CHAPTER II: THE CONCEPT OF VIŚṆU
CHAPTER-II

THE CONCEPT OF VIṣṇU

1. The Ultimate Reality in the Viṣṇu Purāṇa:

Brahman and Ātman are the terms used in the Upaniṣads to refer to the Ultimate Reality. The Upaniṣads regard these two as identical.1 Viṣṇu or Nārāyaṇa is regarded as the Ultimate Reality. Viṣṇu is identified with Brahman. It is also said that Brahman is the self (ātman) of the entire universe, and is Supreme.2 Due to His greatness (bhaktvat) the self is called Brahman and it is called Brahman because it is the cause of growth (brūḥanatvat). The literal meaning of the word Viṣṇu is that reality which pervades everything. Yāska in his Nirukta gives the etymology of the word Viṣṇu as "visnur visaterva vyāsnotervā".3 The word Viṣṇu is derived from the root vis or vis' with the addition of the suffix nuk. The root vis denotes pervasiveness and the root vis' to enter.4 Hence, the etymological meaning of the term Viṣṇu is that which pervades everything or that which enters.

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1. ayamātmā brahma, BU, 2.5.19
2. tamḥbrahmabhūtamātmānamāsajagatāḥ param / prapadye śaraṇāṁ sūddhāṁ tadrūpāṁ paramēśvarāṁ// VP, 1.12.56
3. bhaktvat brūḥanatvād ātmaiva brahmaṃ ghyate. Bhāmāti, P. 5
4. Nirukta, 12.18
5. viservyāpyatyarthābhidhāyino nuk pratayāntasya rūpaṁ ........ visāterva nukpratyayasya rūpaṁ viṣṇuriti. Viṣṇusahasranāma, Sahkarabhāṣya, P. 138
everywhere. Both these meanings ultimately denote a reality, which is absolutely pervasive in nature and is not restricted by time, space or property. In the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* itself the term Viṣṇu is derived from the root *vis* that means to enter. Thus it is said, “As this whole world has been pervaded by the energy of the God he is called Viṣṇu, from the root *vis* to enter.” The same idea is expressed in some other Purāṇas also. Hence, the word Viṣṇu stands for all pervasiveness. The *Mahābhārata* also says that He is Viṣṇu because He has covered the three worlds. This idea is actually derived from the Vedas where the three steps of Viṣṇu are said to cover the whole world. Thus from all these explanations of the word Viṣṇu it is clear that Viṣṇu is all-pervasive, He is infinitely large.

Now the word *Brahman* is also derived from the root *bṛh* or *bṛih* with the suffix *man*. The meaning of the roots *bṛh* and *bṛih* is to grow, to expand, to make grow etc. The suffix *man* added to it signifies an absence of limitation. So *Brahman* derivatively means that which is absolutely the

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6. *yasmādviṣvamidāṁ sarvāṁ tasya śāktyā mahātmanah/*
   *tasmāt sa procyateviṣpurisedhātoḥ praveṣanāḥ// VP, 3.1.45*
8. *kramāṇādāpyahāṁ pārtha viṣṇuṁ abhisamāyitaḥ. MB, 12.341.43*
9. *Rg.V, 1.22.17 etc.*
greatest. This again implies that Brahman is all pervading. Therefore Brahman and Viṣṇu denote the one and the same reality.

2. The Nature of Viṣṇu:

The Viṣṇu Purāṇa advocates that Brahman is the Ultimate Reality and Viṣṇu is identified with this Brahman. Now, Viṣṇu and Brahman being the same reality all the natures of Brahman advocated in the Upaniṣads are also attributed to Viṣṇu. Thus Viṣṇu is nirguṇa and saccidānandarupa existence, consciousness and bliss. Just like Brahman Viṣṇu is unchangeable, pure, eternal and supreme. He is of one universal nature and mighty over all. He is the support of all and is smaller than the smallest. He is immanent in all beings. He is unChanged and imperishable. This implies that though Viṣṇu is immanent in all beings yet is not limited by them. He is also transcendent of the world. Viṣṇu is again of the nature of knowledge (jñānasvarūpam) and very pure. In the

10. Cf. BSS, 1.1.1; Bhāsyaratnaprabhā on it
11. bhūtāvād brāhmaṇatvāccha yadrūpāṁ brahmaśaṁjñātaṁ / VP, 1.12.57 and brahmaśvarūpāṁ devaṁ / Ibid, 1.4.5
12. Cf. Ibid, 1.3.1; 1.2.6; 1.14.38
13 avikārya sūddhāya nityāya paramātmene/
    sadaikarūparūpāya viṣṇave sarvajiṣṇave// Ibid, 1.2.1
14. ādhibhūtaṁ viśvāpyaṇāṁsamaṇāyasyaṁ/ 
    praṇamya sarvabhūtaḥsthamacyutaṁ puruṣottamaṁ// Ibid, 1.2.5
15. Cf. Śrīdhara’s Comm. on Ibid.
second chapter of first Part Parāśāra clearly says that the nature of Viṣṇu is falsely apprehended by the jīvas as of the nature of visible objects. Wilson here points out that “visible objects are not what they seem to be independent existences; they are essentially one with their original source and knowledge of their true nature or relation to Viṣṇu, is knowledge of Viṣṇu himself. In His real nature Viṣṇu is the best (para) of all things, the supreme (parama), supreme self (paramātman), self-existent (ātmasamsthitā). He is devoid of all distinguishing characteristics of colour, caste etc. In this way Viṣṇu is described as nirguṇa (qualityless) and nirvisēsa (adjectiveless). In the third chapter Viṣṇu is clearly said as nirguṇa and indescribable. Parāśāra also describes that Viṣṇu is devoid of all the bhāvavikāras enumerated by Yāska, viz., birth vicissitude, death, decay etc. But then the question arises whether Viṣṇu is devoid of existence also. If Viṣṇu is said to be devoid of existence, then that will go against the Upaniṣadic spirit. It is said in the Upaniṣads, “asanneva sa bhavat asad brahmeti veda cet. asti brahmeti cveda santamanaih".

