

## PĀÑCARĀTRA ĀGAMA

Pāñcarātra is a hoary system of theology. Its beginnings are lost in time and it claims a divine origin as having been given by Śrīman-Nārāyaṇa, the Supreme Godhead to five disciples namely Ananta (Ādiśeṣa), Garuda Viṣvaksēna, Rudra (Śiva) and Brahma. There is a tradition which says that as the secret instructions were given in five consecutive nights (five nights) the name Pāñcarātra came to be applied to this doctrine of Divine worship. At the beginning it was one śāstra comprising jñāna (knowledge of the Godhead), Yoga, (meditation for union), kriya (construction of temples and images) and carya (doing or performing religious spiritual activities in connection with the service of God). But this huge śāstra of nearly one and half crores lōkas became split up into samhita of lesser length. We have nearly 210 Pāñcarātra samhitas but only a few of them are said to be authoritative such as Nārādīya, mahāsanatkuṁāra Jayākhyā, Paramēśvara, Īśvara, Kapiñjala, Parāśara, Padma Viṣṇutilaka, Bhāradvāja, Śrīpraśna, Sātvata, Brhadbrahma and Ahirbudhya.

The Pāñcarātra āgama is at least as old as the Mahābhārata. It is mentioned in the Śāntiparva. Śrī Kṛṣṇa is said to have been a sāttvata (Pāñcarātra). It is also known as the cult of Vāsudeva. Further colour is lent to this by the naming of the sons and grandson of Śrī Kṛṣṇa as Pradhymna and Aniruddha whereas his own brother was known as Samkarshana. Samkarshana, Pradhymna and Aniruddha are said to be vyūhas (cosmic powers of withdrawal, sustention and creation), whilst Śrī Kṛṣṇa and Vāsudeva was the redeemer and saviour of the world in trouble. Dr. R.G. Bhandarkar has also attempted to show that at least by the time of the Harivamsa the identification of the Ābhira Gopālākṛṣṇa with the Mahābhārata Śrī Kṛṣṇa Vāsudeva was complete. The Sāttvata doctrine is clearly implicit in the teaching of the Bhagavad doctrine is clearly implicit in the teaching of the Bhagavad Gītā. It was an attempt at sublimated synthesis of works, knowledge and sacrifice taught in the Upaniṣads and the Vedas. It was a very ancient doctrine as Śrī Kṛṣṇa himself

states (Bhagavad Gītā IV). It is the distilled Śrī Kṛṣṇa who announced Himself as the descent of God in all his supreme plenitude.

The Pāñcarātra Āgama claims that it teaches the knowledge that can flow into works of worship and lead to the ultimate realisation. <sup>1</sup>The name 'Rātra' is traced to the view that the teaching would grant that knowledge which liberates man or be bound soul from its cycle of ignorance. The ignorances are attributed to the individual from beginningless time and go with *karma* which again is beginningless. Another view is that the teaching was given to five great seers by God, namely, Brahma, Rdura, Indra, Ananta, and Garuda on five successive nights. Each became a *Samhita* and each of course was

---

<sup>1</sup> *Introduction to Pāñcarātra and the Ahirbudhnya Samhita*: Otto Schnada: Occult teaching is usually given to the nights: The teaching is given in the deep sleep state or prajna for a true liberation must start in that state and initiations are performed then. Indeed every individual knowingly goes into that state in deep sleep or the night of the individual and meets his Self or God – head in his heart as the Upaniṣads states. Rātra is the teaching given in pralaya according to some Ref. BHAKTI. Gita.II.69: Where the *munis* are those who are awake when everybody is asleep when all others are awake. Ratra is said to be thus knowledge of ignorance, sacrifice that ultimately takes one beyond the five levels of grace or intimates us the truth about the five modalities of being.

---

directed to a particular kind of exposition thought all samhitas contained the essential teaching. It has been also suggested that there is some connection with the Pāñcarātra-satra of the Brāhmaṇas- five – night sacrifices. Sacrifice has been sublimated in the Pāñcarātra Āgama in order to be of the order of worship of the forms of God. The peculiar or differentiating doctrine (pradhāna – prattitantra) of Pāñcarātra is its emphasis on the worship of the one Supreme Being who has taken forms suitable for worship. But such suitability for worship included the conception that the forms worshipped are indeed capable of being directly the Supreme Object of worship and adoration. The Pāñcarātra view in a

sense sublimates and synthesizes the teaching of the Upaniṣads and Bṛahmaṇās and Mantras belonging to the Vedaic knowledge of integrating philosophy of discrimination, occult efficacy of *mantra*, the designs peculiar to the several powers for mechanisms of invocation and presence (*yantra*), the establishment of the places or residence (*mandira*) or temples in a private to the Divine Force, the manner of installation, the prescribing of duties to the individuals who would profit by the presence of the Divine, and the performance of the festivals appropriate to the Supreme Form installed in the temple.

