

Evolution of Hinduism from Vedac to Puranic periods

By

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Hinduism evolved through thousands of years in India among the majority of its population who consider themselves as Hindus. So far we know, that the ancient Hindus who also called themselves Aryan meaning civilized ones, known to have been migrated from the plains of central Asia, on the eastern border of Turkey, around 2000 B.C and settled down in Indus Valley of north western part of old British India, which is currently a part of Pakistan. They drove the Dravidians, the original population of India, into the Southern region of India, beyond the *Vindachal* mountain ranges. Gradually, the Aryans expanded their settlement from Indus valley into the fertile plains of the Ganges rivers in northern India up to the West Bengal in the east. They called themselves *Hindus*, and called India as the "*Hindusthan*" which means the land of Hindus. The ancient Aryans brought with them the concepts of multiple gods and goddesses referred to the various catastrophic forces of the nature, such as "*Agni*", the god of fire, "*Indra*", the god of thunder, "*Vayu*", the god of storm, "*Varuna*", the god of rain, and "*Sabita*", the god of Sun. They also brought with them the practices of sacrifices of animals and other items into the "yagna", the ritualistic sacrificing fire for fulfilling their materialistic and spiritual desires.

The Earliest Hindu scriptures, the Vedas

The Hindus in ancient India created a body of sacred compositions called, The *Vedas*. There are four collections of Vedas, (1) *Rig Vedas* or *Vedas* of sacred rituals, (2) *Sam Vedas* or *Vedas* of sacred chanting, (3) *Yajur Vedas* or *Vedas* of sacred formulas, and (4) *Atharva Vedas* or *Vedas* of sacred charms.

The verses of *Rig Veda*, provide description of many gods and goddesses referring to the various catastrophic and natural forces, planets, comets, and meteors in our cosmic system. For example, *Agni*, the god of fire, *Indra*, the god of thunder, *Varuna*, the god of rain, *Vayu*, the god of storm, the planet Jupiter as the god *Brihaspati*, the planet Saturn as the god *Sani*, Sun as the god *Sabita*, and moon as the god *Chandrima*. They also composed various songs for praising these various gods and goddesses in verses of the *Sam Vedas*. They strongly believed in the power of Vedic ritualistic sacrifices and prayers. They used to believe that if a *Vedic* ritual is performed with perfection, it is bound to produce the desired effects, irrespective of whether the god or the goddess is pleased or not. The mysterious power of *Vedic* ritualistic prayers producing all kinds of physical and spiritual effects has long been recognized in Hindu scriptures and practiced through millennium. They contain within themselves the mysterious secrets of the nature and the happiness of mankind. Later, the *Satapatha Brahmanas* which specify in details how a particular ritual must be performed for

producing desired effects, were priestly composed and appended to the Vedas. Brahmin priests were trained for years to perform rituals, exactly the way they are prescribed in *Satapatha Brahmanas*. When a ritual is performed exactly the way it is prescribed in *Satapatha Brahmanas*, it is believed to produce some mysterious effects, in a mysterious way, whereby the prayers are fulfilled. One may infer that through praises and prayers gods may be pleased and bestow the blessing and benefits, but it is, strongly believed that the complete set of ritualistic performances, including sacrifices, and prayers, are usually the cause of the mysterious effects and fulfillment of the mundane and spiritual desires (1).

Substitution meditation replacing the ritualistic performances:

Since *Vedic* rituals involved enormous amount of material resources, and sincere efforts of a trained authentic priest, which only kings and rich businessmen could afford to bear, in a later period, a new school of thoughts intellectualized the ritual of the sacrifices of an animal with substitution meditation. For example, instead of the actual performance of a horse sacrifice, one may think dawn as the horse, the Sun as its eyes, wind as its life and heaven as its back, the space as its belly, the stars as its bones and sky as its flesh. Such a meditation of the universe as a cosmic horse was believed to have produced the same effects of a ritualistic sacrifice of a horse. Gradually, substitution meditation took various forms. For example, the alphabet “*Om*” has been used to meditate on the *Brahman*, the Supreme One. It was also strongly believed that a substitution meditation of an actual ritualistic performance could also produce similar desired effects, probably, due to be the effects of the mysterious power of prayers through concentration meditation.

