



Jai Maa Saraswati Gyandayini

An International Multidisciplinary e-Journal

(Peer-reviewed, Open Access & Indexed)

Journal home page: www.jmsjournals.in, ISSN: 2454-8367

Vol. 08, Issue-IV, April 2023



Growth of Vaishnavism in India: A Historical Study

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KEYWORDS

Vaishnavism, India, Vishnu, Krishna, Gupta Period, Sunga Dynasty, Kushana Dynasty, Religion, Dharma, Inscription, Pillars

ABSTRACT

India is a country with many religions. It has been the birth of many religions, like Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism. Hinduism is also called Sanatana Dharma. Bhagwat, Pashupat, Lingayat etc. all religions are a part of Sanatana Dharma. Vaishnavism is a part of Bhagwat religion. The Development of Vaishnavism in India begins in ancient period. Vaishnavism in India is mentioned by the Heliodorus, the Greek ambassador in Taxila during the Sunga Period. In the Besnagar inscription of Gautami Putra Satkarni in Madhya Pradesh, we find the mention of Vaishnavism on the Garuda Pillar. In the Kushana period also, we find mention of the development of Vaishnavism. Many Images and sculptures of the Kushana period related to Vaishnava stories are found in the Mathura region. Three different idols of Ekansha, Baldeva and Vasudeva have been found in Devghar village of Nawada district of Bihar. Which are kept now in Patna Museum. Vaishnavism developed a lot in Gupta period. The reign of Gupta kings is famous for the progress of Brahmin religion. An inscription has been received from Tosham village of Hisar district of Haryana, which begins with the praise of Lord Vasudev Vishnu. This is a Gupta carpet inscription. Thus, we see that the development of Vaishnavism in India has been happening since ancient times and even at the present time there are a large number of followers of Vaishnavism in India.

Introduction

India is a country with many religions. It is the birth place of many religions. Religions like Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism etc. were born in India. Hindu religion is also called Sanatan Dharma. Bhagwat, Shaiva, Pashupat, Lingayat etc. all religions are also a part of Sanatan Dharma. Vaishnavism developed from Bhagwat religion. Vaishnavism developed all over India. To know the regional expansion of Vaishnavism, it becomes

necessary to pay attention to its communal worship area. Analysing the contents of the Narayaniya section of the Shanti Parva, Grierson¹ believed that the Yadavas living in the south of Madhya Pradesh worshiped Vasudeva was born. Ray Chaudhuri² has considered the Yamuna valley as the original place of this worship. Megasthenes, ambassador of Seleucus, came to India between 304 to 299 BC. Lived in the Maurya court for a long time. Whatever he saw and heard while living

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.53724/jmsg/v8n4.02>

Received 06th Feb. 2023; Accepted 15th March 2023; Available online 20th April 2023

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in India, he recorded it in his book named 'Indica'. According to Megasthenes the society was divided into seven classes. Megasthenes has praised the Brahmin sages in his book. According to him, the Indians worshiped the Greek gods Dionysius and Heracles. In fact, it refers to the worship of Shiva and Krishna. Elaborating on his account, he writes that 'Heracles i.e., Vasudeva associated Krishna with the Sura Senas living in Methera (Mathura) and Kalisobora (Krishna Nagara), through whose kingdom a navigable river Iobores flowed'. Iobores was the modern Yamuna itself,³ it has been believed and it appears that the worship of Basudev Krishna was very popular in the Mathura region in the fourth century BC. Surely the glory of Shiva and Krishna is introduced through this description.⁴

Vaishnav Dharma in Singa Dynasty-

The oldest record of the existence of Bhagwat Mat is considered to be the Garuda pillar inscription of Besnagar in Madhya Pradesh. It was built by Heliodorus, the Greek ambassador from Taxila. Mr. R.P. Chanda believes that Heliodorus accepted the Bhagavata religion after coming to Vidisha or even before leaving Taxila. If the above opinion is accepted, then it can be believed that Bhagwat religion must have been prevalent in Pakistan in the second half of the second century BC. R.P. Chanda's opinion is confirmed by a special coin of Indo- Greek King Agathocles obtained from a place called Rekhanum in Afghanistan. It is said that there is a special coin in the hoard of coins received from the king's treasury, on which two male figures are made; it has been identified as