16. jñānasvarūpamatyantaniśrmaṇaṁ paramārthataḥ/ tāmevārthasvarūpeṇa bhṛntidarśānataḥ sthitam // Ibid, 1.2.6
17. H.H. Wilson, The Vishnu Purāṇa, P. 8n
18. parah parāṁ paramaḥ paramātmanamātmasanisthitah/ rūpavartādiniṁdeśa visēṣāṇavivarjiteḥ// Ibid, 1.2.10
19. apaksaya vināsābhyyāṁ pariṇāmarddhijanmabhijih/ barjitaṁ śakyate vakturāṁ yah sadāsti kevalaiḥ// Ibid, 1.2.11 and Nirukta, 1.2

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“sadeva somya idamagra asit” etc. Hence, Parâśara says that Viṣṇu is always existent or sat. He is Supreme Lord, eternal, unborn, imperishable, undecaying and of one essence.

This Viṣṇu is called Vāsudeva. The Viṣṇu Purāṇa explains the meaning of the word Vāsudeva. The word is derived from the root vas to dwell Viṣṇu is called Vāsudeva since He exists everywhere and in Him all things exist. The Mahābhārata also explains the word Vāsudeva in the similar way - “He causes all things to dwell in him, and he abides in all, whence he is named vasu: being resplendent as the sun, he is called Deva, and he who is both these, is denominated Vāsudeva,” Viṣṇu is described as pure as he is free from defects.

The nature of Viṣṇu is again emphasised in the words of Brahmā who praises Nārāyaṇa or Viṣṇu as Supreme Lord who is smallest of the smallest as also largest of the largest. He is unborn imperishable and indivisible. No one can perceive Him, as He is unperceivable (aprakāśa). Nārāyaṇa is devoid of any difference also (abhesa). He is the supreme self.

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20. TU, 2.6
21. CU, 6.2
22. VP, 1.2.11; Śrīdhara’s Comm. on it
23. sarvatraṣaṁ samastāṁ ca vasatya-treti vai yataḥ/
tataḥ sa vāsudeveti vidvadbhīḥ pariṣṭhyate // Ibid, 1.2.12
24. Vide, H.H. Wilson, The Vishnu Purāṇa, P. 8n
25. tadbrahma ................. sadā heyābhāvāc ca nirmalam / VP, 1.2.13
in whom all things remain and from whom all things are produced. Just like the Upaniṣads Brahma also says that Viṣṇu exists before the existence of this world.26 The nature of Viṣṇu is pure, intelligent, perpetual, inscrutable and immutable; it is neither gross nor subtle. No adjective can define Viṣṇu’s nature and as such it is inscrutable.27

According to the Upaniṣads Brahman the Absolute cannot be defined by any positive definition. Any positive descriptions of Brahman will naturally bring limitation to it, while Brahman is infinite. Every word employed to denote a thing denotes that thing as associated with a certain genus or act or quality or mode of relation. Brahman is devoid of all these. Hence, our speech cannot express Brahman and our limited mind cannot comprehend the unlimited greatness of it. That is why Brahman is said be avāṁmānasagocara. As such Upaniṣads describe Brahman only negatively as neti (not this), neti (not this).28

In the same way the Viṣṇu Purāṇa also regards Viṣṇu or Brahman as inscrutable or indefinable. Viṣṇu can be defined only negatively. That is why we find that the Pracetas eulogised Viṣṇu attributing all negative

26. Ibid, 1.9.39-41
27. viśuddhāṁ bodhāṁ nityamajamakṣayamavyayaṁ / avyaktamavikāraṁ yat tadviṣṇaṁ paramaṁ padaṁ // na sthūlaṁ na ca sūkṣmaṁ yanna viśeṣaṇaṅgocaraṁ / VP, 1.9.50-51(a)
28. Cf. BU, 4.2.4; Kenopaniṣad, 1.5-9 etc.
qualities to Him. Thus it is said that Viṣṇu is neither long nor short, neither bulky nor minute. He is neither red nor atomic in size. He has neither affection nor body. Viṣṇu has not attachment to anybody. He has neither shape, nor colour, nor shadow, nor substance. He is neither ethereal nor susceptible to contact, smell or taste. Viṣṇu is devoid of eyes, ears, motion, speech, breathe, mind, name and race. He has neither enjoyment, nor splendor. He is without cause, without fear, without error and without fault. He is un-decaying, immortal and free from passion. He is also without sound, imperceptible and inactive. Viṣṇu is independent of place and time and is detached from all properties. Hence the nature of Viṣṇu cannot be expressed by the tongue and cannot be perceived by our eyes.\textsuperscript{29}

The Viṣṇu Purāṇa repeatedly asserts that Viṣṇu is nirguna or quality less, it is ignorantly considered as endowed with qualities.\textsuperscript{30}

The indescribable nature of Viṣṇu is again stressed in the 1\textsuperscript{st} chapter of the 5\textsuperscript{th} part of Viṣṇu Purāṇa in the words of Brahmā. Brahmā here praises Hari as imperceptible indescribable and inconceivable. About the nature of Brahman Sruti says that though without hand and foot He runs and grasps, though without eyes He sees and hears being without any ear. He knows all that may be known and there is none who knows Him. He is

\begin{itemize}
\item[29. \textit{VP}, 1.14.38-43]
\item[30. \textit{suddhaḥ saṁlakṣyate bhrāntyā guṇavāniva yo’guṇah} / \textit{VP}, 1.14.37]
\end{itemize}
the first Great Spirit. In the same vein and more or less in the same words, the *Visnu Purana* describes Kṛṣṇa or Viṣṇu. Thus Brahmā praises God, “Without ears you hear and without eyes you see, you are one and also multiform. You also move though without feet and take though without hands. You know all but are not known by anybody.”

