Meeting 3: The hero of three wide steps

Víṣṇu in the Vedá-s and the Purāṇá-s

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Meeting agenda

- (Re)introduction to discussion group
- Today's meeting topic
- Free discussion

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- What is Vedic literature?
  - Sáṁhitā-s
  - Bráhmaṇa-s
  - Others?

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  - Later monism (ádvāita) vs. earlier dualism (dvāitá)
- Modern (religious, scholarly) fixation upon later literature

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- What is there to discuss?
  - History & linguistics
  - Metaphysics of religion
  - Exegesis (e.g. countering western narratives)
  - Moral principles
  - Nuances of Ṡrāutá ritual

Our plans

- Weekly meetings
- Different topic/aspect/angle discussed in depth every meeting
- Format:
    - Præsentations
    - Free-form discussions
- Eventually something more?

Let's introduce ourselves!

- Name
- School (if student)
- How you found this group
- Background/interest in Hinduism & Vedic literature

Some questions to consider

- What are the three steps of Víṣṇu? their significance?
- What is the role of Víṣṇu in the Vedic pantheon? What similarities are there to later religion?
- To what extent does Vaiṣṇavá have a basis in the Vedá-s?
- What predecessors of the classic Avatārá-s can be seen in much earlier literature?
- We'll return to these at the end!

Víṣṇu: an etymology in English

- Many gods' names originally nominals (e.g. Śivá), especially agents (e.g. Savitṛ́)
- -nu (here with conditioned retroflex): agentive
    - e.g. $\sqrt{d^h r̥ṣ}$ "to dare" → $d^h r̥ṣṇú$ "brave"
- Víṣṇu: one who does $\sqrt{viṣ}$

$\sqrt{viṣ}$ (MW on R̥V, ŚB)

- to be active, act, work, do, perform
- to be quick, speed, run, flow
- to work as a servant, serve
- to have done with i.e. overcome, subdue, rule

Víṣṇu: an etymology in German

- Emphasis on conquest:

$\sqrt{viṣ}$ (Graßmann)

> 5 feindlich ergreifen [A.], bewältigen [A.]

- but also unity:

$\sqrt{viṣ}$ (Graßmann)

> 10 sich vereinigen mit [I.]

- Overall:

víṣṇu (Graßmann)

> 1 wirksam

Víṣṇu in the R̥g-vedá

- Hymns addressed to Víṣṇu: 1.154, 1.156, 7.100
- Hymns addressed to Víṣṇu and Índra: 1.155, 7.99
- Minor god? Not necessarily.

Víṣṇor nú kaṁ · vīríāṇi prá vocam,
yáḥ pártʰivāni · vi mamé rájāṁsi,
yó áskabʰāyad · úttaraṁ sadʰá-stʰam,
vi-cakramāṇás · traya-dʰó 'ru-gāyáḥ.

Víṣṇu's heroic deeds I shall proclaim,
who measured out the Earthly and the Heavenly (regions),
(and) who propped up the higher abode,
striding thrice with wide steps.

—R̥V 1.154.1

Víṣṇu in the Ṛg-vedá

- Common attributes:
  - "Thrice-going", "wide-going" (everywhere)
  - "A youth who is no child" (1.155.6)
  - "Upholding the laws" (1.22.18)
  - "Generating Sū́rya, Uṣás, and Agní" (7.99.4)
  - "slaying Vṛtrá" (4.18.11), "conquering the Dásyu" (7.99.4)

The development of Vaiṣṇavá

- Origin in Bráhmaṇa literature
  - Also origins of many Avatārá-s!
- Development as supreme being
  - *beyond* godhood

Vadanti tat tattvavidas
tattvaṁ yaj jñānam advayam:
Brahme 'ti Paramātme 'ti
Bʰagavān iti śabdyate.

The knowers of truth speak
the truth that is non-dual knowledge:
As Brahman, as Paramātman,
as Bʰagavān it is called.

—BʰP 1.2.11

The development of Vaiṣṇavá

- Caste politics? Kṣatríya-s vs. Brāhmaṇá-s
  - Development of "Brahmanical" qualities in Víṣṇu
  - Power struggle with unique outcome
- Humiliation, denigration of Índra (becomes common theme)
  - New rivalry between Índra and Víṣṇu!

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