

**FINAL DEVELOPMENT OF AVATĀRAVĀDA****Śrī Swāminārāyaṇa as Avtārī**

The concept of Avtārīn is an important teaching of Śrī Swāminārāyaṇa Hinduism that the most exalted of the manifestations of God are in human form. Śrī Swāminārāyaṇa taught that God is in human form in his eternal abode. His teaching is based on the traditional Vaiṣṇava teaching regarding the manifestations of God (*avatāra*).

According to the traditional teaching, whenever there is a great need, God manifests of His own free will, on earth in the created order to assist men. Whereas other creatures take birth as compelled by *karmic* law, God acts of His own will.

Śrī Swāminārāyaṇa also taught that no limit exists in principle on the number of manifestations. Just as Śrī Kṛṣṇa assumed as many forms as the number of cowherd maidens (*gopīs*) with whom he danced, so God can manifest himself simultaneously in his divine form in each and every universe whenever he desires (HVSS 175). Ten major avatāras of Viṣṇu or Nārāyaṇa have appeared, some in human and others in animal form, they came with three general purpose: to protect the devotees, to destroy evil-doers, and to establish the rule of sacred law (Cf. Bhagavadgītā IV.7-8)

Thus, Śrī Swāminārāyaṇa supported the general Vaiṣṇava tradition when he affirmed that there have been many avatāras, and he demonstrated traditional Hindu tolerance when he included Christ among the avatāras. Swāminārāyaṇa told His followers to revere all the manifestations of god, but to give primary worship only to images in human form.

Śrī Swāminārāyaṇa taught that Kṛṣṇa was the highest manifestation of Parabrahman or Puruṣottama and that he was the only appropriate object of devotion and meditations. Hence, the Swāminārāyaṇa religion is sometimes identified, somewhat inexactly, as a Kṛṣṇite sect of the Gujarat (Mallison 1974 : 437-71). There is, one must admit, considerable support for this identification in the literature, temples, and rituals of the satsaṅg. In general, Vaiṣṇavas in Gujarat are worshipers of Kṛṣṇa. One verse of the *Śikṣāpatrī*, contains the injunction: “That Being, known by various names - such as the glorious Kṛṣṇa, Parabrahman, Bhagavān, Puruṣottama - the cause of all manifestations, is to be adored by us as our one chosen deity” (108; trans. Monier - Williams 1882a : 762).

Śrī Swāminārāyaṇa explained that Kṛṣṇa appears in many forms. When he is together with Rādhā, he is regarded as supreme lord under the name of Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa; with Rukmiṇī he is known as Lakṣmī-Nārāyaṇa; when joined with Arjuna he is known by the name of Nara-Nārāyaṇa; when associated with other divine figures, he is called by other names. Śrī Swāminārāyaṇa told his disciples, “Out of the various incarnations emanating from Nārāyaṇa Kṛṣṇa is dearest to me. And I feel that this incarnation is the greatest of all the incarnations and the most powerful. It is distinguished as the source out of which the other avatāras emerge” (Vacanāmṛtam, Loyā 14, HVSS 122).

A more widely held position in the initial stages was that Śrī Swāminārāyaṇa was a manifestation of Kṛṣṇa. Many followers believe that there is no essential difference between Śrī Swāminārāyaṇa, called *Śrī Swāminārāyaṇa* in his exalted role, and Kṛṣṇa. He manifested himself

in one form in Kṛṣṇa at a particular time and in another form in Śrī Swāminārāyaṇa, the latest of the manifestations.

During Śrī Swāminārāyaṇa's own lifetime there was a growing acceptance of his divinity as Śrī Swāminārāyaṇa. Many accepted his leadership and his divinity. Mukṭānanda Swāmī was the most senior disciple of Rāmānanda Swāmī and was twenty-two years older than Śrī Swāminārāyaṇa. When Śrī Swāminārāyaṇa became leader, Mukṭānanda accepted him without argument, but continued to give precedence to Rāmānanda in reverence. At last, it is said, he had vision in which Rāmānanda set forth the correct relationship between them: "I am merely the drum-beater (one who goes through the town to beat a drum to attract attention and make the announcements), whereas he is the real performer (the one whose act has been advertised)." As a result, Mukṭānanda spontaneously composed a chant which he sang as he performed the weaving of the ceremonial light (*ārati*) before Śrī Swāminārāyaṇa.

