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Agama Shastra And Temple Worship

**Extract from: The Agama Encyclopaedia 12 Vols.;
Revised Edition Of Agama Kosa**

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The Hindu temples are complex institutions. They represent the culmination of social and religious aspirations of a society. Temple is the focal point in the life of a community and often represents its pride, identity and unity. It is also the index of the community's wellbeing. It draws into its fold people from its various segments and denominations; and binds them together. In smaller communities the temple apart from being a source of spiritual or religious comfort, also serves as center for education and recreation.

A temple is also a treasure house of art and architecture, designed according to the principle of Vaastu Shastra, characterized by their majesty, serenity and beauty of intricate sculpture and designs. A temple evokes in the visitor a sense of beauty in art and in life as well. It lifts up his spirit, elevates him to a higher plane dissolving his little ego. At the same time, it awakens him to his insignificance in the grand design of the Creator.

The most significant aspect of the temple worship is its collective character. Peoples' participation is both the purpose and the means of a temple. The community is either actually or symbolically involved in temple worship. The rituals that dominate temple worship are therefore socio- religious in character.

The worship in a temple has to satisfy the needs of individuals as also of the community. The worships that take place in the sanctum and within the temple premises are important; so are the festivals and occasional processions that involve direct participation of the entire community. They complement each other. While the worship of the deity in the sanctum might be an individual's spiritual or religious need ; the festival s are the expression of a community's joy , exuberance , devotion , pride and are also an idiom of a community's cohesiveness .

The appointed priests carry out the worship in the temple on behalf of other devotees. It is hence *parartha*, a service conducted for the sake of others. Priests, generally, trained in ritual procedures, pursue the service at the temple as a profession. As someone remarked, "other people may view their work as worship, but for the priests worship is work." They are trained in the branch of the Agama of a particular persuasion. The texts employed in this regard describe the procedural details of temple worship, elaborately and precisely.

The term Agama primarily means tradition; Agama represents the previously ordained practices generally held in regard (*Agama loka-dharmanaam maryada purva-nirmita* -Mbh 8.145.61).

Agama is also that which helps to understand things correctly and comprehensively. Agama Shastras are not part of the Vedas. The Agamas do not derive their authority directly from the Vedas. They are Vedic in spirit and character and make use of Vedic mantras while performing the service.

The Agama shastras are based in the belief that the divinity can be approached in two ways. It can be viewed as *nishkala*, formless – absolute; or as *sakala* having specific aspects.

Nishkala is all-pervasive and is neither explicit nor is it visible. It is analogues, as the Agama texts explain, to the oil in the sesame-seed, fire in the fuel, butter in milk, and scent in flower. It is in human as *antaryamin*, the inner guide. It has no form and is not apprehended by sense organs, which includes mind.

Sakala, on the other hand, is explicit energy like the fire that has emerged out of the fuel, oil extracted out of the seed, butter that floated to the surface after churning milk or like the fragrance that spreads and delights all. That energy can manifest itself in different forms and humans can approach those forms through appropriate means. The Agamas recognize that means as the *archa*, the worship methods unique to each form of energy-manifestation or divinity.

The Vedas do not discuss about venerating the icons; though the icons (*prathima* or *prathika*) were known to be in use. Their preoccupation was more with the nature, abstract divinities and not with their physical representations. The Vedas did however employ a number of symbols, such as the wheel, umbrella, spear, noose, foot-prints, lotus, goad and vehicles etc. These symbols, in the later ages, became a part of the vocabulary of the iconography.

The idea of multiple forms of divinity was in the Vedas. They spoke about thirty-three divinities

classified into those of the earth, heaven and intermediate regions. Those comprised twelve adityas, aspects of energy and life; eleven rudras, aspects ferocious nature; eight vasus, the directional forces; in addition to the earth and the space.

The aspects of the thirty-three divinities were later condensed to three viz. Agni, the aspect of fire, energy and life on earth; Vayu, the aspect of space, movement and air in the mid-region; and Surya the universal energy and life that sustains and governs all existence, in the heavenly region, the space. This provided the basis for the evolution of the classic Indian trinity, the Brahma, Shiva and Vishnu.

Rig Veda at many places talks in terms of saguna, the supreme divinity with attributes. The Vedanta ideals of the absolute, attribute-less and limit-less universal consciousness evolved as refinements of those Vedic concepts. The Upanishads are the pinnacles of idealism that oversee all horizons. But, in practice common people worshipped variety of gods in variety of ways for variety of reasons. They are relevant in the context of each ones idea of needs and aspirations; fears and hopes; safety and prosperity; and, the pleasures and pains.

