

VIṢṆU, THE ULTIMATE REALITY AS REFLECTED IN THE *GARUDAPURĀṆA*

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Abstract

The *Garuḍapurāṇa* is one of the prominent *Vaiṣṇava* Purāṇas and is enumerated in the list of *Sāttvika Purāṇas*. It takes its name as *Garuḍapurāṇa* from mythical bird *Garuḍa*, the king of the birds as well as the mount of Lord Viṣṇu. Being encyclopaedic in nature this Purāṇa discusses manifold topics. However, the present paper proposes to expound and examine the nature of the Absolute Reality of the Universe as revealed in the *Garuḍapurāṇa*.

INTRODUCTION

The Purāṇas are acknowledged as the most important religious literature of Indian culture and religion next to Vedic and epic literature. Though the Purāṇas are essentially religious in nature, yet their contents are more wide-ranging and include so many branches of knowledge such as philosophy, āyurveda, history, geography, poetics, and dramaturgy and so on and so forth.

Generally, the Purāṇic literature is divided into two broad groups – viz., the *Mahāpurāṇa* and the *Upapurāṇa*. The number of the Purāṇas in both the groups is stated to be eighteen. The list of eighteen Mahāpurāṇas as found in most of the Purāṇas are—*Brahma*, *Padma*, *Viṣṇu*, *Śiva*, *Bhāgavata*, *Nārādīya*, *Mārkaṇḍeya*, *Agni*, *Bhaviṣya*, *Brahmavaivarta*, *Liṅga*, *Varāha*, *Skanda*, *Vāmana*, *Kurma*, *Matsya*, *Garuḍa* and *Brahmāṇḍa*. These eighteen Mahāpurāṇas are again classified in accordance with the three guṇas i.e. sattva, rajas and tamas. According to this classification *Viṣṇu*, *Nārada*, *Bhāgavata*, *Garuḍa*, *padma* and *Varāha* are the *Sāttvika* Purāṇas where the greatness of Hari or Viṣṇu prevails. Brahṁā is said to be predominant in the *Rājasika* Purāṇas which are namely *Brahma*, *Brahmāṇḍa*, *Brahmavaivarta*, *Bhaviṣya*, *Mārkaṇḍeya* and *Vāmana*. The *Tāmasika* Purāṇas are *Matsya*,

Kurma, Śiva, Agni, Liṅga and *Skanda* where the greatness of Agni and Śiva are revealed. However, some variations are noticed in regard to the division of these Purāṇas in the Purāṇas themselves. It has been observed that the classification of the Purāṇas as found in the *Garuḍapurāṇa* is different from the *Padmapurāṇa*. In the *Garuḍapurāṇa* it is mentioned that the *Matsyapurāṇa*, the *Kurmapurāṇa* and the *Vāyupurāṇa* are regarded as the *Sāttvikapurāṇa* instead of *Nāradiya, Padma* and *Varāha Purāṇa*.¹ In this connection it is to be noted that the *Sāttvika* Purāṇas are divided in the *Garuḍapurāṇa* into three classes. These are *Sāttvika Uttama, Sāttvika Madhyama* and *Sāttvika Adhama* group.² The *Sāttvika Uttama* Purāṇas are *Bhāgavata, Garuḍa* and *Viṣṇu*, the *Sāttvika Madhyama Purāṇa* is *Vāyu* whereas *Sāttvika Adhama* Purāṇas are *Matsya* and *Kurma Purāṇa*.

The *Garuḍapurāṇa* is one of the prominent *Vaiṣṇava* Purāṇas and is enumerated in the list of *Sāttvika Purāṇas*. It takes its name as *Garuḍapurāṇa* from mythical bird *Garuḍa*, the king of the birds as well as the mount of Lord Viṣṇu.

The *Garuḍapurāṇa* is a kind of encyclopaedic in nature. This *Purāṇa* consists of two khaṇḍas viz., *Pūrva* and *Uttara*. In the *Pūrvakhaṇḍa* there are chapters on cosmogony, astrology, astronomy, medicine, metrics, grammar, politics, various types of vratas, the Ultimate Cause of the universe, the knowledge of Supreme Brahman etc. The *Uttarakhaṇḍa* is sub-divided into two-fold branches. The first part called *pretakalpa*, deals with *karman*, rebirth, fate of the soul after death, the path to *Yamaloka*, the fate of the pretas etc. The second part namely *Brahmakhaṇḍa* deals with the Ultimate Cause of the universe, its nature and knowledge of the Supreme Brahman by which one can attain the supreme bliss i.e., *mokṣa*.