During the second century B.C., the later part of the Vedic period, along with the concept of multiple gods as personification of the various forces of the universe, there was a growing tendency towards meditating on the concept of the “*Brahman*”, the infinite power of the universe, the Almighty God (1). One of the hymns of the *Rig Veda X, 129* describes the *Brahman* as the creator of all thirty three gods of the *Vedas* and in the “*Taittiriya Brahmana*”, the *Brahman* has been described as the creator of the entire universe who is also believed to preside over all lives and spirits of the universe.

“The eternal soul abodes in the same place with the mortal body.

The soul and the Supreme Soul abode together in this world and the other worlds.

The Supreme Soul bearing the finest body, works all along, and enjoys the fruits of His works, transgressing from one body to the other body, and from one world to the other worlds. The ignorant one only see the body. Some can feel the shadow, while the wise ones realize the finest of the fine, the duty-less, the body-less, the ownerless, the essence-less, the Supreme One” - (Rig Veda, I, 164.38).

Thus, concept of *Brahman* has been regarded in the *Vedas* as the highest form of God, the Supreme One, but the *Vedas* did not show the path for realization of the Supreme One. Search for *Brahman* further continued among Hindu yogis and sages in India during the later period of the “*Upanisads*”.

The *Upanisads*

The “*Upanisads*” were created from the concluding portions of the *Vedas*, that is why they are also called the “Vedanta”. They form the most authoritative background of all Hindu philosophical thoughts. According to a renowned ancient Hindu scholar and preacher *Shankaracharya*, the “*Upanisads*” destroys all our ignorance, and leads us to the wisdom of the Supreme One, the “*Brahman*”. Contrary to the ritualistic approach of *Vedas*, which is believed to have lead the Hindus to the fulfillment of mundane and spiritual desires, the *Upanisads* are like the torches of wisdom through darkness of ignorance for spiritual quest for salvation. The *Upanisads* are also believed to help in understanding the concepts of the “*Atman*”, the Self, and the “*Paramatman*”, the Supreme Self. Wisdom of the *Upanisads* also help unveiling the mystery of death with the understanding the existence of the inner spring of the eternal life and the inner most spirituality beyond the range of sense and discursive thought (1).

The quest for immortality was nothing new to mankind. The *Vedas* prescribed performances of some ritualistic sacrifices for fulfillment of prayers for a long life. All over the world, kings built monuments, so that his people would remember him over a long period of time. Many others created literatures, artistic and musical compositions, which might last for many many years, through which he/she might be remembered in the mind of mankind. Contrary to all this efforts, the teachings of the ‘*Upanisads*’ are believed to lead us to the quest for the inner spring of the eternal life, and the eternal fountain of joy, in which our all ordinary experiences dissolve like grains of salt in a fathomless ocean.

The teachings of the “*Upanisads*” are also believed to shed lights into our eternal quest of overcoming our ultimate fear of death and search for immortality by postulating the concept of “*Atman*”, the eternal Soul, which has no birth or death and is inter-connected with all other souls, the others “*Atman*”, and, the “*Param-Atman*”, the Supreme Soul of the cosmos. The *Isha Upanisad* proclaims,

*“Om purnam adah, purnam idam, purnat purnam udachyate,
purnasyu purnam adaya purnam evavaisyate,
Om Santih, Om Santih, Om Santhih.”* -*Isha Upanisad* -1.1

*“Om , This (Atman), is Infinite and unbound,
That(Brahman), is also infinite and unbound .
This (Atman) is projected from that (Brahman).*

*Also, when the Atman merges out of the Brahman,
All that remain, also become infinite and unbound.
Om peace, peace, peace.”- Isha Upanisad 1.1*

This concept of eternal and infinite nature of our “Atman”(soul),as presented in the teachings of *The Upanisad* brought a new eternal dimension into the perception of life, and for overcoming the fear of death. Although our mortal body dies, but our “Atman”(soul) is indestructible. Swami Vivekananda proclaimed in *Bani O Rachana*, “*Sarvam eba khalu Brahman*”
“*Everything around us, and within us is certainly the manifestation of the Brahman. All diverse creations in the universe are interconnected with one another and with their Creator, the Supreme One, the Brahman*”

In the *Katha Upanisad* Nachiketa, son of King Vajashravasa, asked Yama, the, Lord of Death,” What happens to people when they passed away from this earthly life?” This has been the eternal question of mankind. Yama did not have a straight forward answer to this question. Yama answered indirectly, “ No one is ever born and no one ever dies. Birth and death pertains to our mortal body only, but our higher essence, the Self, (also described as Soul in *Bhagavata Gita*), is never born or never dies”.