One often hears Agama and Nigama mentioned in one breath as if one follows the other or that both are closely related. However, Nigama stands for Vedas and Agama is identified with Tantra. The two traditions- Veda and Tantra – hold divergent views on matters such as God; relationship between man and God; the ways of worship; and path to salvation etc. The Vedic concept of God is omniscient, omnipotent, a formless absolute entity manifesting itself in phenomenal world of names and forms. The Agama which is a part of Tantra regards God as a personal deity with recognizable forms and attributes.

Vedic worship is centered on the fire (the *Yajna*), certain religious and domestic rituals, (*shrouta sutraas and grihya sutraas*), and the sacraments, (*samskaara*). In this tradition, the gods and their descriptions are, mostly, symbolic. The hymns of the Rig Veda are the inspired outpourings of joy and revelations through sublime poetry. The Yajur and Sama Vedas do contain suggestions of sacrifices; but they too carry certain esoteric symbolic meaning. Very few of these rituals are in common practice today.

The most widespread rituals of worship today are of the Aagamic variety. The Agama methods are worship of images of God through rituals (*Tantra*), symbolic charts (*Yantra*) and verbal

symbols (*Mantra*). Agama regards devotion and complete submission to the deity as fundamental to pursuit of its aim; and hopes that wisdom, enlightenment (*jnana*) would follow, eventually, by the grace of the worshipped deity. The Agama is basically dualistic, seeking grace, mercy and love of the Supreme God represented by the personal deity, for liberation from earthly attachments (*moksha*).

As compared to Vedic rituals (*Yajnas*) which are collective in form, where a number of priests specialized in each discipline of the Sacrificial aspects participate; the Tantra or Agamic worship is individualistic in character. It views the rituals as a sort of direct communication between the worshipper and his or her personal deity. The Yajnas always take place in public places and are of congregational nature; and in which large numbers participate with gaiety and enthusiasm. A Tantra ritual, on the other hand, is always carried out in quiet privacy; self discipline and intensity is its hallmark, not exuberance or enthusiasm.

The temple worship is the culmination of dissimilar modes or streams of worship. Here, at the temple, both the Agama worship-sequences and the symbolic Tantric rituals take place; but each in its sphere. A temple in Hindu tradition is a public place of worship; several sequences of worship are conducted in full view of the worshipping devotees; and another set of Tantric rituals are conducted by the priests in the privacy of the sanctum away from public gaze. The worship or service to the Deity is respectfully submitted to the accompaniment of chanting of passages and mantras taken from Vedas. There also plenty of celebrations where all segments of the community joyously participate (*janapada*) with great enthusiasm and devotion; such as the periodic Utsavas, processions, singing, dancing, playacting, colorful lighting, spectacular fireworks, offerings of various kinds etc.; as also various forms of physical austerities accompanied by sincere prayers.

It could be argued that a representation of the Supreme Godhead is theoretically impossible; yet one has also to concede that an image helps in contemplation, visualization and concretization of ideas and aspirations. Towards that end, the worship in a temple takes the aid several streams ideologies and practices.

The temple worship, per se, is guided by its related Agama texts which invariably borrow the mantras from the Vedic traditions and the ritualistic details from Tantric traditions. This has the

advantage of claiming impressive validity from Nigama, the Vedas; and at the same time, carrying out popular methods of worship.

For instance, the Bodhayana shesha sutra and Vishhnu-pratishtha kalpa outline certain rite for the installation of an image of Vishnu and for conducting other services. The Agama texts combined the rules of the Grihya sutras with the Tantric practices and formed their own set of rules.

While installing the image of the deity, the Grihya Sutras do not envisage *Prana-prathistapanaritual* (transferring life into the idol by breathing life into it); but the Agamas borrowed this practice from the Tantra school and combined it with the Vedic ceremony of “opening the eyes of the deity with a needle”. While rendering worship to the deity the Agamas discarded the Tantric mantras; and instead adopted Vedic mantras even for services such as offering ceremonial bath, waving lights etc. though such practices were not a part of the Vedic mode of worship. The Agamas, predominantly, adopted the Vedic style Homas and Yajnas, which were conducted in open and in which a large number of people participated. But, the Agamas did not reject the Tantric rituals altogether; and some of them were conducted within the sanctum away from common view..