We have shown earlier that as early as A.D.1804 Śrī Swāminārāyaṇa was described as a manifestation of god in a work called *Yama-daṇḍa*, a work of great historical value because it is the first work written in the sect. Niṣkuḷānanda Swāmī, an important author of twenty-four poetic works, believed that emancipation would come from Śrī Swāminārāyaṇa, who is the perfect teacher and manifestation of Kṛṣṇa. Whoever comes to him is promised salvation from miseries. Even at this early date in Śrī Swāminārāyaṇa's career, some followers believed that at the death of followers who have faith in him, Śrī Swāminārāyaṇa will come to transport them to his abode, where they will reside as released souls. The last chapter of *Yama-daṇḍa* is a song of thanksgiving for the one who brings this emancipation.

It is said : "The sādhus and devotees seated in the assembly realised that the form of Śrī Kṛṣṇa described as remote in Akṣaradhāma had manifested before them presently as Śrījī Mahārāja, son of Mother Bhakti and Father Dharmadeva. No one transcends Him. He is the Divine Form

for our worship and He is our preceptor also” (HVSS 218). The development of insight to recognize this mystery was the path of spiritual development followed by a number of his disciples. Some were aided by being placed in a trance state in which they were enabled to “see” the truth, and these events are the most characteristic of the miracles attributed to Śrī Swāminārāyaṇa during that period.

Rāmānanda is identified as Uddhava. The Brahmin parents of Śrī Swāminārāyaṇa were given the names Dharma and Bhakti, and images of them, a holy family, are found in the temples.

Now, most followers believe that Śrī Swāminārāyaṇa is the single, complete manifestation of Nārāyaṇa or the supreme person, and, as such, is superior in power and efficacy to all other manifestations of god, including Rāma and Kṛṣṇa. Śrī Swāminārāyaṇa is not an incarnation of Kṛṣṇa, but is the full manifestation of Puruṣottama, the supreme person himself.

The deities (*īśvaras*) are involved in the functions of creation, sustenance, and destruction of the universe. They are involved in the flux of the world (*māyā*) because they are attached to the activities of cosmic creation. The Puruṣottama has sent the avatāras into the mundane world, and they manifest themselves at his will. His powers emanate through the *avatāras* for the execution of assigned duties for human emancipation. Śrī Swāminārāyaṇa is superior to all, thought to be the perfect and complete manifestation of Puruṣottama in his human form on earth.

Puruṣottama is the supreme person, the *Parabrahman* identified with Śrī Swāminārāyaṇa as shown in the previous chapter. Puruṣottama is both a divine name and a metaphysical definition of god (Carman 1974 : I59).

Śrī Swāminārāyaṇa thought that God created man in His own image. Emancipated souls also secure for themselves a similar divine body. The fundamental difference between these two kinds of bodies is that the limitations and imperfections essential to the human body are not attached to the divine body. Thus, according to the teaching of Śrī Swāminārāyaṇa, the resemblance between man and god is not due to the fact that men can

conceive god only in the image of man. On the contrary, it exists because man is the crown of creation and has been made in the image of god. Thus, anthropology and theology are complementary, and what we find here is not so much an anthropomorphic conception of God as “a theomorphic conception of man” (Yajnik 1972 : 71). The goal in the sect is to realize that the god who manifests himself on earth in the human form of Śrī Swāminārāyaṇa is the highest supreme reality and that he is the cause of all avatāras is mentioned in previous chapter.

The difference between human beings and the divine manifestation is that the former have bodies and certain personal characteristics caused by the actions of previous births, whereas the latter takes on a body with ordinary human characteristics by his own free will and has no attachment to it whatever. Still, he does not allow his divine characteristics to overshadow the human characteristics. According to the teaching of Śrī Swāminārāyaṇa, god even in human form is totally divine and bereft of all human instincts.

When god in human form exhibits such human instincts as passion, anger, enjoyment of taste, affection, valor, hunger, and partiality. He is unaffected by any of these emotions or feelings. As he says, “I display the feeling of affection for you all, accept the various sumptuous meals that are offered by you, sit on high pedestals, accept the rich dresses, ornaments and garlands of flowers all this I do, not for any enjoyment for me, but for your emancipation only” (HVSS 18).

Thus, at least three levels of understanding of the relation of Śrī Swāminārāyaṇa to Puruṣottama and Kṛṣṇa are found in literature of the group. There was a clear development in the faith about Śrī Swāminārāyaṇa. From an ascetic student he became the ācārya of the faith and was identified with Śrī Kṛṣṇa and at last was regarded as the Supreme Godhead. Although he had a clear vision of his true nature at all times, there was a progressive development in his teaching as his hearers were prepared to receive more complete understanding of his nature. He

made explicit his teaching to match the receptivity of his hearers and was reluctant to speak openly about his identity with Puruṣottama except to his closest disciples.

The difference of interpretation that is observed in the literature was not due to a development in his understanding or teaching from first to last, but was due to a difference in understanding on the part of individual disciples according to their spiritual development.