3. Viṣṇu as *Saguna*:

From our foregoing discussion it is clear that the *Visnu Purana* holds Viṣṇu or Brahman as nirguna or devoid of qualities. But the Purāṇas, especially the Viṣṇuite ones characterise Viṣṇu as a personal God and as such the *saguna* (qualified) character of this reality also finds prevalence in the Purāṇas. The *Visnu Purana* maintains that Viṣṇu is not nirguna only but He is also *saguna*. That is why numerous good qualities are ascribed to Viṣṇu. He is described as possessing thousand heads, thousand eyes and thousand feet who is all-pervading and traverses the world but remains ten inches (*daśāṅgulaḥ*) more. Ācārya Śrīdhara comments here that...
implies the infinite extension of the Lord. It also implies the non-restriction of God by the world. This verse is actually quoted verbatim from the Puruṣasukta of the Rgveda.

Viṣṇu is Puruṣottama (the supreme person); everything-past, present and future-is His form. Viṣṇu is all-earth, water, fire, air, ether, mind, intellect, beings etc. He is all-pervading and protector of all. He is Supreme over all the elements and all the objects of senses, over intellect over Prakṛti and Puruṣa. Viṣṇu is the cause of all. He is the cause of origination, sustenance and destruction of the world. The all-pervasive Lord assumes the three gunās – sattva, rajas and tamas for the purpose of creation, sustenance and destruction of the world. When he is invested with the power of rajas, He is Brahmā, the creator; when invested with sattva, He is Viṣṇu, the sustainer; and when he is invested with tamas, He becomes Rudra, the destroyer. Hence, Janārđana (the object of worship to mankind) takes designation as Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śiva-the trinity-for...
the purpose of creation etc. though in essence He is one.\(^{39}\) He is the author and object of creation. He preserves, destroys and He Himself is the object of preservation.\(^{40}\) This means that there is nothing except Viṣṇu, and everything of the world is but Viṣṇu Himself.\(^{41}\) He is the lord of all creatures and the universal form. He is the Supreme, the giver of all-goods, the fountain of all happiness. Puruṣa, Prakṛti, Kāla and manifested objects are only His different forms.

To emphasise the greatness of Viṣṇu many opposite characteristics are attributed to Him. He is *saguna* and *nirguna*, one and many, small and large, subtle and gross, manifest and unmanifest. He is one as cause many as effects. Cause is again *avyakta* or unmanifest and effect is *vyakta* or manifest.\(^{42}\) He is devoid of three guṇas, but *triguṇātmaka* (having three guṇas). He is the creator and the created, the enjoyer and the enjoyed, the cause and the effect etc.\(^{43}\) Viṣṇu is *amūrtta* (formless) and *mūrtta* (formed), immutable (*akṣara*) and mutable (*kṣara*), perceptible and imperceptible, visible and invisible. He is devoid of parts and again is with parts.

\(^{39}\) srṣṭisthityantakaranād brahmaviṣṇuṣvātmikāḥ

\[\text{sa samjñāṁ yāti bhagavān eka eva janārdanaḥ} \]

// Ibid, 1.2.64

\(^{40}\) srasta srjati catmanam visnuḥ pālita ca/patī ca

\[\text{upasaṁhriyate cānte saṁhartā ca svayaṁ prabhuh} \]

// Ibid, 1.2.65

\(^{41}\) Ibid, 1.2.15, 65-66

\(^{42}\) ekānekasvarūpāya .............. muktihetave // Ibid, 1.2.3; Śrīdhara’s Commentary ibid.

\(^{43}\) Ibid, 1.9.46-49
perishable and again imperishable as also is of the nature of both existence and non-existence. He is eternal and non eternal, \textit{nispapañca} (acosmic) and \textit{sapapañca} (cosmic). Viṣṇu is \textit{puruṣottama}.\textsuperscript{44}

Brahman, who is imperceptible, un-decaying, inconceivable, unborn, inexhaustible, indescribable, almighty, omnipresent, eternal, because of all and without cause, is denoted by the term \textit{Bhagavat}. The \textit{Purāṇa} says that the word \textit{Bhagavat} is a convenient word used in adoration of that Supreme Being, to whom no term is applicable.\textsuperscript{45} The \textit{Purāṇa} explains the word to indicate the nature of Brahman as both \textit{Saguna} and \textit{Nirguna}. The letter ‘bh’ means the cherisher and supporter of the universe, the letter ‘ga’ means giver of the fruits of action and knowledge and also creator. The syllable ‘Bhaga’ again indicates the six properties of Viṣṇu, viz, \textit{aisvarya} (dominion), \textit{dharma} (righteousness), \textit{yasa} (glory and spendour), \textit{jnana} (wisdom) and \textit{vairagya} (dispassion). The letter ‘v’ denotes that reality which exists in all beings and in which all beings exist. In this way the word \textit{Bhagavat} is denotative of Vāsudeva, who is the Supreme Spirit. Though the word is a general denomination of all adorables things, yet primarily means Vāsudeva only, in other cases it is applied only

\textsuperscript{44} Ibid, 1.20.9-12

\textsuperscript{45} \textit{tadeva bhagavadvācyāṁ svarūpaṁ paramātmanah / vācako bhagavacchadbastasyādyasyāksayātmanah //} Ibid, 6.5.69
secondarily. According to the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* the word actually denotes all the good qualities like wisdom, energy, power, dominion, valour and splendour.\(^{46}\)

4. Viṣṇu as the Cause of All:

The whole universe is the manifestation of Viṣṇu who resides in all beings. Viṣṇu is both immanent and transcendent of the world. From Him have originated *Virāt* (i.e., *Brahmāṇḍa*), *Svarāt* (Brahma), *Samvāt* (Manus) and *Ādipurūṣa* (the presiding Spirit).\(^{47}\) This entire world is in Him. In fact the world is included in the *Brahmāṇḍa*, which is nothing but an effect of Viṣṇu and as such is in Him. This means that the whole world is originated from Viṣṇu. To exemplify this the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* elaborately enumerates different objects of the world, which are originated from Him. It is said here that the sacrifices, all oblations curds and ghee are derived from Him. Both domestic and wild animals originate from Him. The Vedas, viz., *Rgveda*, *Yajurveda*, and *Sāmaveda* as also the *Chandāsav* (metres) are born from Him. Animals like horses, cows, goats, sheep, deer, etc. come from Him. The four castes also are born from Him. From His mouth the *Brāhmanas* are born, from His arms, the *Kṣatriyas*, from His