The philosophy of discrimination that it teaches is similar to that of the Sāṃkhya philosophy but with a difference. In fact it is stated to be theistic edition of Sāṃkhya which has similarity with the Viśiṣṭādvaitic philosophy of Śrī Rāmānuja. The one Supreme Godhead is always inseparable connected with the divine principle of Lakṣmī - who is His Śakti. This śakti particular manner appropriate is the principle of creativity and is also known in one of her aspects as Sudarśana. Though undifferentiated from Him in the period prior to evolution when everything is 'a sky without a single cloud', at the end of the period of the night (*paṛuṣhi rātri*) the Śakti of Viṣṇu opens her eyes and it almost looks like a lightning in the sky and she begins to act. Lakṣmī alone acts, Viṣṇu is transcendent. Sudarśana is the kriya śakti of Lakṣmī and Bhūti śakti is the material world; thus Viṣṇu is said to be the causa efficiens of the created world, kriya śakti is the cause instrumental is, whereas the bhūti śakti is the cause (causa materials). The transcendental aspect of Viṣṇu is the background. The world or the universe is created in two stages called *advarika* and *sadvarika*, one which is transcendental process when the Divine Himself splits into four forms which are the cosmic lords of the several cosmic processes and elements. The souls are said to be indistinguishably massed under the first vyūhas (split of the Godhead who opened His eyes so to speak) names as Samkarshana. Then the second split of Vāsudeva originating from Samkarshana is the lord of the Mind when the duality between souls and Nature emerges and He is named *pradhūma*. The third split originating from the last is called *Anirddha* and is the

*adhivevata* of the Guṇas. There are of course possibly variations. But the general fact remains that these three or four vyūhas or splits are of cosmic or transcosmic nature and render possible the lower creation. The principle of unity along with the timeless being is emphasized. In modern language of the seer Sir Aurobindo, we can say that these are supernal states of the eternal and the immortal.

The supreme God head known as Vāsudeva transcendent to all process manifests Himself in the creative manifestations beyond human time as the creator and sustainer and withdrawer principles whilst remaining within the scheme of creation as Himself. Thus four forms has the one Vāsudeva of the Kṣrīābdhi, of Samkarshana and Pradhymna and Aniruddha.

There seems to be also the realisation of the great truth that process of creation is pariṇāma (evolution) gradual manifestation of the inner nature of the things that exist namely the souls and the material world. The Lord thus becomes the indwelling impelling principle by 'entering into the creation' as the *antaryāmi*. This entering of the supreme *Para Vāsudeva* takes place in the heart of all creatures.

The further truth that the Supreme Lord enters into the creation not only as the indwelling inner impelling principle of evolution in each creature (and tattva) is expanded to include the 'historical' descents of God as a personality endowed with supernal powers and richness and sovereignty who comes to order the process of life according the immovable laws of spirit. The Bhagavad gita gives a full exposition of this meaning of the *avatar* (divine descent) when it says that the Lord incarnates (descends into the historical situations) whenever righteousness decreases and evil increases, to save the righteous and eliminate and destroy the wicked. There are of course manifold ways of saving the souls, physically, vitally, mentally and spiritually, and many indeed are the incarnations of the Divine in all sorts of ways adapted to the fulfillment of the Divine Will. These avatārs are reckoned by the Pāñcarātra to be 36 important ones, of which ten

which are reckoned by the public as the most important. These are known as *vibhavas*. *There can be partial avatārās, permanent avatārās and amśavatārās*. Partial avatārās come into being for a brief while taking possession of a might soul and working out the mission and passing out of it as soon as the mission is over. Permanent avatārās are those which continue for the whole period of creation (srishti), and amśavatārās are those descents of the Divine portion (soul or instruments) which are sent for the purpose or mission that has to be done which they execute with divine efficiency. Indeed such speculation has been expanded over the particular source or origin of the avatārās themselves, whether a particular avatāra belongs to the plane of Samkarshana, Pradhymna, Aniruddha or Vāsudeva. Thus among the eternal avatārās Kēśava, Nārāyaṇa and Mādhava are preferred to as Vāsudeva, these Lords being lords of the months.

