



Greatness of Bhakti Philosophy in India – Fishermen’ Worships to Lord Vishnu

R.Narasimhan¹, Dr R.Indira²

Department Of Philosophy, Culture And Religion Poompuhar College (Autonomous),
Melaiyur 609107, India Affiliated To Annamalai University
Narasimhanraman@Yahoo.Com, Nicoraman2013@Rediffmail.Com)

²(Head And Assistant Professor

Department Of Philosophy, Culture And Religion Poompuhar College (Autonomous),
Melaiyur 609107, India Affiliated To Annamalai University
Munaivarindira@Gmail.Com)

Abstract- In Indian philosophy the bhakti movement revolutionised spiritual life by prioritising personal devotion over rigid rituals and caste hierarchies teaching God is accessible to everyone, regardless their social standing. Fishermen are no exception to those principles. Fishermen share a unique spiritual bond with Lord Vishnu, primarily through his Matsya (Fish avatar). They follow local traditions to worship Lord Vishnu. Narratives in various parts of India on fishermen’ worship to Lord Vishnu dates back to Puranas to latest practices in various parts of India and Nepal is illustrated in this article.

Keywords- Matsya, Purana, Vishnu, fishermen, temple, Vivekananda, Bhakti, fish, festival

I. Introduction

India is home to world’s oldest culture, beliefs, customs, traditions and religions. Hinduism is one of the oldest religion and some of the beliefs in that religion based on ecology, insist on protection of forest areas, aquatic bodies and spices. Fish is one is prominent among the sacred animals including snakes, lizards, frogs, cow, ox, peacock, tortoise, etc.

The earliest reference to fish in Hindu writings is found in Vedas and Puranas. The fish are considered sacred as they are described as the first incarnation of lord Vishnu. In this incarnation lord Vishnu saved all species of the world including human being during the Pralaya- Calamitous floods that were to follow. This story is fully explained in the Matsya Purana .

A fisherman or a fishes is one who catches fish mainly and sometimes aquatic animals either as a job or for sport and recreation. Normally they live in groups near the seashore, rivers, and inland aquatic bodies like lakes and ponds which are the main resources for fishes. Most of them are doing this profession traditionally and they follow unique traditions, customs and religion. Religion influences and drives social behaviour in human society. Religion and spirituality have long played important roles in fishery systems around the world, and yet are often neglected in modern fisheries management and research. In India most of the fishermen, despite



their own beliefs and religions, never fails in participating in the festivals and worship practices of the religion in their dwelling areas and nearby. As an integral aspect of culture, society, and identity, religion and spirituality provide powerful cosmological, ethical, and normative frameworks that shape how humans view and relate to each other and the natural world.

II. Literature Survey

Narratives from epics about the existence of fishing communities in ancient Indian civilization

Let us look at a small incident happened in Swami Vivekananda's life which explains the importance of idol worship by Hindus. Swami Vivekananda visited Alwar in February 1891 in Rajasthan and met the King of that state Maharaja Mangal Singh Bahadur (or Mangal Singh). Mangal Singh had deep interest in Western Philosophy and had no respect for the Indian especially Hindu culture, traditions, worship methods and beliefs, and used to feel proud for his attitude.

When swami Vivekananda met him in his courtyard where the staff of the king assembled to listen the conversation between the king and swami. Mangal Singh asked swami "why Hindus are worshipping idols. They are just pieces of clay, stone and metal". It was a direct attack on Hindu beliefs and swami replied that Hindu worship God alone in all the above using them as a symbol of god. Their prayers contain only the characters of Paramathma only and not that of symbol. The king smiled away and seemed not convinced. Then Swami Vivekananda saw a portrait of the King's father on the wall. He asked the Dewan (head of the cabinet) to take it down from the wall. Dewan did it. Vivekananda asked the Dewan to spit on it. All were taken back. King and Dewan were horrified. King was furious. He asked angrily "how dare you ask him to spit on my father?"

Vivekananda replied quietly "is it your father? It is a just a painting— a piece of paper, not your father." All were stunned and remained speechless. Swami continued his reply saying "Look Maharaja, this is a painting of you father, but when you look at it, it reminds you about him, here the painting is a "symbol". Similarly when a Hindu worshipper worships an idol, the idol reminds him about his beloved deity and he feels the presence of the deity in the idol. Here too it is a "symbol". Maharaja, it is all about anubhuti (feelings and realization)." Maharaja Mangal Singh realised the real meaning of worshipping idols. This logic is applicable to our topic also.