'*Brahman*' and '*Ātman*' are the terms used in the Upaniṣads to refer to the Ultimate Reality or Absolute. The Upaniṣads maintain these two as identical.³ All the *Sāttvika* Purāṇas advocate that Lord Viṣṇu is the Ultimate Reality of the world. He is the root cause of the entire universe. In the *Garuḍapurāṇa*, it is found that Hari or Viṣṇu is depicted as the Ultimate Cause of the universe. He is the Supreme Self and the Lord. He is omnipotent, omniscient, and all

pervading.⁴ In this regard the *Viṣṇupurāṇa* also maintains that Lord Viṣṇu or Nārāyaṇa is identified with this Upaniṣadic Brahman. He is the Ultimate Cause of the Universe.⁵ It is also said that Brahman is the self (*ātman*) of the entire universe and is Supreme.⁶

In the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* the Ultimate Reality is denominated by different terms, e.g. Brahman, Paramātmān and Bhagavat. The essence of the Ultimate Reality is non-dual consciousness.⁷ S.N. Dasgupta is of opinion that when the Ultimate Reality is viewed from the Upaniṣadic standpoint it is Brahman,⁸ i.e., devoid of any quality and adjective. When this reality is realized as the possessor of diverse powers and all auspicious qualities, He is called Bhagavat,⁹ and when the reality is viewed as the absolute controller of the individual selves which are like rays emanating from Him is called Paramātmān.¹⁰ The *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* speaks that Lord Viṣṇu or Kṛṣṇa is the Brahman, *Bhagavat* and the *Paramātmān* of the world.¹¹

According to the *Nārādiyapurāṇa*, one of the prominent *Vaiṣṇava* Purāṇas, the imperishable, boundless and omnipresent Nārāyaṇa is the Ultimate Reality of the universe.¹² The whole Universe is pervaded by him. He is minutest of the minute and also greatest of the great.¹³ In the *Varāhapurāṇa* also Viṣṇu or Nārāyaṇa is depicted as the Ultimate Reality.¹⁴ He is Brahman, the Supreme Soul.¹⁵ As water is the repose of the Lord Viṣṇu, He is called Nārāyaṇa. He is eternal and Purāṇa Puruṣa.¹⁶ In this regard, one of the most popular *Sāttvika* Purāṇas i.e. *Padmapurāṇa* too maintains that Lord Viṣṇu is the Ultimate Reality of the world. He is eternal, unborn, inexhaustible and immutable and is the Parama Puruṣa as well as time or *Kāla*.¹⁷ Hence, it seems to be clear that like all other *Vaiṣṇava* Purāṇas, the *Garuḍapurāṇa* also maintains that Lord Viṣṇu or Hari is the Ultimate Reality or Absolute.

The *Garuḍapurāṇa* is of the view that the creation process starts from Viṣṇu or Nārāyaṇa and He is the Ultimate Reality and is directly and indirectly responsible for the evolution of the Universe.¹⁸

Advaita Vedānta views the world is merely an appearance of Brahman. The *Garuḍapurāṇa* also holds in this regard that the

world is not something different from Viṣṇu or the Ultimate Reality.¹⁹ He is said to be the cause as well as the effect. There is nothing apart from him. He is that from which creation follows and also that which is created.²⁰

According to Upaniṣadic literature self or *jīva* attains Brahman and becomes absolutely free from the cycle of birth and death. The *Garuḍapurāṇa* too says that the empirical self or *jīva* is a part of the universal self or Viṣṇu. The rebirth of *jīva* is according to its actions or karmas. It is said that the empirical self is the enjoyer of the joys and sorrows which are the result of its past *karman*.²¹ It is the receptacle of all its experiences. The *jīva* experiences different things through its five sense organs, five motor organs, mind and the intellect.