\(^{46}\) Ibid, 6.5.72-79

\(^{47}\) Ibid, 1.12.59; Śridhara’s Commentary on Ibid
Also describes the origination of the different things of the world from the different limbs of Viṣṇu. Thus, from His eyes comes out the sun, from His ears, the wind, from His mind the moon. The vital airs are born from His veins; fire is born from His mouth, the sky from the novel, and heaven from the head. The regions are originated from His eyes, the earth from His feet. Hence, he creates this entire world; it exists in Him and at the time of dissolution goes back to Him. The Viṣṇu Purāṇa describes this idea with a beautiful analogy. Just as a great Nyagrodha tree remains compressed in a small seed, so also the whole universe is comprehended in Viṣṇu in a seed form at the time of dissolution. As the Nyagrodha germinates from the seed, and becomes first a shoot and then rises into loftiness, so the world proceeds from Him and expands in to magnitude.

Moreover, as the world originates from Viṣṇu, so it cannot be different from Him. The Viṣṇu Purāṇa clarifies this idea with an example. Just as the plantain tree is not seen differently from its barks or leaves, so also the

48. tvanmukhād brahmaṁāstvatto bāhvoḥ kṣatramajāyata //
   vaiṣyāstavorujāh ūdrāstava paddhyāṁ samudgatāṁ / Ibd, 1. 12. 63 (b)-64 (a)

49. viṣṇoḥ sakāśat sambhūtaṁ jagat tatraiva saṁsthitāṁ /
   sthitisaṁyamakartā' sau jagato'sya jagacca saḥ //Ibid,1.1.35;also Cf. Ibid 1.12.64-

50. nyagrodhaḥ sumahānalpe yathā bīje vyavasthitāḥ //
   saṁyame viśvamakhilāṁ bijabhūte tathā tvayī /
   bijādaṁkurasambhūto nyagrodhaḥ susamutthitaḥ // Ibid. 1.12. 66 (b)-67.
universe is non-different from Viṣṇu. As Viṣṇu is the cause of all, hence, He is described as the Self of all (sarvātmak), Lord of all beings (śarvabhūtesa) and origin of all things. He is all beings and knows the desires of all creatures.

5. Powers of Viṣṇu:

A question is asked here: how can creative agency be attributed to that Brahmān who is quality-less and immutable? To answer this question, the Viṣṇu Purāṇa takes the help of the power of Viṣṇu. It is said that Viṣṇu creates this world with the help of His power which is unthinkable in nature and which belongs to Him just as heat is inherent in fire. Three types of power or Sakti of Viṣṇu are mentioned in the Viṣṇu Purāṇa. These are Viṣṇu-sakti or Parā-sakti, Kṣetrajñā-sakti and Avidyā-sakti or Karmasakti. Parā-sakti is the highest power of Viṣṇu. It is of the nature of consciousness and is non-different from Viṣṇu's essence.

51. yathā hi kadali nānyā tvakpatrād vātha dṛṣṭyate //
evān visvasya nānyatvām tatsthāyīśvara dṛṣṭyate / Ibid, 1.12. 68 (b)-69 (a)
52. Ibid, 1.12.74
53. Ibid, 1.3.1-3
54. viṣṇusaktih parā prokta kṣetrajñākhyā tathāparā//
avidyā karmasaṁjñānyā tṛiśyā saktirśyate // Ibid, 6.7.61
Bhadra kali, Candi, Kumari, Vaisnavi etc. The relation of Śrī with Viṣṇu is like the relation of a word with its meaning. To describe the relation of Viṣṇu with Śrī, the Viṣṇu Purāṇa proceeds with different examples. Thus the relation of Viṣṇu with Śrī is as Yajñavidyā, Mahāvidyā, Guhyavidyā and Atmavidyā. She is eternal and imperishable. Like Viṣṇu, Lakṣmī is also all-pervading and omnipresent.

The Ksetrajñā-sākти of Viṣṇu is also all-pervasive. It resides in both animate and inanimate things. Avidyā envelops this Ksetrajñā-sākти and because of this avidyā the individual self suffers all the pains of the world. Being obfuscated by avidyā this Sākти remains in different individuals in different degrees. That is why in things without life it exists in a very small degree, it is more in things that have life. But in animate things also there

55. Ibid, 1.8.15-32
56. evam yathā jagatsvāmī devadevi janārddanaḥ/
avatāraṁ karotyeṣa tathā śrīstataḥsahāyīni // Ibid, 1.9.140
57. Ibid,1.9.118-124
are degrees of difference in different things. The *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* gives a list of the existence of different degrees of the *Kṣetrajña-śakti* in different beings starting from plants up to Hiraṇyagarbha.\(^{58}\)

The third Sakti of Viṣṇu is *avidyā*, which creates this material world. This Sakti causes the selves to undergo transmigration. This is called *māyā* which is conceived as both the cause like earth etc and the effect like pot etc.\(^{59}\) Viṣṇu creates the world with the help of His power.

6. *Para Brahman And Apara Brahman*:

In the *Mundakopanisad* two types of knowledge (*vidyā*) are described – *parā* (supreme) and *aparā* (inferior). The Vedas and other scriptures constitute the *aparā vidyā*, while the knowledge by which the absolute *Brahman* is known is called *parā-vidyā*.\(^{60}\) Following the *Upaniṣads* the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* also alludes to these two types of knowledge – *parā* and *aparā*. According to the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* both these are *Brahman*’s nature. Here two types of Brahman are distinguished – one –

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58. hiraṇyagarbho’ti tataḥ puṇisah śāktyupalakṣitaḥ /
   etānyāseṣarūpasya tasya rūpāni pārthiva // Ibid, 6.7.67
59. Ibid, 6.7.61; Śridhar’s Commentary on it
60. MU, 1.1.4-5
Sabda-brahman and the other is Parabrahman. The Vedas constitute Sabdabrahman. Not only the Vedas but the six Vedāṅgas, Itihāsa, Purāṇa, Vvākaraṇga, Mīmāṁsā, Nyāya, Tattva and Dharmasāstras— all these Scriptures are His form and as such constitute Sabdabrahman. The Supreme or Para Brahman is the Absolute Reality, which is unmanifest, indeterminate, unthinkable and devoid of names and forms. It also said that Parabrahman could be known only after Sabdabrahman is known. The commentator says that the Supreme Brahman can be known by discriminative knowledge alone. In this way Viṣṇu Purāṇa recognizes two types of vidyā—one is of the nature of action (karmaṇa), which the Vedas prescribe and the other is of the nature of wisdom (jñāna). However, though a distinction is made between Sabda-Brahman and Para-Brahman, but in reality they are not different. The difference is only of the viewpoint.