The *Vaikhanasa Vasishnava archana vidhi*, which perhaps was the earliest text of its kind, codified the of worship practices by judicious combination of Vedic and Tantric procedures. In addition, the worship routine was rendered more colorful and attractive by incorporating a number of ceremonial services (*upacharas*) and also presentations of music, dance, drama and other performing arts. It also brought in the *Janapada*, the popular celebrations like Uthsavas etc, These ensured larger participation of the enthusiastic devotees.

The Agamas tended to create their own texts. That gave rise to a new class of texts and rituals; and coincided with the emergence of the large temples. It is not therefore surprising that town-planning, civil constructions and the arts occupy the interest of early Agamas.

In due course the Agama came to be accepted as a subsidiary culture (*Vedanga*) within the Vedic framework.

Agamas are a set of ancient texts and are the guardians of tradition .They broadly deal with *jnana*(knowledge), *Yoga* (meditation), *Kriya* (rituals) and *Charya* (ways of worship).The third segment *Kriya* (rituals) articulate with precision the principles and practices of deity worship – the mantras, mandalas, mudras etc.; the mental disciplines required for the worship;

the rules for constructing temples and sculpting the images. They also specify the conduct of other worship services, rites, rituals and festivals. The fourth one, *Charya*, deals with priestly conduct and other related aspects. [Incidentally, the Buddhist and the Jaina traditions too follow this four-fold classification; and with similar details]

The Texts hold the view that *Japa*, *homa*, *dhyana* and *Archa* are the four methods of approaching the divine; and of these, the *Archa* (worship) is the most comprehensive method. This is the faith on which the Agama shastra is based. The Agama shastra is basically concerned with the attitudes, procedure and rituals of deity worship in the temples. But it gets related to icons and temple structures rather circuitously. It says, if an image has to be worshipped, it has to be worship-worthy. The rituals and sequences of worship are relevant only in the context of an icon worthy of worship; and such icon has to be contained in a shrine. And an icon is meaningful only in the context of a shrine that is worthy to house it. That is how the Agama literature makes its presence felt in the *Shilpa-Sastra*, Architecture. The icon and its form; the temple and its structure; and the rituals and their details, thus get interrelated. The basic idea is that a temple must be built for the icon, and not an icon got ready for the temples, for a temple is really only an outgrowth of the icon, an expanded image of the icon.

The Shipa Shatras of the Agamas describe the requirements of the temple site; building materials; dimensions, directions and orientations of the temple structures; the image and its specifications. The principal elements are *Sthala* (temple site); *Teertha* (Temple tank) and *Murthy*(the idol).

I am not sure about the historical development of the Agamas. However, I think, the most of the present-day Hindu rituals of worship seem to have developed after the establishment of the six orthodox schools of Hindu philosophy (*darshanas*). The changes in religious rituals from the Vedic to the Aagamic seem consonant with the themes prevalent in the six orthodox systems. A very significant change is the integration of *Yoga* methodology into the rituals. Four of these eight stages are an integral part of all worship, namely, posture, (*aasana*), breath (life force)-control, (*praanaayaama*), placing or fixation, (*nyaasa* or *dhaaranaa*), and deep concentration and contemplation (*dhyaana*). . The temple architecture too follows the structure of the human body and the six chakras' as in yoga.

Surely the Agama tradition began to flourish after the 10th or the 11th century with the advent of the Bhakthi School.

There are three main divisions in Agama shastra, the Shaiva, the Shaktha and Vaishnava. The Shaiva branch of the Agama deals with the worship of the deity in the form of Shiva. This branch in turn has given rise to Shaiva Siddantha of the South and the Prathyabijnana School of Kashmir Shaivism. The Shaktha Agama prescribes the rules and tantric rituals for worship of Shakthi, Devi the divine mother. The third one, Vaishnava Agama adores God as Vishnu the protector. This branch has two major divisions Vaikhanasa and Pancharatra. The latter in turn has a sub branch called Tantra Sara followed mainly by the Dvaita sect (Madhwasa).

Each Agama consists of four parts. The first part includes the philosophical and spiritual knowledge. The second part covers the yoga and the mental discipline. The third part specifies rules for the construction of temples and for sculpting and carving the figures of deities for worship in the temples. The fourth part of the Agamas includes rules pertaining to the observances of religious rites, rituals, and festivals.