This *Purāṇa* is actually Advaitic in nature. It declares the non-duality of the *jīva* and Brahman in transcendental level. According to *Garuḍapurāṇa* the knowledge only can lead one to salvation²² and *śravana*, *manana*, *nididhyāsana* are the means to attain that salvation. The *Garuḍapurāṇa* further mentions that *avidyā* is the cause of bondage of the *jīva* and liberation cannot be attained without dispelling this ignorance. Hence, liberation can be attained with the destruction of this ignorance.²³ According to *Garuḍapurāṇa* ignorance can be destroyed only by the right knowledge of Viṣṇu.²⁴

The literal meaning of the word 'Viṣṇu' is that reality which pervades everything. Yāska, in his *Nirukta* gives the etymological meaning of the word Viṣṇu as '*viṣṇurvisatervā vyaśnotervā*'.²⁵ The word 'Viṣṇu' is derived from the root *viṣ* or *viś* with the addition of the suffix '*nuk*'. The root '*viṣ*' denotes pervasiveness and the root '*viś*' to enter.²⁶ Hence, the etymological meaning of the term Viṣṇu is that which pervades everything or that which enters everywhere. Both these meanings ultimately denote a reality which is all pervasive in nature and is not restricted by time, space etc.

Like all the *Sāttvika* Purāṇas, *Garuḍapurāṇa* also maintains that Brahman is the Ultimate Reality of the Universe and Viṣṇu or Nārāyaṇa is identified with this Supreme Brahman. The nature of Brahman advocated in the Upanisads is similar to that of Viṣṇu of

the *Garuḍapurāṇa*. He is *nirguṇa*, i.e. attributeless and *saccidānandarūpa*, i.e. existence, consciousness and bliss.

Just like Upaniṣadic *nirguṇa* Brahman, the Lord Hari or Viṣṇu of *Garuḍapurāṇa* is unborn, endless, eternal, identical with knowledge, Supreme, auspicious, pure, beginning less and devoid of physical body and sense organs.²⁷ In his real nature, the Lord Viṣṇu is the most powerful god. He is the Supreme soul, the Supreme Brahman. The world originates from him.²⁸ He is immanent in all beings. He is everywhere and in him all beings exist.²⁹

In the 226th chapter of the *Pūrvakhaṇḍa* of *Garuḍa Purāṇa* the Supreme being Lord Viṣṇu is considered to be limitless, impersonal, non-dual, infinite and formless. The *Purāṇa* refers to the identity of the individual self with the Supreme Self and describes the realization of this identity as salvation or *mokṣa*.³⁰ According to *Garuḍapurāṇa*, Lord Viṣṇu or Hari is the giver of everything, the omnipresent, the cosmic form and present in the form of every living being.³¹ He, known as Padmanābha and Hari devoid of physical body is pure, the source of purity, the Supreme Soul, the Almighty and connected by the Upaniṣadic word '*tad*'.³²

Lord Vāsudeva or Viṣṇu is the only eternal supreme soul, imperishable, tranquil, permanent, pure, omnipresent and unsullied.³³ Besides, He is devoid of all distinguishing characteristics of colour, caste etc. In this way Lord Viṣṇu is described in the *Garuḍapurāṇa* as *nirguṇa* (qualityless) and *nirviśeṣa* (objectiveless).³⁴ He is the Supreme soul, the Supreme Brahman.³⁵

From the forgoing discussion it can be assumed that the *Garuḍapurāṇa* holds Viṣṇu as *nirguṇa* or devoid of qualities. But the Purāṇas especially the Viṣṇuite ones characterize Viṣṇu as a personal God and as such the *saguṇa* (qualified) character of this reality also finds prevalence in the Purāṇas. Thus, in the *Garuḍapurāṇa* Lord Viṣṇu or Hari is not only *nirguṇa* (qualityless) but He is delineated as *saguṇa* also. That is why numerous good qualities are ascribed to Viṣṇu. In the *Garuḍapurāṇa*, He is described as very great, possessing thousand hands, thousand feet, thousand thighs, thousand faces, thousand eyes etc. He is the

subtlest among the subtle, the largest among the large, heaviest among the heavy and most sublime.³⁶ He is also called Nārāyaṇa and Purāṇa-Puruṣa,³⁷ i.e., primordial being. He is spoken of as Brahman and is beyond both *sat* (existent) and *asat* (non-existent).