Bhagavat Gita, which is considered to be the essence of all teachings of the *Upanisads*, and presented in “*Mahavarata*”, the great epic of Hindus, in the form of discussion between Arjuna, the warrior prince, and Lord Krishna, the avatar of Lord Vishnu, the Supreme One, reinforces the concept of indestructibility of the Soul, the *Atman*, which is in abode of every living being. *Bhagavat Gita* proclaims,

*“Na jayate mryate ba kadachit,
Nanyam bhutwa bhabita ban a bhuah,
Nityo shaswato ayam purano,
Na hanyate hanyamane shareere”*

*“The Atman, the Soul is never born and will never die,
the ever-existing and primeval Soul is neither slain
Nor it slays anyone, even if the body is slain” (Bhagavat Gita,II.20).*

In *Bhagavat Gita* Lord Krishna ,also proclaims,

*“Aham atma gurhakesha sarbabhutashrya stitha,
aham adisscha, madhascha, bhutanam anta ebascha”*

*“ I am the Soul, and the Supreme Soul,
deeply seated in the hearts of all beings as the Soul, the Atman.
I am the beginning, the middle stage, and the end of all beings.”- (The Gita,X.20)*

In *Bhagavat Gita*, Lord Krishna *also* proclaims,

“*Yatchapi sarvabhutanam beejam tad aham Arjuna,
Na tad asti bina yat syanmaya bhutam characharam.*”

“*I am the seed of all beings, living and non-living,
There is nothing in this whole world which exists without Me*” (*The Bhagavat Gita*, X.39)

This concept of inseparability of all beings, living and non-living ones in the *Bhagavat-Gita*, provides a new dimension in the quest of the Supreme One.

Considering one’s own “Atman” being inseparable from the Supreme Soul, the “Param-Atman”, a Hindu Yogi starts his quest for the “Param-Atman” by searching deep into one’s own Self using Yoga processes. They thought that knowing one’s own “Atman”, the “Param-Atman” can be realized. Patanjali, a 2nd century B.C. Sanskrit scholar, compiled “Yoga Sutras”, a collection of aphorism of yoga processes which are believed to bring the realization of one’s own Atman. With Patanjali’s “*Yoga Sutras*” as foundation, a number of yoga teachers including Swami Vivekananda, and Swami Yogananda had refined the yoga process and taught them to their disciples as the “*Raja Yoga*” and the “*Kriya yoga*” in the 19th and 20th centuries A.D. in India (3).

Patanjali’s *Yoga Sutra* is divided into four chapters: (1)*Samadhi Pada*, the process of developing communion with one’s own spiritual essence, (2)*Sadhana Pada* contains the famous eightfold path (*Astanga Yoga*) which are guidelines for successful practice of disciplining of mind through meditational exercises for a complete transformation of Self into a body of light (thought to be a reflection of *the Self*). (3) *Vibhuti Pada*, explains how a continuous stream of mindfulness ranging from concentration meditation to absorption of spiritual essence may be mastered to unravel mysterious supernatural abilities, and for revealing the full range of mind and consciousness. and (4) *Kaivalya Pada* which clarifies the power of primal forces of nature (gunas), and elaborates on how to transcend from all limitations and attachments by completely integrating oneself as a total spiritual and physical being (3). Various teachers practiced various modified version of Patanjali’s *Yoga Sutras* and had unique personal realization of their own which they taught to their own disciples who might also have similarly unique personal realization. However, they all individually might have believed that to be the experience of the Soul and the Supreme Soul (2).

