

HISTORY OF VAISHNAVISM

Lectures by

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Vaishnavism up to A.D.1000

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Vishnu in the Vedic Period

Neither Vishnu nor Siva, the two major gods of modern Hinduism, occupied a particularly prominent position in the Vedic pantheon. Siva has inherited the characteristics of Rudra, a dangerous and unpredictable figure who was to be feared on account of his association with the power of the uncultivated and unconquered. Since he features less in early epigraphy than other deities it has been suggested that Rudra-Siva remained a deity of the lower classes during this early period. He is always more readily associated with aspects of religious practice which are referred to as autochthonous or non-Aryan and was to become the god resorted to by followers of 'left-hand' Tantra and the more unconventional ascetic orders.

Although Siva also became the object of a more devotional style of worship (*bhakti*), it was Vishnu, the only Vedic god who survives in name to the present time as a popular deity, who assimilated the more benevolent, urbane and conventional elements of early religious practice. His name appears about a hundred times in the Rig veda and only five hymns are dedicated to him (whereas Indra has about two hundred and fifty), but later mythology which depicts him as a compassionate god assuming various incarnations in order to help mankind can be related to his character and role as they were regarded in the Vedic period. The central Vedic myth concerning Vishnu describes him as a god who takes three strides (Trivikrama) which are seen as both an heroic feat of manly strength and an example of his protectiveness. One hymn (RV 1.154) says that with his three steps he measured out the broad expanse of the earth, wherein all worlds and beings dwell, and propped up the heavens. His third or highest footstep (paramam padam) is visualised as a source of honey, the resort of devoted men and a place of many-horned and swiftly moving cattle. Through his three steps Vishnu is able to manifest himself on all levels, linking heaven and the world of men and preparing for them a heavenly abode.

The Vedas, however, deal with a basically sacrificial kind of religion in which Vishnu was initially of only secondary importance. Although, like other Vedic deities, he was associated with cattle, mountains and soma, the divine elixir, Vishnu was at first a mere assistant or companion of Indra (cf. RV 1.22.19). Nevertheless there is a possibility that he might have been more important for members of society whose interests are not expressed in the Vedas, such as women or those concerned with agriculture, crafts and trade.

As time went by Vishnu began to occupy a more central position in the Scriptures and to acquire a sacrificial function. He was mentioned once in the Rig veda as the "germ" or 'order' of the sacrifice (rtasya garbhah, 1.156-3), but later Vedic literature (the Brahmanas) constantly identifies him with sacrifice as a key figure in renewal rites and one who protects the sacrificer from his errors. The Trivikrama myth, in which Vishnu appears to represent the *axis mundi*, led to an association with the sacrificial -post (yupa) which helped to sustain the components of the universe and served as a means of attaining the abode of the gods. Rituals involving the axis mundi display a rebirth character, especially when the sacrificer climbs the yupa and proclaims his arrival in heaven when he sees over the top. The sacrificer who takes the three strides becomes like Vishnu and encompasses the three worlds. The Satapatha Brahmana (1-9-3.8ff) gives a version of the Trivikrama. myth which explains

that Vishnu truly is the sacrifice and by striding (*vi-kram*) obtained for the gods that all pervading power (*vikranti*) which now belongs to them and which the sacrificer may also acquire through his strides.

There are other myths in the Brahmanas which deal with Vishnu's role in the sacrifice. One of the most significant of these is the story of Vamana (SBr 1.2-5), a miraculous dwarf (a common figure in the folklore of India and elsewhere) who is the only one of the later incarnations of Vishnu to be positively identified with him at this stage. When the gods and the demons were contending for a place in the sacrifice the latter agreed that they would be happy to let the gods have as much ground as could be covered by Vamana. When he lay down on the earth Vamana expanded to encompass the whole universe and thus won for the gods their supremacy. A later version of this myth, the one usually told of Vamana as an avatar ('descent, or incarnation) of Vishnu, describes how he defeated Bali, a king of the demons in a similar way by, taking three expanding strides. Besides representing a mythological elaboration of the Vedic Trivikrama myth the story of Vamana offers a parable for the relationship between microcosm and macrocosm, the belief that Vishnu as the supreme soul (*purushottama*) corresponds to the thumb-like soul (*Purusha*) dwelling in the heart of man.

Some myths reveal Vishnu as having something of a solar character, the encompassing the three worlds by his strides being related to the diurnal course of the sun. A story in the Satapatha Brahmana (XIV. 1. 1f f) describes how Vishnu was once sleeping with his head resting on a bow string. The other gods, jealous of his superiority, sent an army of ants to gnaw through the string which, as it snapped, out through Vishnu's neck and sent his head soaring up into the sky to take the place of the sun. The discus (*cakra*) which in later iconography was to become one of the attributes used by Vishnu as a weapon, against demons and opponents, is also considered by some to be associated with the sun.

Vishnu's emergence from relative obscurity in the Rgveda may be attributed to changes in society towards a more settled pattern of life for which the older deities, such as Indra the destroyer of cities who inspired the conquering and nomadic Aryans, became gradually less and less relevant. Eventually the rise of Buddhism and Jainism were to challenge traditional brahmanical religion and lead to a reevaluation of its concepts regarding the nature of divinity. Vishnu was able to survive partly because his initial character was vague enough to allow scope for modification of his function and for accretion of suitable mythological details from other deities, and partly because he had always been an all-pervasive and benevolent figure who could, for example, assume Agni's sacrificial function of linking the human and divine worlds but, unlike Agni, was not limited to a particular phenomenon which was to become of lesser theological importance. He was able to assume Varuna's protective role towards mankind, a capacity which was eventually to make him a suitable object of devotion and a dispenser of salvation through his appearances on Earth as an avatara. Vishnu and his avataras assimilated themes from Vedic mythology, such as Indra's conquest of the serpent Vrtra which was to reappear much later in the context of Krsna subduing the serpent Kaliya.

Prajapati, Purusa and Narayana

Towards the end of the Vedic period Vishnu became identified with other divine entities which brahmanical texts had begun to discuss in more theological or philosophical terms than was usually the case with the gods of Vedic mythology. One of these was Prajapati, seen as a kind of creator god or creative principle, who appeared first as a fish, boar and -tortoise (or turtle) and then became identified with the sacrifice. The interests which Vishnu and Prajapati had in common were to be intensified, since both were associated with creation and protection. The concept of Purusa as a supreme soul seems to have been based on the Purusa-sukta, a hymn from the Rig Veda (X.90) which states that the gods performed a sacrifice at which Purusha was divided up in order to produce the Vedas, wild and tame animals, the four castes of man, the sun and moon, Indra, Agni, Vayu, the sky and the earth. Purusa thus came to be regarded as a transcendent soul which, by limiting itself, formed the realm of our experience. Vedic texts describe a purusa-medha as being a five-day sacrifice which allowed the performer to surpass all beings and become the totality of existence — a ritual act which was seen as a disintegration and reintegration resulting in the rebirth of the Cosmic Man.

This Purusa was said to be or to become Prajapati and was synonymous with Narayana. The discussion of these three concepts or personalities in the Brahmanas represents an attempt to conceive of a macrocosmic figure which becomes manifest as phenomenal plurality and into whose identity all other gods merge. The stories concerning Narayana (SBr XII 3.4.1ff., xiii 6.1 ff.) describe how he gained superiority over all beings by performing a five-day sacrifice and managed to place himself in all the worlds, gods, Vedas, vital airs etc. and at the same time contain them all within himself.

There is confusion over the etymology of the name Narayana, both in ancient Sanskrit texts as well as among scholars of the present day. The idea that the name means “lying on the waters” a rather fanciful etymology suggested in the Mahabharata, gained general acceptance among Hindus and accords with the way Narayana is depicted both in mythology and iconography of a later period. Narayana became a name applied to Vishnu when, containing all creation he lies on a serpent upon the cosmic waters, a concept which first appears in a story told about the sage Markandeya in the Mahabharata (111.186;188) While wandering through the world Markandeya happened to fall out of the mouth of Vishnu-Narayana and into the dark ocean, slipping out of existence into the great nothingness. Vishnu explained that Markandeya was seeing him in the form of Narayana, the source of the universe, cosmic magician, divine yogi, cycle of the seasons etc., a cosmic vortex which draws everything back into itself at the time of the dissolution of the universe (pralaya). The fully developed concept of Vishnu-Narayana, widely accepted in the time of the Puranas, sees him as reclining on the many-headed serpent Shesha (alias Ananta), with his consorts massaging his feet and Brahma emerging from a lotus which grows from his navel. Precedents for Vishnu-Narayana as a primordial being resting on the primeval waters and closely associated with seasonal phenomena may be found in the Rgveda (X.121 and the following passage,X.82.5-6):

Prior to the sky, prior to the earth, prior to the living gods, what is that embryo which the waters held first and in which all the gods existed? The waters held that same embryo in which all the gods exist and find themselves; on the navel of the unborn stood something in which all beings stood...

Vasudeva

The grammarian Panini, who lived in the fourth century BC., refers to a group of *Vasudevakas* who worshipped Vasudeva and Arjuna, either separately or together, as “an object of bhakti” (Astadhyayi IV 3.95-98). It is not certain that he was using the term *bhakti* to refer to a devotional religious cult nor is it clear whether he is talking about a single sect or two separate ones. In the course of the following centuries Vasudeva emerged as the chief divinity of the Bhagavatas, predecessors of a form of religion which later came to be called Vaishnavism. Vasudeva appears to have been originally a chief or tribal hero of a clan called Sattvata or Vrsni, whose cult was initially confined to the Mathura area but later spread westwards to Saurashtra when members of the clan migrated. By the second century BC. Arjuna had disappeared and Vasudeva alone was recognised as a supreme deity who was identified with Vishnu-Narayana. His name is interpreted to mean “he who pervades all” — one who resides in all beings and in whom all beings reside.

Evidence for the spread of a Vasudeva cult and for his identification with Vishnu is provided by various inscriptions dating from the second century BC. to the first century of the Christian era. The earliest of these found at Besnagar in Madhya Pradesh, records the dedication of a Garuda column or flagstaff in honour of Vasudeva 'the god of gods' by Heliodorus, Greek ambassador at the court of Kasiputra Bhagabhadra, ruler of Vidisa. The existence of this column and others like it implies that Vasudeva was recognised by members of the ruling class who erected in his honour these equivalents of the Vedic sacrificial yupa. Another inscription from Ghosundi in south-western Rajasthan records the erection of a wall around a place of worship for the divinities Vasudeva and Samkarsana which is called *Narayana-vataka*. An indication that these two deities were recognised in the Poona region during the first century B.C. is given in an inscription found at Nanaghat which includes their names in a list of brahmanical deities, a sign that traditional religion was prepared to acknowledge and incorporate the cult of the Bhagavatas. Another inscription dating from the first century after Christ and found at the Mora well near Mathura records the establishment of images of the five heroes (pancavira) of the Vrsnis in a stone shrine. These five heroes were Vasudeva, Samkarsana, Pradyumna, Aniruddha and Samba, of whom the first two were to retain their status as divine figures while the others were to appear in the Puranas as subsidiary characters in Krsna mythology or as names of various kinds of emanation (vyuha) of the supreme being in later theology.

It has been suggested that the rise of Buddhism and Jainism encouraged brahmins of the Vedic tradition to associate Vasudeva with Vishnu-Narayana in order to win over followers of the popular Bhagavata cult. There is nothing in early inscriptions which shows that such an association of their deity with Vishnu was accepted by the Bhagavatas themselves and references in several texts imply that the ksatriya Satvatas had a somewhat irreverent attitude to Vedic culture. The unanimity of Hindu, Jaina, Buddhist and Greek (viz. Megasthenes) tradition indicates that Vasudeva was a member of the Vrsni/Satvata/Yadava clan originally centered around Mathura and that it was in later mythology that he was presented as being identical with Krsna whose half-brother Balarama was none other than Samkarsana.

In the Mathura region Balarama is still worshipped by certain people as an independent deity and there is some indication that initially Samkarsana was regarded, at least by some of their worshippers as the foremost of the Vasudeva/Samkarsana pair. Stories in the Mahabharata and Puranas and the earliest iconographical representations of Samkarsana-Balarama reveal his origins as an agricultural or fertility deity (he holds a plough) who was also associated with snakes (iconography depicts him with a canopy of serpent hoods, MBh XIII 132.8-11 refers to him as foremost of the Nagas and in mythology he came

to be recognised as an incarnation of the serpent Shesha) and with intoxicating liquor (he often holds a cup and some stories tell how he became drunk with toddy made from the palmyra). Megasthenes says that the Indians speak of three individuals called Dionysos who appeared in different ages, namely Indra, Siva and Samkarsana, while Kautilya suggests that a spy should disguise himself as an ascetic worshipper of Samkarshana, with shaven head or matted hair, and outwit his opponents by giving them a stupefying drink (Artha-shastra-.XIII-3-67)- His incorporation into the Vaishnava pantheon must have helped to bring people of the agricultural and lower classes into the Vaisnava fold.

Although he was of supreme importance for the early Bhagavatas and at one time Vishnu worship gained much ground by assimilating him, Vasudeva is no longer worshipped as a deity, though his name is still invoked in the widely used mantra: *om namo bhagavate vasudevaya*. Whatever independent characteristics Vasudeva might have had as a divine figure were to become incorporated into the personality of Krsna.

Krsna and Vasudeva

The exact connection between Vasudeva and Krsna, and how they came to be associated with each other if indeed they were ever completely separate personalities, is a matter of considerable obscurity. Later mythology states that Krsna was the son of Vasudeva (presumably derived in retrospect from the supposedly patronymic Vasudeva) and Devaki (given as the name of the mother of an apparently different Krsna in Chandogya Upanishad 111 17.6). He and Balarama were said to have been conceived when Vishnu placed a black and a white hair from his head in the wombs of Devaki and Rohini respectively. Theories -out forward by earlier scholars that Krsna had a solar origin (Barth) or was originally a vegetational deity (Keith) or that some of his mythology derived from Christian accounts of the birth of Jesus no longer find support, nor are attempts to relate Krsna to characters of the same name mentioned in the Rig Veda and Chandogya Upanisad very convincing, although such references were taken up by later writers of mythology and scriptural commentaries. Arjuna, for example, is used in the Rig Veda as an epithet of Indra, and Krsna and Arjuna are used in the sense of "black" and "white" (RV VI 9.1, X 21.3). In the search for precedents for Krsna as a cowherd (Gopala, Govinda, Gopendra etc.) much has been made of the fact that the epithet *gopa* is applied to Vishnu in the Rig Veda (1 22.18, 111 55.10), though the term is applied to other Vedic gods as well, most of whom were somehow associated with cattle. There is also a reference to cows in connection with the area along the banks of the Yamuna (RV V.52.17)and the Brahmanas refer to a certain Gobala Varsna (Taittiriya Samhita 111 11.93 and Jaiminiya Br.I.6.1). At best such references might be held to endorse the idea that Krsna was an ancient, sectarian, tribal or 'folk' deity who, before he became identified with Vishnu, may have been synonymous with Vasudeva and whose worship may have been related to that of the agricultural deity Sankarsana.

