

Various Incarnations of Lord Viṣṇu as depicted in Indian Tradition & Culture

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Abstract:

India is a country of different traditional spiritual beliefs and religious faiths. People of India generally bind with the spiritual beliefs and sacred thoughts, since time immemorial. Hence, in India, generally we have the concept of various avatāras (incarnations) of Lord Viṣṇu or Shiva. The traditional scholars of India believe that the avatāras are more in number and they are duly worshipped by the devotees of Lord Viṣṇu or Lord Shiva in different ages of our Indian tradition and culture. This is really very interesting to know all about the sacred as well as mysterious incarnations of Lord Vishnu as rightly described in the Vedic texts and other spiritual texts, like epics and Puranas. But this paper will deal with the different incarnations of Lord Vishnu as described in Indian culture and tradition.

Keywords: incarnation of God, Indian tradition, doctrine of the avatāra, universe.

Introduction:

Ordinarily, we believe and understand that the Sanskrit word avatāra means incarnation in English. The incarnation may be of Lord Viṣṇu or Lord Shiva. But here we will deal about the incarnation of Lord Viṣṇu as found in Indian tradition and culture. The word Aavatāra means to cross over, to attain, to save, with the prefix ava–down; and so, ava+√ṭṛ– means to descend in, to appear, to become incarnate) means ‘descending’ and the term is applied to the act of a Divine or Supernatural Being in assuming the form of man or animal, and continuing to live in that form till the purpose for which that form was assumed or carried out. The incarnation of God on the earth is called avatāra. So, avatāra is an appearance of any deity on earth, or descent from heaven and it bears a great importance as a religious concept in the Indian tradition and culture.

Real Source of different Incarnations (Avatāra):

The term avatāra is relatively late, and an older word for the phenomenon is ‘manifestation’ (āvirbhāva (Viṣṇu Purāṇa, I. 20. 14) & prādurbhāva). The word avatāra does not occur in the classical Upaniṣads, though there are a few references in later Upaniṣads (Vide, Jacob, G.A., Concordance to the Principal Upaniṣads and Bhagavadgītā, 1963 edition, p. 117). It is listed in Pāṇini’s Aṣṭādhyāyī (ave ṭṛstrorghañ, Aṣṭādhyāyī, III.3.120) and also occurs in many standard works after the Epic literature.

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But there are faint glimmerings of the theory of avatāras and of these forms even in the earliest Vedic literature (Upadhyaya, Baladev, Purāṇa Vimarśa, Ch. V, p. 170, Chowkhamba, Varanasi, 3rd Edition). In the Ṛgveda (VIII.17.13) it is said that Indra was the grandson of the sage Śrīgavṛṣa. This may be interpreted as meaning that Indra was supposed to have descended on the earth in a human form. Again, in the Ṛgveda the sage Vāmadeva explains ‘I was Manu and I was also the Sun (ahaṃ manurabhavaṃ sūryaścāhaṃ kakṣivān ṛṣirasmi vipraḥ/ Ṛgveda, IV. 26. 1). This is referred to in the Bṛhadāranyaka Upaniṣad (I.4.10. Cf. Śāstradrṣṭyā tūpadeśo vāmadevavat – Brahma Sūtra, I. 1. 30) and often relied upon in support of the doctrine of the transmigration of souls. It may be capable of that interpretation, but if that is not accepted it will at least tend to support the proposition that the Vedic sage thought that the Sun could be born on the earth as a human being. It clearly indicates that there was an avatāra of Sun. Besides, according to the Śrīmad Bhāgavata Purāṇa, the first incarnation of God is Puruṣa (Bhāgavata Purāṇa, I. 3. 1) as it is mentioned in the famous Puruṣa-sūkta of the Ṛgveda. Some scholars have definitely observed in the following Ṛgvedic verse (mantra), the germ of the doctrine of the avatāra, viz.

pādo 'sya viśvā bhūtāni tripādasyāmṛtaṃ divi (Ṛgveda, X.90.3)