Govinda, Viṣṇu and Madhuysūdana belong to Samkarshan, Trivikrama Vāmana and Śrīdhara belong to Pradhymna and Hrishikēśa, Padmanābha and Dāmodara belong to Aniruddha. (Obviously Trivikrama and Vāmana as lords of the respective months are different from Historical descents.) These are the lords of the month (māsas) as the Supreme Deity (Vāsudeva) is as Prajāpati the year (samvatsara). The historical descents also are referred to the different vyūhas. Thus Matsya Kūrma and Varāha are from Vāsudeva, Nrisimha, Vāmana and Paraśurāma are from Samkarshana, Daśaratha Rāma and Balarāma are from Pradhymna whereas Kṛṣṇa and Kalki are from Aniruddha. Pāñcarātra does not recognize Buddha as an avatāra of the right order but of the left order; that is, the purpose of that avatāra is not to restore the right and redress the wrong so much as the attracting of the wrong from the right by the process of presenting doctrines which have the glamour of godlessness and goodness superficially considered and preaching them. There are other versions of this process. One of them emerges that God is at once the incarnate lord of the form of Time (as Varṣa or Samvatsara), as māsa and as day and night. This śeṣī beautifully echoed in the Praśṇopaniṣad, I praśṇa, which however is not referred to by any āgama.

Time in its eternal form as well as in its temporal serial form has been thus given a full place. Everything in this world works out according to Time and *Niyati* (fixed order and not so much the predestined order) and *Guṇa* (the quality of events and things). There are interesting discussions as to whether they are one unit which have separated gradually in evolution (*pariṇāma*) as three different principles. It is clear that Time as regular succession almost is *Niyati* and the *guṇa* of time depends on the speeds of time. But more than all Indian thinkers of the Pāñcarātra had the conception of the integral time which is neither subjective nor merely objective but as the dimension of every event. All categories, not merely matter but souls also, are differentiated according to their time – factor, law – factor and quality factor. Thus we have *dēva*, *mānava*, *paśu* etc., with different measures of time; they have their respective *dharmā* and *adharma* or *niyat* and they are distinguished by their qualities of *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*; The formation of the original process becomes the condition for the manifestation of the time – process. The subtle become the condition of the gross manifestation.

The souls are gradually made to descend into the most gross elements and assume such bodies as their *Karma* demands. They are found in all conditions and have different equipments which gross not by their own will however, they have been given the opportunity for returning to the timeless state. They have to become self-conscious of the supreme status from which they have descended. They should realise that they are in every activity sustained by the power of Brahman. The whole process of creation must be realised as the play of the One Supreme Being through His Power (*Lakṣmī*) which is manifested in two forms as *Sudarśana* and *Bhūtī-śakti* (*Maakti* (*Māya*, *Vidya*, *śasvadvidya*, *Mūlaprakrit*)). They are to realise their unity with God in every sense. It is because of this supreme unity of the soul with Brahman, Viṣṇu that the soul experience liberation. The philosophy of the Pāñcarātra is capable of being described Viśṣṭādvaita, in so far as the Supreme Brahman as Viṣṇu is eternally inseparably and even indistinguishably one with His Power *Lakṣmī*, and the souls are eternal *amśas* of the Supreme Brahman's Power so to speak. There is only God with His

Power and none other. The processes of this Power of God are real processes involving two processes of *pariṇāma* and involvement or descent of the souls into every category of Bhūtiśakti or nature and a return of ascent in and through these categories so to speak by realizing that one is the *amśa* of God (or His Power) and dedicated oneself to that Godhead through surrender and devotion.

The *Arcā avatārā* of course, the most important part of this Āgama as it renders worship possible in a concrete way that is open to all souls even as the lowest level. Redemption being the aim and return being the immediate incentive the souls turn to God. A philosophic certainty about the existence of the creator-God is good for those who think or could think the transcendent Godhead is beyond all knowledge unless He could present Himself in vision; the historical *avatārā* could not be approached by all and served and loved because He descends only at certain periods of time and withdraws: the *antaryāmin* is to be known and worshiped and loved and entered into only by the Yogis in their deepest moments of meditation. Not so however the *Arcā* form of God which one could install at any time and worship and see and adore. It is the most accessible form; and all persons in so far as they are embodied feel the necessity for a visualized God. It is not as a delegate of the other forms of God which are also in a sense delegates of the One Supreme Godhead. But it is necessary to realise that the same power and force of the Divine indivisibly is pervading and acting in this delegate. Thus the *Arcā* is not a representation or merely an object for meditational purposes (*pratīka*) but a *presence* in full of the Divine Himself and His Power. The *Arcā* has to be installed in a particular manner. Indeed it has to be made according to the *sāstras* on this subject. The Pāñcarātra āgama devotes a considerable amount of its enquiry into the proper construction of the temple and proportion of the temple to the size of the image to be installed. The recent publication Śrīrangam of the *Parameśvarasamhita* contains numerous diagrams about the temple construction and the necessity to install the several deities or subordinate powers in the temple so as to reveal the full plenitude of the temple of God which is His city, the strict adherence to the performance of the *nitya* and

