Vishnu: Cosmic Magnification Of The Divine Being
Lord Vishnu, the central figure of the Brahmanical Gods-Trio and the most widely worshipped divinity of Indian masses, far beyond a sanctum-deity or temple-idol, manifests cosmos scaling it from its beginning to end and every inch of its space. In him is contained the creation, its expanse, action, inaction, matter, spirit, dynamism, inertia, growth, stagnation, virtues, vices, order, chaos, light, darkness, evolution, dissolution, life, its termination, illusions, all that exists, has ever existed or shall ever exist, as also that which is beyond existence. A personalised God, Vishnu is essentially the vision of abstraction. Not so much the manifest cosmos, he manifests its unseen, unmanifest inner source by which it evolves out of the debris of dissolution, by which it sustains, by which it again dissolves. He manifests the cycle, composition and decomposition, every transformation, and every form and non-form.

Not an overseer presiding over the cycle from beyond, Vishnu is the cycle’s inherent part. Two myths, often perceived as mutually contradicting, one of his emergence as a child on a fig leaf afloat the post-deluge oceanic waters, and the other, perceiving him as reclining on serpent Shesh in Kshirasagara, are symbolic extension of this cosmic process of which Vishnu is the axis.

As the former myth has it, after the Great Deluge subsides, all around are dark unfathomable waters with immeasurable expanse. Vishnu, just a child, emerges afloat on a fig leaf, something symbolic of nothingness, or comprising just a nominal support. The myth discovers Vishnu in child, as the child alone has possibilities of growing, the essence of Vishnu's being. It sets him in darkness and over
immeasurable seas, as it is only the darkness that contains the light in its womb and might release it, and, it is the immeasurable out of which the measured spaces are carved. Vishnu is not the creator but he only grows and expands and there-from emerge the manifest and the unmanifest worlds.

And, then there is the other myth. Vishnu, now fully grown-up, reclines in Kshirasagara - the ocean of milk, on the coils of serpent Shesh unfurling its hoods over him. Now Shri or Lakshmi, his spouse, is in attendance and from his navel rises the lotus.

Atop the lotus emerges Brahma with water-pot in one hand, Veda in another, rosary in the third, and the fourth being held in varada - the posture of benevolence, a total transformation of the myth which perceives Vishnu as child. The dark waters of the child Vishnu's myth transform into the grown-up Vishnu's ocean of milk abounding in unique radiance. The light pervades the darkness. Out of the immeasurable expanse are carved the measured length and width which the serpent Shesh, symbolic of life and representing the earth, manifests. Vishnu lying on it and holding it canopy-like above him pervades it. Lotus, symbolic of three cosmic regions - the earth, the sky and the ocean, is Vishnu's offshoot, and so is Brahma emerging to define them in terms of creation. Brahma defined life, which the water contained in the pot symbolised; good and benevolence which pre-empted the course of life and regulated the creation; jnana - knowledge, which Veda in his hand symbolised; and, devotion, which the rosary in his other hand represented. Shri, Vishnu's spouse, manifests his will to let it sustain and lead it to abundance.

Conjointly, the two myths illustrate the Vaishnava theory of Vishnu's emergence and growth.

As the scriptural tradition has it, after every 60 crore, 18 lac, 34 thousand and 752 years of human calendar Vishnu disappears and then there is desolation and deep
eternal silence for 30 crore, 9 lacs, 17 thousand and 376 years before he re-emerges and grows, and along with emerges the entire creation - the manifest as also the unmanifest. In Vedic perception Vishnu is a continuum, and in Puranic, a plurality. The term 'vishnu' is not an incidental catch for his name. 'Vish', the Sanskrit root out of which the term 'vishnu' developed, means 'vyapana', that is, to expand and pervade. Thus, Vishnu is one whose ultimate nature is 'vyapana'. Hence, Vishnu is not a mere sanctum deity or worshippers' idol but also a deep cosmometaphysical principle that defines on one hand the principle of evolution, and on the other, manifests the Rig-Vedic theory of God's oneness and unity of the cosmos. Some scholars contemplate 'vish' as suggestive of one who is 'incessantly in act'. Incessant is only the growth. Hence growth alone is the incessant act. Vishnu, who is the growth, and thus the incessant act and the essential nature of all things, is inherent in all things, manifest or unmanifest, and is their life. When Vishnu withdraws, the cosmos drops and perishes like the dead mass. It is thus that in the Great Trinity - the three aspected manifestation of the Formless God, Vishnu represents sustenance or preservation, and is the core of cosmic order.