Baladeva and Vasudev. It appears that the worship of Vrishni deities must have been very popular in the north- west. In Besnagar, Madhya Pradesh, there is a reference to the installation of a beautiful Garuda pillar of Bhagwat by Gautami's son Satkarni. In the ruins of Besnagar,⁴ one can see a pool and a fish head. Perhaps this top would point towards Sankarshana and Pradyumna.⁵ An idol of Shri has also been found in these ruins.

Two carvings obtained from Bharhut of the second century BC indicate the popularity of Vaishnavism. In them, a man sitting on the horse's back and a woman sitting behind with Garudadhvaj in her hand is depicted. Scholars have accepted Purush as Bhagwat. A pillar top of stone has been found in Pavaya of Gwalior, which is considered to be the symbol of Sankarshanopasana. If we pay attention to the Rajputana period, the indication of the trend of Bhagwat religion is obtained from the Ghoshandi inscription. It is said that Kanvavanshi king⁷ Sarvatat had built a stone wall around the place of worship of Sankarshan and Vasudev in Narayan Vatika. Madhyamik, an ancient city located eight miles north of Chittorgarh in Rajasthan near Ghoshandi town. Narayan and is adorned with the devotion of Vasudev.

The spread of the Bhagavata religion extended to the kingdom of Queen Naganika in the western Deccan region. This is confirmed by the Nanaghat cave inscription. This inscription begins with the praise of Sankarshana and Vasudeva. Its date is believed to be of the second half of the first century BC.⁸

A stone statue of the remaining Sankarshan of the second century BC has been received from Mathura. It is said that at that time Mathura was ruled by tribal kings. Names showing Vaishnavite influences like Vishnu Mitra, Ramdatta and Sheshadatta are inscribed on the coins received from his treasury. Out of this, the first ruler was of the first century BC and the remaining two were probably subordinate to the Kushanas were feudatories.⁹

Mr. Allen studied some of the oldest coins of the Audumber Republic. In this he found that Bhagwat Mahadevsya Rajarajya was written on some coins. On this basis, he inferred that there must have been a Bhagavata king named Mahadeva in the Audumber dynasty.¹⁰ The D.C. government has read the text of the seal as 'Bhagavato Mahadevasya Rajarajya' meaning Mahadev, the king of kings.¹¹

It appears that these coins were issued in the name of Mahadeva, the family deity of the Audumbaras. Alan had read the seal inscription of a Yaudheya coin as Bhagavat Swamino Brahmanya 'Devasya Kumarasya' Later JN Banerjee refined it as 'Bhagavat Swamino Brahmvyaya Devasya Kumarasya. Similarly, on the Kunind coins, the mudra inscription read by Allen as 'Bhagavat Chhatesvara Mahatman was presented by J.N. Banerjee as 'Bhagavata Chhatesvara Mahatman'.¹²

It appears that for a period of four centuries after the end of the Shung rule, the tribal republics of western and central India, except for the Vrishnis, were predominantly Saiva.

Vaishnav Dharma in Saka Kushana Dynasty-

Although the number of archives related to Bhagwat religion from the first century to the middle of the third century has been insufficient, but a ray of hope arises from the sculptures and artifacts of this period. The Mora inscription of the time of Shadas, son of Ranjubul,¹³ "indicates the development of Bhagavad religion in Mathura during the reign of Shaka Kshatrapas. In their reign, the idol of the five Vrishni Nayak deities is mentioned. After this inscription, in another inscription, a Vasu A temple, pylon and vedika at the holy place of Bhagwat Vasudev by a person named there is mention of making.

