VIṢṆU, THE ULTIMATE REALITY AS REFLECTED IN THE GARUḌAPURĀṆA

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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 Garuda, 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, Nāradiya, Mārkaṇḍeya, Agni, Bhaviṣya, Brahmanda, Linga, Varāha, Skanda, Vāmana, Kurma, Matsya, Garuḍa and Brahmanda. 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. Brahmā is said to be predominant in the Rājasika Purāṇas which are namely Brahma, Brahmanda, Brahmanda, 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, Paramātman 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 Paramātman.¹⁰ The Bhāgavatapurāṇa speaks that Lord Viṣṇu or Kṛṣṇa is the Brahman, Bhagavat and the Paramātman of the world.¹¹

According to the Nāradīyapurāṇa, 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 Garudapurāṇa also maintains that Lord Viṣṇu or Hari is the Ultimate Reality or Absolute.

The Garudapurāṇa 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 Garudapurāṇa also holds in this regard that the
world is not something different from Viṣṇu or the Ultimate Reality. 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.

According to Upaniṣadic literature self or jīva attains Brahman and becomes absolutely free from the cycle of birth and death. The Garudapurāṇa 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. 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 Garudapurāṇa the knowledge only can lead one to salvation and śravana, manana, nididhyāsana are the means to attain that salvation. The Garudapurāṇa 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.

According to Garudapurāṇa ignorance can be destroyed only by the right knowledge of Viṣṇu.

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 vyasnotervā’. 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. 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, Garudapurāṇa 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 nirguna 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. 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. He is immanent in all beings. He is everywhere and in him all beings exist.

In the 226th chapter of the Pūrvaṅkhaṇḍa 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. According to Garuḍaurāṇa, Lord Viṣṇu or Hari is the giver of everything, the omnipresent, the cosmic form and present in the form of every living being. 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 Upanisadic word ‘tad’.

Lord Vāsudeva or Viṣṇu is the only eternal supreme soul, imperishable, tranquil, permanent, pure, omnipresent and unsullied. 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 (objectivless). He is the Supreme soul, the Supreme Brahman.

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.\textsuperscript{36} He is also called Nārāyaṇa and Purāṇa-Puruṣa,\textsuperscript{37} i.e., primordial being. He is spoken of as Brahman and is beyond both sat (existent) and asat (non-existent).

According to Garudapurāṇa Lord Hari is the cause of the creation and destruction of the world.\textsuperscript{38} He is Vāsudeva and is the creator, preserver and destroyer of the world. He is Puruṣottama and is devoid of beginning and end.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{41} Taking the form of four-faced Brahmā, Viṣṇu creates this world. He himself maintains it and destroys it taking the form of Rudra.\textsuperscript{42} Regarding the creation of the universe it is said in the Garudapurāṇa that the Supreme Lord Viṣṇu created the unmanifest and from that unmanifest the soul evolved.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{44} Hence, it can be said that like all other Sāttvika Purāṇas the Garudapurāṇa 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.\textsuperscript{45} As an Ultimate Reality He is also said to be the sustainer and destroyer of the Universe.