Agama is essentially a tradition and Tantra is a technique; but both share the same ideology. But, Agama is wider in its scope; and contains aspects of theory, discussion and speculation.

The term Agama is used usually for the Shaiva and Vaishnava traditions and the Shaktha cult is termed as Tantric. But, there is an element of Tantra in Agama worship too, particularly in Pancharatra.

Vaikhanasa Agamas

As regards Vaikhanasa, after the emergence of temple - culture, Vaikhanasa appear to have been the first set of professional priests and they chose to affiliate to the Vedic tradition. That may perhaps be the reason they are referred to also as Vaidikagama or Sruthagama. Yet, there is no definite explanation for the term Vaikhanasa. Some say it ascribed to Sage Vaikhanasa who taught his four disciples: Atri, Bhṛighu, Kasyapa, and Marichi; while some others say it is related to vanaprastha, a community of forest-dwellers.

Vaikhanasa claim to be a surviving school of Vedic ritual propagated by the sage Vaikhanasa. The Vaikhanasa tradition asserts that it is the most ancient; traces its origin to

Vedas and steadfastly holds on to the Vedic image of Vishnu. For the Vaikhanasa, Vishnu alone is the object of worship; and that too the pristine Vishnu in his Vedic context and not as Vasudeva or Narayana. Though it admits that Vasudeva or Narayana could be synonyms for Vishnu, it prefers to address the Godhead as Vishnu, the Supreme.

Vaikhanasa worship is, therefore, essentially Vishnu oriented. And, it assures that when Vishnu is invoked and worshipped, it means the presence of all other gods and their worship too (*Vishnor archa sarva devarcha bhavathi*). Hence, according to Vaikhanasa, worship of Vishnu means worship of all gods.

Agama Grihya sutras explain: the Godhead is formless –*nishkala*; filled with luster *tejomaya*; beyond comprehension *achintya*; and is of the nature of pure existence, consciousness and blissat-*chit-ananda*; and abides in the heart-lotus -*hridaya-kamala*- of the devotee.

But because of the limitations of the human mind the worship of Brahman –with form, *sakala*, is deemed essential for all of us who live ordinary lives. The human mind finds it easier to deal with forms, shapes and attributes than with the formless absolute. A sense of devotion envelops the mind and heart when the icon that is properly installed and consecrated is worshipped with love and reverence. By constant attention to the icon, by seeing it again and again and by offering it various services of devotional worship, the icon is invested with divine presence and its worship ensures our good here (*aihika*) and also our ultimate good or emancipation (*amumika*). That is the reason the texts advise that icon worship must be resorted to by all, especially by those involved in the transactional world. In the *Agama* texts, the *Nishkala* aspect continues to be projected as the ultimate, even as they emphasize the relevance and importance of the *sakala* aspect. The devotee must progressively move from gross *sthula* to the subtle *sukshma*.

The worship of gods is of two modes: iconic (*sa-murta*) and non-iconic (*a-murta*). The Yajna, the worship of the divine through fire, is *a-murta*; while the worship offered to an icon is *sa-murta*. According to Vaikhanasas, though yajna might be more awe-inspiring, Archa (worship or puja) the direct communion with your chosen deity is more appealing to one's heart, is more colorful and is aesthetically more satisfying.

The Vaikhanasas were greatly in favor of iconic worship of Vishnu; but they did take care to retain their affiliation to the Vedic tradition. Not only that; the Vaikhanasa redefined the context and emphasis of the Yajna. The Yajna, normally, is ritual dominant, with Vishnu in the backdrop. But, the Vaikhanasa interpreted Yajna as worship of Vishnu; and, Yajna as Vishnu himself (*yajno vai Vishnuhu*). The religious scene shifted from the *Yajna mantapa* to temple enclosures. Vedic rituals were gradually subordinated to worship of Vishnu. But, the Vedic rituals were not given up entirely. Employment of Vedic passages and mantras during the rites lent an air of purity and merit to the rituals. The Vedic rites too were incorporated into the worship sequences in the temple. Along with the rituals, it stressed on devotion to Vishnu and his worship. The Vaikhanasa thus crystallized the Vishnu cult and lent it a sense of direction.

