for the mother, in the bright half of the eighth month of pregnancy. It involves a homa and then offering to the pregnant mother, pāyasa (sweet rice-pudding) in which the emblem cakra (discus-emblem of Viṣṇu) and śaṅkha (conch) have been previously dipped and a part offered in homa. While the woman is drinking it, a special mantra is recited. The belief is that during this ritual, Lord Viṣṇu himself will brand the arms of the child to be born, with the marks of śaṅkha (conch) and cakra (discus), which he carries in his own hands.

The practical import of this ceremony is that the child born as a vaikhānasas has already been sanctified by Viṣṇu himself and hence needs no more initiatory rites as the Pāṃcarātra do. He acquires the right to be a priest of Viṣṇu by birth. He can perform the worship both at home and in temples after formal training in the process of worship.

The vaikhānasas take to worship in temples as priests, not for eking out a living—such priests are called devalakas—but with a sense of duty and obligation. It is the responsibility of the temple management to provide for their maintenance.

The vaikhānasas bestow a very high place to the priest who worships in a temple. Whereas the icon acquires divinity after āvāhana (invoking), divinity, according to them, abides in him permanently.

Recitation of the Ātmasūkta (Vaikhānasasainhitā, Manthrāprāśa 5.49) enables the priest to get identified with the cosmic form of Viṣṇu.

Temple Images of Worship

The vaikhānasas mode of worship is essentially oriented towards Viṣṇu. In temples adopting their mode, there will generally be four or five icons of worship. The dhruvabera is the permanently fixed stone image. Next comes the kautukabera, an exact replica of the original (but smaller in size) which receives the daily worship, hence being called arcanabera also. Then comes the snapanabera, an image used for naimittika or occasional rituals. Last is the utsavabera or autsavabera, used in worship for the sake of people who are motivated by worldly desires (kāmyārcana).

The kautukabera rests on an arcanapitha, a seat of worship. The snapanabera is placed in another enclosure called snapanamandapa which is outside the sanctum. The utsavabera too has its own special place.

Viṣṇu is said to have taken three strides (vide Viṣṇusūkta 3). If the dhruvabera is Viṣṇu in the original posture, the three other images represent the same Viṣṇu in his three steps: Kautukabera is the first step, snapanabera, the second step and the utsavabera, the third step. It is the spirit of the same original icon that has entered into the other three.

Sometimes another icon is added to these three imovable images, called the balibera. This is used for the sake of distributing food daily to the attendant deities located in the enclosures.
If the same movable icon is used for all purposes, it is known as bhogabera. Sometimes the system of having five icons for one deity is compared to the establishing of and maintaining the five Vedic fires (gārhya-patya, āhavaniya, dākṣināgni, āvasthya and sabhya). Similar to the four vyūhas or emanations of the Pāncarātra system, the Vaikhanasa system posits the caturmūrtis. Viṣṇu is the Ādimūrti. The four mūrtis or aspects are: Purusa, Satya, Acyuta and Aniruddha.

They also correspond to the four icons in the temple: Puruṣa is represented by the kautukabera, Satya by utsavabera, Acyuta by the snapanabera and Aniruddha by the balibera. During the actual worship, however, Aniruddha is omitted. The four images—kautuka, utsava, snapana and bali—are taken to represent Viṣṇu, Puruṣa, Satya and Acyuta respectively.

In the temple worship of the Vaikhanasa system, these four aspects of Viṣṇu are visualized as four forms located around him, in the immediate enclosure: Puruṣa to the east; Satya to the south; Acyuta to the west; and, Aniruddha to the north.

Iconographical works describe their images in different ways.

Conclusion

Though the Vaikhanasa Āgamas give primary importance to arcā or mūrtipūjā, to the images of gods, their consorts and attendant deities, the outlook is, in essence, idealistic. It holds that Godhead is sarvādāhara (support of all), sanātana (ancient and eternal), aprameya (inscrutable), acintya (indefinable), nirguṇa (without attributes) and niṣkala (without parts). It is all-pervading even as butter in milk, oil in oilseeds or fire in firewood.

However, even as fire blazes forth by friction of the arani sticks, Viṣṇu appears in the heart of the devotee by dhyānamathana (churning due to meditation) or constant meditation. This is the ‘sakala’ form, the Absolute materializing itself due to the devotion and visualization of the devotee.

Even then, worshipping an icon, properly prepared, and as per the rules given in the treatises, is extremely important. That itself can, ultimately, lead to salvation.

This seems to be the sine qua non of the Vaikhanasa Āgamas.

"... Give all to the Lord and go on and think not of it. The whole soul pours in a continuous current to God; there is no time to seek money, or name, or fame, no time to think of anything but God; then will come into our hearts that infinite, wonderful bliss of Love. All desires are but beads of glass. Love of God increases every moment and is ever new, to be known only by feeling it. Love is the easiest of all, it waits for no logic, it is natural. We need no demonstration, no proof. ..."

—Swami Vivekananda