Krsna as he appears in the earliest texts which narrate stories about him is not a deity, whatever might be said about Vasudeva. Buddhist and Jaina literature preserve references to Krsna-Vasudeva as a human hero and the Mahabharata shows traces of Krsna having been initially regarded as a mortal human being. Krsna and/or Vasudeva, like Gautama Buddha and Mahavira, thus appear to have been men who became deified after their death. In the fourth century B.C. Megasthenes, and later Arrian, referred to the worship of Herakles by the Souraseni (Saurasenas) of Methora (Mathura) and an unidentified place called Kleisobora (= Krsna-pura ?). Two centuries later Patanjali (Maha-bhashya on sutra, IV 3.98) says that the Vasudeva mentioned earlier by Panini is the name of the 'worshipful one', He also says that Krsna slew Kamsa 'a long time ago', and states elsewhere that it was Vasudeva who

killed him, implying that the two were identified with each other in his time. He mentions the performance of plays dealing with the slaying of Kamsa and says that music was played in gatherings at temples of Rama (a name frequently used for Balarama in early texts) and Kesava (ibid. on sutra 11 2.34). The Bodhayana Dharma Sutra (11 5.24) says that the epithet Kesava applies to Vishnu, suggesting that Vasudeva-Krsna was already associated with Vishnu-Narayana.

Patanjali refers only to Krsna's overthrow of Kamsa, a tyrannical usurper of the throne of Mathura. An extensive account of his background, heroic feats and of his eventual identification with Visnu-Narayana was compiled over a long period in the Mahabharata.

The Mahabharata and the Bhagavad Gita

The gradual transition of Krsna from human to divine status may be traced in the different stages of the Mahabharata, an epic which, in its basic form and outline, may date back as far as the fifth century BC. but which was modified and enlarged over several centuries, acquiring the form in which we know it today by about A.D.400. The main thread of the story deals with rivalry between the Kurus and Pancalas (Kauravas and Pandavas) in the Punjab region which culminated in the battle of Kuruksetra. it was originally told by charioteers who also functioned as bards (sutras) in a style which could readily accommodate digressions and sub-plots. Krsna appears as a Yadava chief, based in Dwarka after having spent his youth in Mathura, who fought on the side of the Pandavas and who, just before the great battle was about to commence, delivered a sermon to the despondent Arjuna in the form of the Bhagavad-gita in which he revealed his identity as the supreme being.

It seems that somewhere around 300 BC. the Brahmins began to elaborate this originally ksatriya epic, inserting stories about the gods, long discourses on dharma and promoting the idea that the hero Krsna is a manifestation of Vishnu. It is generally thought that the Bhagavad-gita was originally a separate text which was incorporated into the epic when it became more Vaishnava in orientation. Most scholars assign the Bhagavad-gita to the period between the 5th and 2nd centuries BC, the majority favouring the second century but some suggesting that an older version of the text was adapted for inclusion in the epic. Those who say that it was originally a separate text are inclined to regard it as a kind of Upanishad used by the Bhagavatas which was incorporated into the Mahabharata once the identification of Vasudeva with Vishnu had become accepted.

The Bhagavad-Gita is a dialogue cast in the traditional Upanishadic question and answer form, affording Krsna an opportunity of explaining to Arjuna a series of principles regarding man's fate and duty. He encourages Arjuna, who is reluctant to take part in an internecine battle, to re-evaluate death and killing by considering life from the point of view that the body belongs to a transient world of phenomena. Arjuna repeatedly asks for further explanation and justifications, but Krsna gradually manages to dispel his doubts by trying different lines of argument, eventually transcending all his reasoning by a stunning revelation of his cosmic form. This finally convinces Arjuna who duly takes part in the battle, reassured by the conviction that the warriors are fulfilling the demands of the dharma which regulates the universe.

The Bhagavad-Gita appears to be the product of a more 'orthodox' phase or form of Vasudeva worship which blended the devotional religion of the Bhagavatas with a philosophical outlook based on the widely accented Samkhya and yoga systems. Its basic aim is to explain how the soul can attain Godhead and to demonstrate that dharma-consists in fulfilling one's obligations to society and to god by acting without desire for personal benefit or reward. In the course of his exposition Krsna deals with

three possible approaches; the way of study, meditation and intellectual apprehension (jnana-yoga), the way of actions, especially ritual actions (karma-yoga) and the way of devotion and surrender to a personal god (bhakti-yoga). The lines of argument Krsna uses incorporate the monism of the early Upanishads and the theistic tendency of the later ones with the dualistic explanation offered by *Samkhya* of the relationship between soul (Purusha) and matter (Prakrti). Upanisadic monism provides the overall metaphysical foundation, *Samkhya* supplies the ontological and meta-psychological framework and yoga an ethical substance and some basic praxis.

Samkhya ontology is employed in the Bhagavad-gita to explain the process by which the One becomes manifold, purusa and prakrti being viewed not as distinct entities but rather as two poles of the same Being experiencing itself as separate only on a spatio-temporal level. Krsna steers clear of any atheistic tendency in the system and says that the self is a fragment (amsha) of the supreme being, whereas traditionally *Samkhya* postulated a plurality of transcendent selves. Yoga offered a praxis using *Samkhya* theory and adding the concept of a theistic Isvara. In his exposition of yoga Krsna recommends a path of renunciation in action rather than from action, stressing the need to participate in society rather than seek a solipsistic withdrawal thus regarding one's actions in the world as a better test of one's inner achievements. True renunciation consists in acting disinterestedly and dedicating the fruits of one's actions to god, not in cultivating yogic absorption (samadhi) or miraculous power (siddhi).

The most significant teaching of the Bhagavad-gita for later Hinduism is the supremacy given to *bhakti* as an approach to the divine. The root *bhaj* in the Vedas has the meaning of 'divide', 'share', 'partake of', with the derivatives *bhakti* meaning 'a share' or 'portion', *bhakta* 'that which is allotted' or 'one who receives a share', and *bhagavat* 'one who is possessed of shares or wealth'. The use of the term *bhakti* to refer to a participation of the soul in the divine (encountered perhaps for the first time in Svetasvatara Upanisad VI.23) came to be used increasingly in a religious context in which the semantic sphere of *bhakti* encompassed worship and devotion with respect to a personal god. The idea of humble, loving and devoted service required the existence of a god with an adorable physical form with whom the devotee could experience an intimate and personal bond. Vasudeva-Krsna revealed himself to be just such an approachable manifestation of the supreme being, fulfilling a messianic role well suited to a period in Indian history when old notions of tribal solidarity became less influential as the Mauryas established a stable state and more centralised system of government.

While Buddhism, Jainism and the Upanisads taught that man should renounce worldly life in order to realise his essential identity with the universal self, since the phenomenal world is in some sense unreal, the Bhagavad-gita declared that man has a duty to promote stability, solidarity and the common good (loka-sangraha). It offered a spiritual life in which all could participate, recommending that *bhaktas* should meet together for communal worship. Although the older sacrificial type of religion is not explicitly condemned in the Bhagavad-gita the concept of sacrifice is redefined metaphorically as disinterested performance of one's duty as a 'sacrifice in the fire of restraint'. One verse indicates the possibility of a form of worship which was open to all, not merely to those who could afford to sponsor brahminical rituals:

*patram puspam phalam toyam yo me bhaktya prayacchati
tad aham bhakty-upahrtamasnami prayatatmanah (IX.26)*

This statement that a leaf, flower, fruit or water serves as an acceptable offering of devotion when presented by one with a devout soul indicates the recognition of a more popular, democratic and non-Vedic form of worship — the kind of puja which was to become so characteristic of Vaisnavism.

Although Vasudeva-Krsna declared himself to be the source of all creation and a personification of Brahman, he does not state explicitly that he is an incarnation of Vishnu-Narayana. He does not propagate any avatara theory although, when talking about his having appeared in the past to teach yoga to Vivasvan, he refers to different births (in terms of *sambhava*, and *srjana*) of his eternal self when he became manifest through his magic power. Once the avatara had become accepted later Vaisnavas referred back to the following Slokas as being an announcement of Vishnu's purpose in descending to earth in different forms:

*yada yada hi dharmasya glanir bhavati bharata
abhyutthanam adharmasya tadaatma-nam.srjamy aham
paritranamca sadhunam vinasaya ca duskrtim
dharma-samsthapanarthaya sambhavami yuge-yuge(IV-7-8)*

These slokas are often quoted to explain that in every age, whenever there is a decline in *dharma* and upsurge of *adharm*, Vishnu assumes the form of an avatara in order to protect the righteous, destroy the wicked and establish *dharma* once again. In the Bhagavad-gita Vasudeva-Krsna, no longer simply a tribal hero, is presented as a Bhagavan who is identical with the Brahman of the Upanisads as well as an embodiment of divine grace and love, showing concern for the welfare of mankind but still not specifically identified as a manifestation of Vishnu-Narayana.

The Bhagavatas and Pancharatra

Later portions of the Mahabharata reveal a growing acceptance of the notion that Vasudeva-Krsna and Vishnu-Narayana are different manifestations of the same godhead. This assimilation of the gods and religious practices of the Bhagavatas into the orthodox brahminical tradition is reflected both in adaptation and conflation of mythology and in changes in the style of worship and ritual. The term 'Vaisnava' appeared for the first time with reference to one who adores Vishnu as supreme being (cf. MBH XVIII 6.97). Previously, and for some time after-wards, the generally accepted term for one who followed the religion expounded in the Bhagavad-gita was 'Bhagavata'. The later Narayaniya section of the Mahabharata (XII 12-321 ff.) refers to the religion of the Bhagavatas as being also termed Satvata, Ekantin or Pancharatra and that it was revealed to the sage Narada by Narayana and was also expounded by Krsna in his address to Arjuna on the battlefield.

Neither the Bhagavad-gita nor the Mahabharata appear to present the doctrines of the Bhagavatas in their original or unalloyed form. The Bhagavad-gita presented their doctrines in a traditionally acceptable framework of Samkhya, Yoga, Dharma etc. , whereas later more independent Bhagavata texts reveal that some of them retained their older metaphysical and theological ideas. A fundamental concept in their system of belief was the idea that Vasudeva as supreme soul transposed or distributed aspects of himself in a series of emanations which were termed *vyuhas* and which were named after Samkarsana, Pradyumna and Aniruddha. These *vyuhas* were phases of conditioned spirit from which individual souls, minds and the physical elements came into being. They are not mentioned in the Bhagavad-gita but, in the account of the Bhagavata religion given in the Narayaniya section they are represented as being part of the same religion taught to Arjuna by Krsna.

The religion presented in the Narayaniya section emphasises the idea that god is not to be perceived by one who follows a sacrificial mode of worship or practises austerity, but by one who cultivates loving

devotion. Vasudeva is identified with Narayana who by now was visualised as a cosmic deity resting upon Sesa and containing all the universe within him. Narayana is described as being the eternal Soul-of-the-universe who, having four forms called Nara, Narayana, Hari and Krsna was born as the son of Dharma with Ahimsa as mother.

Although the Bhagavatas and followers of Pancaratra worshipped the same supreme god Vasudeva they are enumerated separately in various lists of different sects. It seems that- they were different schools of thought within the same cult, the Bhagavatas being more inclined to accept the brahminical social order while the followers of Pancaratra were indifferent or even opposed to it. While the Bhagavatas participated with the traditional brahmins in the development of a Vaisnava religion which was accepted by the ruling classes during the Gupta period, the Pancaratra school continued to exist as a distinct group which retained its original doctrines and followed a different style of worship. Eventually, however, the distinction between the two schools disappeared and Pancharatra texts became used as ritual manuals for Vaisnavism in general.

The origin of the Pancharatra school and its relationship to the Bhagavatas is obscure. They were all monotheists and devotees of Vishnu (once he had become accented as supreme deity), but the Pancharatra school appears to have had additional or supplementary literature and ritual.. They emphasised the *vyuha* doctrine and tried for as long as possible to reconcile it with the avatara doctrine which was eventually to prevail. They were less inclined to present their doctrines in a samkhya framework and their later ritual texts show that they favoured practices of a tantric nature which were probably widespread but were not initially acceptable in the more brahminical style of Vaishnavism. As an aspect of or cult within Vaishnavism they survived right through the Gupta period and around the eighth or ninth century were attacked by Sankara for being heterodox or non-Vedic, though they themselves claimed that their practices and beliefs were based on Sruti. By this time the South of India had become a stronghold of Vaishnavism and there were Vaishnava Pancharatra schools over a wide area.

Although it is uncertain when and where it began, Pancharatra must have been active since the early centuries B.C. Members of the cult even seem to have forgotten the origin of the name of their school, since their texts offer a variety of etymologies based on any acceptable pentad and various interpretations of the obscure term *ratra*. The bulk of their surviving literature was composed during the Gupta period and the centuries which followed (the earliest perhaps dating from the fifth century), thus their tradition is much older than any of their extant works. Different Pancharatra schools compiled enormous samhitas (traditionally a hundred and eight in number, though only a few survive, many only in a fragmentary form) which dealt with ritual and liturgy and, apart from differences in nuance or detail, were largely homogeneous. Few of them received any form of commentary by later Vaisnavas, but a large number of shorter manuals, digests and breviaries were derived from them which were widely circulated in -the medieval period and are still referred to by devotees today (the sort of doctrinal and ritual texts which include in their titles -sara, -sangraha, -prayoga, -vidhi. -niraya, -pradipa, -paddhati, -candrika etc.).

The Pancharatra Samhitas dealt with a wide range of topics, including philosophy, theories of mantra, yantra and yoga, the construction of temples, iconography and the manufacture and dedication of idols, domestic observances, social rules and festivals, always insisting on communal worship with other Vaishnavas. The chronology of the literature is uncertain, but generally the later samhitas show an atrophy of philosophy and more elaborate description of rituals and esoteric practices. They are usually in question and answer form, introducing digressions, stories, hymns of praise and authoritative citations and are always assertive and dogmatic in tone. Their authors had a strong tendency towards

gratuitous systematisation, correlating and enumerating various categories of things according to numerological schema. The mythical tales usually illustrate how Vishnu, through grace, the intercession of sages or through ritual devices, helps his worshipper in overcoming opponents and difficulties. They also retained the *vyuha* doctrine which, in the Vaishnava Puranas, yielded to the belief in avatars. They adapted the avatara theory to the vyuha doctrine and said that along with these emanations of Vishnu there arose Visnu's heaven of Vaikuntha, a manifestation of his transcendent power where he resides in his highest form. Once freed from the limitations of existence in the phenomenal world the soul enters into the heaven of Vaikuntha, also called *Visnuloka* or *Paramapada*.

Two later texts (post A.D.900) which deal specifically with bhakti and became widely studied are the *Naradiya bhakti sutras* and *Sandilya bhakti sutras*, the former being used exclusively by southern Indian Vaisnavas. Although their philosophical importance is small they had a considerable influence on popular religion as a result of the emphasis they placed on bhakti as a kind of intense love, cultivation of which was open to all and superseded all other approaches to god.