*naimittika* as also the *Utsavās* or festivals according to the *śāstra* is the condition of the proper presence of the Godhead in the installed idol. Nowadays with modern notions we are likely to forget that the temple should be treated as reverently as we treat a power house and the occult force of the installed idol can be retained without being 'earthed' by the maintenance of the occult health of the temple. The human individual must worship the Divine's five forms during the five periods of the Day. The worshipper should conform to the *abhigāna*, *upādāna*, *ijya*, *svādyaya* and *yogakālās* and thus be in touch with the fivefold nature of Brahman always in order to be able to attain the glorious union with God which is liberation. These worshippers are known as *panchakala – pāṛāyanas*. The temple worship also conforms to this panchkalāniyama and should be sedulously performed by the priests according to the prescribed methods. Any violation of these performances could lead to the withdrawal of the presence. The conditions of the presence are really important. Just as the yogic has to practice yama and niyama so too the arhaka and the devotees should closely observe the principles of *Śraddha*, *Saucha*, and *Īśvaraprāṇidhāna*. The worship of the temple includes the strict cleanliness in all matters and pure chanting of the *mantras* and other observances. Man lives in the holy presence of God in order to benefit from such a daily content. Then alone there grows the awareness of the other wonderful forms of the Supreme Godhead, from and issuing out of the *arcā*. The word *arcā*. The word *arcā* itself signifies the light which leads to the light-worlds – *archirādi-mārga* of God-realisation. *Sāyujya*, *salokya*, *sarūpya* and *samīpya* are the four stages of this process. To live nears God, to experience the worlds of light of God, to get united with God in all His supreme glory, and finally to attain the same quality or form of God which is the attainment of universality all modes of consciousness and beneficence in all activities that consciousness except with regard to the creative world activities (*loca-vyāpāra*) are indeed the four stages of the liberation. All these are rendered possible by the worship of the Iconic representation (*Arcā*) which is to be worshipped as if it is indeed also the Para (transcendent), *vyūhas*(cosmic powers), *vibhava* (*avatāra*) and the *antaryāmi* (*harda*, seated in the heart of all creatures). This is integral meditation. All are



indeed Perfect, full and One only, even as the Vēdear Avadhani, Date puts it :  
Pūrṇam adah pūrṇam idam pūrṇāt pūrṇam udacyate. *Pūrṇasya pūrṇam ādāya,  
pūrṇam evāvaśiṣyate.*

That (Para) śeṣi Full (integral); This (Arcā) is integral (full); Arising from that Integral (this) (vyūhas) is integral; that which is arising is indeed full (integral): that which remains is integral (full). In non is there diminution or loss of perfectness or integral oneness. This is the mystic realisation of the Pāñcarātra Philosophers and āḷvār .

The glory of Pāñcarātra lies in the assertion that God can be perceived here and now on this terrestrial scheme of things, provided one surrenders oneself to this experience of God through the God in the temple dedicated and consecrated to His Supreme Presence. Prapatti is the path of Yoga which includes gradually all other yogas in the light of surrender. Man should will to know God, renounce all that leads him away from Him, choose Him alone as the path and way and end; and increase the faith in Him as the One Supreme Person everywhere and in every activity, both objective and subjective, and utter surrender to His will in perfect abasement and understanding; and these steps of surrender are the yoga of *prapatti* and should be understood as including the jñāna karma and bhakti yogas also in an Integral way.

Thus briefly considered Pāñcarātra is one of the most interesting and living theisms in the world and in a pregnant sense the most complete and satisfying theism. No wonder this school of theism which is Religion and Philosophy in integral union, has had its fullest growth in South India. The temples of South India reveal this living theism as the most satisfying to the human mind. Their purity must be maintained and the *āgama* mode of worship must be preserved. And it is indeed a very bright idea to have special colleges for teaching this vast literature of the Āgama. There are many p, *yajñā* and installation and festivals which require to be brought light and edited with scrupulous care by men who actually are in touché texts of this system which deal with all aspects of temple

architecture, worship, *yajñā* and installation and festivals which require to be brought to light and edite with scrupulous care by ment who actually are in touch with worship of the Godhead in the *sanctum sanctorum*.

May Śrī Kṛṣṇa the founder of this teaching of the Pāñcarātra Āgama bless the endeavour to preserve and teach this most blessed doctrine and religion.