Quotations of Swami Vivekananda "Let New India arise...let her arise-out of the peasant's cottage, grasping the plough; out of the huts of the fisherman, the cobbler, and the sweeper. Let her emanate from the factory, from marts, and from the markets and from groves and forests, from hills and mountains." Swami Vivekananda Fishermen in most part of India trust that they are the descendants of deities, rishis, monks, kings, races that existed in ancient civilisations. Narratives that exist in authentic epics make them to believe like that. Let us seen some narratives are available in epics like Ramayana, Mahabharata, and Matsya Purana. Ramayana a. King Janaka, father of Seetha Devi who is Lord Rama's wife, arranged a debate on philosophy and raised a question:



“Kim kim suptho nimishoti.... king swidhegon bordhote”

Which means “Who does not close its eyelid when sleeping? Who does not breathe during birth, who does not have a heart? Who grows at a great speed? ”

The leading sage Ashtavakra replied

“Matsya supthe nimishthyadong nodi begen bordhote”

Which means: “The fish does not close its eyelid when it is sleeping, the egg does not breathe during birth, hard hearted man is heartless River stimulates with a great speed” (Bezbaruah: 73.)

In the Ramayana, Guha was the king of the Nishadas, a tribal community living near the Ganga River. This community was doing the profession of transporting people across river Ganga, protecting its banks and fishing in Ganga River and hunting in forests and mountains. He became a crucial ally to Rama during his exile, providing assistance and shelter when Rama, Sita, and Lakshmana (Rama’s bother) arrived at the banks of the Ganga. Despite the significant difference in their social standings, Guha showed deep love and respect for Rama, who also reciprocated his friendship.

Poet Kamba in his Kamba Ramayana describes that Guha offered Honey, fruits and fish foods to Lord Rama

(Kamba Ramayana Ayodhya Kandam- Ganga Padalam 36:3-4) “Orungu Thenodu Meen Upakaraththan” .

Which means Guha’s offering of high quality fish from the river and pure honey collected from high mountains and his offerings revealed Guha’s utmost devotion to Lord Rama.

Lord Rama just touched with His hands and was pleased with it, but He did not consume them.

This is stated in the Adhyatma Ramayana (2.7.8) as follows.

guhena kinchidaaneetam phalamoolaadhikam cha yat
prsrhtvaa hastena samprityaa naagrahidvisasarja tat

But Rama, true to his promise, did only what a hermit must to keep the body and the mind free from worldly actions

Guha tried to reach for the Sri Rama's feet but Rama rejected it saying that a friend like him had a place in his heart and hugged him affectionately calling him as his own brother. . Sita and Lakshmana had tears in their eyes seeing the affection and devotion.

Mahabharata

The root of fishing communities can also be traced to a famous race, popularly known as the Bharata race or the lunar dynasty.

King Shantanu was happy with his son Devavrata (later called as Bheeshma) after his wife Ganga left him. Yet he could not tolerate the absence of his wife. One day, king Shantanu went for hunting and he smelt a beautiful fragrance. He found that it came



from a beautiful woman. On enquiry he found that she was Satyawati, the daughter of a fisherman. Shantanu wanted to marry her and he went to her father to get his consent. The father agreed for their marriage with one condition – Shantanu must make the future child of Satyawati the ruler of his country. Shantanu refused as he considered his elder son Devavrata to be appointed as the next king. Devavrata came to know about his father's love on with Satyawati, he went to Satyawati's father and promised that he would never demand the kingship of the country. The father replied that Devavrata's son might demand kingship and Devavrata made a heavenly promise that he would never get married as well as demand the kingship for himself. Shantanu finally got married to the Satyawati and their sons and grandsons became the kings of the country and shaped the famous Bharata race. Fishing communities always find a close association with this narrative. As Satyawati was originally the daughter of a fisherman, fishermen consider Bharata race as the descendants of fishing communities.

Matsya Purana

Fishing communities believe that fish is the incarnation of Lord Vishnu called "Matsya Avatar" and it's the first incarnation of Lord Vishnu to the world during Pralaya.

According to Matsya Purana

At the end of the past kalpa there was a practical dissolution of the universe in which the earth and other worlds were submerged in the ocean. Then the powerful Raksasa named Hayagriva took away the Vedas from the mouth of the creator, who from the drowsiness, which had come on through the lapse of time, had become disposed to go to sleep. On discovering this deed of Hayagriva, the chief of the Danavas, the divine lord Hari, took to the form of a Saphari fish and recovered the Vedas.