\textit{Notes:}

1. G.P.; 1.223.15-20
2. sattvādhamemātsyakaurmam tadāhurvyāyum cāhuḥ sattvikāmadhyamaṁ ca/ viṣṇuḥ purāṇaṁ bhāgavata purāṇaṁ sattvottame garuḍaṁ prāhurāryaḥ// ibid.;1.226.24
3. ayamātmā brahma, B.U.,2.5.19
4. tāṁ viṣṇu paramātmānamiśvaram/sarvadam sarvagam sarvaṁ sarvaṁ prānīṁdisthitam// G.P.,1.2.11
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5. brahmasvarūpinaṁ devaṁ jagatoprabhavāpyayam//V.P.,1.4.5
6. ibid., 1.12.56
7. vadanti tattvattvaide斯塔tvam yajjñānamadvayam/ brahmeti paramātmeti bhagavāniti śabdyaṭe/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 niraṅjanaḥ/ tenedamakhilam vyāptam jagatsthāvarajāṅgamam// N.P., I.III.2
13. ibid., 1.2.51-55
14. idam codāharantyaatra ślo’ kām nārāyaṇamprati/ brahmasvarūpinaṁ devaṁ jagataḥ prabhavāpyayam/Va.P.,1.2.23
15. ibid., 3.11
16. āpo nārā iti proktā āpo vai nasasūnavaḥ/ ayanaṁ tasya tāḥ pūrvaṁ tena nārāyaṇaḥ smṛtaḥ//ibid.,1.2.24
17. tam guyaham paramāṁ nityamajama kṣayamavyayam/ tathā puruṣarūpena kālarūpena samthinaṁ//P.P.,2.87
18. anādinidhano dhātā tu anantah puruṣuttamaḥ/ tasmadbhavati cavyaktāṁ tasmādātmāpi jāyate//G.P.,1.4.6
19. jagat sthiterahāṁ vijaṁ jagatkarāṁ tvḥam śiva//ibid., 1.2.38
20. svarravajñānanyaham śāmbho brahmātmāhamaham śiva/ ahaṁ brahma sarvalokaḥ sarvadevātmako hyaham//ibid., 1.2.43
21. karmanā vadhyaṭe jantarjñānāṁmukto bhavat bhavet/ ātmajñānamāśrayedvai ajñānam yadatonyathā//ibid.,1.241.11
22. vedāhametam puruṣaṁ cīt rūpaṁ tamasah param/so ahamasmīti mokṣāya nānyah paṁthāḥ vimuktaye//ibid.,1.241.6
23. sarṃsārabandhanāt so’pi mukticchan samāhitāḥ//ibid.,1.237.29
24. brahma prakāśakāṁ jñānaṁ bhava bandha vibhedanam/ tatraikacittatāh yogo muktidā nātrasaṁ sayaḥ//ibid.1.240.45
25. Nik., 12.28
26. viservyāptyarthabhidhayino nuk pratyayāntasya rūpaṁ... visatervā nuk pratyaysya rūpaṁ viṣṇuriti, Viss.,p.138
27. ajamajaramanantam jñānarūpam mahāntaṁ, śivamamalam anādikambhūtadehādhīhinam.G.P.,1.1.1
28. eko nārāyaṇa devo devānāmiśvareśvara/
paramātmā paramāḥ brahma janmādyasya yato bhaved.ibid.,1.1.12
29. sarvadaṁ sarvagam sarvaṁ sarvaprāṇī hṛdi sthitam. ibid., 1.2.11
30. advaitayogasampannāste mucyante atibandhanāt/
so ahamsmītī moksāya nānyāḥ paṇthā vimuktaye// ibid., 1.241.6
31. ibid., 1.1.11-13
32. viṣṇumṛṣṇum padmanābham hariṁ dehavivarjitam/ 
sucimūcipadam haṁsam tad pādam paramēsvaram// ibid., 1.2.13
33. eka evāvyayaḥsāntaḥ paramātmā sanātanaḥ/ vāsudeva dhruvaḥ 
suddhaḥ sarvavyāpi nirañjanaḥ// ibid., 132.3
34. ibid., 1.237.16-19
35. ibid., 1.1.12
36. sahasraśaṁ sahasrāṅghim sahasroraṁ varānanam/
aniyasāmaṇīyāmsam sathavisthanca sathāvīyāsām/
gariyasām gariṣṭhanca śreṣṭhanca śreyasāmapi// ibid., 1.2.15
37. purāṇapuruṣāḥ proko brahma proko dvijātisu/ ibid., 1.2.18
38. jagatsthiteraham bijam jagatkarṭā tvaham śiva/ ibid., 1.2.38
39. śṛṇu rudra pravakṣyāmi sargaṁ pāpanaśānim/
sargāhitipralayantāṁ viṣṇuḥ kridām purātānām// 
eko nārāyaṇo devo vāsudevo nirañjanaḥ/
paramātmā param brahma jagajjanilāyādikīt// ibid., 1.4.2-3
40. ibid., 1.4.5
41. tadetat sarvamevaitadvyaaktāvyaktasvarūpavat/
tathā puruṣarūpena kālārupena ca sthitam// ibid., 1.4.4
42. brahmā caturmukho bhūtvasṛjadvīṣṇurjagat pāti hariḥ svayam 
rudraruṇi ca kalpante jagat samharate prabhuḥ// ibid., 1.4.11-12
43. tasmādhvāti cāvyaktām tasmādātmāpi jāyate/ ibid., 1.4.6
44. tasmādbuddhirmanastasmāttataḥ khaṁ pavanastataḥ/ 
tasmāttejastastāpastato bhumistato srjat// ibid., 1.4.7
45. vide supra, p.6

SELECTED ABBREVIATIONS

BP : Bhāgavata Purāṇa
Brahm : Brāhmaṇa Sāṉkarabhāṣya
B.U. : Brhadāranyakopaniṣad
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

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