Many images and sculptures of the Kushan period related to Vaishnava stories are found in the Mathura region. Artifact¹⁴, found near Mathura town, depicts Vasudev carrying the infant Krishna on his head and walking on water to Gokul. This is the earliest sculpture to depict Krishna's philosophy of life, which has been attributed to the first marriage on the basis of stylistic features. The picture engraved on Karvarlal Balukasm has been described as Govardhan Parvat located on the right finger of Krishna.¹⁵ There is a difference of opinion among the scholars regarding the above picture. Mr. Kumar Swami and J.N. Banerjee considered it to be of Uttar Kushan period, but Mr. Agrawal does not consider it to be earlier than the seventh century. In the CatLog of the Brahminical Images in Mathura, Vasudev Sharan Agarwal sir has mentioned fourteen images of Vasudev Vishnu.¹⁶ KD Vajpayee have also mentioned two idols. Which has been placed at the end of the Kushan period. Apart from the idols of Vishnu,

two idols of Shesh Sankarshana have also been found in the Mathura region. Mathura's Long Vishnu temple had a two-armed male statue with headgear, nakshatra, cup in left hand and Vaijayanti garland around the neck, while another statue of Baldev was obtained from Girdharpur village.¹⁷

Due observation of the above facts shows the expansion of the worship of Vasudev and Sankarshana in the Mathura region. Perhaps because of the popularity of Vasudev and Baldev Jainism it included in its community the evidence of this was found in 113 ADs by a Jain devotee while dedicating the statue of Vasudev. The idols of Baldev and Ekansha, which are said to be of Kushan period, were found near Mathura. Three such idols were found in the Mathura Museum.¹⁸

Three different statues of Ekansha Baldev and Vasudev have been found in Devangarh village of Nawada district of Bihar, which are now kept in Patna Museum.¹⁹ The first statue obtained from Mandsaur and currently preserved in the Central Museum; Indore is of 11th century. In this, the giant Varaha is situated on a stone block. There is a dense marking of various miniature deities on his body and the remains of Merulinga on the reverse. The right leg of Varaha is extended forward and below it is displayed an Ayudha Kada of Vishnu. Rajputana Museum. Ajmer's statue has been obtained from a place called Aghurna in Banswara district of Rajasthan. This statue is of 12th wedding. It has the marking of quadrilateral Linga on the back of Varaha and many deities are engraved on the body similar to the above statue.

Decorated with muktamala and foot-cuts and on the left side near her face, there is an image of Bhudevi and Sheshnag between the legs on the pedestal. The image of Bhudevi is standing in dvibhanga-mudra and is two-armed. Her right hand is in abhayamudra and left is in kayavalambita mudra. And it is decorated with Karandmukut Kundals, Graveyak, Keuro pebbles, mekhla, long garland, foot-cuts and nupurs.²⁰ In the inscription of 179 AD on a Yajna pillar from a place named Barnala in Jaipur district of Rajasthan, there is mention of organizing five 'Triratna' Yajnas and the wish to please Lord Vishnu has been expressed.

The idol, which is the treasure of the Pratap Museum, Udaipur, has been obtained from a place named Nagda in Udaipur district. This idol belongs to the 13th century. In this, many deities are engraved on the body of a giant pig standing on a stone slab and on the back, there are remains of Mekling. The idol is decorated with Muktamala and Padkatkas. His right leg extended forward is situated on a conch shell and chakra is displayed near the left leg. Is ever near the circle²¹

The Varaha sculpture preserved in the Watson Museum; Rajkot has been obtained from the Surendra Nagar district of Gujarat. This idol belongs to the 13th century. This idol is also similar to the above examples of Varaha form Vishnu and general architectural instructions. In this also the mailing is displayed on the back side of Varaha. In an inscription of the Peshawar Museum, there is mention of Vasudev, the son of Indradev, a resident of Omar.²² It can be inferred

from this name that Bhagwat religion must have been dominant in the northern parts of Punjab at that time as well.