Also, following the teaching of *Bhagavat-Gita*, considering himself/herself being inseparable from the Supreme Soul, a true devotee, using contemplation devotional, with his/her mind focused on God, and surrendering completely to the will of God, also believe in leading his/her life as an instrument of God for his/her liberation This process of completely surrendering to God is known as “*Saranagatee*”. In this process, the devotee also considers himself/herself always guided by God all through his/her journey

of life. Contrary, to the teachings of the Upanisads, where mind is considered as the driver of a chariot driven by our seven senses as the horses, in this process of “Saranagatee” the devotee gets the ride in a bus driven by God Himself, and the price for the ticket is the “unconditional faith”, and the complete surrender to God. Bhagatvat-Gita proclaims ,

*“Iswara sarbabhutanam hridideshe tristhati,
bramayan sarbabhutani yantrarurhanu mayaya,
Tameba sharanam gacha sarbabhabena Barata,
tadprasadat param shantim sthanam prapsyasi shaswatam.”*

*The “ Iswara ”, the God being deep seated in the heart of every beings,
living and non-living, guides and directs all their actions,
as they are nothing but instruments of God, and
by His grace you will attain eternal peace and eternal abode in Him ”.*
-(The Bhagavat-Gita, XVIII.61)

The Puranas

The performance of Vedic rituals demanded tremendous amount of resources and only kings and very rich businessmen could afford them. At the same time, the concepts of the “*Atman*” or the Self and the Param-Atman, the Supreme One, in the Upanisads were very complex for average Hindus to understand and only wise men and sages could realize them through complicated yoga processes. After the invasion of India by Afgans in the 11th century A.D. Hinduism took a different turn. From 11th century through 21th century A.D. Hinduism evolved into the period of the “*Puranas*” when a large majority of Hindus sought the path of “*Bhakti*”, which requires intense devotion with “*Saranagatee*”, the ultimate surrender to the God, in their quest for prosperity, peace, and salvation. Contrary to the *Vedas*, and the *Upanisads*, the *Puranas* used a hybrid concept of multiple gods and goddesses which are believed to be the various powers, for various functional aspects of the Almighty God, the Supreme One.

One may consider the Almighty God, the Supreme One, the *Brahman*, as the energy of the cosmos, which is infinite, can never be destroyed, but transformed from one form of energy to another form, both living and non-living ones. The *Brahman* is believed to remains in a steady state or equilibrium as a material and a biological form of energy, like coal, natural gas, a lake full of water, and is similar to the potential energy in physics. Whereas, when it changes into a dynamic form of energy, such as fire and heat from burnt coal and natural gas, or as hydro-electricity from water hold by a dam, it can produce tremendous amount of powers for all kind of actions. The power of the cosmos is also known

as “*Shakti*” usually represented by the powerful mother goddess who is also known as “*Kali*” and “*Durga*”, and “*Chandi*” in the “*Markendeya Purana*”

The *Puranas* present a number of powerful mythological stories, about some gods and goddesses, such as *Vishnu*, *Narayana*, and *Durga*. The *Puranas* also prescribed some simplistic rituals known as “*puja*” using contemplation meditation and intense devotion. A deity or a portrait representing the particular god or goddess is also used for worship. It is believed that if the god or the goddess is pleased, then the devotee’s prayers are fulfilled. The mythological story of the *Purana* first reinforces the faith of a devotee into the miraculous power of a god or goddess. Then rewards and punishment approach is used for motivating the devotee in worshipping the god or goddess, using a “*puja*” ritual for fulfillment of the prayers. Usually, a “*puja*” is performed by a priest for a devotee, for a devotee’s family and friends, or for a community. It may also be performed by a devotee himself/herself. Contrary to Vedic rituals which are very rigid and complex, and must be performed by a priest, *Puranic* “*puja*” rituals are comparatively simple, and can also be performed by the devotee himself. Because of their simplicity, *Puranic* “*puja*” rituals gradually became very popular among the average Hindu families from 12th through 21st century in India.