The very act of worship (*archa*) is deemed dear to Vishnu. The major thrust of Vaikhanasa texts is to provide clear, comprehensive and detailed guidelines for Vishnu worship. The Vaikhanasa texts are characterized by their attention to details of worship-sequences. It is not therefore surprising that Vaikhanasas do not employ the term 'Agama' to describe their text. They know their text as '*Bhagava archa-shastra*'.

The characteristic Vaikhanasa view point is that the pathway to salvation is not devotion alone; but it is icon-worship (*samurtha-archana*) with devotion (*bhakti*). 'The *archa* with devotion is the best form of worship, because the icon that is beautiful will engage the mind and delight the heart of the worshipper'. That would easily evoke feeling of loving devotion (*bhakti*) in the heart of the worshipper. The icon is no longer just a symbol; the icon is a true divine manifestation enliven by loving worship, devotion, and absolute surrender (*parathion*). And, Vishnu is best approached by this means.

The Agamas combine two types of scriptures: one providing the visualization of the icon form; and the other giving details of preparation of icon for worship. This is supplemented by prescriptions for worship of the image and the philosophy that underlies it.

The Agamas also deal with building a shrine to Vishnu (*karayathi mandiram*); making a worship-worthy beautiful idol (*pratima lakshana vatincha kritim*); and worshipping everyday (*ahanyahani yogena yajato yan maha-phalam*). The Agamas primarily refer to ordering one's

life in the light of values of icon worship (*Bhagavadarcha*). It ushers in a sense of duty, commitment and responsibility.

For worship, Godhead is visualized as in solar orb (*arka-mandala*) or in sanctified water-*jala kumbha*; or in an icon (*archa-bera*).

When Godhead is visualized as a worship-worthy icon, a human form with distinguishable features (*sakala*) is attributed to him. Vishnu's form for contemplation (*dhyana*) and worship (*archa*) is four armed, carrying *shanka*, *chakra*, *gadha* and *padma*. His countenance is beatific radiating peace and joy (*saumya*), delight to behold *soumya-priya-darshana*, his complexion is rosy pink wearing golden lustrous garment (*pitambara*). A beautiful image of Vishnu with a delightful smiling countenance and graceful looks must be meditated upon.

As regards its philosophy, Srinivasa –makhin (c.1059 AD), a Vaikhanasa Acharya, terms it as *Lakshmi-Visitad-vaita*. Though the term *Visistadvaita* has been employed, the philosophical and religious positions taken by Srinivasa –makhin vary significantly from that of Sri Ramanuja in his Sri Bhashya.

Srinivasa –makhin in his *Tatparya chintamani (dasa vidha hetu nirupa)* explains that Brahman (*paramatman*) is *nishkala* (devoid of forms and attributes) as also *sakala* (with forms and attributes). They truly are one; not separate. The *sakala* aspect is distinguished by its association with Lakshmi (*Prakrti*). For the purpose of devotion and worship the *sakala* aspect is excellent. The Vaikhanasa therefore views its ideology as *Lakshmi-visitadaita* (the advaita, non-duality, refers to Vishnu associated with Lakshmi) Lakshmi is inseparable from Vishnu like moon and moonlight. Isvara associated with Lakshmi (*Lakshmi visita isvara tattvam*) is Vishnu. Those devoted to him as Vaishnavas. If Vishnu (*purusha*) grants release from the phenomenal fetters (*Mukthi*), Lakshmi (*Prakrti*) presides over *bhukthi* the fulfillment of normal aspirations in one's life. The two must be worshipped together.

Srinivasa –makhin explains that in the Pranava (Om-kara), O-kara represents Vishnu; U—Kara: Lakshmi and Ma-kara, the devotee. The Om-kara binds the three together.

According to Vaikhanasa ideology, the four aspects of Vishnu - *Purusha*, *Satya*, *Achyuta* and *Aniruddha*- are identified

with *Dharma* (virtue), *Jnana* (wisdom), *Aishvarya* (sovereignty) and *vairagya* (dispassion). Of the four faces of Vishnu, the *Purusha* is to the East; *Satya* to the South; *Achyuta* to the west; and *Aniruddha* to the North. The four virtues or planes Vishnu are regarded the four quarters (*pada*) of Brahman: *aamoda*, *pramoda*, *sammoda* and *vaikuntaloka* (*sayujya*) the highest abode – *parama pada*.