A stone block written in Brahmi script is found behind the Raghunath temple in Dev Prayag village of Himachal Pradesh. The spread of Vaishnavism is also visible in the south. The Satavahanas supported the Mahayana form of Buddhism by encouraging the Mahasandhikas. In the Nasik cave inscription²³ of Gaumati son Satakarni, there is a mention of Vishnupalit, the chief official named Govardhan.²⁴ The Nasik rock inscription of Vashishthiputra Pulumavi mentions an officer named Vishnupala." The Buddhist Kund inscription of Maja mentions the name of Kaushik's son Vishnudatta. In the Kanheri rock inscription of the time of Rajan Mahariputra Swami Shakasena, there is a reference to Vishnunandin. It is said to be a resident of present-day Kalyan situated in Thana tehsil of Maharashtra. Names like Ramdatta Kanha, Vishnu and Benhu are often visible in Amravati Kunda and Kodane cave inscriptions.²⁵

Vaishnavism in the Mughal period-

The reign of the Gupta kings is famous for the origin of Brahmanism. The Gupta rulers were followers of Vaishnavism and had the title of Param Bhagwat. She performed the rituals of Vedic sacrifices, but being an ethical Vaishnava herself, her approach was completely tolerant of religion and she was not reactionary in any sense. His policy of religious tolerance and liberalism had provided a proper opportunity for various religions and wealth to flourish during this period.

They used to appoint all religious followers to high administrative posts without any discrimination. This period is considered to be the time of revival of Brahminism and Hinduism. Important changes were visible in this development journey of religion, for example, idol worship became a common feature of Hindu religion. Worship took the place of Yagya. Coordination was established between Vaishnavism and Shaivism during the Gupta period itself. Devotion to God got importance. Vaishnavism was in vogue as an important sect. Apart from India, it was propagated to the islands of Java, Sumatra, Borneo etc. and various islands of South-East Asia.

An inscription has been received from Tosam Village in Hisar tehsil of Haryana, which begins with the praise of Lord Vasudev Vishnu. The continuity of Vaishnavism among four generations of the same family of Hinsar around the fourth century shows its popularity. Seals obtained from a place named Sunet of Ludhiana, rich in Vaishnava symbols, confirm its antiquity. Five of those ten seals bear the Vaishnava mudra text Jit Gavata. Excavations have also found some burnt clay seal impressions from the same place, in which personal names like Shankar Narayan and Vishnudas are inscribed. It is believed to be of 5th century BC.²⁶

In the inner stone pillar inscription of Skanda Gupta, there is a mention of the installation of Vishnu statue. Just outside a village in the inner Ghazipur district is a red sandstone obelisk to the south. Vishnu statue is engraved on the same stone

pillar. A statue of Anantaswamin was found in 486 ADs from a place called Garhwa in Allahabad district. Which was actually the name of Vishnu in its remaining attraction form. It also mentions a deity named Chitrakoot Swamin, who can be none other than Dashastha's son Rama. In the Jaunpur inscription²⁷ of Ishwar Varman Bhaukhari, Lord Vishnu is mentioned as Atma Bhu and the archer deity.

Ishwar Varman was a feudatory of the Guptas in the first half of the sixth century. Apart from inscriptions, seals have also been found in Uttar Pradesh. In the seals obtained from Bhita of Allahabad, symbols like Chakra are present with the inscription *Namo Bhagwate Vasudevaya*. Marshall's²⁸ guess is that there must have been a temple of Vasudev in Bhita during the Gupta period. Another seal has a figure of a man, identified as Vishnu. There is a picture of Shri Lakshmi on four seals. Two other seals depict tortoise and swan incarnations of Vishnu.²⁹ Of the 120 seals listed by Marshall, only a few are associated with Buddhism and sun worship. Most are associated with Vaishnavism and Shaivism. The Vishnu Purana depicts a Vishnu at Mathura. The earliest available images of the Varaha, Nrisimha and Vamana avatars of Vishnu have been ascribed to the Gupta period and one of them was the Varaha lifting the earth.³⁰ Another artefact from Kansa Fort in Mathura in which Kaliyanag is subdued by Lord Krishna.