The Sabda-Brahman actually refers to the Saguna aspect whereas Para Brahman refers to the nirguna aspect of the same Brahman. Hence, it is said that one is Mūrta (possessed of form) and the other is Amūrta (devoid of form).

61. dve brahmaṇī veditavye sabdabrahma paraṇca yat /
    sabdabrahmaṇi niśpātaḥ paraṁ brahmādhigacchati // Ibid, 6.5.64
62. Ibid, 6.5.61,64
63. Śrīdhar’s Commentary on Ibid
64. sa iśvaro vyāśṭisamaṣṭirūpo vyaktasvarūpo prakāṭasvarūpaḥ / Ibid, 6.5.86
7. The Doctrine of Incarnation:

The doctrine of Incarnation is actually a distinctive feature of Vaishnavism. The term *avatāra* means assuming the form of a man or another animal by the God for the purpose of fulfilling some particular objective. *Śrīmadbhagavatagītā* declares that when injustice and lawlessness abound in the universe Viṣṇu will incarnate in the world in various forms and reinstate righteousness.⁶⁵ Though it is more a Purānic conception, the doctrine of incarnation is really found in a seed form in the Vedas. The *Rgveda* says that Indra possesses the ability of assuming many forms to accomplish a purpose.⁶⁶ According to the *Rgveda*, Viṣṇu is another such deity who can assume different forms in different times according to his own wish.⁶⁷ Bhandarkar points out that “The conception that the supreme spirit manifests himself in various forms which we have expressed in the Upaniṣads is a development, in the opposite direction, of the idea that one God, for instance Agni, is the same as Varuṇa, Mitra, Indra and Aryaman.” If these several gods are one, one god may become several.”⁶⁸ The elaborate concept of incarnation is mainly found in the

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⁶⁵ BG, 4.7-8
⁶⁶ Rg V, 6.47.17-18
⁶⁷ Ibid, 7.100.61
Purāṇas. The term *Avatāra* is derived from the root ‘ṛ’ by adding the prefix ‘ava’ which means descent of the God. In some Purāṇas the word ‘Prādurbhāva’ is also used to mean the incarnation of the God. The signification of the words ‘avatāra’ or ‘prādurbhāva’ is that God Viṣṇu, who is eternal, cannot be tied down by the chain of births and deaths as a mere mortal, He only descends from His divine abode for the benefit of the devotees. As and when this purpose is fulfilled He again returns to His abode.

The purpose and function of the different *avatāras* of Viṣṇu are described in most of the Purāṇas. According to the *Vāyu Purāṇa* when sacrifices grow rare then Lord Viṣṇu is born again and again to show the people what is to be done.69 In the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* it is found that God Viṣṇu assumes many forms to establish righteousness.70 The same idea is expressed in the *Gītā* also. It is said that when virtue is overpowered by vice then God comes down by assuming various forms to protect His devotees and to punish the wicked.

However, regarding the number of *avatāras* some differences are noticed in the Purāṇas. The most popular and often mentioned *avatāras* are ten in number, viz., Matsya, Kūrma, Varāha, Vāmana, Narasiṁha.

69. Va.P. 98.69
70. indrārivyākulaṁ lokaṁ mṛdayanti yuge yuge / BP, 1.3.28
Paraśurāma, Rāma, Kṛṣṇa, Budha and Kalki. In the *Padma Purāṇa* twelve incarnations of Lord Viṣṇu is clearly mentioned as -

\[
\text{matsyaḥ kūrmo varāhasca nārsimho'tha vāmanah /}
\]
\[
rāmo rāmasca rāmasca buddhāḥ kalkiśca te dasa }^{71}
\]

This is also found in the *Agni Purāṇa, Liṅga Purāṇa, Varāha Purāṇa, Matsya Purāṇa, Garuda Purāṇa* etc. But in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* and the *Garuda Purāṇa* we notice some variations regarding the number of *avatāras* of Viṣṇu. In three different *Skandhas* of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* the number of incarnation varies from sixteen to twenty-four.


The seventh chapter of the second *Skandha* gives another account of twenty-four incarnations of Lord Viṣṇu. Here Hayagrīva and Hamsāśāra included in the former list of incarnations. The *Garuda Purāṇa* also gives

71. PP. Uttarakhaṇḍa 257.40-41
72. Ag.P. 2.16; Lin.P. 2.48.31-32; Var.P. 211. 68 (b) -69;
    MP. 285.6-7; GP. 1.86.10-11 & 2.20.31-32 etc.
73. BP. 1.3.6-25
an account of twenty-two incarnations of Viṣṇu. But the same Purāṇa enumerates sixteen incarnations in another place. According to the Purāṇa innumerable incarnations are there.

Regarding avatāras our Viṣṇu Purāṇa is not a systematic one. Like Bhāgavata Purāṇa there is no any systematic list of Viṣṇu's incarnation in the Viṣṇu Purāṇa. Though this Purāṇa has mentioned the names of twenty-one incarnations, yet these are scattered in the whole book. The names tally with the aforementioned incarnations with the exception of the names of Nārada, Buddha and Haṁsa. In the Viṣṇu Purāṇa, Nārada, Buddha and Haṁsa incarnations are not mentioned anywhere. Though there are different Avatāras of Viṣṇu mentioned in these Purāṇas, all the Avatāras are not of the same status. In some cases Viṣṇu descends only with a portion of Himself, while in other cases only a part of a part of Viṣṇu descends. The former are called Aṁśāvatāras and the latter are Aṁśāṁśāvatāra. In rare cases Viṣṇu comes down to the earth in His full form. Then that incarnation is called Purnāvatāra. According to the Bhāgavata Purāṇa, Kṛṣṇa is such an incarnation of Viṣṇu.

