

Vaikhānasa Āgama

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Introduction

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

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

Vikhanas, the Founder

Vikhanas 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 Kalpasūtras* and the *Daivikasūtras*.

He had four chief disciples—Marīci, Atri, Bhṛgu and Kāśyapa—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 daṇḍa (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 mukhamaṇḍapa (front porch) in a temple of Viṣṇu.



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Vaikhānasa Literature

The original, basic, work was the *Vaikhānasa Kalpasūtras* 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)

Ātreyantra; Pūrvatantra; Uttaratantra; Viṣṇutantra.

2. By **Bhṛgu** (in 64,000 verses)

Arcādhikāra; Citrādhikāra; Khilādhikāra; Khilatantra; Kriyādhikāra; Mānādhikāra; Niruktādhikāra; Prakīrṇādhikāra; Prati-grhyādhikāra; Purātantra; Varuṇādhikāra; Vāsādhikāra; Yajñādhikāra.

3. By **Kāśyapa** (64,000 verses)

Jñānakāṇḍa; Satyakāṇḍa; Tarkakāṇḍa.

4. By **Marīci** (1,84,000 verses)

Ānandasamhitā; Jayasamhitā; Jñāna-samhitā; Samjñānasamhitā; Vijayasamhitā; Vijitasamhita; Vimalasamhitā; Virasamhitā.

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

Ānandasamhitā and Jayasamhitā of Marīci;

Khilādhikāra, Kriyādhikāra, Prakīrṇādhikāra

and *Yajñādhikāra* of Bhṛgu;

Jñānakāṇḍa of Kāśyapa; *Uttaratantra (or Samūrtārcanādhikāra)* of Atri.

Some of the other, more important, works are:

Daśavidhahetunirūpana (of Śrinivāsa Makhin, A.D.1050); commentaries on the *Vaikhānasa Kalpasūtras* and *Sakalāgama-*

sārasaṅgraha by Nṛsiṃha-Vajapeya-Yājñi; *Lakṣmi-Viśiṣṭādvaita-bhāṣya* on the *Vedāntasūtras* of Bādarāyaṇa, *Uttamabrahmavidyā* and *Vaikhānasa mahimamañjarī* by Śrinivāsa Makhin; *Arcanānavanīta* by Keśavācārya; *Prayogavṛtti* (on the *vaikhānasasūtra*) by Sundararāja; *Vimānārcanakalpa* by Raghunātha-cakravartī and Setumādhavācārya.

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 Śrinivāsa Makhin on the *Vedāntasūtras* of Bādarāyaṇa as mentioned above, one Raghupati Bhāṭṭācārya (also known as Vāsudeva) composed a work called *Mokṣopāyapradīpikā*. Here he has systematized the philosophy of the Vaikhānasa Āgamas which is practically the same as the Viśiṣṭādvaita 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 niṣkala (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 who 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 prārabdhakarma).

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); upāsana (worship); prapatti (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 amūrta (an-iconic) form, arcanā in the iconic form has been declared to be the most effective of all.

Mukti (emancipation) is of four types: sālōkya (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
Sammōda	-	Sadāviṣṇu
Vaikuṇṭha	-	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 Pāñcarātra system, Vaikhānasa too posits four aspects of Viṣṇu who is called the Ādimūrta.

The four forms are : Puruṣa representing the quality dharma (righteousness); Satya, the quality jñāna (knowledge); Acyuta, the quality aiśvarya (glory); Aniruddha, the quality vairāgya (detachment).

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

The Vaikhānasa Community

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 Vaikhānasa household include a unique ceremony called Viṣṇubali (or garbhacakrasaṃskāra). 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 vaikhānasa has already been sanctified by Viṣṇu himself and hence needs no more initiatory rites as the Pāñcarātra 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* (*Vaikhānasa-saṃhitā*, *Manthrapraśna* 5.49) enables the priest to get identified with the cosmic form of Viṣṇu.

Temple Images of Worship

The vaikhānasa 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 arcanābera 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 (kāmyārcanā)

The kautukabera rests on an arcanāpiṭha, 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 utasavabera, 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 (gārhyapatya, āhavanīya, dakṣiṇāgni, āvasthya and sabhya).

Similar to the four vyūhas or emanations of the Pāñcarātra system, the Vaikhānasa system posits the caturmūrtis. Viṣṇu is the Ādimūrti. The four mūrtis or aspects are: Puruṣa, 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 Vaikhānasa 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 Vaikhānasa 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 sarvādhāra (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 araṇi 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 Vaikhānasa 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