During a period of over a thousand years following the composition of the Bhagavad-gita the religion of the Bhagavatas and Pancharatra blended with traditional Hinduism to form a sectarian Vaisnava pattern of worship. Epigraphic and other sources of this period indicate that Vaisnavism enjoyed the patronage of many rulers and wealthy citizens and spread over most of India, often becoming associated with local or regional cults. The Pancharatra samhitas represent a brahminical formulation of a system of non-Vedic rites which eventually became accepted as being orthodox. The acceptance of popular idols by the brahmins brought about a harmonisation of idolatry with Vedic tradition in which Vedic mantras were superimposed on forms of ritual with which they originally had no connection. Worship of Siva also underwent similar changes and was adopted by several rulers, though in general a non-sectarian *smarta* attitude prevailed and there was no basic conflict between Saivas and Vaisnavas during this period. A new form of Hinduism evolved in which the rich could earn merit by building temples and the poor and uneducated could hope to improve their position, at least in their next birth, by simple devotion and observance of the social obligations imposed upon them by the priesthood and rulers. The emphasis was on faith rather than logic and learning, and all kinds of popular beliefs, superstitions and stories could be assimilated into an overall Sanskrit religious framework.

The Vaisnava Puranas

By the time it had attained its final extensive form the Mahabharata had incorporated many accounts of episodes of Krsna's life which it is difficult to place alongside older legends to produce a consistent and chronological biography. Additional stories dealing with Krsna's early years in and around Mathura were to acquire greater religious significance, while the narratives describing his years in Dwarka and the conflicts between different branches of the Yadava clan attracted less attention from Vaishnava devotees. The Mahabharata does allude to some of Krsna's childhood feats (such as in a diatribe against him delivered by a rival Yadava chieftain called Sisupala, 2:38), but the first extended account of his early years appeared in the Harivamsa, a supplement to the Mahabharata written in about the fourth century of the Christian era, and the more or less contemporary Vishnu-Purana. A play by Bhasa entitled *Balacarita* appeared in the same period featuring the exploits of the child Damodara ('having a cord around the waist', an epithet of Krsna) and his brother/friend Samkarsana. These texts brought out new elements in the Krsna story which had probably been long current in folk tradition.

The next few centuries witnessed the compilation of other Puranas, often identical for pages, which incorporated a large amount of mythological and didactic material. The basic repertoire of Vaishnava Purana material was consolidated during the fourth to the ninth centuries, though passages continued to be interpolated and new Puranas were written right through the medieval period, usually of a distinctly sectarian nature. Mythological and theological notions from older Scriptures were reinterpreted and combined with later ideas and evolutionary theories while genealogical legends were included to give the narrative some vague kind of historical context.

The Vishnu Purana introduced a version of the story of Prahlada, whose love for Vishnu was so strong that he was able to resist the persecution he suffered at the hands of his father. Prahlada was regarded as an exemplary *bhakta* who experienced devotional ecstasy, enjoying god's love as others enjoy the pleasures of the senses. The Matsya Purana is a notable example of how theories of the cosmic nature of Vishnu were developed in this period, while the ninth century Bhagavata Purana imbued with devotional significance the early pastoral life of Krsna and his amorous encounters with the girls who tended the cows (*gopis*). Buddhist and Jaina literature also referred to Krsna, Vasudeva or Dgmodara, indicating the widespread currency of the legends, but often showing him in a rather unfavourable light, perhaps indicative of the fact that his cult was being adopted by the brahmins.

This same period also produced the earliest extant Vaishnava iconography, including the depiction of Vishnu lying on the serpent (*ananta-sayana* or *sesa-sayana*). Episodes from Krsna's early life were also popular, particularly his holding up of the Govardhana mountain in order to protect the inhabitants of Braj from torrential rain inflicted upon them by a jealous Indra. An important monument is the sixth century Dasa-avatara temple at Deogarh (near Jhansi) which had a number of sculptural panels depicting all the ten avatars of Vishnu, indicating that by then the ten incarnations had become recognised.

From a mythological point of view the idea of avatars is one of the most significant aspects of Vaishnavism to develop during this period. It meant that different kinds and modes of worship could be brought within the general domain of Vaishnavism, and seems to have begun to evolve with the identification of Krsna as a human incarnation of Vishnu-Narayana who came to Earth with the specific purpose of destroying evil and maintaining dharma. It is a concept different from the Vedic idea that gods were capable of assuming different forms and may be related to the Buddhist and Jaina notion of previous compassionate bodhisattvas or tirthankaras.

The Narayaniya section of the Mahabharata contains lists of four and six manifestations including Hayasirsa and Hamsa who had recovered the Vedas from the ocean. They both disappeared from later lists which present a standard number of ten avatars, namely Matsya, Kurma, Varaha, Vamana, Narasimha, Parasu-rama, Rama, Krsna, Buddha and Kalki. Some-later texts produced lists of twenty-four and twenty-nine avatars which included several mythological and semi-human characters but which never became popularly accepted. The first four avatars appeared in older texts but were not initially associated with Vishnu. The three theriomorphic avatars, although they can be traced back to Vedic literature where they are said to dive under water and bring things up, are regarded by some to have been incorporated into Vaishnavism because they were once tribal deities or totems. The anthropomorphic avatars were added later when Vishnu came to be regarded as a god who intercedes in human form.

Matsya, the fish avatara, appeared in the Brahmanas as a saviour of Manu, (SBr.I.8.1 ff.). The fish was cared for by Manu when it was tiny and was released into the ocean by him once it had grown large enough, in return for which it towed Manu's boat to safety when the waters inundated the earth. It was

perhaps the expansion in Matsya's size which led to its association with the all-pervasive Vishnu. In the Matsya Purana's retelling of the story the fish grows to an enormous and terrifying size, and when Manu declares that he recognises it to be Vishnu it promises to rescue him from the flood along with other creatures placed in the boat. Kurma, the turtle became identified with Vishnu perhaps because it was a form assumed by Prajapati and was a creature upon which the world rests and allowed its back to be used as the pivot for the *axis mundi* when the ocean was churned by the gods in competition with the demons. In the Brahmanas Varaha was a boar form, of Praja-pati which kept the earth afloat by spreading it out on the surface of the waters, a protective and expansive action which could readily be associated with Vishnu. The boar was also a sacrificial animal which was associated with fertility because it produced large litters and because its tusk (potra), with which it dug up the earth, was associated with the plough. As an independent cult the worship of Varaha may be traced to the Vindhya region on the evidence of texts, inscriptions and a temple in Saugor district (Madhya Pradesh) dated around AD 500.

The later version of the Vamana story (mentioned above with the introduction of the demon king Bali as his opponent, appeared as part of the avatara cycle during this period.

Vishnu assumed the form of Narasimha (or Nrsimha, the man-lion) in order to slay a demon name Hiranyakahipu who had gained a boon that he could be slain by neither man nor beast, neither by night or day. Narasimha burst out of a pillar at sunset and ripped Hiranyakasipu apart with his claws. With the exception of a late passage added to the Taittiriya Aranyaka (X .1.6) Narasimha is not mentioned in Vedic literature. He might have been a wrathful deity worshipped in central Punjab by the Madrakas who had their capital at Sialkot (as suggested in the Visnu-dharmottar-purana) an area where his worship is still popular. Parasurama, called Rama Bhargava because he belonged to the clan of Bhrgu, was present at the Kuruksetra battle, annihilated the ksatriyas twenty-one times and, on the command of his father killed his mother because of her unlawful desires, though later prayed for her to be restored to life. There is no evidence of his having had any independent cult following and so his apotheosis was probably the work of Bhargava brahmin redactors of the Mahabharata whose inclusion of him in the list of avataras somehow became generally accepted.

The Ramayana story was in existence long before Rama, son of Dasaratha, became recognised as an avatara. The Ramayana , like the Mahabharata, was originally a secular heroic epic and it was only in the first and last books, added in the third or fourth century, that he is declared to be a manifestation of Vishnu. Krsna, the first anthropomorphic figure to appear in the earliest lists of avataras, had a broad base in popular tradition and, since he was also the enunciator of the Bhagavad Gita, enjoyed a remarkable growth in popularity during the Gupta period. Gautama Buddha first appeared as an avatara in the Visnu Purana, but not as an attempt to incorporate Buddhism into Vaishnavism since Vishnu's purpose was to destroy the demons by uttering anti-Vedic statements, thereby corrupting and misleading them with an evil doctrine. Kalki, the avatara who will appear as a horseman at the end of Kaliyuga to uproot the heathens and re-establish the true dharma, may owe something to the Buddhist concept of Maitreya

The avatara doctrine helped Vaishnavism to acquire a cultural unity throughout the area in which it spread, helped the orthodoxy to accommodate regional religious traditions and enabled rulers to promote the idea that they were themselves some form of avatara. In older mythology the early avataras had no moral purpose of helping man but did so only indirectly by subduing demons or rescuing the earth. The Puranas adapted the older stories to show how Vishnu was a compassionate god who intervened to promote the welfare of man and show him a path to salvation.

In the same period Garuda, the solar bird and enemy of the serpent whose history dated back several hundred years and has parallels in Mesopotamian legends, was given the role of Vishnu's vehicle (vahana) while Lakshmi was presented as his consort.

Lakshmi, whose name means 'mark', 'sign, or 'token', may formerly have been a goddess of prognostications before she became associated with good luck or fortune, while her other name, Sri may have been that of a separate goddess of well-being and prosperity. Her association with water and lotuses perhaps indicates her origins as a fertility goddess, as does her representation as Gaja-lakshmi in which she is bathed by elephants as she rises out of the water during the churning of the ocean. As a promoter of wealth and prosperity she was adopted by the merchant classes as a patron goddess and was among the earliest figures to be depicted on coins. She had been associated with Indra and Kubera before she was given the role of Vishnu's consort and is nowadays the principal deity worshipped at the Divali festival, an occasion primarily associated with the merchant classes and formerly a festival in which Kubera was prominent. She first appears in association with Vishnu in later passages added to the Mahabharata, though it was Tantric influence in the Pancharatra samhitas which brought her into prominence. She was presented as Vishnu's Sakti, a dynamic power active in the world to carry out the will of her transcendent consort, the two of them being visualised as a divine couple referred to as Lakshmi-narayana. The Pancharatra school produced many theories about her role and status, explained in fullest detail in the Lakshmi Tantra, written in about the ninth or tenth century and the only Pancharatra work exclusively devoted to Lakshmi in which she was established as a creative principle at least equal to Vishnu.

Of all the divine figures who became associated with Vishnu it was Krsna who was best suited to the bhakti approach, and so his mythology was elaborated accordingly in order to emphasise themes which could evoke a strong emotional response and personal identification with him or with episodes in his earthly life. This led to an expansion of the myths about his early life as an adorable child and amorous youth, and a waning of interest in his later heroic period. A problem for scholars is the identification of the different groups of legends which coalesced to form the Krsna known to us from the Puranas. He was a miraculous infant who was fostered by a pastoral community of cattle owners, an amorous *gopa* who flirted with the *gopis*, a slayer of Kamsa a Yadava chieftain, who became the king of Dwarka with sixteen thousand wives, and a participant in the Kuruksetra battle as well as the expounder of the Bhagavad Gita. Some claim that there need be no inconsistency, that all the legends relate to a single person who was initially an historical figure. They point out that there need be no contradiction between a pastoral childhood and eventual emergence as a prophet and hero, citing Moses, Mohammed and Rama as other examples of religious leaders who first spent several years in exile. It is also difficult to find convincing evidence for the existence among the nomadic *Abhira* tribe of a child-god cult which became incorporated into Vaishnavism through identification with the infant Krsna. There is, however, a marked contrast between Gopala-Krsna, the just defeater of demons and protector of the country folk of Braj, and the later Krsna of Dwarka who appears as a much more political and opportunistic figure who, at Kuruksetra, encouraged the Pandavas to defeat their opponents by deceit and justified such actions by referring to the theory of karma and the demands of expediency in the interests of dharma.

The Bhagavata Purana is concerned primarily with Krsna's years in Braj, culminating in the slaying of Kamsa and dealing with other, parts of his biography in a rather perfunctory manner. It was written in consciously archaic Sanskrit somewhere in the south of India where stories about the young Krsna were popular and had featured in popular songs by a series of saints called the *Alvars*. The Bhagavata Purana became the most important scripture and source book for later Vaishnava bhakti sects, particularly those chapters dealing with his dalliance with the gopis which culminated in a round dance

(*maharasa*, an elaboration of a *hallisaka* dance mentioned in the *Harivamsa* and *Balacarita*) which was interpreted as a communion between god and the individual souls and contrasted with periods when Krsna was absent, during which the gopis experienced intense pangs of love in separation (*viraha/viyoga*) comparable to the yearning of a bereft soul for union with the Godhead.

The Alvars

The Alvar saints of Tamil Nadu are India's earliest devotional poets in a vernacular language. They flourished from the 7th to the 9th centuries, but their biographies were not recorded until the 13th century and so contain largely miraculous hagiographical stories with little or no historical information. It was a period when Buddhism and Jainism were in decline and when Vaishnavism and Saivism were developing characteristic modes of worship. The Saiva counterparts to the Alvars were the Nayanmars, both of them being groups of inspired poets who expressed their divine revelations in a personal and intensely emotional way.

Antecedents for their style of poetry may be found in earlier Tamil literary traditions, particularly a form of song composed by bards in praise of feudal patrons as a request for some kind of gift. The Alvars adapted the form to a personal appeal to god for the gift of grace and deliverance rather than for material reward. Their use of the vernacular allowed them to convey bhakti in a popular and homely style, and their simplicity is emphasised in their biographies which point out their devotion and sincerity rather than their social status and formal learning. Of the twelve Alvars one was a woman (Andal) and another an untouchable (Tiruppan Alvar), while all of them are celebrated for their humility and wholehearted devotion.

Their songs or hymns are collected in the '*Nalayira-Divya-prabandham*' (the four thousand divine works'), a compilation traditionally attributed to Nathamuni who lived in the 10th century and is said to have arranged the hymns and set them to music. They are sung daily in Tamil Vaishnava temples, some of them being used for specific ceremonies or festivals, and at the great temple of Srirangam they are recited annually in their entirety for a period of ten days. In processions the songs of the Alvars, referred to often as the Tamil Veda, are recited in front of the deity while the Sanskrit Vedas are recited by priests following behind. Later the custom arose of reciting them in temples in a more 'Vedic' style in which they are sung antiphonally by groups of brahmins.