In the Sarnath Museum of Varanasi, a huge statue of Lord Krishna lifting the Govardhan Mountain on Kani Angul, made of Chunar's sandstone, has

been kept. A Vishnu statue of the Gupta period has been found from Junsi in Allahabad, which has been preserved in the Allahabad (Prayagraj) museum.³¹ A three-dimensional statue of Lord Vishnu engraved in the Gupta style has been found in Nainital. Some fragments and weapons have been found.³² On a clay plaque set up to decorate a brick temple at Bhitargaon in Kanpur district of Uttar Pradesh, Narayan is shown lying on the coils of Sheshnag. A lotus has blossomed from his navel, which Brahma is seated above. Near his feet, two demons Madhu and Kaitabh are shown in the posture of war. This temple is believed to be of the second half of the fifth century AD.³³ There is also a Varaha avatar of Vishnu in the center of the western wall of this temple.

Excavations were carried out in Jhansi district of Uttar Pradesh under the supervision of DR Sahni. The Dashavatar temple of Deogarh was discovered in this Khuda. This temple was built in Panchayatan style. Four small temples were built at the four corners of the main temple. This was a unique temple in its architecture. Its construction is said to be of the first half of the sixth century. The child form of Krishna is depicted on the temple panel.³⁴ There is a niche on the east side of the temple, which depicts the penance of Nar and Narayan. There is a pavilion on the south side, which presents the fully developed Vaishnavite myth of the Gupta period. In this, Narayan is shown resting on Sheshnag.³⁵ Several scenes from the Ramayana are depicted on a panel in the southern corner of the temple. The figure of Vamana, an avatar of Vishnu, is engraved on a

craft panel.

There was a temple of Vishnu at a place named Nagari in Rajasthan, which was built by three Vaishya brothers named Satyasur, Sugandha and Das together. From there an inscription beginning with the praise of Vishnu has been received. Two red sandstone pillars related to the events of Krishna's life have been found at a place named Mandore in Jodhpur. Scholars have considered it to be of the fourth century. Remains of an inscription have been found in the Mandeshwari hill of Shahabad district of Bihar. Dandanayaka named Gomibhatt had arranged for a mutt of Vinitheshwar to have a shamavesh in the temple of the presiding deity Shri Narayan. This record mentions the rule of Mahasamanta Udayasena. N.G. Majumdar has considered it to be of Gupta Samvat on epigraphical basis. Gajalakshmi painted from a place named Basad in Muzaffarpur district of Bihar.

Clay seals have come to light. This shows the popularity of Vaishnavism. At one place, there is a picture of Varah with conch shell on both the sides. In the excavation done by Spooner to investigate the facts, interesting material came to light from Basadh. On a seal, the female idol depicted on a platform above the barge was identified by G.N. Banerjee as Vanijya Lakshmi. Lakshmi is depicted between two elephants and some holding a lotus flower³⁶ on one face there is a statue of a male lion sitting on a high altar. The right hand of that statue is raised and the left is adorned on the waist. This appears to be one of the oldest images of Narasimha Devata.

An inscription of Vaishnavism made by Chakra Varman from Bankura district of West Bengal has come to light. In that inscription Chakra Varman is described as Vishnudasa.³⁷ Various incidents in the legends of Krishna and Sankarshana from a place called Paharpur in Raj Shahi tehsil indicate the growth of Vaishnavism in Bengal from the beginning of the sixth century. Maharaja Surendra Varman excavated a cave temple for Lord Balabhadraswamin in Guwahati, Assam.³⁸ His reign is believed to be from 470 AD to 495 AD. Vaishnavism must have been very popular in central India. A huge statue of the Varaha avatar of Vishnu has been found from the famous hill of Udayagiri near Bhilsa in Madhya Pradesh. Kumar Swami has fixed its time as 400 AD.³⁹ 50 miles northeast of Milsa in the Sagar district of Madhya Pradesh, there is a place called Eran.⁴⁰ There is a group of temples. On the basis of Samudragupta's Eran inscription⁴¹ Cunningham determined that the rock was probably a Vishnu temple located to the north of the Varaha temple. The standing huge statue was attached to the temple. A Gupta inscription from Mandsaur in Madhya Pradesh also mentions the worship of Vishnu. The inscription of Mandsaur begins with the praise of Lord Vishnu, in which he is described as Sahasrashirsha Purusha, who sleeps on the water bed of the ocean-made Paryak.⁴²