In *Vishnu Puranas*, and many other *Puranas*, the *god Krishna* (also known as the *god Vishnu* and *god Narayana*) was adored and praised metaphysically as the Supreme One, the Creator and the Controller of the universe, the prime mover and the primal cosmic energy of the universe. The universe, is created by Him, sustained by Him, and will finally be absorbed in Him. In *Vishnu Purana*, the story presents that the *god Vishnu* is said to have appeared before the devotee *Prahlad*, son of the evil king *Hiranyakasipu*, through devotion and contemplation meditation, and was pleased with his prayers, spoke to him, protected him from the evil king, and granted him boons of everlasting companionship with *god Vishnu*. The devotion of *Prahlad* was a serene contemplation of *god Vishnu*, in which he became one with *god Vishnu* which lead to the ultimate liberation of his soul. Unlike the *Vishnu Purana*, the *Markendya Purana* presents the mythological story of king *Surat* who worshipped the most powerful goddess *Durga*, for winning the war against his enemies in order to regain his lost kingdom. Also, in *Ramayana*, one of the great epics of Hindu, it is written that *god Rama*, the reincarnation of *god Vishnu*, himself performed the *puja* of the goddess *Durga* for acquiring the power of defeating the invincible demon *Ravana* who kidnapped his wife *Sita*. For millennium “*Durga puja*” ritual has been performed in communities all over India. Even today, “*Durga puja*” is one of the most widely celebrated events among Bengali Hindus. Likewise Hindus families also perform “*Lakshmi puja*” for prosperity, “*Saraswati puja*” for wisdom, and “*Shiva puja*” for procreation, “*Satyanarayan puja*” for peace, and prosperity, “*Mansa puja*” for

protection against Snakes, and even puja of their own “Guru” using intense devotion (*Bhakti*), and contemplation meditation for fulfilling their various mundane desires and spiritual quests.

While the *Rig Vedas* created the concepts of the thirty three gods and goddesses representing the various natural, catastrophic and, planetary forces of the cosmos, the *Puranas* brought the concepts of many more gods and goddesses, representing some special power of the Almighty God, using powerful mythological stories intertwined with a reward and punishment approach. Contrary to the performance of ritualistic sacrifices in “*Yagna*”, precisely according to *Satapatha Brahmana*, the *Puranas* use the simplistic ritual of “*puja*” using utmost devotion(*Bhakti*), contemplation meditation and prayers for fulfillment of mundane desires, and for attainment of spiritual liberation. *Bhakti*, which is the intense devotion with the contemplation meditation, and prayers with concentration meditation are the key specialties to all puja rituals in the *Puranas*.

Ramanuja, the great Vedanta commentator in eleventh century A.D., defined *Bhakti* as a ceaseless contemplation of a god, which has its main source in love for the god, who is so dear to his devotee, that the devotee withdraws his/her mind from all other things, and become absorbed in his/her god. In *Bhagavat Purana*, which is dated eleventh century A.D. *Bhakti* has been recognized as the supreme source of bliss and spiritual enjoyment, it is also believed to destroy all past sins, and possess a protective virtue It manifest itself in the soft melting of the heart, often express itself in tears in eyes, inarticulate utterance of speech, laughter, songs, and dances, such as can be possible only through an intoxication of love for a god. The devotee sings, dances, laughs, and weeps for his love for his god. He stays no longer as a person of this world as his mind is completely immersed in the thought of his god. In *Bhaktishataka*, Ramchandra Bharati, a thirteenth century A.D. writer also defined *Bhakti* as a firm feeling of love for God, considering Him the Supreme One, and taking refuge in Him with faith and strong conviction that god alone, by His divine grace, will lead him to liberation. The devotee may consider himself/herself as the servant and the Lord is his/her Master, who controls his mind and body. This type of *bhakti* is found among many classes of *Vaishnava* Hindus, including the followers of *Ramanuja and Sri Chaitanyadev*.

Love of God is a the spiritual longing usually found in the heart of a devotee. It is a permanent flame, slowly burning in the cavern of his/her heart. Hearing and singing of the praises of a god or goddess or of the Supreme One, stimulates the devotee’s spiritual longing, until it ascends to higher and higher levels and eventually reaches the realization of the Supreme One. A true devotee sees everything and everyone as the manifestation of his/her god. Though controlled by his/her god all the time, a devotee for all empirical purpose also

consider him/her different from his/her god. This duality of god and the devotee is the core of all types of devotional mysticism of “*Puranas*”. A devotee may experience various types of devotional relationships with his/her god, as a servant, as a son, as a friend, even as a spouse.