The Alvars sang of an intensely personal and emotional type of devotion which transcended caste barriers. They often compare themselves to a woman yearning for her absent lover, or identify with a participant in one of the Krsna stories (such as his mother Devaki) employing a style and imagery derived from earlier traditions of Tamil erotic poetry. God is described as having transcendent beauty and charm and is the object of yearning by the female soul which suffers the different mental and physiological symptoms of love sickness. They describe how the female soul lies awake all night in expectation of him, waiting to experience the joy of his embrace, but the general tone is restrained and does not develop such extreme erotic overtones as became characteristic of some later bhakti poetry. Their type of devotion was expressed most systematically by Nammalvar, one of the last of the Alvars, who deals with the cultivation of certain kinds of feeling (*bhava*) for the Lord, the foremost being that of adopting the attitude of a servant (*dasya bhava*), while others are that of parental affection (*vatsalya-bhava*) and the emotion shared between lovers lie also emphasises the need for submission (*prapatti*) a passive state of dependence on the Lord for the bestowal of his grace. A. Govindacarya. says of Nammalvar that:

He declares that when one is overcome by bhakti exaltation, trembling in every cell of his being, he must freely and passively allow this influence to penetrate his being and carry him beyond all known states of consciousness never from fear or shame that bystanders may take him for a madman ought the exhibition of his bhakti rapture that deluges his being be suppressed. The very madness is the means of distinguishing him from the ordinary mortals to whom such beatific vision is denied. The very madness is the bhakta's pride. In that very madness the saint exhorts 'run, jump, cry, laugh and sing, and let every man witness it'. (from The Holy Lives Of the Alvars)

Krsna, especially as an infant and youth, is the most frequently mentioned divine personage in the songs of the Alvars, and there are also some songs featuring Rama, especially those of Kulasekara . The main places of pilgrimage mentioned by the Alvars are the temples of Kanchipuram, Shrirangam and Tirupati, some of them being closely associated with certain temples and having shrines dedicated to them in the temple precincts. Although they wrote only in Tamil their message was carried throughout India by means of the Bhagavat Purana which conveyed aspects of their devotion, in a Sanskritic mythological context . It emphasised those episodes in the life of Krsna which had special emotional and sentimental appeal for the passionate devotee. Krsna was now considered to have come down among mankind to establish *prema* (love) rather than *dharma* and it is largely thanks to the Alvars that terms such as *prema*, *bhava*, *rasa*, *sringara*, *vatsalya* and *madhurya* were to become so important in later bhakti sects.

Vaishnavism since A.D.1,000

Lecture 24/2/1981

A.W.Entwistle

By the beginning of what might loosely be termed the 'medieval' period (10th to 16th centuries) Vaishnavism had acquired a standard body of mythology, narrated in the Puranas, and a pattern or style of ritual which was expounded in the Pancharatra texts. The majority of modern Vaishnavas still acknowledge this overall mythology and follow common forms of temple worship and religious practice, each group or sect worshipping a particular manifestation of Vishnu as its chosen deity, revering its special saints and sometimes adopting its own philosophical interpretation of the Scriptures, but otherwise differing only in such details as the use of a particular kind of rosary or forehead mark. The different sectarian traditions are handed down among groups of Vaishnavas which are referred to by the term *sampradaya* and are traditionally held to be four in number:

sampradaya	founder/acarya	type of philosophy
Sri	Ramanuja	visishtadvaita
Brahma	Madhva	dvaita
Sanakadi	Nimbarka	dvaitadvaita
Rudra	Vishnusvami	Suddhadvaita

Apart from the Sri Vaishnavas these sampradayas are generally referred to by the name of their founder rather than by the name derived from their divine inceptor. Their philosophies were framed as attempts to challenge Sankara, champion of Saiva monism, by rejecting his doctrine that the phenomenal world is an illusory product of *Maya*, that the supreme being is without attributes (nirguna) and that the only path to ultimate liberation was that of intellectual realisation (jñana). The Vaishnava sampradayas differed among themselves in their explanations of the exact relationship between god as supreme soul and the phenomenal world, the Madhva sampradaya being distinctive for its thorough-going dualism. They are called Vedanta schools because they were concerned with interpretation of the Vedas, Upanisads and, in particular, the Brahma-sutras of Badarayana. Some sampradayas produced commentaries on the Bhagavad Gita and for many later commentators the Bhagavata-purana was acceptable as a canonical text. The Vaishnava schools agree that *Brahman* is the supreme cause of the universe which, possessed of an infinite number of attributes, appears as *isvara*. They held that individual souls and the inanimate world are both as real as Brahman and that their individual distinctions can never be completely lost. Individual souls are believed to be atomic and infinite in number and possessed of knowledge and activity, their deliverance from *samsara* being their ultimate goal. This release from an endless cycle of rebirths is, they believe, only attainable through bhakti, to which ritual actions and intellectual apprehension are subordinate.

Philosophy, however, remained a pursuit of Vaishnava scholars and intellectuals. The masses were inspired by songs in the vernacular languages by various 'poet-saints', the first of whom were the Alvars who were adopted by the Sri Vaishnavas as forerunners of their sampradaya. Other sampradayas also had groups of poet-saints associated with them, while some independent and popular movements grew up around 'individual saints without feeling the necessity of declaring an affiliation with any of the four major schools. Any significant religious developments during the early medieval

period took place in South India, Vaishnava. expansion being hindered in the north by the effects of Muslim incursion and domination.

1. Ramanuja and the Sri Sampradaya

Although Ramanuja is regarded as the founder of the Sri sampradaya, its origins are traced back to earlier teachers, and beyond them to Narayana, Lakshmi and Visvakshena. Nathamuni was believed to have inherited all the doctrines of the Alvars through Nammalvar, who had given a unified and systematic presentation of their form of bhakti.

From references to works that are no longer extant it appears that Nathamuni, the earliest of the line of acharyas associated with the temple of Ranganatha at Srirangam, was eventually succeeded by his grandson Yamuna who provided further philosophical justification for bhakti and the practice of *prapatti* (submission or self-surrender). He also defended Pancharatra ritual and the Bhagavatas, claiming that they were authentic Vedic and brahmanical traditions. It was the need to substantiate these claims that must have motivated the construction of a philosophy based on Vedanta and the production, in the form of the Bhagavata-purana, of a Sanskrit version of myths popularized by the Alvars. This *soi-disant* orthodoxy became allied to popular religion through the incorporation of Tamil hymns into the rituals connected with the deity of the Ranga-natha temple. Ramanuja strengthened the philosophical basis by providing appropriate commentaries on the Brahma-sutras and Bhagavad Gita.

Ramanuja was active in the latter part of the 11th century, a time when a large part of South India was enjoying economic prosperity under the rule of the Colas. These rulers were generally Saiva, but contributed liberally to the establishment of Vaishnava, temples as well. Although he is said to have been initially a disciple of the monist teacher Yadava-praksha, Ramanuja was designated by Yamuna as successor to the post of acharya at Srirangam. He seems to have reorganised the temple administration, coming into conflict with the hereditary priests over the appointment of other Brahmins, or perhaps even non-Brahmins, to various positions in the temple service. According to his traditional biography he was obliged to spend some years in exile in the neighbouring Hoysala kingdom as a result of conflict with Saivas who were favoured by the Cholas. He is said to have converted the Hoysala king from the Jaina faith and, with his support, founded a Vaishnava temple at Melkote.

Although Ramanuja was not the originator of the Sri Vaishnava school he helped to articulate its traditions and must have persuaded many Brahmins to join the sampradaya who would formerly have adhered to a more Vedic type of orthodoxy. The philosophy which he expounded is termed *visishtadvaita* meaning either 'monism of the differentiated' or 'qualified or modified non-dualism', though it is not a term which Ramanuja himself used. It is basically a philosophy which seeks to establish a unity between the spiritual and material substances which comprise the universe by seeing the material world as constituting the body of god. Earlier philosophers, such as Bodhayana, had viewed the relationship between god and the universe as being one of both difference and non-difference (bhedabheda) . Ramanuja asserts that knowledge of Brahman is obtained by religious practices (upasana), bhakti and grace, which supersede the orthodox path of Vedic ritual as well as yoga and any inferences drawn from perception. and experience.

His metaphysical doctrines are derived from the Upanishads and Brahma-sutras and his explanation of the production of the external world is based on the Samkhya system as it appears in the Puranas. He

refers to Vasudeva and the *vyuha* theory, but the most common name given to Vishnu is Narayana. The Bhagavata-purana, a modern work in the time of Ramanuja, is not cited, nor is there any reference to the Alvars or Gopala-Krsna and the gopis.

In contrast to Sankara's view that *jñāna* ultimately supersedes *bhakti* and leads to a state of liberation (moksa) in which the soul realises its essential and absolute unity with Brahman, Ramanuja propounds the Vaishnava view that the soul becomes god-like but remains different from god, thus there remains the possibility of a relationship of bhakti based on love and piety which was denied by Sankara's undifferentiated monism. Although Sankara's monism was more thoroughly logical, Ramanuja's theism was more in accord with the basic doctrines of the works which he commented upon and allowed him to accept the concepts of the incarnations and divine grace of Vishnu. He was able to offer an effective compromise between monistic and dualistic passages in the Scriptures which do not support Sankara's interpretation of *maya* and the relationship between the soul and Brahman. Although his reliance on Scriptures as an infallible authority in metaphysical matters and his anthropomorphic conception of god are hardly acceptable in philosophical terms, Ramanuja admitted the possibility of an emotional and intuitional knowledge of god which was attainable through bhakti. God, who is both material and efficient cause, uses his *maya* (in the sense of magic power) to create the world in order to enact his divine play (lila), dwelling in the world yet remaining free from its limitations. He is the inner controller (antaryamin) of both individual souls (comprising cit) and the external material worlds (acit) which are regarded as his attributes. Just as a soul (jiva) and a body constitute an individual human being, so *cit* and *acit* on a universal scale constitute *Isvara*, the Lord who is eternal Brahman and pure bliss (ananda).

Themes found in Pancharatra literature and in the songs of the Alvars which were not taken up by Ramanuja himself were elaborated in the context of visisthadvaita by later scholars of the Sri Sampradaya. They emphasised the role of Sri as an immanent power in nature which helps the soul to obtain grace (purusakara), whereas neither Yamuna nor Ramanuja seem to have wanted to divide god's functions in such a manner. They gave a more schematic presentation of his teachings in which they incorporated theories on the role of the avatars and the function of idol worship and explained how bhakti can be cultivated through various religious disciplines and observances. This gives the impression that Nathamuni, Yamuna and Ramanuja were pure philosophers who were appropriated in retrospect by later Sri Vaishnavas, unless one wishes to argue that they were primarily 'academic' philosophers who tolerated popular worship and elaborate ritual even if they did not wholeheartedly endorse them. Ramanuja would then appear to be a philosopher who wished to confine himself to theoretical discussion on traditional commentarial lines rather than become involved in the justification of sectarian practices and doctrines. It is only in 8r! Vaishnava sources that he is said to have been an acharya of the sampradaya and nowhere in his commentaries does he declare any sectarian affiliation. It was his successors, and not Ramanuja himself, who blended the religious approaches of the Vedas, Vedanta, Pancharatra and the Alvars.

Within two centuries of the death of Ramanuja there arose a schism in the Sri Sampradaya which centred around the question of *prapatti* in relation to divine grace. Ramanuja used the term to refer to taking refuge in god, implying that it can induce god's grace but is not in itself sufficient. The two sub-sects which resulted from this schism were the *Vatakalai*, or northern group, based at the *Varada-rajāsvami* temple at Kanchipuram, and the *Tenkalai*, or southern group, based at the temple of *Ranganatha* at Shrirangam. The *Vatakalai* maintained that man must actively cooperate in order to receive grace, just as a baby monkey has to cling to its mother in order to be taken to a place of safety, while the *Tenkalai* held that no self-effort was necessary, interpreting *prapatti* as complete surrender, just as a kitten is picked up by its mother. This difference of opinion arose within two centuries of the death of

Ramanuja and resulted in a division along sectarian lines between followers of Vedanta-Desika (Vatakalai) and Pillai Lokacarya (Tenkalai), each of them thenceforth maintaining a separate acharya lineage. The Vatakalai minimised references to Ramanuja's supposed liberalism in caste matters and regarded Sri as being infinite like the Lord himself. The Tenkalai emphasised references to Ramanuja's liberalism and regarded Sri as the foremost of finite spirits.

Although there are Sri Sampradaya temples at places of pilgrimage all over India, it has remained predominant only in the Tamil speaking area of South India (in the north the Sampradaya is said to be represented by followers of Ramananda). The most important temples are those of Varada-rajā-svami, Ranga-natha and Venkatesvara (above Tirupati on the Tirumalai hills). They are all built according to the typical southern plan which has a central shrine surrounded by rectangular boundary walls with elaborate gateways (called gopura) and a series of concentric enclosures (called Prakaram) along which are found shrines of various Vaishnava deities, acharyas and Alvar saints. In the medieval period they became centres of cultural and economic activity employing a large number of hereditary priests, artisans and labourers and financed by donations from pilgrims and grants of land, revenue and wealth from the rulers. The influence of the Tenkalai school has been more widespread since they were always more closely associated with popular worship, the Vatakalai remaining more exclusive and elitist in their centre at Kanchipuram. All three temples must be originally over a thousand years old since they are mentioned in the songs of the Alvars. The temple of Ranganatha has retained historical importance because of its association with Ramanuja and became a model temple for Sri Vaishnavas in matters of ritual and doctrine. Inscriptions show that these temples began to receive grants from the Cholas as early as the 9th century, but they reached their zenith in the 15th and 16th centuries when the buildings and festival activity were elaborated.

The temple of Venkatesvara., today one of the wealthiest and most popular temples in India, is visited by pilgrims of all denominations. Some elements in the myth of the sacred hill and the foundation of the temple imply that it was not originally a Vaishnava site but had been a centre of ascetics and a religious cult of a perhaps more Saiva nature in the remote past. The other two temples, though they are widely regarded as centres of pilgrimage, have a somewhat less universal appeal due to their more sectarian association with the Sri Sampradaya.

2. Madhva and the Haridasas

Scholars place Madhva's lifetime in the 13th century, a view endorsed by the existence of inscriptions found in Orissa relating to a disciple whom he sent there named Nara-hari-tirtha. He refers to himself as an avatara of Vayu (like Hanuman, the devoted servant of Rama) and seems to have had a messianic idea of himself as a servant of Hari (Vishnu) whose role was to propagate the doctrine of Dvaita (dualism). He often refers to his teaching as *tattva-vada*, as opposed to the *maya-vada* advocated by Sankara. Sectarian biographies say that his father was from Udipi, on the coast of southern Karnataka, and that he was born in a village nearby. His family appears to have been *smarta Brahmins* without any strong sectarian leanings who were associated with the worship of two temples at Udipi named *Anantesvara* and *Candramaulisvara*, both of which seem to have been places where a 'Vaishnavised' linga cult was carried on with rituals more allied to Saiva Agama than to Pancharatra. A *smarta* attitude was perhaps prevalent in this region of India and there is evidence there for the popularity of the worship of Hari-hara or Sankara-narayana, composite deities with elements of both Visnu and Siva.

Madhva was strongly influenced by the Bhagavata Purana and founded a Krsna temple at Udipi. He eventually placed eight of his disciples as heads of monastic communities around the town which

continue to share the temple service. Madhva himself prescribed the form of ritual (cf. *Tantra-sara-sangraha* and *Krsna-jayanti*) in which Siva was allotted a subsidiary place in the divine hierarchy but may be worshipped as long as one bears in mind his dependence on Vishnu (in contrast to the Sri Vaishnavas who exclude worship of Siva from their temples). Madhva thus appears to have orientated the worship of his community along more purely Vaishnava lines, though accepting the status of other deities as subordinate members of the pantheon.