The great philosopher Prof. S. N. Dasgupta in his History of Indian Philosophy, says that here there is the starting-point of the theism of the Bhagavad Gītā, the idea of God as not only immanent but transcendent, a universe which is no illusion, and the doctrine of incarnation (Dasgupta, S. N., A History of Indian Philosophy, Part II, p. 523ff. 1991, Reprint edition). Certainly, this hymn is important, and it is quoted in the theistic Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad and in the Gītā (Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad, III.12ff; Bhagavad Gītā, XIII.13) Hence, the Bhāgavata Purāṇa clearly states that this Puruṣa form (rūpa) is the original source of different avatāras, as well as the real base of creation of gods, human beings, animals and other creatures (Śrīmad Bhāgavata Purāṇa, I. 3.5). However, the beginning of the doctrine of avatāra and some of the well-known avatāras of Viṣṇu may also be traced to the Vedic literature. In the Vedic idea of Lord Viṣṇu, as a solar divinity, coming down to the earth from the highest abode, and so in the frequent allusions in the Vedic literature, it is clear that gods assumed different forms in order to accomplish their several exploits. In the Vedic literature, especially in the Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa we see the descriptions of various incarnations, like, Matsya, Kūrma, Varāha, Varāha and Vāmana (Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa, I.8.1.1-6 (Matsya avatāra); VII.5.1.5 (Kūrma); XIV. 1.2.11 (Varāha); I.2.5.1ff. (Vāmana). In the Chāndogya Upaniṣad, III.17.6 (Kṛṣṇa), etc.), we actually come across of the early indications of the Matsya, Kūrma, Varāha, Vāmana and other incarnations.

Real Necessity of Incarnation of Lord Viṣṇu:

The theory of Incarnation brings to mankind a new spiritual message and it presupposes the recognition of Lord Viṣṇu as a Supreme God, the creator and ruler of the

universe, the upholder not only of the cosmic, but, also of the moral order of the world. When the enemies endanger the order of the world, the Lord incarnates Himself for the purpose of defending it. It is a comforting belief for the ordinary man to hold that when the affairs of the world are in a mess, Gods come down to the earth to set matters right (Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa, I.8.1.1-6 (Matsya avatāra); VII.5.1.5 (Kūrma); XIV. 1.2.11), i.e. when the world is in serious trouble, people believe that deliverance will come by the grace of God and they are often justified in their belief by their appearance of godly men who appear with some noble mission and masterly idea suited to the particular time and place when they appear.

Another purpose of the Supreme God assuming the worldly form is to educate the mortals (Bhāgavata Purāṇa, V.19.5), (because the people, in general follow the footsteps of the great men). The Supreme Power appears in human form as the guru, the teacher, to lead them beyond the delusion of ignorance, to where there is no difference between the guru and the disciple.

In addition to these, the manifestation of the Lord is intended only for bestowing the boon of the final beatitude or liberation on the human beings.

As it is rightly said in the Śrīmad Bhāgavata Purāṇa:

nṛṇām niḥśreyasārthāya vyaktirbhagavato nṛpa (Mahābhārata, Śāntiparva, 339.103–104).

Number & Types of Incarnation of Lord Viṣṇu as described in Sanskrit Texts:

It is very common to find out the various incarnations of Lord Viṣṇu in different famous Sanskrit texts. In the Mahābhārata, the Rāmāyaṇa and the Purāṇas, it is frequently stated that Lord Viṣṇu comes down to the earth often for punishing the wicked, for the protection of good and the establishment of dharma. The Śrīmad Bhāgavata, the most popular Purāṇa, states that the avatāras of Viṣṇu are innumerable, like the rivulets following from an inexhaustible lake (Bhāgavata Purāṇa. I. 3. 26). In the Mahābhārata, the avatāras are stated to be ten and they are the same as now generally accepted except that Haṁsa which is mentioned instead of Buddha and Kṛṣṇa is called Sāvata (Mahābhārata, Śāntiparva, 339.103–104). Among the Purāṇas also, several Purāṇas do not mention Buddha as an avatāra. The Matsya Purāṇa mentions the well-known ten avatāras (Matsya Purāṇa, 285.6–7) including Buddha as the 9th avatāra (Matsya Purāṇa, 47.247) of Lord Viṣṇu. Besides, the Agni Purāṇa (Agni Purāṇa, Chapters 2–16), the Padma Purāṇa (Padma Purāṇa, II.257.40–41) & the Varāha Purāṇa (Varāha Purāṇa, IV.2; cf. Padma Purāṇa, VI.229.90; Liṅga Purāṇa, II.48.31-32; Matsya Purāṇa, 285.6–7.) enumerate the well-known ten avatāras of Viṣṇu. The names of the ten avatāras are thus : (1) Matsya– the fish, (2) Kūrma–the tortoise, (3) Varāha–the boar, (4) Narasimha–the man-lion, (5) Vāmana– the dwarf, (6) Paraśurāma (7) Śrī Rāma, (8) Śrī Kṛṣṇa, (9) Buddha and (10) Kalkī. The Bhāgavata Purāṇa makes the number of avatāras twenty–two (Śrīmad Bhāgavata Purāṇa, I.3.1–25) including the minor ones. These are : — (1) Puruṣa, (2) Varāha, (3) Nārada, (4) Nara & Nārāyaṇa, (5) Kapila, (6) Dattātreyā,

(7) Yajña, (8) R̥ṣabha, (9) Pṛthu, (10) Matsya, (11) Kūrma, (12) Dhanvantarī, (13) Mohinī, (14) Narasimha, (15) Vāmana, (16) Paraśurāma, (17) Vedavyāsa, (18) Rāmacandra, (19) Balarāma, (20) Śrī Kṛṣṇa, (21) Buddha and (22) Kalkī (yet to come). The Gītagovinda of Śrī Jayadeva speaks of ten incarnations (avatāras) of Lord Viṣṇu. Famous Poet Jayadeva (Gītagovinda, I.1.16) takes Balarāma as an avatāra, instead of Kṛṣṇa and explain Kṛṣṇa as the Supreme Lord, the Puruṣottama in his Gītagovinda.