74. GP, 1.1.14-33
75. Ibid, 11. 4.17-22
76. BP, 1.3.28
Though there are innumerable incarnations of Lord Viṣṇu, yet the most popular and often mentioned ten *āvataṁras* of Viṣṇu are accepted by all and also found in almost all the scriptures. In the *Mahābhārata* there is a verse about ten incarnations of Viṣṇu.⁷⁷ In the following lines we are going to discuss about ten popular *āvataṁras* of Viṣṇu as found in other Purāṇas especially in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*.

**Matsya or the Fish Incarnation:**

Among the ten incarnations *Matsya* generally comes first. The idea of this incarnation actually evolves from the Manumatsya-kathā of the *Satapatha Brāhmaṇa*.⁷⁸ The same legend is found in the *Mahābhārata*, the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*,⁷⁹ the *Matsya Purāṇa*⁸¹ etc. According to the legend, Manu saved the various species of the universe from extinction with the help of a giant fish. The fish came to Manu and cautioned him about a devastating flood, which would sweep the entire creation. The fish also advised Manu to store in a boat all the species of the world, so that

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⁷⁷. hamsaḥ kūrmaśca matsyasca prādurbhāvād dvijottama/
   varāho narasimhaśca vāmano rāma eva ca/
   rāmo dāśārthasāvitaṁ satvataḥ kalkireva ca// MB, *Śantiparva*, 339.103-104

⁷⁸. *Satapatha Brāhmaṇa*, 1.8.1.1-9

⁷⁹. MB, 3.185

⁸⁰. BP, 8.24

⁸¹. MP, 1.2
after the deluge, the creation might be restored. The fish here plays the role of a great saviour.

In the Bhāgavata Purāṇa we find another legend relating to Viśnu’s fish incarnation. The story is as follows: In the Satya Yuga, when demon Hayagrīva stole away the Vedas and entered into Pātāla, then Viśnu descended as Matsya and returned the Vedas to Brahmā by killing the demon. This is the supplementary legend to the flood legend. Reference of Matsya avatāra is found in the Viśnu Purāṇa.

Kurma or the Tortoise Incarnation:

The second Avatāra of Viśnu is known as Kūrma or the Tortoise. Being frightened by the demons the Gods approached Viśnu. Viśnu instructed them to churn the ocean and thereby obtain nectar or amṛta by drinking which the gods would become immortal. Viśnu Himself helped the gods by taking the Mandara mountain on His back having assumed the form of a giant tortoise. The Mandara Mountain served the purpose of the rod for churning.

82. BP, 8. 24.7-9,12
83. akarot sa tanūmanyāṁ kalpādiṣu yathā purā/
matsya kūrmaśikāṁ tadvad vārāhaṁ vapurāṣṭhitah// VP, 1.4.8 and
matsyarūpaśca govindaḥ kuruśvāste janārddanaḥ // Ibid, 2.2.50 (a)

53
This story is met with in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, Matsya Purāṇa, *Padma Purāṇa* etc. The *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* also describes the story in the same line. In the ninth chapter of the 1st part of the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* it is said that at the time of churning of the ocean of milk the mountain *Mandāla* was taken as the staff and the serpent Vāsuki for the cord. Lord Viṣṇu Himself served as a pivot for the mountain in the form of a tortoise. The churning of the ocean for procuring nectar was necessitated by the fact that the Gods felt their power and authority were waning because of the rise of the demons.

It is clear from this story that Lord Viṣṇu assumed the form of a tortoise to save the gods who were His devotees from the ill treatment of the demons.

**Varāha or the Boar Incarnation:**

In the third *avatāra* Viṣṇu assumed the form of a Boar (varāha) in order to lift the earth from the *rasātaḷa*. The story of Viṣṇu’s *Varāha*

84. BP, 1.3.16
85. MP, 249-251
86. PP, 6.232
87. ksirodamadhye bhagavan kūrmmarūpi svayaṁ hariḥ/
    manthanādreradhiśṭhānāṁ bhramato’bhūnmahāmune // VP, 1.9.87
avatāra is found in many Purāṇas. But there are some variations in the story.

In the Viṣṇu Purāṇa it is described that at the time of dissolution the world being filled with water, the earth also sank down under the water into pātāla. The earth prayed to lord Viṣṇu for her rescue. Hearing her prayer Lord Viṣṇu manifested Himself as a Boar and raised her from the pātāla upon his tusks. The Viṣṇu Purāṇa also gives the description of the figure of the Boar. The body of the Boar is vast as the Nīla Mountain and is of dark clolour. Its eyes are like the lotus and it has ample tusks.

The story is somewhat different in the Bhāgavata Purāṇa. Here the legend is related with the Asura Hiraṇyākṣa. The legend runs thus: when Viṣṇu was rescuing the earth from the Rasātala, the demon Hiraṇyākṣa saw Him and claimed the earth. As a result a conflict took place and Hiraṇyākṣa was slain.

