

## **Agama-Pramanyam - Establishing Validity and Authority of (Vaisnava) Agamas**

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[This talk on ‘Agama-Pramanyam’ of the great Acarya of Visistadvaita, Sri Yamunacarya, delivered on 7th Jan. 2018, at the above seminar.] [The following is the gist of the content of the talk.]

### **Introduction – The Agama and the Nigama**

Among the great scriptures of the Hindus [Sanatana-Dharma], the Agamas [also known as the Tantra] and the Nigama [well-known as the Veda] are considered to be the most sacred and authoritative. They enshrine vital teachings of the greatest value and the highest significance. The Agama is fundamentally a Sadhana Sastra [Science of Self-realisation for the benefit of the votaries, i.e., Sadhaka-s or Upasaka-s] that prescribes a particular way of life and a practical course of Self-discipline in conformity with the theoretical teachings of its Philosophy. It also governs to a considerable degree, the forms of worship performed in the temples and the religious rituals performed in the houses. Both Agama and Nigama have their own divisions and sub-divisions. The Nigama is divided into the four Vedas, well-known as Rk, Yajus, Sama and Atharva. The Agama has its three sub-divisions, Saiva, Sakta and Vaisnava. Each of these has sub-divisions of its own. The last is divided into two sub-divisions namely Pancaratra and Vaikhanasa.

The day-to-day ritualistic life and temple-worship of the Modern Hindus are based mostly on the Agama teachings and traditions, notwithstanding the almost universal esteem and veneration with which the Nigama or the Vedas are held as the revealed scriptures or the self-revealed Sruti. For the past hundreds of years, the Vedic yajnas [sacrifices] have largely give place, especially in South India, to resplendent rituals of Temple-worship based on the Agamas. So too the rituals of Vedic worship at the domestic fire-altars of the ancient times have largely given place to worship practiced according to the teachings and traditions of the Agamas. In both cases, certain elements of the sacrificial rituals as practiced in the ancient Vedic times have been incorporated into the rituals of Temple and Domestic worship as practiced in recent times.

The Agamas in general claim to be based on the Nigama or the Vedas. There is also the view that both are derived from a common root or Mula-Veda. Harita, for example, states in his Dharma Sutra that Sruti is of two kinds – the Vedic and Tantra (or Agamic) (श्रुतिप्रमाणको धर्मः । श्रुतिश्च द्विविधा । वैदिकी तान्त्रिकी चेति ।). In later times, however, there seems to have arisen a school which held that the Agama was inferior to, and was only for those

who were not equal to treading the Vedantic path. It is to refute this view that, about ten centuries ago, Sri Yamunacarya, the father of the Vaisnava Visitadvaita school of Sri Ramanuja, seems to have found it necessary to write his famous work Agama-Pramanya, for upholding the view that Agama is as equally authoritative as Nigama or Veda a view acceptable to all the three Acaryas.

### **Agamas - Subject Matter**

As regards the general contents of Agama literature, the subject-matter is generally dealt with under four heads viz. Jnana, Yoga, Kriya and Carya.

1. Jnana: Knowledge which leads to release or mukti.
2. Yoga: Concentration or meditation on one subject.
3. Kriya: Action - including all actions from laying the foundation of the temple to the completion of the sacred edifice and installation of the images therein according to prescribed rules.
4. Carya: Performance of daily worship, other rites and festival rituals etc., according to prescribed methods.

In many of the Pancaratra Samhitas [literature] the subject matter is divided into two heads only, that is, Jnana-Kanda and Kriya-Kanda. In most of the Agama Samhitas, the practical portion namely the Kriya and Carya sections are dealt with in great length.

As regards the import and significance of the word **Pancaratra**, among the many views propounded, it is traceable to the central doctrine of the school which has reference to the Pancaratra Sattras of Narayana, (spoken of in Satapatha Brahmana 13.6.1), interpreted philosophically as the five-fold self-manifestation of God by means of His Para, Vyuha, Vibhava, Antaryamin and Arca forms, This agrees well with Ahirbudhnya Samhita (end of 11th Chapter), that the Lord Himself framed out of the original Sastra the system (tantra) called Pancaratra describing His five-fold nature known as Para, Vyuha, Vibhava, Antaryamin and Arca.