**VISHNU IN VEDIC LITERATURE**

The Vedas abound in strange mysticism and such mysticism is far deeper in case of Vishnu. The Rig-Veda assigns to Vishnu a status secondary to other gods, specially, Indra - the god of rains, Varuna - the god of oceans, Agni - the god of fire, Surya - the Sun-god, among others. Just five of the Rig-Vedic Suktas - hymns, are devoted to Vishnu, and in these too, he has not been attributed the status of an independent being. The Suktas do not recount any of his exploits, nor his role. The Rig-Veda perceives him just as another form of Surya assisting Indra - obviously a deity subsidiary to both. However, it is in such Rig-Vedic perception that the real mystique of Vishnu's being lies. While the other Rig-Vedic gods, such as Surya or Agni, seek to deify nature's corresponding entities, or represent, as do Varuna or Indra, some tangible aspect of nature, or even Brahman - the Creator, Vak - Speech, or Ushas - Dawn, representing some aspect of cosmic activity, Vishnu is a god by conception with no specificity of any kind. He has not been linked with any aspect of the universe, manifest or unmanifest. The Rig-Veda conceives him as a youth with as massive a build as pervaded the entire cosmos. It perceives Ushas also as a youthful maid with unique lustre but nonetheless it also links her with one of time-cycle's phenomenal phases, which is the sun-rise.

The Rig-Veda does not do so in case of Vishnu. It does not link him with any specific aspect of nature, the tangible in the least, or assigns to him any specific role or phenomenalism.

Thus, unlike any other god of Vedic Order, Vishnu, even if a subsidiary god, is more or less an abstract concept, not corresponding to an aspect of materially or visually existing world. He is the only divinity whom the Rig-Veda seeks to personalise. The Rig-Veda uses for him terms like 'urugaya' - someone with long strides, 'urukrama' -
someone with wide steps, 'tri-pada' - someone with three steps, that is, it perceives Vishnu as a massive-bodied youth capable of covering the entire space, width-wise and length-wise, in just three steps. At another place the Rig-Veda acclaims that he spans the entire universe with three strides, with two of which he covers the visible space, and with the third, which the Rig-Veda designates as 'Parama-pada', the space to which human eye does not have access. Thus, whatever the Rig-Vedic perception, Vishnu pervades all spaces, the 'seen' and the 'unseen'. The Vedas perceived some unmanifest levels also of other gods, especially of Agni that exists on a plane to which the human mind does not have access. But, such super-existence apart, the Rig-Veda weaves the veil of mysticism only around Vishnu, not barring the human mind from reaching it but rather allowing it to lift the veil and develop its own concept of him.