[The individual *jiva* that *frees* itself from the fetters of the transactional world enters into the sphere of Vishnu *vishnuloka* through four successive stages; each stage being designated a plane of Vishnu-experience *Vaishnava-ananda*. The first stage is *aamoda* where the *jiva* experiences the pleasure of residing in the same plane as the Godhead is Vishnu (*saalokya*)- associated with Aniruddha. The next stage is *pramoda* where the *jiva* experiences the great delight of residing in proximity to with the Godhead Maha-vishnu (*saamipya*)-associated with Achyuta. The stage higher than that is *saamoda* where the *jiva* experiences the joy of obtaining the same form as the Godhead *sadaa-Vishnu* (*sa-rupya*) –associated with Satya. The highest plane is *vaikunta lok* where the individual *jiva* experiences the supreme joy of union with the Godhead Vyapinarayana (*sayujya*)- associated with Purusha.]

In the context of the temple worship and layout, the four forms represent the four iconic variants of the main image in the sanctum (*dhruva bhera*) which represents Vishnu. And, within the temple complex, each form is accorded a specific location; successively away from the *dhruva bhera*. Purusha symbolized by Kautuka-bera is placed in the sanctum very close to *dhruva bhera*; Satya symbolized by Utsava-bera (processional deity) is placed in the next pavilion outside the sanctum; Achyuta symbolized by snapana-bera (oblation) too is placed outside the sanctum; and Aniruddhda symbolized by Bali bera (to which food offerings are submitted) is farthest from the *dhruva-bhera* in the sanctum.

As regards its differences with the other Vaishava –Agama the Pancharatra, the Texts such as *asprakina-adhikara* (*kriya-pada*, ch 30 -5 to 11) mention that Vaikhanasa mode of worship is more in accordance with Vedic tradition (which does not recognize initiation rites such as branding); Vaikhanasa worshipper being deemed *garba-vaishnava –janmanam*; he is Vaishnava by his very birth, not needing any initiatory rites (*diksha*) or branding. The Vaikhanasa are distinguished by acceptance of Vishnu in his Vedic context. Vishnu is supreme; and Vishnu

alone is the object of worship. Though they are now a recognized sect of Sri Vaishnavas, their allegiance to Sri Ramanuja as the Guru or to the Alvars or to the Visistadvaita philosophy is rather formal. They also do not recite passages from the Tamil *Prabandham*. The worship is conducted mainly through verses selected from Rig Veda and Yajur Veda; and performance of the yajna as prescribed in Krishna-yajur Veda. There is also not much use of the Tantra elements of worship such as uttering Beeja-mantras etc, except for the sequence of projecting the deity from ones heart into the icon; that is, the assumed identification of the devotee with the deity during the worship . The Vaikhanasa worshipper, in privacy behind the screen, recites the '*atma-sukta*' aiming to enter into a state of meditative absorption with Vishnu. That is followed by the symbolic ritual placements (*nyasas*). The icon attains divinity after invocation (*avahana*) of life force; while divinity always abides in the worshipper.

The Vaikhanasa is regarded orthodox for yet another reason; they consider the life of the householder as the best among the four stages of life. Because, it is the householder that supports, sustains and carries forward the life and existence of the society. They treat the worship at home as more important than worship at the temple. A Vaikhanasa is therefore required to worship the deities at his home even in case he is employed as a priest at the temple. There is not much prominence for a Yati or a Sanyasi in this scheme of things. They decry a person seeking salvation for himself without discharging his duties, responsibilities and debts to his family, to his guru and to his society.

The Agama texts make a clear distinction between the worship carried out at his home (*atmartha*) and the worship carried out as priest at a temple(*parartha*) for which he gets paid. This distinction must have come into being with the proliferation of temples and with the advent of temple-worship-culture. It appears to have been a departure from the practice of worship at home, an act of devotion and duty. Rig Vedic culture was centered on home and worship at home.

The worship at home is regarded as motivated by desire for attainments and for spiritual benefits (*Sakshepa*). In the temple worship, on the other hand, the priest does not seek spiritual benefits in discharge of his duties (*nirakshepa*). He worships mainly for the fulfillment of the desires of

those who pray at the temple. That, perhaps, appears to be the reason for insisting that a priest should worship at his home before taking up his temple duties.