According to *Garuḍapurāṇa* Lord Hari is the cause of the creation and destruction of the world.³⁸ He is Vāsudeva and is the creator, preserver and destroyer of the world. He is Puruṣottama and is devoid of beginning and end.³⁹ The process of creation, preservation and the annihilation of the world is his divine sport like that of a sportive child. Just as a child does many things in sport so also the Lord Hari creates, preserves and annihilates this world in sport.⁴⁰ All this visible universe with its manifest and unmanifest phases exists in this great Puruṣa i.e., Viṣṇu since Lord Viṣṇu is both manifest and unmanifest, the Great Puruṣa as well as the primordial time.⁴¹ Taking the form of four-faced Brahmā, Viṣṇu creates this world. He himself maintains it and destroys it taking the form of Rudra.⁴² Regarding the creation of the universe it is said in the *Garuḍapurāṇa* that the Supreme Lord Viṣṇu created the unmanifest and from that unmanifest the soul evolved.⁴³ From the soul intellect was born and from intellect evolved mind. From mind was evolved firmament. From firmament air, from air fire; from fire water and from water earth was evolved.⁴⁴ Hence, it can be said that like all other *Sāttvika* Purāṇas the *Garuḍapurāṇa* also maintains that the creation process of the world starts from Viṣṇu. In conclusion it can be said that Lord Viṣṇu is the Ultimate Reality and is directly or indirectly responsible for the creation of the Universe.⁴⁵ As an Ultimate Reality He is also said to be the sustainer and destroyer of the Universe.

Notes :

1. G.P.; 1.223.15-20
2. sattvādhame mātsyakaurma tadāhurvāyurim cāhuḥ
sāttvikamadhyaṃam ca/ viṣṇuḥ purāṇam bhāgavata purāṇam
sattvottame garuḍam prāhurāryāḥ// ibid.;1.226.24
3. ayamātmā brahma, B.U.,2.5.19
4. taṃ viṣṇu paramātmānamiśvaram/ sarvadaṃ sarvagaṃ sarvaṃ
sarva prāniḥḍisthitam// G.P.,1.2.11

5. brahmasvarūpinam devam jagatoprabhavāpyayam//V.P.,1.4.5
6. ibid., 1.12.56
7. vadanti tattvattvavidestattvam yajñānamadvayam/ brahmeti paramātmēti bhagavāniti śabdyate/B.P.,1.2.11
8. HIP., Vol. IV, p.15
9. ibid., pp.15-16
10. cf., ibid., p.21
11. B.P., 1.1.1
12. nārāyaṇo 'kṣaro'nantaḥ sarvavyāpi nirañjanaḥ/tenedamakhilam vyāptam jagatsthāvarajaṅgamam// N.P., I.III.2
13. ibid., 1.2.51-55
14. idam codāharantyaatra ślo' kam nārāyaṇamprati/ brahmasvarūpinam devam jagataḥ prabhavāpyayam/Va.P.,1.2.23
15. ibid., 3.11
16. āpo nārā itī proktā āpo vai nasasūnavaḥ/ ayanam tasya tāḥ pūrvam tena nārāyaṇaḥ smṣtaḥ//ibid.,1.2.24
17. tam guhyam paramam nityamajama kṣayamavyayam/ tathā puruṣarūpeṇa kālarūpeṇa samthinaḥ//P.P.,2.87
18. anādinidhano dhātā tu anantaḥ puruṣuttamaḥ/ tasmadbhavati cavyaktam tasmādātmāpi jāyate//G.P.,1.4.6
19. jagat sthiteraham vijam jagatkartā tvham śiva/ibid., 1.2.38
20. svarvajñānanyaham śambho brahmātmāmaham śiva/ aham brahmā sarvalokaḥ sarvadevātmako hyaham/ibid., 1.2.43
21. karmanā vadhyate janturjñānānmukto bhavāt bhavet/ ātmajñānamāśrayedvai ajñānam yadatonyathā//ibid.,1.241.11
22. vedāhametaḥ puruṣam cit rūpam tamasam param/so ahamasmīti mokṣāya nānyaḥ panthāḥ vimuktaye//ibid.,1.241.6
23. saṁsārabandhanāt so'pi muktimicchā samāhitaḥ/ibid.,1.237.29
24. brahma prakāśakam jñānam bhava bandha vibhedanam/ tatraikacittatā yogo muktido nātrasam sayam//ibid.,1.240.45
25. Nik., 12.28
26. viservyāptyarthābhidhayino nuk pratyayāntasya rūpam... visatervā nuk pratyayasya rūpam viṣṇuriti, Viss.,p.138
27. ajamajaramanantam jñānarūpam mahāntam, śivamamalam anādikam bhūtadehādihinaḥ.G.P.,1.1.1
28. eko nārāyaṇa devo devānāmiśvareśvara/ paramātmā param brahma janmādyasya yato bhaved.ibid.,1.1.12