The thirty-seven works attributed to Madhva take the form of *bhasya* (commentaries on Scriptures employing citations and etymological explanations), *tatparya* (a freer kind of commentary allowing scope for digressions from the basic text), *prakarana* (treatises) and texts on ritual and devotion. The fundamental dualism of his philosophy makes him the most opposed to Sankara of all the Vaishnava schools. He enumerated five basic distinctions (Panca-bheda) namely between god and matter (on the lines of Prakrti and purusha of samkhya), god and individual souls (paramatman/jivatman), individual souls and matter, individual souls and other individual souls and, finally, between material objects and other material objects. Matter and spirit exist eternally in separation and both are equally real though their mode of existence is different. Individual souls and matter are dependent on god, the only real agent from whom all things derive. He is independent (svatantra) and his relationship to the world is one of grace. The world is not an illusion but a place in which god and the soul can meet, a field of action for divine grace and lila. Bhakti is the recognition of our dependence on him. Madhva believes that only such a dualistic attitude allows one to postulate the reality of the world and the transcendence of god, any suggestion that god is somehow incorporated in the substance of the universe involves him in the process of becoming and so diminishes his status. Madhva thus rejects the idea of god being a material cause in favour of the view that he is only the efficient cause and is ontologically different from the effects produced.

There is no obvious source for Madhva's version of Vedanta and he himself cites no guru tradition which he inherited. Although it is dualistic his system is as theocentric as those of other Vaishnavas. The individual souls are entirely dependent on Vishnu and may gain salvation through recognition of this fact and, the realisation of god by divine grace through the practice of meditation. Religious observances will not automatically save anybody, but bhakti will save even the greatest sinner. He supports his position with citations drawn largely from the Puranas (especially the Bhagavata-purana) and the Pancharatra samhitas, but has a hard time finding endorsement in the Upanishads and Brahma-Sutras. He persistently tries to make monistic passages yield a dualistic interpretation, and in doing so cites many passages from 'revealed Scripture' (Sruti) which no one else has cited before or since. This has led later authors to accuse him of forgery, though if one is inclined to be generous one may argue that he was quoting from obscure Pancharatra texts which he believed to be Sruti, or that he had access to literature no longer extant.

Despite his fondness for the Bhagavata-purana, Gopala-Krsna and the Gopis are absent from his system. Rama and Krsna are adored, as well as Vishnu, and Laksmi is regarded as being distinct from the supreme soul but dependent on him.

As is the case with other acharyas his followers commented upon his works and elaborated the philosophy of the sampradaya, the foremost among them being Jayatirtha (14th century?) and Vyasa-tirtha (late 15th /early 16th century). The sampradaya has a large following in Karnataka, but there are only scattered adherents elsewhere in India, usually based at small communities established in the major pilgrimage centres. The popularity of the sampradaya in Karnataka may be attributed partly to the fact that it had the allegiance of a series of poets who wrote songs in the Kannada vernacular.

Bhakti was expressed in Kannada by both Saiva and Vaishnava poets, the former being represented by the *Saranas* of whom the most celebrated is Basavanna. The Haridasas, who emerged somewhat later, acknowledged the Dvaita philosophy and fell into two groups, the *Vyasa-kuta*, required to be learned in the Vedas, and the *Dasa-kuta* who were concerned to convey the teaching of Madhva and his message of love for Krsna to those for whom the Scriptures were incomprehensible. They were not markedly sectarian and aimed to dispel the superstitions and ignorance of the lower classes. Their songs, describing personal experiences on the path to salvation through dreary samsara, reflect the grim realities of social life and attempt to prepare the individual for release through bhakti. They stress a life of morality, condemning mere maintenance of outward appearances, and hoped to gain strength through devotion to Hari, some of them, like Purandaradasa, speaking of the supreme importance of repeating his name. Besides worshipping Krsna at Udipi and Venkatesvara of Tirupati they were also fervent devotees of Vithoba of Pandharpur.

The earliest writer in Kannada to deal with a Vaishnava theme was Rudra-bhatta who composed Jagannatha-vijay in the late 12th or early 13th century. He was followed by Nara-hari-tirtha who succeeded to Madhva's *gaddi* and left two songs in the vernacular. The first of the Haridasa poets, Sri-pada-rama, introduced Kannada into the religious life of the matha (scholarly/monastic establishment) of which he became the head. During the 15th and 16th centuries many other poets followed his example, among them Vyasaraaya, founder of the Dasa-kuta, who became associated with the rulers of Vijaya-nagara as a kind of spiritual advisor and initiated many subsequent Haridasa poets. The most popular of them are Purandara-dasa, Kanaka-dasa (from a low caste but initiated by Vyasaraaya in the face of opposition from Brahmins), Vadirajatirtha and Vaikunthadasa. The poetic tradition was carried on into the 18th century by Vijayadasa and Jagannatha-dasa. Some of them were occupants of *gaddis* of *mathas* belonging to the Madhva sampradaya. and composed works in Sanskrit as well as in the vernacular.

A recurrent theme in their poetry is, to use a term applied to medieval Christian mystics, 'the dark night of the soul, when one experiences extremes of despair and disillusionment before being granted a glorious revelation which dispels all one's despair and gloom. As dualists they sing rather of a continuous state of self-surrender and rapture than of blissful union with the absolute.

Their poems abound in homely similes and allegories drawn from daily life and they composed many songs on the theme of Krsna and his beloved Radha, though without the pronounced erotic element of other bhakti poets of northern and eastern India. They remain at some distance from god and regard him more as a father, brother or mother than a lover.

3. Vithoba and the Varkari Panth

The *Varkari Panth* arose as a Marathi phenomenon in the 12th and 13th centuries in the form of a body of devotees who participated in regular pilgrimages to the shrine of *Vithoba*, or *Vitthala*, at Pandharpur in southern Maharashtra. Before Pandharpur became part of Maharashtra it was a predominantly Kannada speaking area, thus the cult of Vithobi has many followers in Karnataka, but the Varkari Panth is confined to the deity's Marathi speaking devotees. Vithoba's origins are obscure, particularly the etymology of either of his names but it is possible that he developed either from the cult of a hill god or from the worship of a stone set up to commemorate a local hero who sacrificed his life for the protection or rescue of cattle. He is regarded as a manifestation of Visnu or Krsna who came and stayed at Pandharpur because he was impressed by the devotion a certain Pundalika showed to his elderly

parents. In some lists he appears as the ninth avatara of Vishnu. The earliest record of the temple at Pandharpur is an inscription of AD 1189 which records the donation by Yadava rulers of land to a group of devotees of Vitthala and assistance to build a temple. There are many other shrines of Vithoba/Vitthala in Karnataka and Maharashtra and all the images share common characteristics namely standing posture with hands on hips and elbows sticking out usually carved in a crude and rough-hewn manner. The tall crown on the head of Vithoba is likened to a linga and the existence of old Saiva temples in Pandharpur and the etymology of the name of the town (Pandu,- having Saiva associations) all point to a non-Vaishnava origin of the cult. Iconographically the image is reminiscent of figures of Harihara, Surya or men depicted on memorial stones erected for fallen heroes. His identification with Visnu, however, was accepted at an early period and he is worshipped and referred to by poets as a child or youthful manifestation.

The oldest of the Varkari saints is Jñanadeva who, in 1290 wrote an extended vernacular interpretation of the Bhagavadgita entitled *Jñanesvari*. Legends say that he and his family suffered persecution from the brahmin community because his father had broken a vow of samnyasa and returned to his home. Similar stories are told about the other Maratha saints and their struggles against social injustice. Along with his brothers and sister he helped to popularise the worship of Vithoba as a bhakti cult and gave it a philosophical background derived from Sanskrit Scriptures with some advaita influence. The other great Varkari saint of this period was Namadeva, a tailor whose date of birth is normally given as 1270. He wrote a biography of Jñanadeva after his untimely death, and is reputed to have travelled widely and to have spent several years in the Panjab (some of his hymns appear in the Adigrantha of the Sikhs). He preached purity of mind, speech and deed and showed utter disregard for caste distinction. Like other Varkari saints who followed him, he leaned towards a more *nirguna* type of devotion in which god is thought of as being present everywhere and idols are seen as simply a token of his presence rather than being imbued with any divine essence. Thus, from the beginning, the power of the name of god and its repetition was extolled in the Varkari Panth.

As a result of the incursion of Ala'uddin Khilji the deity of Vithoba was removed from Pandharpur and the temple was destroyed. The deity was probably taken to Vijayanagar and did not return to Pandharpur until the beginning of the 16th century. The Varkari Panth somehow survived during the intervening centuries and was given a new impetus in the time of Ekanatha (dates traditionally given as 1533-99). He edited and restored the *Jñanesvari*, translated Sanskrit works into Marathi, wrote commentaries on part of the Bhagavata-purana and Ramayana, as well as many short poems in a folk style. The other popular saint of this period was Tukarama (1598-1649), a Sudra whose *abhangas* (the name of the type of song composed by the Maratha saints) reflected his struggle with his soul, overcoming his doubts to attain eventual revelation. He was a harsh critic of social hypocrisy and advocated worship free from all sectarian, ritualistic and learned influences.

During the 17th century the Marathas rose up against Muslim domination and gained control over a large area of India. Although the Varkari Panth was never officially patronised by the state many nobles and wealthy pilgrims founded temples and other establishments at Pandharpur, thus making the 17th and 18th centuries something of a golden age for the town.

The Varkari Panth is basically a saint cult, its followers venerating their gurus and singing their *abhangas*, the main means by which their traditions are transmitted. They are a non-sectarian band of devotees gathered around gurus without any special rituals, mantras or elaborate initiation ceremony. They make a pledge to lead a straightforward life and to observe the regular pilgrimages which are the only outward manifestation of the cult. They have no centralised organisation and are mainly farmers, craftsmen, traders and brahmin landlords from the rural areas. The pilgrimages culminate on the

eleventh day (ekadasi) of the bright halves of the months of Ashadha and Karttika (the beginning and end of the four month period when the gods are asleep). various processions come from all corners of Maharashtra and are each termed *palkhi*, the term used for the kind of palanquin carried in the procession which contains the sandals (paduka) of each group's most revered saint. About forty *palkhis* converge at Pandharpur, the oldest being that of Jñanesvara which is carried from near Poona some two hundred and fifty kilometres away. Each *palkhi*, which grows larger as it passes through different towns and villages on the route, is comprised of caste or communal groups called *dindis*, each of them singing *abhangas* of the saints as they move along throughout the whole period of the pilgrimage. The *palkhis* assemble near Pandharpur and enter the town together, there being currently over a hundred thousand devotees present. The pilgrims have *darshana* at the rather plain and simple temple of Vithoba, worship the memorial, (samadhi) of their patron saint and then usually make a circumambulation (parikrami/pradaksina) of Pandharpur.

4. Nimbarka and his sampradaya

While various developments in Vaishnavism were taking place in southern India the north was experiencing a period of political instability under a succession of Muslim dynasties while the Saiva cult of the *Natha Yogis* acquired widespread popularity, particularly among the lower classes. Not until the 16th century was there any significant growth in Vaishnavism in North India, although Nimbarka, a Tailanga brahmin from Bellary District, had travelled from the south and settled near Mathura some centuries previously. Mathura had long been recognised as the birthplace of Krsna and a major centre of pilgrimage and so we must assume that there were some Vaishnava sacred sites in the neighbourhood and that Vaishnava pilgrims from other parts of India passed through. It is likely that the nearby hill of Govardhan had already been identified as being the one which had been held up by Krsna and that there were some small communities of Vaishnava devotees in or around the town. One such group would have been that of the followers of Nimbarka who is believed to have settled in a village near Govardhan. Although many of the local inhabitants are traditionally members of the Nimbarka sampradaya, there is no evidence of the sect having had a wide influence until it participated in the general upsurge of Vaishnava bhakti in the area during the 16th century.

Most scholars agree that Nimbarka was active before 1300, the majority placing him in the 12th century, others in the 10th or 11th, while sectarian scholars try to argue that he lived as early as the 6th century. Despite the fact that his is one of the four classic Vaishnava sampradayas, now well established in North India, very little has been written about Nimbarka and his philosophy. His system is referred to as *Dvaita-advaita* or *Bheda-abheda* and, like that of Ramanuja, was another attempt to explain how god is distinct from matter but ultimately has some connection with the world and individual souls. Nimbarka wrote a short commentary on the Brahma-sutras (entitled *Vedanta-parijata-saurabha*) and a short work of ten Slokas (*Siddhanta-ratna*) which is commonly referred to as *Dasa-sloki*. Srinivasacarya, his successor, wrote a commentary on *Vedanta-parijata-saurabha*, while other doctrinal texts were produced by such later acharyas as Kesava Kashmiri, Devacarya and Hari-vyasa-deva. The later philosophers in the sampradaya appear to have modified its original philosophy or theology under the influence of the *rasa-siddhanta* introduced by the Bengali Vaishnavas.

Their general approach to the problem of reconciling monism and pluralism has much in common with that of Ramanuja, but whereas he used the analogy of soul and body (sariri/sarira) to explain the relationship between god and the world, seeing him as a personal pantheos who pervades all things, Nimbarka saw the relationship in terms of cause and effect rather than of substance and attribute. For

Nimbarka difference and non-difference co-exist on the same level whereas Ramanuja saw non-difference as a principle which is qualified, by the subordinate factor of difference, plurality being comprised of all the attributes of fundamental unity. The individual soul (jiva) is the same as Brahman, but different in so far it is atomic while Brahman is all pervasive and the creator and supporter of the universe. This highest Brahman is identical with Krsna who has a celestial body and attributes such as beauty, charm, tenderness and sweetness. This Parabrahman/Sri Krsna is the material cause in the sense that it enables the eternal and subtle forms of mind and matter (cit and acit) to become manifest in gross form. The Jiva is ignorant of its true nature owing to contact with karma and can only be released through bhakti,— the first stage of which is complete surrender (prapatti), combined with the grace of Krsna.

The main deities worshipped in the sampradaya are Krsna and Radha in a combined form (yugala-svarupa). If the Dasa-sloki is a genuine work of Nimbarka, then it provides us with perhaps the earliest reference to the worship of Krsna alongside Radha — 'the daughter of Vrsabhanu who shines on Krsna's left side with corresponding beauty'. Together they comprise the highest form of existence (parama-tattva), Krsna being the embodiment of bliss (ananda-svarupa) and Radha the embodiment of delight or ecstasy (ahlada-svarupini)- The worship of the divine couple on equal terms, as a god engaged in eternal love play with his female Sakti, is characteristic of the sampradaya, most other Vaishnavas showing a tendency to stress one or the other of the divine pair.

The theme of the love play between Krsna and Radha was elaborated by later writers of the sampradaya, including those who wrote in *Braj Bhasa*, notably Sribhatta (whose *Yugala-sataka* is among the first Krsna bhakti works in this vernacular) and Harivyasadeva (a leader of the sampradaya in the 16th century whose *Mahavani* is now sung virtually as a liturgical text).

Members of the Nimbarka sampradaya are nowadays found all over North India including even Bengal and Nepal. There are many followers in the area around Mathura, Braj being the spiritual centre of the sampradaya, while the chief religious authority of the sampradaya, known as Braj Maha-raj, has his headquarters at Salemabad near Jaipur (often referred to in the sampradaya as Parashurampur, a name derived from its founder). The sampradaya consists of both householders, including the families of gosvamis who are custodians of various temple deities, and of ascetics, called vairagis, who are organised into groups called *dvara* or *akhara* each having its elected *mahanta* Twelve *dvara*-s were established by pupils of Hari-vyasa-deva, the senior of them Parasurama being given custody of a *Salagrama* which is highly revered in the sampradaya, while later in the 18th century some *vairagis* organised themselves into militant groups called *ani* or *akhara* as did many Ramanandi ascetics, in order to oppose certain groups of Saiva Samnaysis.