In regard to the topics dealt with in the Pancaratra Sastra in general, the scientific student will probably find it best to distinguish the following ten:

1. Tattva (Philosophy), 2. Mantra-sastra (Linguistic occultism), 3. Yantra-sastra (Theory of Magical figures), 4. Maya-yoga (practical magic), 5. Yoga, 6. Mandira-nirmana (Temple building), 7. (Pratima) Pratishtha-vidhi (Image making), 8. Samskara, ahnika (domestic observances), 9. Varnasrama dharma (Social rules) and 10. Utsava (Public festivals).

Among the landmarks of Pancaratra, the six qualities (guna) Jnana, Sakti, Bala, Aisvarya, Virya, Tejas, of Supreme Brahman is Narayana, the five-fold manifestation viz., Para, Vyuha, Vibhava, Antaryamin and Arca, Evolution of soul and matter, the three realities, (Tattvatraya) viz., Cit, Acit and Isvara and Purusarthas (Dharma, Artha, Kama and Moksa) are dealt with in detail.

The Pancaratra Agamas are an age old tradition widely in practice, the philosophy of which is not much discussed, but simply taken for granted.

The Pancaratra Agamas are one of the most popular Agamas not only ancient but also widely prevalent particularly in the South India to begin with, and now very popular all over.

The subject is highly philosophical. Specifically, Nights and Days of Narayana (The Supreme Reality), Higher or “Pure” creation (Evolution – First Stage), Intermediate Creation (Evolution – Second Stage), Lower Primary Creation (Evolution – Third Stage), Secondary or “Gross” creation and nature and destiny of the soul, are elaborately dealt with.

The present talk is based on the Pancaratra School or sub-division of the Vaisnava Agama.

### ***Visistadvaita System of Philosophy***

Among the works of the preceptors of Visistadvaita philosophy, those of Sri Yamunacarya are the earliest. Reliance on the Tamil verses of Alvars, the devotional Vaisnavite Saints and Pancaratra Agama tenets is the foundation of the philosophy, as expounded by Bhagavad Ramanujacarya.

Upanisads in Vedas preach that by lasting, boundless devotion/meditation on Lord Sriman Narayana, individual souls get liberated. Our past misdeeds fuel growth of rajas [selfish action] and tamas [ignorance] in us, destroy discrimination, amplify desire, anger, sleep, laziness etc. and make devotion and contemplation impossible. To ward off these ill-effects of past deeds, noble and virtuous deeds are a must. With these, the impediments to spiritual evolution get removed and sattva [right knowledge] grows resulting in clarity in thoughts and propriety in action. Meditation becomes possible.

Vedas in karma-kanda [concerning virtues, prosperity, worldly desires etc.] mostly prescribe yajnas, danas, homas etc, and kalpa sutras [ritual manuals] explain how to perform these to attain this-worldly and pleasures in the higher worlds.

For liberation from the cycle of births and deaths, meditation or selfless surrender and service to Lord Sriman Narayana is required. By selfish acts, realisation of self and Lord’s attributes is not easy. Hence, Lord Sriman Narayana Himself facilitates such devotion by incarnating Himself into four Forms that lend easily for devotees’ worship and various other pleasant ones that amplify devotion. These forms are called Vyuha, and Arca. Presently recited Vedic texts indicate and the branches recited in SvetaDvipa etc. denote these clearly. The original branch of Veda called Ekayana details these.

Like Kalpa Sutras for ritualistic performance, Pancaratra Agama, taught by Bhagavan Himself, preach us the required information for worshipping and attaining devotion that ensures final release from bondage for all living beings. Experiential aspect makes it easy for achieving devotion and practice it ceaselessly. These are also as ancient as Vedas. All those who accept validity and authority of Vedas, accept those of Pancaratra too. Samkaracarya, Vacaspati Misra, Citsukhacarya etc. have no objection to the Omni-

present Lord Sriman Narayana, distinct from Primordial Matter [Mula Prakrti] and inherent Controller [Antaryami] of all beings, dividing Himself into four divine forms [catur-vyuha] or the five-fold, time-bound daily worship starting with Abhigamana, [Upadana, Ijya, Svadhyaya and Yoga] rooted and culminating in devoted meditation on Him, prescribed in Pancaratra texts.

### **External Onslaught and Yamunacarya's Agama Pramanyam - A Summary**

Other religions, bent upon condemning Vaidika dharma, especially, Temple worship, particularly chose to campaign against Pancaratra. Like water-bodies sustaining urban areas, the daily routines based on Vedic injunctions elaborated in the Bhagavad-sastra [Pancaratra] were to be protected and propagated by the custodians of the Sampradaya. Thus, Sri Nathamuni began this sacred duty, ably established by works of great philosophical and polemic merit by Sri Yamunacarya [Alavandar]. His Gitārtha Samgraha protected daily routines based on Varnas and Asramas and Agama Pramanya protected selfless, uninterrupted service, purely out of devotion.