The inscription of Maharani Prabhavati Gupta obtained from Berar region of Maharashtra is a witness to the popularity of Vaishnavism. The queen was a devout worshiper of Lord Vishnu like her father Chandragupta II and her husband

Vakataka Maharaja Rudrasena is said to have attained immense opulence by the grace of Lord Chakramani.⁴³

In the Jabalpur district of Madhya Pradesh, at a place called Sindusi, some Gupta artefacts made by cutting the rock have been found. Lord Vishnu is depicted in many forms in this. The Junagarh inscription of the time of Skandagupta in western India is an important Vaishnavite document. It begins with Vishnu-Stuti.

In the second half of the 5th century, Saurashtra passed into the hands of Madhva rulers, all of whom except Dhruva Sen 1st were worshipers of Lord Shiva. In the documents of this dynasty, Dhruva Sen 1st is described everywhere as Param Bhagwat. An artifact has been received from Valabhi of the fifth century. In which Krishna is shown killing Ghotkasur Koshin. There is a mention of a Vasudev temple in Dwarka in the Vishnu Purana. Rashtrakuta Maharaj Dahsen and Vyaghra Sen have declared themselves Param Vaishnav. His time is said to be the latter half of the fifth century. The picture of Varaha is inscribed on the copper plate of King Chandavarman received from Goa. Varaha may refer to an avatar of Vishnu.⁴⁴

It is clear that by the beginning of the sixth century Vaishnavism had spread widely in South India. The first Chalukya kings were also worshipers of Vishnu. This is confirmed by the documents beginning with the praise of the boar incarnation of Vishnu. The picture of Varaha is also inscribed on their seals and coins. It appears that by the middle of the 6th century Vaishnavism crossed the

boundaries of India and reached Java, Sumatra, Borneo. Mounted on his vehicle Garuda, Lord Vishnu was found in a golden ornament from the Malay Peninsula.⁴⁵ A seal made of a precious stone was also unearthed from the same place. Bana Bhatta's Harsha Charita describes devotion to Shiva. The Pacharatrik and Bhagavata sects have been mentioned in the Harsha Charita. Bhagwat people worship Vasudev Vishnu and believe in the theory of incarnationism. In addition to history and archaeological evidence, literary texts also discuss the incarnations of Lord Vishnu. Vishnu avatars are also discussed in books like Acharya Kshemendra's Dashavataracharit Jaydev's Geet Govind etc. Several incarnations of Vishnu are also mentioned in the Bandhavgarh inscription of Yuvraj Dev.⁴⁶ Many idols of Vishnu's Varah avatar were being made during the Gupta period.

Examples of Vamana avatar are found in one of the records of Mewar and Bengal of the tenth century. Some idols of Parshuram have also been found from Bengal. The great poet Jayadeva has referred to Parashurama as Jagapati and Bhrigupati.⁴⁷ Alberuni who came to visit India in the eleventh century, has mentioned Chakra Swami of Thaneshwar in his travelogue. He writes, Tansen Nagar is heavily populated by Hindus. The idol of that place is called Chakra Swami. Jaisingh Siddharaj, the Chalukya ruler of Gujarat, had built the temple of Dashavatara on the banks of the Sahastralinga lake. The temple of Keshav built on the banks of Varuna and Ganges of Kashi, mentioned in Gahadwal records, still

exists today.⁴⁸

We see that Vaishnavism had come into vogue in the Teej-festivals of the contemporary society. The proof of this is also obtained from mythological works, in the Udayagiri inscription of Chandragupta II, Shayan Ekadashi is celebrated on the eleventh day of Shukla Paksha of Ashadh month. Also mentioned. In the Gangadhar records, this day has been described as giving gaiety and gaiety. Alberuni has also given many descriptions related to Teej festivals of Vaishnava religion in his travelogue. Thus, we can say that Vaishnavism has been spreading in India for a long time. In its spread, many rulers contributed to the development of Vaishnavism, due to which Vaishnavism spread substantially in India.

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