Traditionally, a person who receives remuneration for worshipping a deity is not held in high esteem. The old texts sneer at a person "displaying icons to eke out a living." That perhaps led to a sort of social prejudices and discriminations among the priestly class. But, with the change of times, with the social and economic pressures and with a dire need to earn a living, a distinct class of temple-priests, naturally, crystallized into a close knit in-group with its own ethos and attitudes. Whatever might be the past, one should recognize that temples are public places of worship; the priests are professionals trained and specialized in their discipline; and they constitute an important and a legitimate dimension of the temple-culture. There is absolutely no justification in looking down upon their profession. Similarly, the Agamas, whatever is their persuasion, are now primarily concerned with worship in temples. And, their relevance or their preoccupation, in the past, with worship at home, has largely faded away.

Pancharatra Agama

From the end of the tenth century Vaikhanasa are prominently mentioned in South Indian inscriptions. Vaikhanasas were the priests of Vaishnava temples and were also the administrators. However with the advent of Sri Ramanuja, who was also the first organizer of temple administration at Srirangam Temple, the Vaikhanasa system of worship lost its prominence and gave place to the more liberal Pancharatra system. Sri Ramanuja permitted participation of lower castes and ascetics, the Sanyasis (who were not placed highly in the Vaikhanasa scheme) in temple services. He also expanded the people participation in other areas too with the introduction of Uthsavas, celebrations, festivals, Prayers etc. This change spread to other Vaishnava temples particularly in Tamil Nadu. Vaikhanasas, however, continues to be important in Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and in some temples of Tamil Nadu. It was explained that while the *srauta* and *smarta* rituals of the Vedas were intended for the intellectuals, the Pancharatra was given to ordinary people who longed to worship with heart full of devotion and absolute surrender to the will of God.

As regards Pancharatra, it appears to have been a later form of worship that gained prominence with the advent of Sri Ramanuja. Pancharatra claims its origin from Sriman Narayana himself.

Here Vishnu is worshipped as the Supreme Godhead. Pancharatra described as '*Bhagavata shastra*' or '*Vasudeva –matha*' is centered on worship of Vishnu the Godhead (*Bhagavan*) as Narayana identified with Vasudeva of the Vrishni clan. He is regarded as *Bhagavan* as He is the manifestation of six divine attributes: *jnana* (omniscience), *shakthi* (omnipotence), *bala* (unhindered energy), *aishvarya* (sovereignty), *virya* (matchless valor) and *tejas* (great splendor).

Pancharatra as a system of thought prescribes that worldly involvement must be minimized (*nivrtti*) in order to engage oneself exclusively in devotion to Bhagavan (*ekanta bhakthi*). The Pancharatra doctrine is associated with the Samkhya ideologies.

The Pancharatra philosophy is characterized by its conception of the Supreme assuming five modes of being (*prakara*). They are in brief:

Para, or transcendent form;

Vyuha or the categorized form as *Vasudeva*, *Sankarshana*, *Pradyumna*, and *Aniruddha*, who are brought together in worship and adoration as a complete body of divine power;

Vaibhava, or the several incarnation of God;

Archa, or the form of God worshipped in an image or an idol symbolizing the Universal entity;

And, *Antaryamin*, or the indwelling immanent form of God as present throughout in creation.

The recognition of three modes of the Deity (*para*, *vyuha* and *vibhava*) assumes great importance in the context of Pancharatra ideology and practice of icon-worship (*archa*).

The peak of *Vaishnava* devotion is in *Dashamaskanda*, the Tenth Book of the *Bhagavata Purana*, and in *Nalayira Prabhandam* the four thousand Tamil verses of the Vaishnava saints, the Alvars; and especially in the thousand songs known as *Tiruvaimozhi* of Nammalvar. The ecstasy of the *Gopi*-type of God - intoxicated-love is exhilarating and gives raise to divine intoxication in Nammalvar's poetic compositions.

Therefore, the Tamils verses and songs are prominent in Pancharatra worship. This method also employs more Tantras, Mandalas and Uthsavas which makes room for a large number of devotees of all segments of the society to participate. There are more *Jaanapada* (popular) methods of worship than mere Vedic performance of Yajnas. Even here, each prominent temple follows its favorite text. That is the reason there are some minor differences even among the Pancharatra temples.

The differences between the two systems

As regards the differences between the two systems, one of the major differences is their view of the Supreme Godhead Vishnu. The Vaikhanasas view Vishnu in the Vedic context ; as the all-pervading supreme deity as Purusha, the principle of life; Sathya, the static aspect of deity; Atchuta, the immutable aspect; and Aniruddha, the irreducible aspect. Here the worshipper contemplates on the absolute form (*nishkala*) of Vishnu in the universe and as present in the worshippers body; and transfers that spirit into the immovable idol (*Dhruva Bheru*) and requests the Vishnu to accept worship. Vishnu is then worshipped as the most honored guest. Lakshmi , Shri is important as nature, prakriti, and as the power, Shakti, of Vishnu.