29. sarvadaṁ sarvagaṁ sarvaṁ sarvaprāṇi hṛdi sthitam. *ibid.*, 1.2.11
30. advaitayogasampannāste mucyante atibandhanāt/
so ahamasmīti moksāya nānyaḥ panthā vimuktaye // *ibid.*, 1.241.6
31. *ibid.*, 1.1.11-13
32. viṣṇuṁjīṣṇuṁ padmanābhaṁ hariṁ dehavarjitam/ śuciṁ
śucipadaṁ haṁsaṁ tad pādaṁ parameśvaram // *ibid.*, 1.2.13
33. eka evāvyayaḥśāntaḥ paramātmā sanātanaḥ/ vāsudeva dhruvaḥ
suddhaḥ sarvavyāpi nirañjanaḥ // *ibid.*, 132.3
34. *ibid.*, 1.237.16-19
35. *ibid.*, 1.1.12
36. sahasrākṣaṁ sahasrāṅghriṁ sahasroram varānanam/
aṇiyasāmaṇiyāṁsaṁ sthavisthanca sthaviyasām/
gariyasām gariṣṭhanca śreṣṭhanca śreyasāmapi // *ibid.*, 1.2.15
37. purāṇapuruṣaḥ prokto brahma prokto dvijātisu // *ibid.*, 1.2.18
38. jagatsthiterahaṁ bījam jagatkartā tvahaṁ śiva // *ibid.*, 1.2.38
39. sṛnu rudra pravakṣyāmi sargādin pāpanaśanim/
sargathitipralayantām viṣṇuḥ krīdām purātanim //
eko nārāyaṇo devo vāsudevo nirañjanaḥ/
paramātmā paraṁ brahma jagajjanilayādikit // *ibid.*, 1.4.2-3
40. *ibid.*, 1.4.5
41. tadetat sarvamevaitadvyaktāvyaktasvarūpavat/
tathā puruṣarūpeṇa kālarūpeṇa ca sthitam // *ibid.*, 1.4.4
42. brahmā caturmuko bhūtvasṛjadviṣṇurjagat pāti hariḥ svayam
rudrarūpi ca kalpānte jagat samharate prabhuḥ // *ibid.*, 1.4.11-12
43. tasmādbhavati cāvyaktaṁ tasmādātmāpi jāyate // *ibid.*, 1.4.6
44. tasmādbuddhirmanastasmāttataḥ khaṁ pavanastataḥ/
tasmāttejastatastāpastato bhumistato sṛjat // *ibid.*, 1.4.7
45. vide supra, p.6

SELECTED ABBREVIATIONS

BP	:	Bhāgavata Purāṇa
Brahs	:	Bṛahmasūtra Sāṅkarabhāṣya
B.U.	:	Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad
G.P.	:	Garuḍa Purāṇa

HIP	:	History of Indian Philosophy
Nik	:	Nirukta
N.P.	:	Nāradiya Purāṇa
P.P.	:	Padma Purāṇa
Va.P.	:	Varāha Purāṇa
Viss	:	Viṣṇusahasranāma Saṅkarabhāṣya
V.P.	:	Viṣṇu Purāṇa
V.U.	:	Vāyu Purāṇa