**VISHNU IN LATER VEDIC LITERATURE**

Hence, it is not strange that in later Vedic literature - Samhitas, Brahmins and Upanishads, this subsidiary god of the Rig-Veda emerges as the most powerful divinity of the Vedic pantheon. The Shatpatha Brahman (14.1.1) illustrates through a myth how Vishnu attained such superior position. Once all gods performed a yajna stipulating that whoever accomplished it first would have supremacy over all other gods. Vishnu did it and was worshipped by all as the supreme of all gods. Tetreya Aranyaka (5.1.1-7) gives to the myth of his supremacy a different dimension. It narrates that once Vishnu's bow broke and with it broke his head. This broken head, with enormous lustre, took the form of the sun. Later, Ashwins - a class of celestial beings, re-planted this broken head on his torso. Thereafter Vishnu emerged as the supreme master of all three worlds. Shatpatha and Etareya Brahmans (1.2.5 and 6.15) recount further how Vishnu rescued all gods from demons and emerged as their natural superior. Once demons defeated gods and occupied their habitation, the world. The demons began breaking the land in fragments. This endangered its very existence. Gods approached Vishnu for setting the world free from demons. Vishnu transformed into a dwarf - Vamana, and went to the demon king. He asked the demon king for a piece of land measuring just three steps. When the prayer was granted, Vishnu magnified his form into cosmic dimensions so much so that in three steps he measured not merely the three worlds but also the Vedas and Vak, that is, all known and spoken. The Puranas modified the legend a little. The Vamana, a Brahmin, spanned in his cosmic magnification all three worlds in two steps and with the third pushed the demon king into the nether world. The Puranas designated this form of Vishnu as Vishnu-kranta, Tri-Vikram or Vikranta. This is one of his most widely represented forms in early sculptures.

Whatever Vishnu's form in these later texts, the Rig-Veda contained the initial roots of such forms. Except Vishnu, all other gods that the Vedas personalized represented one of the manifest forms of nature, the sun, fire, wind, rain etc. Such
personalization was unnatural and unconvincing, for one might perceive some kind of divinity in these forms of nature but not the face of man in any of them. On the contrary, personalization of Vishnu was more natural and convincing; obviously because the Vedas did not ever identify him with an otherwise manifest form. Rather, a concept of mind as he was, the Vedas, the Rig-Veda in particular, chose to visualise him in a human form. The Rig-Vedic mysticism begins from here. It talks of Vishnu as one would talk of a man but at the same time allows him to walk out of the man's frame and vests in him unique divinity. As for Vishnu, he sometimes appears to be, but at other time, one beyond being, one beyond the entire manifest world.

This shift from the abstract or a nature-manifesting solar deity to one perceived anthropomorphically was effected partly out of the efforts of concretizing the Rig-Vedic mysticism and partly being necessitated by the Vedic worship-cult involving yajna as an essential aspect of day's routine that had become by now quite methodical.

An anthropomorphic deity was better suited for presiding over such yajnas. This seems to have effected the shift from the solar god to a yajna-deity. Subordinated to Vishnu other Vedic gods did not have their prior status. They were sometimes yet personalised but either as subsidiary deities or as Dikpalas - guardians of directions, etc. Vishnu, other than Rudra-Shiva, was the only major personal god of this era and ever after. Rudra-Shiva was a god with wrathful nature worshipped mostly for preventing him from inflicting his wrath. The massive-bodied Vishnu was contrarily all-pervading and protective. Hence, in Vedic cult he soon had an enormous presence and with it the Vedic worship had two separate sects, the Shaivites and the Vaishnavites.

VISHNU’S PURANIC TRANSFORMATION AND ICONOGRAPHIC VISION IN INDIAN ART

The Puranas pursued broadly the same line as the later Vedic texts in regard to Vishnu's form and status in the pantheon. However, while the Vedic mysticism was still the dominant spirit of later Vedic texts it was largely missing in Puranas. Instead, in Puranas he emerged with far greater divine aura combined with such personal attributes - invincibility, stateliness, anatomy of a warrior, appearance and grace of a king, which made him more the supreme commander of the world rather than an abstract principle manifest. Hundreds of hymns in these Puranic texts lauded not merely his appearance - a robust build, oceanic blue complexion and
figural distinction, or divinity, magnificence, or lustre but also his brilliant costume, precious jewels, special crown, and celestial flowers that he wore. Despite that he was perceived as possessing great majesty such as should the Lord of the world in command of all cosmic regions and all elements and a multi-armed anatomy, these texts brought to mind such personalized picture of Vishnu as of one's next-door neighbour. Thus, the supreme monarch but with great personal touch Vishnu emerged as the foremost guardian and protector. This Vishnu was both, the benevolent boon-giver and the supreme deity of yajna as also the slayer of demons and the protector of the earth and its inhabitants. The Devi Bhagavata acclaims Vishnu to have fought a thousand battles against 'asuras' - demons. Not merely the supreme divinity, this Vishnu was also the supreme model of life manifesting both, the highest principles of faith and the brightest colours of culture.