The God takes three kinds of incarnations (avatāras), such as:

a) Pūrṇāvatāra (full incarnation): When the God manifests Himself in the form of a human being for the full span of life, this is known as pūrṇāvatāra. The examples of this kind are: Śrī Rāma, rī Kṛṣṇa, sage Vedavyāsa, etc.

b) Amśāvatāra (partial incarnation): When the incarnation is only partial, i.e. the activity of such manifestation is limited to a particular time, place or incident, it is called amśāvatāra. The most famous and common manifestations of Lord Viṣṇu under this category are in the form of animals of semi-human beings, such as Vāmana, Varāha, Narasimha, Kūrma, Matsya, etc.

c) Āveśāvatāra: Āveśa means over-shadowing. The example of this kind is Paraśurāma avatāra (Mahābhārata, II.49; III.98; 116–117, etc; Matsya Purāna, Ch. 47). When Śrī Rāma had married Sītā and was returning from Mithilā, he was accosted by Paraśurāma and challenged to a duel, where it is said that after bending Viṣṇu’s bow, Viṣṇu’s influence in Paraśurāma, passed on to Śrī Rāma. Thereafter, Paraśurāma is said to be no longer an avatāra. In this case, Viṣṇu’s influence that overshadowed the soul of Paraśrāma, passed on to Śrī Rāma, leaving Paraśurāma a mere sage. This is clearly a case of āveśa or overshadowing.

Incarnation (Avatāra-vāda) & the theory of Evolution:

The avatāras give us the keys which will make us unlock the mysteries of nature. They represent the different stages of evolution in the different departments of nature. Even if we take into consideration the ten avatāras (of Lord Viṣṇu) as they stand, the different stages of evolution are there. The circumstances which necessitated these avatāras and the mighty deeds accomplished by Viṣṇu on these occasions are most graphically and exhaustively described. Attempts have been made to rationalize the different forms assumed by Viṣṇu in different incarnations. In the beginning of the creation there were waters everywhere, and, to suit this condition of the world, the first incarnation of Viṣṇu was, appropriately enough, in the form of a fish—the animal to be found in water and therefore in His second incarnation, Lord Viṣṇu appeared as a tortoise, which can easily move both in water and land. The later stages of evolution are of animal life in the forests. After this, the boar (Varāha) incarnation has appeared. The Boar lives on land alone. Next, we have the transition between the animal and the human worlds in the man-lion (Narasimha) incarnation. The development is not completely fulfilled when we come to the dwarf (Vāmana) incarnation. The first stage of man is that of the

brutish, violent, uncivilized Rāma with axe (Paraśurāma), who devastates the rest of humanity; later we get the Divine Spiritual Śrī Rāma, who consecrates family life and affections, and Śrī Kṛṣṇa, who exhorts us to enter into the warfare of the world; and after him Buddha, who, full of compassion for all living beings, works for the redemption of mankind. Last of all we have the incarnation yet to come, the Kalkī, who will fight against evil and injustice with the sword in hand.

Conclusion:

However, from the above discussions with textual evidences and explanations, it may be safely concluded that the tendency of showing oneness to many forms, i.e. henotheism to polytheism and finally go back to the oneness indicating the Vedic theory of monotheism, e.g. ‘ekaṁ sad viprā bahudhā vadanti....’ Secondly, it is also clear that an avatāra or incarnation is a descent of God (Devī Bhāgavata Purāṇa, I. 8. 4) into man and not an ascent of man into God. Although we accept a number of avatāras of either Lord Viṣṇu or Lord Śiva, but in reality, both are conceived as one and these incarnations are treated as the essence or part of one God or Absolute, appear in the world for the protection of dharma as well as for the welfare of beings in time.

Finally, it can be said that, through this paper, the scholars may get some general idea of the various incarnations of Lord Vishnu as described in the Epics, Puranas and other traditional texts of Sanskrit. Although the number of incarnations may be more or less, but we should try to critically understand and study the real and sacred nature of various incarnations in different ages as found in the Sanskrit texts. For we all general beings, in fact, it is a real mystery to know the true form of Lord Vishnu, as He is the Absolute Reality of the Universe.

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