

Meeting 3: The hero of three wide steps

Víṣṇu in the Vedá-s and the Purāṇá-s

Nikhil Surya Dwibhashyam, Rohan Pandey

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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?
 - Sāṃhitā-s
 - Brāhmaṇa-s
 - Others?

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

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- Modern (religious, scholarly) fixation upon later literature
- What is there to discuss?
 - History & linguistics
 - Metaphysics of religion
 - Exegesis (e.g. countering western narratives)
 - Moral principles
 - Nuances of Śrāutá 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 Vīṣṇu? their significance?
- What is the role of Vīṣṇu 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. Savitr̥)
- -nu (here with conditioned retroflex): agentive
 - e.g. $\sqrt{dhr̥ṣ}$ "to dare" $\rightarrow dhr̥ṣṇú$ "brave"
- Víṣṇu: one who does $\sqrt{viṣ}$

$\sqrt{viṣ}$ (MW on RV, 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

Viṣṇu: an etymology in German

- Emphasis on conquest:

√*viṣ* (Graßmann)

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

- but also unity:

√*viṣ* (Graßmann)

- 10 sich vereinigen mit [I.]

- Overall:

viṣṇu (Graßmann)

- 1 wirksam

Víṣṇu in the Ṛg-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 párt^hivāni · vi mamé rájāṁsi,
yó áskab^hāyad · úttaraṁ sad^há-st^ham,
vi-cakramāṇás · traya-d^hó '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.*

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 Sūrya, Uṣás, and Agní” (7.99.4)
- “slaying Vṛtrá” (4.18.11), “conquering the Dásyu” (7.99.4)

The development of Vaiṣṇavá

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

Vadanti tat tattvavidas
tattvaṁ yaj jñānam advayam:
Brahme 'ti Paramātmne 'ti
B^hagavān iti śabdyate.

*The knowers of truth speak
the truth that is non-dual knowledge:
As Brahman, as Paramātmā,
as B^hagavān it is called.*

The development of Vaiṣṇavá

- Caste politics? Kṣatriya-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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