This Puranic personalization of Vishnu gives to Indian art - sculpture and painting, a uniform, elaborate and well defined iconography. His anatomy and other aspects apart, Puranas also associated with him some attributes, body-postures and gestures of hands, all revealing some kind of symbolism or some of his related mythical contexts. The two of his postures are more usual; one as standing, and other as reclining. His standing posture with a forward thrust has Vedic connotations. It is the Rig-Vedic form of Vishnu as revealed in epithets like 'urugaya', 'urukrama' or 'tri-patha', already discussed before. This is the most usual form of Vishnu's sanctum idols or votive iconography.

The other posture relates to the myth representing him reclining on the coils of serpent Shesh in the ocean of milk. In this form he is Nara, the cosmic ocean which spread everywhere before the creation of the universe. As he moves over these waters of cosmic oceans he is Narayana, 'one who moves in water'.
His seated postures are rare except sometimes as in his manifestation as Yoga-Narayana, or in shrines like one at Badrinatha.

His Tri-Vikram form, representing him with one of his legs shot into the sky or onto the face of the demon king Bali, a representation of the myth of spanning the universe in three strides, has also been sculpted on temples' walls.
Lintels of early Vishnu temples and sometimes even Shaiva, usually carry the image of Vishnu riding his mount Garuda. In Dasavatara panels on the door-frames of early temples too the Garudaruda - Garuda-mounted Vishnu, is usually the central figure.

He has been usually conceived with four arms, but sometimes also with six or eight carrying in them various attributes - a conch, lotus, mace, goad, disc, rod, sword, bow among others. Conch was a later addition, which was included in his attributes after his incarnation as Krishna he eliminated Shakhasura - the demon seeking refuge in a conch. The usual gestures of his hands are abhaya - fearlessness, and varada - benevolence. He has been conceived and represented as blue complexioned wearing a yellow antariya - unstitched length of textile, and rich lustrous jewels. His towering gems-studded crown and a garland of fresh Parijata flowers of celestial origin, worn down to ankles, are other exclusive features of his iconography and hence of his identity.

In his cosmic magnification - Vishva-rupa, Vishnu has a different set of iconography. Vishva-rupa is only Vishnu's transform. Brahma did not have such magnification. Himself being the cosmos Vishva-rupa was irrelevant in Shiva's context. As the creation sustains and prevails in Vishnu, his form is required to magnify to assimilate in it the vision of the world.
VISHNU'S INCARNATIONS AND TRANSFORMS

Vishnu was initially a cosmic presence without a manifest form or appearance. Hence, the seers, right from the Vedic days to the days of Puranas, wove around him, on one hand, a form of his own, and on the other, discovered in any being, a man or animal, which they found containing Vishnu-like dimensional width and magnanimity, a transform of Vishnu or his incarnation. Transformation is a shift from one form to the other in the same birth, while incarnation is a form attained in other birth. Ordinarily, transform and incarnation are two different things but in Vaishnava context both are largely identical. Vishnu enters into another form but without subjecting himself to birth and death. In some of the beings, such as the mythical Matsya - Great Fish, Kurma - Tortoise, or Varaha - Boar, popularly revered as his incarnations, Vishnu had merely an elemental presence. They were only his 'anshavataraas' - part-incarnations, each performing one divine act having cosmic magnitude. Narsimha and Yamana, his two other incarnations, were perhaps more decisively only his transforms. Their related myths in the Shatpatha Brahman represent just their emergence, neither their birth nor parentage. Mysticism enshrouded the events of births also of his other incarnations, Parasurama, Rama, Krishna, Balarama, or Buddha. They had parents, babyhood, growth, manhood and a full life and a chain of events but their related myths, ambiguous as they are at least in regard to the circumstances of their births, incline to suggest that their emergence was hardly the outcome of a biological process.