5. Caitanya and the Gaudiya Sampradaya

In view of the predominance of Tantra and Sakta cults in Bengal it is not surprising that Vaishnavism in this-area is centred around Krsna and Radha as a divine couple. The most influential literary composition in the development of Vaishnavism in eastern India was Jayadeva's *Gita-govinda*, written in the 12th century, which, by describing the union of the divine pair in terms of human erotic passion, helped to promote the concept of Radha being representative of Sakti in the Tantric sense of the term. The idea that the love of Krsna and Radha is a kind of cosmic Lila arose from the way in which the relationship between the creator and the universe was envisaged in Tantrism. Precedents for the use of sexual and erotic symbolism with a mystic intent may be found in songs (*caryapadas*) written in early

Bengali by Buddhist siddhas. The Bengali Sahajiya cult came to regard Jayadeva as their first guru (adiguru) since his depiction of Krsna and Radha could be interpreted so as to support their idea that they represent male and female principles whose union might be emulated by men and women. Jayadeva, adapting the vernacular *pada* song form into melodious Sanskrit, described the couple's divine love entirely in human terms with language, imagery and situations borrowed from classical love poetry. Krsna, for example, becomes in turn each of the four types of lover (nayaka) which were enumerated in secular poetry and treatises on erotics. He appears to have been the first poet to introduce the theme of the lovers' quarrel and temporary estrangement (maana) into the context of divine love, an episode in which Krsna himself suffers from separation to such an extent that he becomes subservient and has to beg for Radha's forgiveness.

Jayadeva's poem became immensely popular and helped to establish Radha as the consort of Krsna — hitherto she had been absent from the Puranas and other sources of Krsna mythology, though is perhaps alluded to in Hala's *Gaha-sattasai* and may be connected with *Nappinai*, a favourite gopi of Krsna who is mentioned by the Alvars. Jayadeva was followed by Candidasa, the first poet in Bengali to deal with Krsna and Radha and whose concept of the latter as being representative of Sakti may be related to the ideology of the Sahajiyas.

Vidyapati, writing around 1400 in the Maithili dialect, composed lyrics dealing with specific incidents in the emotional relationship of Krsna and Radha, showing marked sympathy for the latter. His songs, composed under court patronage, thus reflecting the concerns of earlier Sanskrit erotic poetry, were given a more devotional interpretation by subsequent Vaishnavas who adapted them as hymns for use in worship.

Although these poets had made Krsna and Radha popular in eastern India it was not until the early 16th century that their worship became the focus of a widespread religious movement. The inspiration for this movement came from Caitanya, whose lifespan is traditionally held to date from 1486 until 1533. He was born in the town of Nabadwip (West Bengal) and started out as a promising scholar) but decided to give up everything and immerse himself totally in an emotional and ecstatic style of devotion which aimed at experiencing the Godhead through singing and chanting the names of the Lord ('Hare Krsna') Several scholars, in search of precedents for this style of worship, have pointed out similarities between Caitanya's approach and that of the Muslim Sufi saints who also tried to immerse themselves in divine love ('ishq) and had developed the practice of singing and recitation of divine names (sama and Zikr). Caitanya's ecstatic devotion was such an inspiration to others that he soon attracted a number of followers who expressed their devotional fervour through group participation in processions (samkirtana) which featured singing; chanting, dancing and the beating of drums and cymbals.

He made a tour of South India and, in his later years, became particularly devoted to the deity Jagannatha at Puri in Orissa. Swooning, tears of joy, states of trance and ecstasy are recurrent elements in stories told about Caitanya and his total absorption in love for Krsna and Radha. He developed a strong desire to visit *Braj* and see for himself the places associated with the *lilas* of the divine couple. He is said to have made the pilgrimage in 1516 and to have visited Mathura and Govardhan, among other sites, and to have rediscovered the original Vrindaban on the banks of the Yamuna as well as a sacred pond called Radha-kunda. His visit was brief, but on his return to Bengal he instructed two disciples, officials at the Muslim court of Gauda named Rupa and Sanatana, to settle in Braj and complete the rediscovery and identification of the 'lost' sites associated with the pastimes of Krsna. Rupa and Sanatana went to Vrindaban where they were later joined by their nephew Jiva and other disciples, the most important of whom were Gopala Bhatta, Raghunathadasa and Raghungtha Bhatta.

These disciples became known as the Six Gosvamis and together they founded temples and religious communities at Vrindaban and Radha-kunda.

Caitanya himself seems to have done little to organise his followers into a sampradaya; this was achieved by his companions Nityananda and Advaitacarya and by the gosvamis in Braj. Rupa and Sanatana, succeeded by Jiva, became the highest authorities in the movement on doctrinal matters. It was due to their association with the province of Gauda that the movement became known as the Gaudiya sampradaya. They did not present their doctrines in theistic philosophy of the traditional type, as represented by commentaries on the Brahma-sutras and other universally acknowledged Scriptures, but adapted classical aesthetic theory (rasa-sastra) such as it is found in the works of Bharata Muni, Abhinava-gupta and Ananda-varadhana. Rupa Gosvami was the prime exponent of this blend of traditional aesthetics with a psychology cum theology appropriate to bhakti and its literary expression. In his *Bhakti-rasa-amrta-sindhu* (probably composed around 1540) and *Ujjvala-nillamani* he provided Caitanya's emotional bhakti with a theoretical framework which in turn influenced other Krsna sects, including those of Vallabha and Nimbarka. Rupa's theories, and those of his successors and imitators, made devotees and poets more conscious of theological interpretations and mystical symbolism derivable from the theme of the love between Radha and Krsna.

Rupa analysed the emotions of bhakti by applying a psychology and pathology of love in terms borrowed, with appropriate modifications, from the aesthetics of courtly love poetry of the classical Sanskrit period. Erotic sentiments are sublimated into religious devotion, the devotee becoming a *rasika*, equivalent to the *sahrdaya* or connoisseur who was able to appreciate and relish Sanskrit love poetry. Bhakti was thus represented as, in the words of S.K. De (p.169), 'a literary erotic emotion transmuted into a deep and ineffable devotional sentiment, which is intensely personal yet is impersonalised into a mental condition of disinterested joy'. The underlying mood (sthayi-bhava) of such an emotion is erotic, passion for Krsna (krsna-rati) which the devotee can relish in his mind as bhakti-rasa. Rupa adapted the elaborate classifications of poetic imagery and other elements of literary expression to the context of bhakti in order to encourage devotional poets, their audience and the ordinary worshipper to adopt and cultivate the feeling (bhava) appropriate for a participant in one of the Krsna lilas, such as a female attendant (sakhi) promoting the love play of Krsna and Radha or the mother Yasoda adoring her divine child.

Among notable works produced by the six gosvamis and their circle was *Hari-bhakti-vilasa*, normally attributed to Gopala Bhatta which described all the rituals and other observances to be followed by Gaudiya Vaishnavas, citing the Puranas, Smrti and other prestigious texts. Narayana Bhatta, using citations from the same sources, wrote a full account of all the sacred sites in Braj entitled *Braja-bhakti-vilasa*, thus helping to establish the pilgrimage trail which incorporates all the places around Mathura which can be associated with an incident in the life of Krsna and his companions. At Radha-kunda the poet Krsnadasa Kaviraja wrote a biography of Caitanya in Bengali entitled *Caitanya-caritamrta*. It was only much later, in the 18th century, that this sampradaya was provided with a commentary on the Brahmasutras (Govindabhashya of Baladeva. Vidya-bhushana) and a link was sought to be made with the older sampradaya of Madhva.

Prema-bhakti centred on the love of Krsna and Radha, is the main pursuit of members of the sampradaya, though Caitanya himself is often worshipped in the form of an idol, sometimes accompanied by Nityananda, the two of them being thought of as incarnations of Krsna and Balarama. The main centres of the sect are at Nabadwip, Puri and Vrindaban and its membership includes both householder gosvamis (who look after temples), lay devotees and groups of ascetics. Followers are

grouped into numerous *parivaras* ('families') which are associated with -prominent disciples of Caitanya.

Vaishnavism in Orissa

The earliest record of Vaishnavism in Orissa is provided by a dynasty of rulers in the Gupta period who associated themselves with Vishnu-Narayana or styled themselves *parama-bhagavata*. From the middle of the 6th century, however, the rulers were Saiva for a period of over five hundred years, thus there are no records of grants made to Vaishnavas during this period. From the 11th century onwards there are references from central India indicating that there was a famous temple of Purushottama, at Puri, while in medieval texts the area is referred to as *Purusottama-ksetra*. Images of a four-armed standing Vishnu in a bluish stone (called Nila-madhava) have been found in Orissa, indicating that the Purushottama cult was current among the ruling classes between the 11th and 14th centuries.

From the early 12th century Vaishnavism flourished under the Ganga dynasty and Coda-ganga, who died in 1147, founded a new temple for Purusottama/Nilamadhava on the site of an older one which may have dated from the 10th century. The temple was intended to reflect the power and prestige of his rule and in 1230 the whole of Orissa was dedicated to Purushottama while the kings pretended to rule under the overlordship of the deity. The cult of Purushottama as a form of Vishnu erotically associated with Laksmi or an epithet applied to Krsna as a lover of the gopis, together with the promotion in conjunction with it of the worship of a ferocious Narasimha, is perhaps indicative of influences from the kind of Sakta worship which had been propagated in Orissa by Vajrayana Buddhists in the period lasting from the 7th to the 9th centuries. By the end of the 13th century Purusottama became known as *Jagannatha*, a name which had been associated with Tantrism and esoteric practices. Gradually Jagannatha became accepted as the main title of the deity at Puri and was applied to other representations carved in the same style which were worshipped elsewhere in Orissa.. It would appear that a stone image of Purusottama was replaced by a wooden effigy of Jagannatha as an attempt by the Ganga dynasty to legitimise its rule and unify their Hindu and tribal subjects by merging brahmanical and tribal cults in order to give the social hierarchy a common identity through the worship of Purusottama-Jagannatha as a patron deity of the state.

Nowadays the great temple at Puri houses three crudely formed wooden images which are identified with Krsna (Jagannatha), Balarama and their sister Subhadra (who was substituted for the infant Krsna and dashed against a stone by Kamsa but rose up in a terrifying form to prophesy his eventual death at the hands of Krsna). There is no evidence for the existence of this wooden trinity before the 13th century, and it is possible that initially only one or two of them were worshipped in the temple, but the origin of the figures is to be found in the worship by the tribal people of Orissa of deities represented by wooden posts. Various local myths attempt to explain how the wooden Vaishnava triad came to be made and to explain why they have the form of trunks with large heads and eyes and stunted arms.

Initially both Saivas and Vaishnavas worshipped them in the Puri temple, but gradually Saiva elements were suppressed and a Vaishnava style of worship prevailed. Two groups of priests supervise the worship of the deities, one of them being an originally non-brahmin group called *Daitas* whose main function is periodically to renew and consecrate the wooden triad, the other comprising Brahmins first appointed in the late 13th century, perhaps because a more standard or Sanskritic form of worship was required as the temple began to attract more and more pilgrims from all over India. Two festivals attracted particularly large crowds of pilgrims, namely the annual procession of the deities in three

huge wooden cars (ratha-yatri) and their 'new embodiment' (nava-kalevara) which normally occurs every twelve or nineteen years (i.e. whenever a year has two months of Asadha).

In the 16th and 17th centuries the temple suffered attacks by Muslims, probably attracted more by its enormous wealth than by any desire to suppress the cult, which resulted in the destruction of the deities or their periodic removal from Puri. After these troubled centuries the deities were restored and their worship became more distinctly Vaishnava with particular emphasis on the identification of Jagannatha with Krsna. Caitanya's devotion to Jagannatha must have helped to popularise the cult among the masses and to encourage the identification with Krsna while at the same time weakening the domination of the traditional priesthood over the cult since his form of worship was essentially non-ritualistic. By the end of the 16th century the tradition had arisen that Caitanya's earthly existence had culminated with his absorption into the image of Jagannatha and stories were told of how he had danced ecstatically in front of the temple cars during the ratha-yatra. Caitanya helped to popularise the Krsna and Radha- element in Orissan Vaishnavism and the expression of devotion through chanting and processions, but the propagation of the Gaudiya sampradaya in the region was largely the work of Syama-nanda and his companions in the early 17th century. The doctrines of the sampradaya, however, seem to have made less impression than the example of Caitanya's fervent devotion. He came to be regarded as an embodiment of Jagannatha and many shrines were dedicated to him in Orissa.

6. Vallabha and the Pusti-marga

Vallabha, a Tailanga brahmin whose family came from near Rajahmundry in Andhra Pradesh, was born in Madhya Pradesh while his parents were returning from Varanasi, the traditional dates for his birth and death being 1478 — 1530. According to sectarian tradition he was a brilliant scholar who, while still a boy, won a great debate for the Vaishnavas against the Saiva monists at Vijayanagar as a result of which he was offered the leadership of the Sampradaya of Vishnusvami. This, however, is a story invented by his descendants who wished to claim prestige for their sampradaya by relating it to the older school of Vishnusvami even though Vallabha made no such claim and, unlike his successors, did not refer to his philosophy as Suddhadvaita.

He is said to have travelled extensively in his youth visiting places of pilgrimage and delivering sermons on the Bhagavata-purana. He married and made his family home at Adail near the confluence of the Ganges and the Yamuna on the opposite side of the water from Allahabad, but the spiritual centre of the sampradaya he founded was the Govardhan hill near Mathura. According to sectarian tradition the goddess of the Yamuna revealed to him the location of Gokul, the place near Mathura where Krsna had grown up in the care of his foster parents Nanda and Yasoda while Krsna appeared before him and instructed him to initiate disciples and go to Govardhan where he would discover a deity. The deity which Vallabha is said to have discovered at Govardhan, called *Govardhana-nathaji* or simply *Srinathaji*, was an image of Krsna holding up the hill in order to protect the people of Braj. Vallabha is said to have begun the worship of this deity and to have arranged for the construction of a temple on the Govardhan hill which was completed after much delay, in 1519. The Gaudiya sampradaya, through association with a saint called Madhavendra Puri who was in Braj at the time, also claims some connection with the temple at Govardhan, and even Vallabhite sectarian tradition states that initially Vallabha's followers supervised only the administration of the temple while the actual service of the deity was conducted by Bengali disciples of the gosvamis at Radha-kunda and Vrindaban.