Matsya Purana describes the fish incarnation of Vishnu in the first Chapter, according to which, "A king named Manu, leaving his kingdom, went out to Malaya country. He left his country to perform penances and after tough penance he obtained a boon from Brahma (lord of creation) that he should be able to protect all the creatures at the time of dissolution called Pralaya. The boon was granted. The king one day at the time of offering oblation to Pithrus (Forefathers) noticed a small fish in the palm of his hand.

He put it in a water pot which the fish fully occupied by waxing during the course of the day. Then the king threw it into a jar and the same thing happened again. He repeated in a well, pond, and finally the ocean. When the piscine form filled the whole ocean by its giant size, the king became perplexed. He talked to fish and asked its true identity – "asuras (demons) or god Narayana himself, the cosmic deity in the form of fish." The Fish replied, "Verily, O king, you have known the truth. I am lord Vishnu (or Narayana). Soon the Pralaya will start and the earth will be submerged into the water." The fish instructed him as follows:

"Take a boat which all the hosts all the Devas have improvised for the protection of living beings and place them on the ship.



When the same is rocked by the furious winds of dissolution, fasten it to my horn or cranial protuberance.

When the storm is over, you will have saved the creatures and then you will become as Prajapati of the universe (Prajapatis are mental sons of Brahma and are considered the progenitors of all living species)". He followed the instructions and became the Prajapati after Pralaya was over.

Another story is that armed Vishnu here emerges from the fish in the ocean and is attacking the demon Hayagriva who stole four Vedas from Brahma. The demon is lying before him in the water and is holding back shield and a sword, while Vishnu holds his usual attributes of Conch, chakra, mace and lotus. Four devotees are paying tribute to the lord with folded hands who represent four Vedas.

Fishermen often believe that

- Lord Vishnu always bestows favour to all his worshippers.
- The Lord assumes the form of fish so that fishermen can catch fish and run their source of livelihood.
- Matsya avatar-the golden fish, an incarnation of Lord Vishnu came to this earth first who created all other fishes for fishermen.

These narratives from epics declare the presence of fishing communities in ancient civilization, signifying their importance in formulating our culture and tradition.

Some festivals of India involving the fishermen community and Lord Vishnu

Let's discuss some of the festivals in which fishermen are highly involved in the worship of Lord Vishnu. We also see few temples which are devoted to Lord Vishnu Matsya avatar.

Rameswaram festival

President of India Dr. Abdul Kalalm hailed from a fisherman's family in Rameswaram. He wrote a book "Wings of fire" - an autobiography. He used to describe his father's contribution to Sri Ramanatha swami temple during festival season as follows:

"During the annual Shri Sita Rama Kalyanam (marriage) ceremony, our family used to arrange boats with a special platform for carrying idols of the Lord (Lord Rama is an avatar of Lord Vishnu) from the temple to the marriage site, situated in the middle of the pond called Rama Tirtha which was near our house. Events from the Ramayana and from the life of the Prophet were the bedtime stories my mother and grandmother would tell the children in our family."

Chaiti ghoda nata, Odisha

The fishermen community of Odisha performs Chaiti Ghoda Nata in a festival. It lasts for 9 days beginning from the full moon day of the lunar month of Chaitra (April). This community is known as "Keuta". The dance and the festival are closely associated and inspired by an Oriya puranic literature named Kaivarta Purana which tells the story behind the fishermen's killing fish.



The puranic story in brief: The Supreme God (Lord Vishnu) slept on the leaf of a banyan tree that floated on the ocean of milk. “A slokam (ŚB 3.33.4) in Srimad Bhagavatam describes lord Krishna as follows:

sa tvaṁ bhṛto me jaṭhareṇa nātha
katham nu yasyodara etad āsīt
viśvaṁ yugānte vaṭa-patra ekaḥ
śete sma māyā-śīsur aṅghri-pānaḥ

Translation: As the Supreme Personality of Godhead, You have taken birth from my abdomen. O my Lord, how is that possible for the supreme one, who has in His belly all the cosmic manifestation? The answer is that it is possible, for at the end of the millennium, you lie down on a leaf of a banyan tree, and just like a small baby, you lick the toe of your lotus foot.”

To keep the leaf-bed steady, someone was required to hold the rudder firmly. Therefore, the lord took some dirt from his ear. He created a man out of it and gave life. The lord asked him to hold the rudder firmly. While he was dozing, a gigantic fish came and swallowed him. When the lomni-present did not find the man, he was angry. He caught the fish and pulled the man out from the stomach of the fish. The man was re-engaged in his duty. From that day onwards, man became one of the most vindictive enemies of fish. As ordained by God, the first Kaivarta (fisherman) and his descendants started earning their livelihood by catching fish.