Listing the objections of those who hold that Pancaratra should not form the basis of daily routine and following Vaidika dharma, refuting them systematically with sound reason and scriptural authority and establishing the validity of agamas like Pancaratra is the purpose of Agama Pramanyam.

We will now see some of them.

1. Ancient Knowledge systems, divided into fourteen vidyasthanas, do not include Pancaratra [Agamas, in general]. So, how can we then accept its validity?

Ans. Like Itihasas [Epics], Ramayana and Mahabharata, being included in the vidyasthana of Purana, this too should be included similarly. Or else, like Grhya Sutras [domestic ritual manuals] under Kalpa Vedanga [Vedic auxiliary], this could be included there. This is due to the fact that Tattva (Metaphysics), hita (means for attaining objectives) and purusartha [essential characteristics of entities, Means for liberation and objective or goal = 'summum bonum'] are dealt along with elaborate ritualistic instructions in Agamas, they can be included in either of the category/vidyasthana.

A parallel could be drawn here between Pratisakhya of different Vedic branches, having validity and authority due to being alike Siksa and Vyakarana in dealing with phonetic or grammatical aspects.

2. Like the Buddha avatara where, Lord Sriman Narayana took deceitful form [disguise], entered [three] cities, taught Bauddha Agama, to mislead Asura prakrti-s [people with non-sattvic nature] and destroy them, as mentioned by Sri Nammalvar, can Pancaratra also not be similar?

Ans. No. As the Upanisadic tenet that, Bhagavan Vasudeva becomes the Means for devotees to approach and attain Him, was gladly taught to His disciples out of abundant compassion, this is not for misleading. Unlike Bauddha Agama was meant to mislead, declares Sage Vyasa in Mahabharata. The Visistadvaitin equates the Brahman and the antaryamin of the Upanisads with Vasudeva of the Pancaratra, the Bhagavan of the

Puranas, the avatars of the Itihasas and the arca murti-s of the experience of Alvars.

As the Pancaratra is the word of God leading to the supreme spiritual goal of godliness, it is as valid as the Veda. The highest proof of the existence of God is the experience of God by godly men. The Alvars, like the Vedic rsis, had a direct experience of God, and they invite humanity to share in the joy of their divine life. In an extended sense, the Veda is definable as a body of eternal spiritual truths which are

verified and verifiable by spiritual experience. The Satvata religion of the Pancaratra is the word of God promoting godliness and is therefore true.

3. Sarvajna Siva taught about things like Pasu, Pati, Pasa etc. in his Agama out of compassion and still it has been rejected in Pasupati Adhikarana of Brahma Sutras and so, this also should be similar.

Ans. Pasupata Agama's teachings are at loggerheads with the Upanisadic injunctions that Bhagavan [Brahman] is the upadana and nimitta karana [material and efficient/instrumental cause], by insisting Him as only instrumental cause. Also, many forbidden practices in the Dharma Sastras are advocated like, eating food kept in human skull, smearing self with ash of dead bodies, invoking/worshipping deities in jars filled with liquor, as means for liberation. Thus, due to self-evident opposition to Vedic principles, sage Vyasa rejected Pasupata Agama. Pancaratra has no such abhorrent teachings.

4. Does not Pancaratra advocate certain samskaras like Cakrabja-Mandala-Diksa etc, not found in Vedas or dharma sastras and hence belittle Vaidika samskaras like Upanayanam?

Ans. Samskara is preparing one to be fit/competent to perform certain prescribed act. Even after Upanayanam, one cannot perform yajnas, as Agni-Adhana is a pre-requisite. Vaidika samskaras are many and all have their necessity in their contexts and none repudiates others. Pancaratra also, as it is based on Vedas, prescribes samskaras which are Vaidika only. Tantrika means the basis for a certain samskara is from tantra, as known now and not non-Vedic. As even CakrabjaMandalaDiksa is prescribed only after Savitri upadesa [upanayanam], how can it belittle Upanayanam?

5. Sage Sandilya is said to have got redemption from means prescribed in Pancaratra, after he was unsuccessful in achieving the same by those from all the four Vedas. Does this not make Vedas superfluous/ineffective and hence oppose Vedas?