Though the multiplicity of his incarnated forms, ranging from animals to man, suggestive of Vishnu's elemental presence in all things, has undertones of Rig-Vedic mysticism, the proper incarnation cult has its beginning in Brahmans. At least three forms, Yamana who redeemed the world from the demon Bali, Matsya, the great fish that rescued Manu from high tides of the Great Deluge.
and Varaha, boar, that dragged back the earth from deep waters and rescued her, occur in these later Vedic texts.

Vishnu-related Puranas comes out with its own list of his incarnations, totaling in thousands. However, these are two sets that have greater unanimity. According to one tradition the number of his incarnations is twenty-four, while under another, it is ten. His Dasavatara - ten incarnations, comprise the theme of Indian art - sculptures, at least since Gupta period in fifth-sixth century. These ten incarnations are Matsya, Kurma, Varah, Narsimha, Vamana, Parashurama, Rama, Balarama, Krishna, Balarama and Kalki.

The Mahabharata identifies Vishnu as Krishna when he shows his cosmic form to Arjuna. However, it is in Puranas that the theory of incarnations fully explodes. Each of his Dasavatara - ten incarnations, comprise the theme of Indian art - sculptures, at least since Gupta period in fifth-sixth century. These ten incarnations are Matsya, Kurma, Varah, Narsimha, Vamana, Parashurama, Rama, Krishna, Balarama and Kalki.
The Vishnu Purana and some other texts acclaim Buddha, not Balarama, as his ninth incarnation. According to many texts, Kalki, the tenth incarnation, has to incarnate in Kaliyuga, the present eon. Around the end of this eon righteousness would turn into unrighteousness, light, into darkness, good, into evil, virtues, into vices, believers, into profanites, community of man, into thieves and evil doers, and the faith in God would be lost. Then Kalki would emerge riding the horse Devadatta - one given by gods, and with this the Kaliyuga would end.

However as Venkateshvara, Vishnu has at least one such form which is not his incarnation.
Vishnu's south Indian devotees consider Venkateshvara as Vishnu's proto-form. Even if this position is unacceptable, Venkateshvara, a manifestation of Vishnu, might be termed as his transform or re-emergence. Vishnu is believed to have abandoned Baikuntha and migrated to Tirumala, a hill-range in south India having serpent Shesh-like form and hence designated as Sheshachala.

The related myth is variously narrated. However, the one in the Padma Purana is better known. As it has it, gods once fell into a dispute for settling which they deputed sage Bhragu. For seeking their guidance Bhragu went to Great Trio. Shiva, engaged in amorous act with Parvati, did not pay attention to him. Brahma behaved almost rudely, but Bhragu lost his temper when he found Vishnu asleep. The angry sage hit him on his chest with his leg, which left on it the impression of his foot that as Shrivatsa adds another element in his iconography. Vishnu, instead of punishing the sage, only apologised for being asleep. Lakshmi who was lying on his side felt insulted and in fury abandoned Vishnu and his Baikuntha. Unable to bear separation Vishnu also left Baikuntha and migrated to Tirumala hill on the earth. After eons of repentance and yearning one day Vishnu realised that like a lotus Lakshmi was sprouting within him and thus the two were re-united. Tirumala is thus Vishnu's only abode where he permanently settled after he had abandoned Baikuntha, his heavenly abode. His presence here is considered thus full and absolute.

**VISHNU'S EXPLOITS**

Except that he is one who spans the earth, known and unknown spaces in three steps, the Rig-Veda does not recount any of his exploits. With his transformation as the god of yajna his role widens in later Vedic texts. Now also as Yamana, Matsya and Varaha he indulges in more personalised kind of acts. In Puranas his form is almost concretised and so his exploits against demons, Hayagriva, Madhu and Kaitabha, Andhaka, Vritrasura, Nemi, Sumali, Malyavan among others. He
fights against mighty demons Madhu and Kaitabha for ages before he is able to kill them.