Vallabha presented his philosophy in a commentary on the Brahma-sutras called Anubhashya (a work completed by his son Vitthala-natha), another on portions of the Bhagavata-purana entitled *Subodhini tika*, a text called *Tattvartha-dipa-nibandha* and a series of short works known as *Sodasha-grantha*. Parabrahman, represented by Krsna as Purna-purushottama, is the substratum of apparently contradictory attributes and is untainted by maya the magic power which he employs to create the world for the purposes of enacting his lila-s. He is present in all levels of existence, but the gradations from divine to material existence are dependent on the proportions in which he allows his manifestation as bliss (ananda), consciousness (cit) and 'being' (sat) to be apparent. He is both inherent and instrumental cause, pervading the world in a multiplicity of forms but without undergoing any fundamental change — a doctrine of unmodified transformation (*avikrta-parinama-vada*) which is expressed by the analogy of clay being made into a pot or gold being used to fashion various kinds of ornament. The individual soul (jiva), a manifestation of the *sat* and *cit* aspects of Para-Brahman in which his *ananda* is concealed, is controlled by Parabrahman acting as an inner force (antaryamin) but remains lost in samsara until, through divine grace, it realises its essential nature as a part of Parabrahman. The importance which Vallabha gave to the role of grace, which is called *pushti* led to his sampradaya becoming known as the Pushti-marga ('the way of grace'). No actions performed by the Jiva can oblige Krsna-Parabrahman to impart the blessings of his grace, all we can do is cultivate humility and devotion and dedicate everything to Krsna. The mantra of initiation used in the Pushti-marga, called the brahma-sambandha, is a formula which expresses the initiates dependence on Krsna and his willingness to dedicate everything — his mind, body and wealth — to his service.

Vallabha was eventually succeeded by his second son Vitthala-natha who wrote some philosophical works which gave more emphasis to ideas of *rasa* and *bhava* as propounded by Rupa Gosvami and his followers. He also did much to elaborate the service of Srinathaji and make it more attractive by introducing more festivals, enlarging the deity's wardrobe, providing it with feasts and incorporating songs in the local vernacular (Braj Bhasa). Although Krsna was worshipped as a companion of Radha and the gopis, special emphasis was placed on *vatsalya-bhava* whereby he was envisaged as a baby or a child. The Bengali priests were forcibly expelled from the temple, allowing Vitthala-natha to assume control of the worship of Srinathaji and develop it as he wished. He made several trips to Gujarat and other parts of northern and western India and attracted many devotees, particularly among the merchant classes. The Pushti-marga offered a style of worship in which devotees could enjoy the good things of life as long as they made a token dedication of them to Krsna. Vallabha himself had stressed that renunciation was not as effective as the path of grace and devotion, that one should follow the life of a householder and experience tapas (penance) not by deprivation and mortification, but by experiencing separation from and longing for Krsna (viraha or viyoga).

Vitthala-natha developed the Pushti-marga into a widespread and popular sect and, at the end of his life, gave each of his seven sons a deity so that they could carry on his mission, almost as if it were a family business. The different branches of the Pushti-marga which were established by the distribution of the seven deities became known as *gaddis*, Each having its own temple at Govardhan or Gokul. They were not like other temples but were built in the style of the house of a noble or rich merchant, hence they are referred to as *haveli* rather than Mandira. The *haveli* was the residence not only of an important deity but also of its custodian who, as a guru, head of the *gaddi* and a descendant of Vallabha, came to be regarded as a semi-divine personage. Although other sampradayas had hereditary gurus, none of them developed the notion of an inherently sacred family to such an extent as the Pushti-Marga. The wealth and status inherited by Vallabha's later and senior descendants tempted some of them to take advantage of the obsequious deference shown to them by their devotees, culminating in various scandals during the last century which considerably damaged the reputation of the Pushti-marga, though eventually led to some attempts at improving its image.

Until the advent of Aurangzeb the *gaddis* remained at Govardhan and Gokul while followers of the Pushti-marga contributed to the development of the pilgrimage route around Braj which incorporated the many places associated with episodes in the life of Krsna. Aurangzeb reversed the policy towards Hinduism which had been followed by his predecessors and began to make things difficult for the Vaishnavas in Braj. In 1669 Srinathaji was removed for safety from the temple at Govardhan and, like several other important Vaishnava deities in Braj, was taken out of the area. After a journey lasting over two years the deity eventually found refuge in the Rajput state of Mewar where the ruler granted land in a valley in the Aravalli mountains north of his capital at Udaipur so that a new temple could be built for Srinathaji. The town which grew up around the new *haveli* became known as Nathdwara and is today the most important pilgrimage centre for members of the Pushti-marga. The other *gaddis* moved to Rajasthan and Gujarat where they received the protection of local rulers and were closer to their large following among the merchant classes of western India.

7. Hita Harivamsa and Svami Haridasa

We may conclude this survey of the major Vaishnava sects by mentioning two smaller groups of devotees which have evolved as a result of the inspiration of two well-known 'poet-saints' of Vrindaban. Neither of these groups shows much interest in formal theology or philosophy since they aim to generate in the devotee an experience of the *rasa* inherent in the amorous play of Krsna and Radha through emotional identification with participants in their eternal *lila*.

This emphasis on emotional identification and experience has led to the use of the term *rasika sampradaya* to describe any kind of group following such a path. It represents an extension of the type of bhakti formulated by Rupa Gosvami and his followers in which the pursuit of emotional identification and involvement takes the place of theology, philosophy and ritual. The term *rasika sampradaya* is applied to groups of devotees who seek this kind of experience and is also used for some branches of the Ramanandi sampradaya.

Hita Harivamsa wrote two compositions which are regarded virtually as canonical texts by his followers, namely the Caurasi Pada, a collection of eighty-four poems in Braj Bhasa, and *Radha-sudha-nidhi*, a Sanskrit work in praise of Radha. He was born early in the 16th century in a village between Mathura and Agra and, after receiving instructions from Radha in a dream, settled in Vrindaban and began the worship of a deity called Radha-vallabhaji, the beloved of Radha. His poems contain very little in the way of doctrine since they are mainly descriptive of the love of Krsna and Radha, referred to as *nikunja-lila* ('sporting in the bower or *nitya-vihara* eternal play, or delight'). The poems concentrate on this theme, the only aspect of Krsna mythology which was relevant for Hita Harivamsa and his followers, and are seen as a refinement of the Bhagavata-purana. The central theme is the beauty and perfection of Radha, contemplation of whom leads to spiritual experience and who helps to make Krsna accessible to the devotee. The devotee must aim to become like one of her companions or attendants (*sakhi* or *sahacari*) who watch and promote the love play with Krsna. The *sakhis* have a more intimate connection with the divine couple than the *gopis* and do not experience love in separation (*viraha*) because they do not desire Krsna for themselves and are not abandoned by him since they participate in *nityavihar*.

This eternal love play takes place in the eternal celestial Vrindaban, thus the town of Vrindaban near Mathura as its terrestrial counterpart is the spiritual centre of the sect. The sect or movement which grew up around Hita Harivamsa became known as the Radha-vallabha sampradaya and its main place

of worship is the temple of Radha-vallabhaji which is in the custody of gosvamis descended from him. The worship centres around the singing of the verses of Hita Harivamsa and his followers in a musical assembly known as samaja and, as in other Vaishnava sampradayas, the darsana of an elaborately decorated image of Krsna.

Svami Haridasa, a younger contemporary of Hita Harivamsa, also settled in Vrindaban and began the worship of a deity (Banke Bihariji). He was also a poet whose songs became canonical texts for his followers. He has acquired the reputation of having been a great musician and has left one collection of 18th verses known as *Siddhanta ke pada*, though they contain hardly anything in the way of philosophy, and another of a hundred and ten verses called *Kelimala* which describe the love of Krsna and Radha. Nitya-vihara is regarded as the highest expression of love and only Radha's sakhis may enter the eternal bower and witness the eternal delight. Because Haridasa and his followers emphasised the need to cultivate sakhi-bhava they have become known as the sakhi-sampradaya.

Due to a schism between the gosvami and ascetic followers of Haridasa the accounts of his life are confused and, in addition, have acquired a certain amount of miraculous detail. Haridasa was himself an ascetic (virakta) and never married, so the gosvamis claim descent from his brother. The ascetics, who maintain a guru pupil lineage (guru-sisya parampara) say that the gosvamis are descended from a priest who was not related to Haridasa. The ascetics and the gosvamis seem to have split early in the eighteenth century over the question of the custody and worship of *Banke Bihariji* and have remained unreconciled ever since. The gosvamis, who have custody of the deity, claim to belong to the Visnusvami sampradaya while the ascetics are affiliated to the Nimbarka sampradaya. The ascetic branch has produced more literature, mainly in the form of commentaries on the works of Haridasa or verse in Braj Bhasa- dealing with Radha and Krsna. One of the ascetic Acharyas, taking up a theme expressed in some of the poems of Haridasa that everything happens through the will (iccha) of Krsna, coined the term *icchadvaita* for the supposedly philosophical standpoint of the sampradaya.

Since neither of these groups has a Vedanta philosophy enshrined in commentaries on canonical Scriptures it is questionable whether they should be referred to as a sampradaya at all. They are rather movements or cults within the general current of Vaishnavism which may be likened to other localised and smaller groups which have drawn their inspiration from a saint with a particularly impressive personality or way of expressing his devotion.

THE RISE OF THE WORSHIP OF RAMA AS A SEPERATE CULT WITHIN VAISNAVISM

Lecture, 24-2-1981, Prof Hans T .Bakker.

Some of the members of the list of Visnu's Avataras belong to older periods, e.g. matsya, kurma, varaha, who in the Vedic literature were considered as manifestations of Brahma/Prajapati. Vamana is already considered to be a manifestation of Vishnu in the Brahmana period. Krsna was the first human historical being to be deified and was considered as a manifestation on earth of Vasudeva (200-100 BC, BhG.).

During the period AD 200-400 all these forms and manifestations of Vishnu/Narayana/Vasudeva were systematized, listed, and a first attempt was made to fit them into a comprehensive theological system. The lists that resulted from these systematizations, which are found in the Narayaniya section (Mbh.112,321-339) and other parts of the Mbh. (Mbh.(Bombay) 3,272; AD 200-400) include from the very beginning some other manifestations of Vishnu, namely Bhargava Rama, Narasimha, Rama son of Dasaratha, and some others which are omitted or only figure in later extensive avatara lists.

In this period these manifestations of Vishnu are not yet entitled avatara, but *pradurbhava* i.e. appearances (cp. P.Hacker 1960). We may say that Rama son of Dasaratha was reckoned among the appearances of Vishnu on earth as early as the 3rd-4th century AD. The first text that deals with this manifestation as such are the books I and VII of the Ramayana in which the term avatara however is not yet used, and which therefore (and because of other reasons as well, the horoscope of Rama's birth (Ram.I,17,8-10) corresponds with 11 March AD 200 (see Ferrari d'Occhieppo 1979) may date from the third or fourth century AD.

At the end of the fourth century there seems to have originated a tendency to draw up a (standard) list of ten manifestations (*pradurbhava*) of Vishnu which also features the future one, Kalkin (found in the *Purana-panca-laksana* (PPan"c.) p. 514f., i.e. Harivamsa and some of the oldest parts of the Puranas. This new doctrine developed during the 5th century when a new denomination of these ten incarnations of Vishnu came in vogue: avatara (ava-tr— to descend). As for Rama son of Dasaratha, this new appellation is found in the *Ramopakhyana* of the Mbh. (3.260 ff.), and in the colophon of Kalidasa's *Raghuvamsa* 10 (both fifth century).

We note that during the classical period of the Gupta reign the formation of Vaishnavism as a coherent theological system was basically completed. This fully fledged Vaishnavism is reflected in the oldest Puranas, which may date from the 5th and 6th centuries, e.g. Vishnu-purana Matsya-purana and Vishnu-dharmottara-purana. Iconographically this theology is reflected in Vishnu temples built during the Gupta period, though very little of them remains nowadays. According to the H.C.I. (111, 427): " In the inscriptions of the Gupta Age there are references to temples or flag-staffs of the God Vishnu-Narayana-Vasudeva throughout the length and the breadth of India, in Nepal and the upper regions of the Beas in the North, in Bengal in the East, in Kathiawar in 'the West and the trans-Krsna region in the South where some of the early Pallava and Early Ganga rulers were devout Bhagavatas." The Gupta rulers themselves just as their allies the Vakatakas styled themselves as *parama-bhagavatas*.

One of the oldest surviving Vishnu temples is the Dasa-avatara temple at Deogarh (6th Century), which has reliefs depicting scenes of Vishnu's appearance as Rama according to the Ramayana story, Popular themes were e.g. Rama in exile in the forest and the transformation of Ahalya (Ahalya- uddhara).

After this sketch of the formative period of Vaishnavism in which a human hero Rama, whose deeds were depicted in the kernel of the Ramayana (books II-VI), was transformed into a divine incarnation and as such acquired a place in the Vishnuite pantheon, we shall now concentrate on the development of a separate cult in Vaishnavism that considered Rama as the highest manifestation of the Lord Vishnu.

The rise of this cult seems to be relatively late and not to have taken place before AD 1000. In the centuries AD 400 — 1000, the story of the deeds of Rama enjoyed an immense popularity, though this does not necessarily imply that Rama was the exclusive object of a religious cult. This popularity is reflected in many texts which are generally termed *Rama-katha*. One of the earliest texts of this kind after the Ramayana itself, seems to be the *Ramopakhyana* in the Mbh. (5th century). Most of the later Puranas include a *Ramakatha* and the story is theme of several Kavya works, such as *Raghuvamsa* and *Uttara-rama-carita*, to mention only the most well known among them.

The story of Rama was also adopted by the Buddhist and Jaina religions and featured in their popular literature, the Buddhist *Dasaratha-jataka* the Jaina *Pauma-cariyam* of Vimalasuri and the *Padma-purana* of Ravisena being the most important.

Iconographical popularity of the Rama story during these centuries is indicated by the depiction of scenes of the Ramayana on temple walls. Besides the aforementioned Dasavatara temple, the Patthara Ghati temple at Nalanda should be noted (AD 600—800) : Forest scene, Rama and Sita in the *panchavati* Ravana threatening Sita, Hanuman bringing the mountain, and the Ahalya-uddhara scene (Desai 1973, 116ff.).

Inspite of his divine character Rama is depicted in these centuries only in connection with his deeds as a human being. Idols in which Rama is depicted as a God in his own right and which served as objects of worship (puja) are not found before AD 1000. This seems to be in conformity with the oldest iconographic descriptions of Rama in Sanskrit literature.

The Brhat-samhita of Varahamihira (AD 587) does not describe Rama as a special form in which Vishnu is to be worshipped, but simply lists him together with Bali and says that his representation should be 120 angulas high. Another old iconographic text is the Vaikhanasa-agama (quoted in Rao). Here an image of Rama is described as endowed with two arms, holding in his right hand the bow in his left the arrows, clad in a red robe, and wearing a crown (kirita). (Note that the common paraphernalia of Vishnu conch, cakra etc, yellow robe, and four arms are still absent). No iconographic descriptions of Rama are found (as appears from the compilation of the Vaishnava Iconography from Pancharatra texts by Smith 1965) in what are generally considered to be the oldest Pancharatra samhitas (Jayakha-S., Sattvata-S. and Pauskara-S. called Ratna-traya), AD 600-850 (Gonda 1977).

In fact only one sanctuary which appears to have been exclusively devoted to Rama is known to us to have existed during this period, namely Ramagiri (modern Ramtek) a hill 45 km. N.E. of Nagpur in the North East of Maharashtra. This hill was situated only about 3 km from the old capital of the Vakataka realm: Nandivardhana. As already noted the Vakatakas, as did the Guptas, styled themselves devout Vaishnavas.