Narasiṁha or Man-Lion Incarnation:

The fourth avatāra of Satya Yuga is Narasiṁha or Man-lion. In this half man and half lion incarnation Viṣṇu killed Hiraṇyakaśipu to save
true devatee Prahlāda who was the son of that demon. The story of man-
lion incarnation is elaborately described in the Bhāgavata Purāṇa. The story as found in the Bhāgavata Purāṇa runs thus: The demon Hiranyakashipu received a boon from Brahmā by which he became almost immortal. Brahmā gave him the boon that any weapon would not kill him. This made him very arrogant and he started torturing the devotees of Viṣṇu everywhere. His son Prahlāda was a devotee of Viṣṇu because of which he was tortured in different ways by his father. Every time Viṣṇu protected Prahlāda from the rage of his father. One day Hiranyakashipu asked his son Prahlāda if Viṣṇu was omnipresent, then why he was not visible in a pillar in the hall where they all assembled. Prahlāda replied that for him God was visible even in the pillar also. Then Hiranyakashipu could not restrain his anger and hit that pillar with a sword. On which to show his pervasiveness Viṣṇu assuming a miraculous form, which is neither wholly a lion nor a man, issued from the pillar. Then that Narasiṁha carried Hiranyakashipu to the gate of the court hall and putting him on his thigh tore asunder his heart with his nails. The above story of the man-lion incarnation of Viṣṇu is referred to in the Viṣṇu Purāṇa. The story of Prahlāda and his torture by his father is described in detail in the Viṣṇu Purāṇa. But the appearance of the man-lion and his killing of Hiranyakashipu is only briefly referred to.

90. Cf. BP, 3.14.44-51; 3.15.1-7
Even the cause of assuming such a peculiar form is also not explained here.

Vāmana or Dwarf Incarnation:

The fifth incarnation of Viṣṇu is Vāmana or the Dwarf who is the first incarnation of Tretā Yuga. The Purpose of Vāmana avatāra was to save the gods from the great asura king Bali. Bali the king of asuras established his rule over three worlds by defeating all Gods, and was also performing one hundred sacrifices for attaining Indraloka. The gods being worried of the success of Bali approached Viṣṇu. Viṣṇu then assuming the form of a Dwarf Brāhmaṇa proceeded to the sacrifice of Bali and asked a very small gift of three paces of land. Bali was very much pleased to offer such a small gift to him. The Dwarf Brāhmaṇa then with a gigantic form covered the earth with one step, the heaven with the second step. Finally the third step of Viṣṇu was placed on the head of the Asura king Bali and as a result he was sent to pātāla or the neither world. In this way Viṣṇu achieved his purpose to restore the lost kingdom of Indra. This is the story of Dwarf Incarnation as described in the Bhāgavata Purāṇa. The same

91. daityeśvarasya tu badhāyākhilalokot-pattisthitivināśakarir pūrvatāṁ grhyatā

92. BP, 2.7.17-18
story is also found in other Purāṇas such as Matsya Purāṇa, Vāyu Purāṇa, Agni Purāṇa etc. The Viṣṇu Purāṇa only mentions the Vāmana incarnation of Viṣṇu. It is said there – “In this Manvantara, Viṣṇu was again born as Vāmana, the son of Kaśyapa and Aditi with his three strides he subdued the worlds, and gave them to Purandara, i.e., Indra.94

The germ of the Dwarf Incarnation is actually found in the Veda literature. It is true that there we do not find any mention of the Dwarf form of Viṣṇu, but the mention of the three steps of Him is found in the Rgveda itself.

Parāśurāma Incarnation:

Viṣṇu took the form of Parāśurāma in order to establish social order in the society. His name was Rāma who was the youngest son of Rājarāja and great sage Jamadagni. Immediately after his birth Rāma went to the Mountain Kailāsa to meditate on Bhagavān Śaṅkara. Pleased with him Śiva presented to him a never blunt parasu (axe), which he always carried with him. Due to that Parasu, Rāma came to be known as Parāśurāma.

93. MP, 246, Va,P, 98, 74-87, Ag.P. 4.
94. manvantare to samprāpte tathā vaivasvate dvija. /
   vāmanah kaśyapād viṣṇuradityāṁ sambabhūva ha // VP, 3.1.42.
story of Parasurama is also described in detail in the Bhagavata Purana. At that time the Kṣatriyas became very arrogant and tortured innocent people. In order to curb down the arrogant Kṣatriyas Parasurama destroyed them for twenty-one times. The story starts with his quarrel with the mighty Kṣatriya king Kārtavīryārjuna whom he defeated and killed. The Pañcaviṃśatī Purāṇa also proceeds in the same line. The Viṣṇu Purāṇa only mentions the fact that Parasurama, who was a part of Lord Viṣṇu and killed Kārtavīryārjuna.

Rāma Incarnation:

Rāma is the third incarnation of the Tretā Yuga. Rāma occupies an important place in the religious history of the world. The story of Rāma is found in the Purāṇas as well as in the Rāmāyanavata and the Mahābhārata. Actually Rāma is the hero of the Rāmāyanavata. The story of Rāma is too well known to recount here. Viṣṇu took the Rāma avatāra to destroy the wicked Rāvana who was a terror to the gods and mankind. Gods prayed to the Supreme Brahmā to take birth and to kill Rāvana, as a result Viṣṇu himself took up four forms as the four sons of Daśaratha. The Viṣṇu Purāṇa briefly:

95. BP, 9.15
96. PP, 6.241
97. yāḥ pāṇḍavaṁśaḥ hasropalakṣṇapakālāvasāne bhagavannārāyaṇāṁśena parasurāmeṇa upasaṁhṛtaḥ / VP, 4.11.7
refers to the story of Rāma. Here it is said that Lord Viṣṇu became fourfold as the sons of Daśaratha, viz., Rāma, Laksmana, Bharata and Śatrughna, for the protection of the world. All the heroic deeds of Rāma, narrated in the Rāmāyana and in other Purāṇas are recounted in a few lines here. 

The incarnation of Rāma is highly adored in India. The people of India treat Rāma as the ideal king, ideal brother and ideal husband. The popularity of Rāma tale in India is beyond comparison. The influence of the story of Rāma is noticed to a great extent in later literature as well as in the society.

**Balarāma Incarnation:**

Balarāma is also an incarnation of Viṣṇu. Though Balarāma was the son of Rohinī his mother was also Daivakī who was the mother of Kṛṣṇa. He was the seventh son of Daivakī. It is said that the womb of Daivakī was transferred to Rohinī because of the threat of Kaiśa who promised to kill all the sons of Daivakī. That is why he was known as Saṅkarsana Balarāma. 