A part of the banyan leaf was transformed into a horse. The God ordered Vishwakarma, the celestial craftsman, to build a boat. Relieving the man from his duty of holding the rudder of the leaf-bed, he asked the man to cross the ocean in the boat with the horse. The divine horse died on the eighth day of the lunar month of Vaishakha. God consoled the man saying that the horse was the goddess named Basuli and her worship will bring him salvation. From that day onwards, the Kaivarta (Keuta in colloquial Odia) community holds the festival in which goddess Basuli is worshipped and the dummy-horse dance is performed.

Maund fishing festival, Uttarakhand

The traditional fishing festival of the Jaunpuri community of Tehri Garhwal, Maund Matsya Mela is a fishing festival with a difference. The Agral river serves as the site of the community fishing once a year where a certain Timru plant powder is used to first desensitize the fish only after which the people began fishing in the waters. A one-day event that begins with beating of traditional drums and cries of “Macha, Macha” (Fish, fish), the festival was devised as a means to restrict all year fishing in the river which is fed generously by the small streams draining the northern slopes of the Mussoorie ridge.

Matsya Narayana temple in Chennai

The Matsya Narayana Temple in Uthandi Beach, Chennai is a unique open air temple nearer to the bay of Bengal. Its dedicated to Matsya (fish), an incarnation of Lord Vishnu.



"Meenavar" (fishermen) Context: In Tamil Nadu, communities like the Paravars, Sembadavars, and Pattanavars are known as Meenavar (fishermen). The Matsya Narayana Temple, dedicated to a fish avatar, could hold cultural resonance for people in fishing communities, although this is speculative.

Local fishermen are part of devotees who are visiting the temple and no special privileges or rights are given to them.

It was constructed by Chinmaya Mission and opened to all sections of people including fishermen in 2015.

Like Kasi, we can meditate here while watching the Arathi to the sea. It is very special here. The ocean arathi is taken here every Sunday. It looks like Ganga Arathi in Kasi. Local people including fishermen with families and more devotees gather here to see this.

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Every Sunday sumdhra arathi is done local people including fishermen participates Why does Lord Pandering alias Vitthal in Shree Vitthal Rukhmini Temple, Pandharpur, Maharashtra wear fish earrings?

There was a devotee of Vitthala who was a fisherman. And he lived a bit far away from Pandharpur. And so, throughout his life, he saved his money to go to Pandharpur to have darshan of Vitthala-Rukmini. And that was his aim. So, he saved money and everything and went to Pandharpur. But, as per tradition if someone visit somebody, he never go empty-handed. He was a fisherman and so what would he bring? Fish! So, he took a basket and put some fish inside and brought it as he went to Pandharpur. And when he had darshan of Vitthala, of course, he put his covered basket down in front of Vitthala and said, 'Prabhu, I brought this. This is the only thing I have, I brought it for you', and happily he went out. And when the Main Pandit opened the basket, it was stinking and smelling of fish. When he opened the basket, they saw fish and they got really mad and angry. So, they all rushed out quickly to this man, to this fisherman and beat him up and said, 'How dare you bring fish into the temple to offer to Vitthala?!' And he had a good beating (bruises and everything) and was thrown out of the temple. This poor man was sitting there with his basket of fish, crying not because they have beaten him up, because Bhagavan had not accepted his offering. He said, 'Because I am poor, that's why God has not accepted my offering. Because I don't have anything else to give Him.' And as he was crying, of course, the merciful Lord hears everybody's call when they are sincerely calling from the heart. Vitthala and Rukmini appeared in front of him and He said, 'Give Me your offering. Give Me that fish.' The moment Bhagavan touched the fish, the fish transformed into golden ear-rings. Bhagavan wears those earrings always in remembrance of that devotee.



III. Conclusion

In summary, the bhakti (devotion) of fishermen reveals that true spirituality is found in the intersection of unwavering faith and humble fulfilment of one's dharma ensuring a permanent place in the heart of Preserver. These highlights that a devotee's selfless love can even save devine from falling, shattering the pride of ego and replacing it with a bond of mutual protection and love. They illustrates that sincere prayer offered amidst worldly obligations is a valid and powerful form of bhakti. These narratives conclude that Lord Vishnu is easily pleased by "Ananya Bhakti" (undivided devotion), regardless of one's social standing or formal education proving that the "path to Liberation is open to all who approach with a pure heart". This is the strong foundation of Saint Ramanuja's Philosophy and Swami Vivekananda's preaching.

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