The smaller movable images represent Vishnu's *Sakala* that is the manifest, divisible and emanated forms. The large immovable image representing Vishnu's *niskala* form, ritually placed in a sanctuary and elaborately consecrated; and the smaller movable images representing Vishnu's *sakala* form are treated differently.

The Pancharatra regards Narayana and Vasudeva too as forms of Vishnu the Supreme Principle (*Para*). In his manifest form (Vyuha) he is regarded as Vasudeva, Sankarshana, Pradyumna, and Aniruddha, representing Krishna, his elder brother, his son and his grandson, respectively, who are brought together in worship and adoration as a complete body of divine power.

It is explained that Vasudeva, the Supreme Brahman, out of compassion, voluntarily assumed the bodily forms so that the devotees may have easy access to his subtle form. The approach to the divine is again graded. The devotee worships the *Vibhava* form; or the incarnation of God, on several occasions such as Rama , etc and moves on to worship the *Vyuha* forms and from Vyuha form he progresses to worship the subtle forms of Vasudeva.

Among the other differences between Vaikhanasa and Pancharatra, the latter say, they gain eligibility to worship (*Diksha*) after the ceremonial *Chkrankana*, which is imprinting the symbols of Vishnu on their body. Vaikhanasa see no need for such a ritual. The pregnant mother is given a cup of *Payasam* with the Vishnu seal in the cup. They recognize as worthy only such *Garbha_Vaishnavas*.

Vaikhanasa follow the lunar calendar while the Pancharatra follow the solar calendar.

Vaikhanasa consider Vishnu_Vishvaksena_Brighu as the *guru_parampara*;

while Pancharatra consider Vishnu_Vishvaksena_Satagopa_Nathamuni_Yamuna_Ramanuja as the *guru-parampara*.

Vaikhanasa think it is enough if the daily worship is performed once in a day or, if needed be, stretched to six times in a day (*shat kala puja*). Pancharatra do not place any limit. If needed the service could be even 12 times a day, they say.

The Vaikhanasa worship is considered more Vedic, the mantras being Sanskrit based and there is a greater emphasis on details of worship rituals and yajnas. Even here, the householders and celibates get priority in worshipping the deity. They consider *Griha_archana* the worship at home as more important than the congregational worship. The Sanyasis or ascetics have no place in this system.

Whereas in Pancharatra, the emphasis is almost entirely on devotional idol worship than on yajnas; and more Tamil hymns are recited and there is greater scope for festivals, celebrations and processions where all sections of the society including ascetics can participate.

What surely is more important than the rituals is the symbolism that acts as the guiding spirit for conduct of rituals. At a certain level, symbolism takes precedence over procedures.

I think, ultimately, there is not much difference between Pancharatra and Vaikhanasa traditions. Both are equally well accepted. The differences, whatever might be, are not significant to a devotee who visits the temple just to worship the deity and to submit himself to the divine grace. The *Shaiva Agama* worship is less formal than the *Vaishnava*, less restrained and less accustomed to social forms of regulations. *Siva* is the Supreme God of the *Shaiva* system, who

is *Pati*, or Lord over all creatures, the latter being *Pashu*, meaning animal or of beastly nature. The *Jiva* or the individual is caught in the snare of world-existence and attachment to objects. The grace of God, alone, is the means of liberation for the individual.

The worship of *Shaiva* is graded in steps: *Charya*, or the external service rendered by the devotee, such as collecting flowers for worship in the temple, ringing the bell, cleaning the premises of the shrine, and the like; *Kriya*, or the internal service, such as actual worship as well as its preparations; *Yoga*, or seeking identity with Shiva; and *Jnana*, or wisdom, in which the Shiva and the seeker are one. In Southern Shaivism the great Shaiva saints *Appar*, *Sundarar*, *Jnanasambandar* and *Manikyavachagar*, are said to represent, respectively, these four approaches to Shiva.

Kashmir Shaivism is a world by it self. Similar is the *Shakta* Agama, the *Tantra* worship of *Shakti*, the Divine Mother. These subjects deserve to be discussed separately.

II.

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