This type of *Bhakti* which is preached in *Purana* is well illustrated in the life of *Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu*, who was born in *Navadwip*, West Bengal in 1486 and died in 1534. After the death of his first wife, who died very young, he married *Vishnuprya*. After couple of years from this marriage, he went to Gaya, Bihar, for offering funeral prayers for his diseased father. At Gaya, when he visited the temple of *god Krishna*. At this place, there is a sacred shrine where there is a set of foot prints believed to be of god Krishna. Staring at the foot print he was stunned and unconscious. After gaining his consciousness, he became transformed into a true *Vaishnava*. After returning home in *Navadwip*, he became a singing saint and started singing with his disciples all over eastern India, the following “*Kirtan*”

“*Hari Haraynamo,*
Krishna Jadavaya namo,
Jadavaya Keshavaya Gobindaya namo,
Gopal Gobinda Ram Madhusudana”

This particular *Kirtan* is a continuous chanting of a chain of names of the reincarnation of god *Vishnu*, was first sung in *Kedar raga* by *Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu* and his disciples. Still this *Kirtan* is sung everyday in *Navadwip*, West Bengal in the same raga by *Vaishnava* devotees, in intoxication with love of the god *Krishna*. Many Hindu believes that by chanting the names of a god or goddess, one can become one with same the god or goddess. This *Kirtan* usually touches the inner spiritual chords of a devotee and brings the resonance of vibration with spiritual intoxication with love of god Krishna. The devotee becomes one with his god *Krishna*. *Sri Chaitnya* described the love of God in the most exalted form of love like that of a woman in deep attachment with her lover, where the love is so intense and so deep that only insatiable desire of union in love remains and all other consideration cease to exist. Thus, absorption in a single passion of love for God can make the mind so single pointed that all other attachments are transcended, and an individual attains the *Brahmanhood*, by realizing the *Brahman*, the Supreme One. *Chandidas*, the great *Vaishnava* poet wrote,

“ *There is no god or goddess in heaven,*
who can teach spiritual truths more than the beloved one,
whom one loves with the whole heart”- *Mukhopadhyay, H. Vaishnava Padaboli*

A similar idea of the purification power of intense love is also found in *Vishnu Purana*, where intense love of *Radha* for *Krishna* helped her attaining her liberation.

This *Bhakti* movement grew rapidly in 13th century A.D. all around India along with other traditional worships of gods and goddesses. Representation of gods and goddesses in images (deity or pictures) and their worship using contemplation meditation and devotion became the common form of worship in India. Although, in 13th century A.D., in South India, Vesoba Khecar, the teacher of Namdeva proclaimed that God is omnipotent and omnipresent, and that there is no place which is devoid of God. He also declared that we can call Him by any name, and even worship Him in any form. Dating from 13th to 19th century A.D. *bhakti* movement flourished in North India by teachers like Ramananda, Kabir, Haridas, Nanak, and Chaitanya, and in South India by Vesoba Khecar, Namdev, Tukaram, and many others. In 20th century A.D. India, Sri Ramkrishna and Mahatma Gandhi also preached that we all worship the same omnipotent and omnipresent God, in different forms and in different names, some call Him *Allah* and worship in mosques, some call Him *Rama* and worship Him in temples, and some call Him *Jesus* and worship Him in churches, and so on. At the same time, *Swami Vivekananda* preached the philosophies of the *Vedanta/ the Upanisads* and emphasized that God resides in every living and nonliving beings, and by sincerely serving them all and earnestly loving them, one can attain salvation, and realize God in himself and in all living and non-living beings. Bible, also proclaimed “thou art the temple of God”. Mother *Teressa* of Kolkata, India served the poor and destitute of Kolkata as if she was serving her god, *Jesus Christ*, attained sainthood.

Thus, among Hindus, the concepts of God evolves through millennium from the concepts of multiple gods and goddesses in the *Vedas* to the concepts of the Brahman, the omnipotent, and omnipresent power of the cosmos, the Supreme One, in the *Upanisads*, and later into concepts of multiple powerful gods and goddesses of the *Puranas*, who are also considered as the functional representations of the Supreme One, the Almighty God. Also, the practice of worshipping among Hindus transformed for millennium from the *Vedic* ritualistic performances of sacrifices to various types of meditations and yoga processes for realization of the *Brahman* and later into “*Bhakti*” or “*Saranagatee*” and “*puja*” rituals using intense devotion, prayers and contemplation meditations. At the same time, a Hindu is allowed to freely choose his/her own god or goddesses, and his/her ways of worship.

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