The myth of annihilation of Madhu and Kaitabha appeared first in the Shanti Parva of the Mahabharata. Later, with a few variations, it appeared in the Devi Bhagavata Purana. As goes the myth, after the Great Deluge Mahavishnu lay asleep on the water's surface. Long after from his navel grew a lotus, out of which subsequently emerged Brahma. Staying in the lotus he engaged himself in meditation and in reciting Vedas. Meanwhile some ear-wax emitted from the ears of Mahavishnu and from it were born two demons, named Madhu and Kaitabha. According to the Mahabharata, Madhu and Kaitabha were born from two drops of water that Mahavishnu had created in the lotus. One of the two drops was sweet like Madhu - honey, and hence, Madhu, the name of the demon born of it. He stood for Tamas - darkness, one of the three attributes of cosmos. The other drop was hard. From this drop was born Kaitabha representing Rajas - activity.

Born and grown up in water Madhu and Kaitabha had exceptional power to walk on water's surface and under it, which had made them arrogant and proud. They wondered how this big flood came into being. One day, Devi appeared and taught them the 'Vagbijra mantra' - hymn of the origin of logos. Reciting the hymn they performed Devi’s worship for a thousand years. Appeased by their worship Devi appeared and told them to ask whatever they desired. They wished that they should die in the manner they chose. The wish was granted. Their arrogance now multiplied. One day, they stole Brahma's Vedas and hid in the nether world. Brahma went after them but tortured and frightened by them came back. He went to Mahavishnu and sought his help in restoring Vedas. Mahavishnu went to Madhu and Kaitabha but they refused to return the scriptures. Mahavishnu raised arms against them but it yielded no result. Under a strategy, when one fought with him the other rested and thus they tired Mahavishnu who was battling non-stop. It continued for a thousand years. Finally, Devi appeared and revealed that they would not be killed unless they disclosed the manner by which they could be killed. Mahavishnu feigned to give up arms and lauded the demons for their great valour. He told that he would grant them anything they wished. As anticipated, the demons laughed and said that they were superior to him and hence he should ask them whatever he wanted from them. Mahavishnu instantly said that he wished to kill them and asked them to grant this wish. With no other option left, they granted his wish but with the condition that he could kill them but not inside the water. Mahavishnu instantly expanded his thighs so far that like earth they reached above water. The demons expanded their bodies many more times leaving waters far below. Vishnu expanded his thighs further, caught hold of the demons, held them on his thighs and cut their throats with his disc.

Mahavishnu likewise eliminated Hayagriva, the son of Kashyapaprajapati by his demon wife Denu, for torturing good people and destroying their yajnas, Anthaka,
the notorious minister of the demon king Mahisha, Vratasura, the son of Prajapati Twasta born of his wrath, Sumali, the son of Patalaravana, Malyavan, the son of demon Sukesh and brother of Mali and Sumali, Nemi, the head of the demons of Nemi clan, and Rahu, the notorious planet. Rahu was cut into two parts by Mahavishnu with his disc. As the related myth has it, the incessantly warring gods and demons once reached an accord under which they agreed to churn ocean and discover nectar that the ocean contained. After the nectar was found in the course of churning the demons rushed to snatch it. Fearing that the world would be destroyed if it fell into the hands of demons, gods were reluctant to let it pass into their hands. And hence, a fearful battle ensued for its custody. When arms did not yield result, Vishnu resorted to other options. He transformed himself into Mohini, the temptress. All demons rushed to obtain her. Meanwhile gods disappeared with the pot of nectar, and just after them, Mohini. They reached Baikuntha and to bar entry of any demon put the Sun and the Moon on guard. However, Rahu in disguise succeeded in entering. But, on being detected by Moon Mahavishnu discharged on him his disc and cut him into two pieces.

For Further Study:

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Veronica Ions: Indian Mythology

This article by Prof. P.C. Jain and Dr Daljeet.

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