The Gupta realm was connected to the Vakatakas by matrimonial alliances, notably Candragupta II's daughter Prabhavati-Gupta who was married to the Vakataka king Rudrasena II. In two inscriptions issued in the first half of the 5th century by this queen, in which she calls herself a "extreme devotee of the Lord" (*atyanta-bhagavad bhakta*) this sacred place seems to be mentioned; one charter was issued "from the footprints of the Lord of Ramagiri" (ramagiri svamin-pada-mulad, CII.V, 33-37), in another the offering of some villages to a Vaisnava Acharya Canala-svamin was initially offered to "the footprints of the Lord" (*bhagavat-pada-mule-nivedya*). Both seem to indicate the presence of a sanctuary on the Rama-hill. The feet of Rama on this hill are also mentioned in Kalidasa's Meghaduta., where it is referred to as the temporary abode of the exiled Yaksha (Megaduta 9 (12)). On the hill are said to be also situated a hermitage (asrama) and a holy pond where Sita is said to have taken a bath (Meghaduta 1). A *tirtha* Rama-giryasrama is likewise mentioned in the Garuda Purana 1:81:8.

Although the evidence implies that we are here concerned with a sanctuary related to Rama there are no indications that an actual, idol of Vishnu as Rama was installed in a temple. This does not seem altogether likely in view of the iconographic state of affairs of this period with respect to Rama.

Before the cult of Rama emerged into prominence, the cults of two other avatars of Vishnu had already gained much ground, i.e. those of Narasimha and Krsna. Krsna is already been dealt with by Entwistle. Some words need to be said about Nrsimha. That the Nrsimha cult preceded the Rama cult is beyond doubt. It may even be said that to some extent the Rama cult was modelled on that of the Man-lion.

The worship of Nrsimha is described in the early technical literature of this period, viz. the Narasimha-tapaniya Upanishad dating from the 6th or 7th century (commented on by Sankara!), and in one of the oldest Pancharatra-samhitas :the Sattvata-samhita (Ch. XVII, see Smith 1975, 527). In these texts the puja of Nrsimha is outlined in accordance with the complicated ritual developed in the Pancharatra school, which had its counterpart in the Agama literature of the Saivas and the Tantra literature of the Saktas. For the moment it is not necessary to go into the details of this ritual. It may suffice to note that the worship is centered on a cult-object that is to be installed and consecrated; mostly a temple idol.

The Nrsimha-tapaniya Up. served as a model for the Rama-tapaniya Up., presumably one of the oldest extent texts dealing with the worship of Rama. This text may tentatively be dated about AD 1000. and together with the Agastya-samhita (see below), it ushered in a new era.

Since this iconography was dealt with in the Pancharatra texts it is probable that Rama worship was already recognised before texts exclusively devoted to this topic were composed. A lengthy description of Rama's iconography appears in the Padma S.(See Smith 1969), and in the Visvaksena Samhita which may both date from before AD 1000. In them idols of Rama, being cult-objects in which Vishnu is to be worshipped, are described as having all the usual Visnuite attributes and paraphernalia. Rama may have two arms, a reminiscence of his human origin and most fitted for a king, but he may also have four arms being a full form of Vishnu. Up to this day the two-armed Rama idol remains the most usual one.

Images of Rama in which he is depicted in his own right (i.e. not in scene of the Ramayana) are found from the 11th century onwards. The oldest images are not yet cult-objects (idols), but form part of the temple walls in the Parsvanatha temple in Khajuraho and the Amba Mata temple at Osian (classical Uvasisa in the Jodhur district of Rajasthan, see Desai 1973, 119). In the Khajuraho temple he is depicted with both two and four arms, in both cases holding a bow and arrows, and in the latter blessing

Hanuman with his lower right hand and embracing S'ita with the lower left. The Osian temple depicts Rgma and Sita in the manner of Laksmi-Narayana with Hanuman standing to the right of Rama.

The oldest temple dedicated to Rama that is known to me dates from the 12th century. It is the Rajivalocana temple in Rajim, a holy place at the confluence of the Mahanadi and the Pairi rivers in Madhya Pradesh, near Raipur. The skt. name of this place is not known to me, unless it is Rajiva. This *tirtha* became an important Vaishnava centre during the Gupta period, when it formed part of the Vakataka realm in the 5th and 6th century. The Vaishnava Rajiva-locana temple was built during the reign of a later dynasty of the Nalas (7th century), maybe by king Vilasatunga (EI. XXVI, 49 ff; CII. IV, 2, 455. Cp. HCI. III, 190). Additions to this temple, notably a massive entrance in which Vishnu was depicted as Anantasayin, were made during the reign of the Panduvamsi dynasty (7th and 8th century) (See Tripathi 1978, p. 14, n. 43 in COJ.).

According to the Rajim inscription of king Prthivideva II, a Kalachuri king of Patanpur, (HCI. V, 65) (AD 1144) the Rajivalocana temple was rebuilt (or restored) by his minister Jagapala as a Rama temple (CII. IV, 2, 455). From the same period, 12th — 13th century, may date the first Rama idol that is reported, found in South India in the Madras Presidency and described in Rao I, prt.1, p. 192f. (including photograph).

If we now survey the extant evidence pointed out above, and come to conclusions, we can fairly state that the cult in which Rama was worshipped as the supreme form and main *avatara* of Vishnu did not rise into prominence before the 11th and 12th centuries AD. This is to say that, though belonging to the latest period of Hindu rule in North India, it began to emerge before the Muslim power was firmly established. In the beginning Rama would not have had more than a minor shrine in a Vishnu temple (cp. Rao I, 1, p. 191), and the priests who were responsible for his puja would not have formed more than a small minority of the Vaishnava brahmin community. Nevertheless it was probably in this small circle of Rama devotees that the first doctrinal Ramaite cult-text originated. Not surprisingly, it was fully modelled upon the great tradition of the Vaishnava ritual as laid down in the Pancharatra Samhitas, a ritual that, as it seems, was practised in most Vaishnava temples of the day and to which also the Ramaite priests may have adhered.

The oldest text of this type is the Agastya Samhita, which deals with all aspects of the Rama theology and the installation and worship of various types of Rama idols. The only conspicuous differences with the Pancharatra texts are that all emphasis is laid on Vishnu's incarnation as Rama (as a result of which the *vyuha* doctrine is no longer adhered to but replaced by a monistic more Vedantic type of philosophy (bhedabheda) and secondly, that the topic of building a temple is not treated. We may tentatively surmise that the reason for the absence of temple architecture in the AgS. may be that there were no separate Rama temples at that time, since his worship took place only in minor shrines of the main temple. The Agastya-Samhita may date from the 11th or 12th century. A *terminus ad quem* is set by an extensive quotation from it in Hemadri's *Catur-varga –cintamani* (AD 1260-1270), and a MS dating from c.AD 1335 in the Darbar Library in Nepal (Regmi 1965, 1, 409-11).

The Agastya samhita and a related text *Rama-purva-tapaniya-* up. which may roughly date from the same period or a little earlier, reveal the early phase of the Rama cult and throw light on its origins in so far as these are accessible for scientific investigations.

The reasons why the cult of some Krsna's avatars preceded that of Rama, such as Varaha worship and the Narasimha and the Krsna cults may be sought in the fact that these cults were based on regional, popular and not specific Vaishnava traditions which were eventually incorporated into the Vaishnava

religion, whereas the Rama cult could not rest on any such local or popular form of worship in spite of the immense popularity of the story of the Ramayana. As to its rise, it had to wait until historical circumstances favoured such a development. This seems to have occurred when the Hindus were driven into a defensive position by Muslim power, and conditions were conducive to the worship of a righteous and mighty Hindu king. This alone would never have led to a cult of such proportions, impact and importance had not a wave of emotional devotion on the popular level completely changed the outlook and character of Hindu religion, in particular of Vaishnavism. Consequently the Rama cult eventually eclipsed such older cults as that of Narasimha, simply because a personal emotional approach to God was more appropriate with regard to a divine human hero than to a hybrid of man and animal. This also explains why the cult of Krsna, survived and flourished co-existently with that of Rama up to the present day.

Bhagavatas in Ancient India

Here are some random quotes and notes from Sanskrit and Tamil literature giving information on Bhagavatas, Vaishnavism, Vaikhanasa followers before 850 AD that I collected. There are doubtless a lot of other information- for instance Utpaldeva's commentary on the Spandakarikas has numerous quotations from Pancharatra text and Vaishnava Sankarshanasutras (can post them if you want). Shall collect other references with time. All bibliographic references at the end.

1. Harshacharita of Banabhatta (c620 AD)

There are numerous references to Vaikhanasas in the Kavya literature. Chapter 7 of Harshacharita of Bana, a work of early 7th century C.E., mentions Vaikhanasa ascetics who spent their old age in forest hermitages. Bana distinguishes between the Bhagvatas and the Pancaratrins in his Harshacharita. He mentions the following characteristics of Grhya-munis:

1. Cooked their own food
2. Devoted to Vedic learning
3. Very virtuous, avoided hypocrisy and untruth
4. Well learned in all schools of philosophy and tried to resolve the differences between them
5. Paid a lot of attention to secular arts like dancing, poetry as well
6. Had a passion for Itihasa-Purana
7. Were *Vidyadharas* and unflinching in the performance of Yajnas

2. Bhavabhuti (750 AD?)

According to Bhavabhuti, these monks spent their times living under trees, in the forest grove and hermitages. Bhavabhuti also mentions householders adhering to the Vaikhanasa ideal

3. Kalidasa (5th century CE)

In the Uttara-Ramacharita 1.25, Kalidasa describes the hermitage of Kanva distinguished by features like Nivara rice, presence of deer, hospitality to guests and the Vedic *vaitana* sacrificial fire etc. Kalidasa designates Kanva living in his Asrama with young and old female inmates to be a Vaikhanasa Muni (there are other texts associating Pancharatrins with Kanvas and in fact the Agama-pramanya of Sri Yamunamuni says that Sri Vaishnavas are followers of the Sukla Yajurveda Sakha, Katyayana sutra). If I remember correctly, the Ahirbudhnya Pancharatra Samhita also says that Kanva Sakha is of the Pancharatrins.

4. Buddha-swamin (500 AD)

In the *Brihat-katha-sloka-samgraha* of Buddhaswamin (500 CE), we find the following references to Vaishnavas (Page number references are to the translation, rest to the other book mentioned below): Pg. 359: Verse 480 "In this way, showing the *danda* of Bhagavad Gita, as Vishnu did with Arjuna, Acera forced me to do the cruel act". (Shows that even in olden days, some people thought that Gita is a war mongering book.

The statement is actually made with reference to an unscrupulous person, which lands Wendy Doniger into some rather shady company) Pg. 485, verse 59 mentions a follower of the Pancharatra living on the banks of Sindhu river.

In verse 18.104, reference is made to Gita 18.48

Verse 20.362, there is a reference to the order of the Vaikhanasa ascetics who lived on grains self grown in the jungle and on the Ganges water.

Verse 21.27 mentions Tridandins inhabiting the city of Varanasi

5. Manimekalai — Tamil Buddhist epic

In Canto XXVII of Manimekalai (400 CE?), the Vaishnavas are counted among the followers of Vedas and are said to follow or study the Purana of Vishnu.

6. Neelakesi (700 AD?) - Tamil Jaina epic

Description of the "Veda Vada" in Neelakesi: Neelakesi debates with 'buthika', who presides over a Vedic college in a town called *Kakanti*. Buthika states that the Vedas are eternal, authorless and self subsistent. He then proceeds to include all the 'Astika' systems including Samkhya, Vaiseshika, Pasupata, Mahesvara, Vaishnava, Pancaratra, Parivrajika, Srishtivada (describing the nature of creation) and Brahmavada together with their branches under the umbrella of Vedas. This view of Buthika is similar to modern Hindu view that all the multifarious of philosophies are different aspects of the one Vedic religion. Neelakesi ridicules Buthika for being a follower of the Mimamsa doctrine which is atheistic. This infuriates Buthika and he refuses to impart the Vedic wisdom to Neelakesi on the grounds that she is a Sudra lady. Neelakesi objects to this statement by quoting the following verses from the scriptures of Buthika:

1. Vyasa, born of a dancing girl, became a great Rishi; Hence, it is tapas that makes one a Brahmin, and not his birth.
2. Sakti, born of a Chandala woman, became a great Rishi. Hence, it is tapas that makes one a Brahmin, and not his birth.
3. Parasara, born of Swapaki, became a great Rishi; Hence, it is tapas that makes one a Brahmin, and not his birth.
4. Vyasa, born of a fisherwoman, became a great Rishi; Hence, it is tapas that makes one a Brahmin, and not his birth.

These verses are found in Bhagavata Purana. Neelakesi questions the notion that the Vedas are eternal, on the same grounds that constitute the prima facie view in Purva Mimamsa sutras, Chapter 1. Amongst other things, she states that the *Jnanakanda* of the Vedas states that everything is of the nature of Brahman, and that the multiplicity and diversity in the world are unreal. She avers that if the followers of the *Jnanakanda* of Vedas describe the creation of the world as false, then how will they interpret statements like "From the mouth of the Purusha arose the Brahmin"? These statements show that the doctrine of 'Mayavada' existed even in the early days of the epic, and so Sri Shankaracharya is not the founder of 'Mayavada'. Neelakesi also states that some followers of Vedas worship Sri Vishnu whereas others adore Sri Shiva as the Supreme Being Who is worshipped by all other Devatas including Sri Vishnu. This duality creates confusion in the minds of laity and they cannot decide who the Supreme Being is. This shows that by the time of the Epic, Shaivism and Vaishnavism were already established as the two prime theistic traditions in Vedic Hinduism.

Neelakesi also attacks the slaughter of animals in Vedic sacrifices. She advocates the use of flour images of animals rather than sacrificing live animals in sacrifices. In support of her claim, she narrates the tale of Uparichara Vasu in the Mahabharata. Neelakesi's line of argument is interesting, because precisely these arguments are offered by opponents of animal slaughter in Vedic sacrifices even today.

The Gita is also referred to in connection with a lay follower of the Bhagavata religion who, it is said, knew both the text and its meaning. The Vaishnava Bhagavatas were supposed to know the text and the meaning by heart. Prathama khanda mentions the Bhagavatas who have smeared their body with the sacred ash, who rode a bull and were devoted to Shiva. The Bhagavata before his initiation in the order had to leave his family and other relations. These are the 'Shiva-bhagavatas', to be distinguished from the Vaishnava Bhagavatas.

7. In the Agama Aadambara (a play) of Jayanta Bhatta of Kashmir,

the main character is a Vaishnava. The climax of the story is reached in the Chakra-dhara-swamin temple at Srinagar - an actual temple which was subsequently demolished during Islamic invasions. The hero of the play displays the duality that characterizes Hinduism - a dual allegiance to the Veda on one hand and an Agama on the other. The Agamas are Shaiva, Vaishnava, Yoga and Pancharatra. The Buddhist and Jaina agamas are rejected, as also the heterodox varieties of Shaiva-agamas like the Kapalikas. The 5 acceptable doctrines are called '*Kritanta-panchaka*' in Agni Purana 219.31 and Vishnudharmottara Purana 2.22.134 - 4. The entire play of Jayanta Bhatta must be read- a very good insight into the nature of our Dharma and our dilemmas.

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