98. VP, 4.4.40-45

99. garbhasaṅkarṣat so tha loke saṅkarṣaneti vai /

saṅjhāmavāpsyate viṛhaḥ śvetādriśikharopamaḥ // VP, 5.1.75
The story of Balarāma is narrated in the Visnu Purāṇa together with the story of Krṣṇa. Here it is said that when Brahmā requested Viṣṇu for reliving the burden of the earth which is oppressed by mighty Asuras and for maintaining piety in the world, Viṣṇu plucked off his two hairs - one white and one black and said that these hairs would descend upon earth for the protection of the world. These two hairs became Balarāma and Krṣṇa. The Brahmānda Purāṇa clearly says that the white hair became Baladeva, while the black hair Krṣṇa. But the Viṣṇu Purāṇa says that Balarāma is the avatāra of Śeṣa, who is a part of Lord Viṣṇu.

The Krṣṇa Incarnation:

Most of the Purāṇas include the name of Krṣṇa in the list of ten Avatāras instead of Balarāma. The Krṣṇa Avatāra of Lord Viṣṇu is most famous and prominent among the incarnations. This incarnation of Viṣṇu has exercised a deep influence on the later Vaiṣṇava religion and philosophy. The descent of Viṣṇu as Krṣṇa is narrated in the Harivaṁśa. Many Purāṇas deal with the subject in great detail. The principal authority for the adventures of Krṣṇa is the Bhāgavata Purāṇa. The Brahmavaṁśa...

100. Ibid, 5.1.59-62
101. hatēṣu teṣu kamsena sēṣākhyaṁ sāstato mama //
   aṁśāṁśenodare tasya saptamaḥ śambhaviṣyati // Ibid, 5.1.72
The whole of Book five of the Viṣṇu Purāṇa is dedicated to the description of the adventures of Kṛṣṇa. The Viṣṇu Purāṇa says that the earth being oppressed by Kāṁsā and other Asuras approached Brahmā for a device to control the demons. Brahmā also could not control them and approached Viṣṇu who plucked off two of his hairs – one white, the other black and assured the gods that the hair would descend upon earth as Kṛṣṇa and save the world. The same account is found in the Mahābhārata. The white hair became Balarāma and, the black, Kṛṣṇa. The commentator of the Viṣṇu Purāṇa maintains that this doesn’t mean that the two hairs would incarnate as Kṛṣṇa and Balarāma. Viṣṇu only meant to signify that the hairs were more than sufficient to destroy Kāṁsā and other demons. Wilson here remarks, “This seems to be a refinement upon an older and somewhat undignified account of the origin of Kṛṣṇa and his brother.”

According to the account of the Viṣṇu Purāṇa, Kṛṣṇa was born as the eighth son of Vasudeva and Daivāki. The Purpose of his incarnation was, as has already been stated, to destroy Kāṁsā and other demons.

102. MB. 1.1.266
103. tatāh kṣayamaśēṣāste daiteyā dharanītale /
prayaśyanti na sandeho maddṛkpatavicūrṇitah // VP, 5.1.62
104. H.H. Wilson, The Vishnu Purāṇa, p. 400, 23n
Though he was born of Vasudeva, Nanda and Yasodā brought him up in Gokula. All the Purānic account agrees with this description. Kṛṣṇa was also known as Vāsudeva for being the son of Vasudeva. Various miraculous deeds of Kṛṣṇa are described in the Purāṇa. During his stay in Gokula as the son of the Nandas Kṛṣṇa killed many asuras like Pralambha Kesīn, Dhenukā, Pūtanā, Ariṣṭa etc. And lastly he killed Kaṁsa in face-to-face fight.

In the Nārāyaṇiya section of the Mahābhārata, the Vāsudeva incarnation of Viṣṇu who killed Kaṁsa is mentioned. But there is no mention of the exploits of Kṛṣṇa, the cowherd with the Gopis, his pastimes with the cowboys, or the destruction of the Asuras as found in the Viṣṇu Purāṇa, the Bhāgavata Purāṇa etc. Kṛṣṇa appears as a shrewd politician or diplomat in the Mahābhārata. The identification of Vāsudeva with Supreme lord is actually noticed in the Mahābhārata. Here he imparted the supreme knowledge to Arjuna in the form of his holy songs, i.e., the Gītā.

Though the Viṣṇu Purāṇa agrees mostly with the Bhāgavata Purāṇa about the birth and the exploits of Kṛṣṇa, there is a major difference. The Bhāgavata Purāṇa regards Kṛṣṇa as the Lord Himself "kṛṣṇastu bāgavān"
The *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* on the other hand maintains that Kiṃśubhū is only a part of Viṣṇu as other *Avatāras*.  

**Buddha Incarnation:**

At the beginning of the Kali Yuga Viṣṇu incarnated as Lord Buḍḍha for preaching non-Violence and wiping out all afflictions of the world. He was the son of king Suddhodana and the founder of *Buḍḍha dharma*. He belonged to Kikatā country and the name of his father is said to be Ajana. There is no reference of Buddha in the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa*.

**Kalki Incarnation:**

The tenth incarnation of the Lord will be a future one. This is agreed by all the Purāṇas. The *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* narrates that in the last part of the Kali age Viṣṇu will incarnate as an eminent *Brāhmaṇa* of Sambhata village, Viṣṇuyāsa by name. His name will be Kalki and he will be endowed with eight superhuman faculties. By his irresistible might he will destroy the *mlecchas*, the *dasyus* and all those whose are devoted to evil.

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105. BP, 1.3.28 (a)
106. *ayam sa sarvabhūtasya viṣṇurakhilajanmanāḥ / avatīrṇo mahāmanisō nūnaiḥ bhāraharo bhuvah* // VP, 5.20.38 and 5.23.25
He wills then re-establish righteousness upon earth.\textsuperscript{108} The \textit{Bhāgavatī}, \textit{Purāṇa} also agrees with this text.\textsuperscript{109}

\textsuperscript{108} VP, 4.24.26

\textsuperscript{109} athāsau yugasandhyāyāṁ dasyuprāyeṣu rājasu /
janitā viṣṇuyāsāso nāmnā kalkirjagatpatih // BP, 1.3.25 & 2.7.38