Ans. This does not mean to criticise or find fault with Vedas. This is a form of eulogising a desired text. Vedas say that 'one who does Agnihotra homa before Sun-rise, speaks untruth [falsehood] every morning' and also 'one who performs Agnihotra after Sun has risen well, is like one chasing a guest with items of worship, who has left the house in a huff after feeling unattended by anyone', in two contradictory ways. These are reconciled as the former is to mean praising and prescribing homa after Sun-rise and the latter, that before it. One does not repudiate the other. One has to follow one's own tradition among them. Similarly, when sage Narada approached Sage Sanatkumara to learn Bhuma-Vidya, his enumerating all vidyasthanas, though learnt, as not being helpful in realising Atman, It is to be taken to praise Bhuma-Vidya. Likewise, Sage Sandilya did not say



that Vedas do not get purusartha-s, but that a simpleton like him, needed a simpler/easier means and hence he took recourse to Pancaratra.

6. There is no Vedic text saying ‘worship in temples through consecration etc. can grant four-fold purusarthas’. We cannot know this through direct sensory perception as well. Consequently, inferring also is not possible. How to believe this [as in Pancaratra]?

Ans. Pancaratra has been highly lauded by Sage Vyasa in Mahabharata. It is based on original Vedas. It is preached by Lord Sriman Narayana, who is capable of perceiving dharma, adharma, their results etc., directly. By performing one of the means prescribed herein, and attaining its fruit, one can conclude the similar efficacy of others also. Hence, due to the existence of pramanas [sources of valid cognition] doubt about this sastra will not arise for fortunate people [devotees].

7. In the Sariraka Mimamsa Sutras, 2nd quarter of second chapter, like the doctrines of Sage Kapila etc., has this also not been rejected by Sage Vyasa?

Ans. No. Other commentators have claimed so. That is not right. Sage Vyasa has only stated that, those who have criticised Pancaratra have done so mistaking that Pancaratra posits creation of Jivatma [individual soul] and from him, indriya-s [senses] and has clarified the factual position and upheld/ reiterated the validity of Pancaratra.

The sentences apparently meaning the creation of Jiva etc. are to be taken to mean that - the three forms Sankarsana, Pradyumna and Aniruddha are, respectively, the superintending deities of Jiva, manas and ahamkara and are special Vyuha avatara forms of the ParaBrahma Purusottama Sriman Narayana [who is Vijnana, Ananda and Brahma] taking care respectively, of dissolution, sustenance and creation of the Universe.

Also, this Bhagavad Sastra [= Pancaratra] holds Jivatmas as eternal and declares them to not have birth and death in clear terms. Hence, the adhikarana dealing with this Agama upholding its validity, is to refute the argument that like other Agamas, this also is to be rejected as invalid.

8. The adherents of this Agama are termed Bhagavatas, and Sattvatas. These do not belong to the three varnas and are of lower births isn't it? Don't they partake the forbidden nirmalya [used things, leftover] also? Being lower by birth and conduct, are these not excluded from Vedic sampradaya?

Ans. Even the higher brahmins are also the followers of the duties prescribed in Bhagavad Sastra. This is seen directly. Even otherwise, we can know this from their gotra, sutra etc. While the prescribed austerities are being followed, this is easily known. Otherwise, by dress, language, conduct etc. could be observed to infer this.

To elucidate this aspect, Sri Yamunacharya has shown many examples. Molten ghee can be known by smell and taste. Cinder covered by ash, though not visible, is known by touch. Presence of a horse at a distance, though not visible, is known by [hearing] it's neighing. He asks that, just because, from a distance, the difference between oyster-shell and silver is not comprehended, can we say that silver can never be perceived by eyes?

The nirmalya of Lord Vishnu is not prohibited. Scriptures declare that by consuming it,

one can cross Maya [= samsara, transmigration of the soul]. Nirmalya of other deities only is forbidden.

Moreover, one who worships Lord Vishnu for monetary gains [salary etc.] alone is condemned as becoming a ‘devalaka’ [= dealer/merchant in god]. Sincere worship of Lord Sriman Narayana, without expecting anything in return, out of pure devotional outpouring, is a great virtue and supreme dharma.

In the performance of Vedic yajnas also, it is seen that participants in various activities belong to various varnas. Ritviks [officials, priests] are from Brahmin community, while those to construct the Vedi, homakunda, yagashala [altar, fireplace, sacrificial hall etc.] like architects are from other communities. Similarly, those who conduct direct worship of deities in temples are brahmins, while those who build it, maintain/protect it etc. are from other varnas. All of them are bhagavatas [devotees] only.

The food offered to Lord Vishnu, as it is to be offered to His subordinate deities, is also to be used in prana-agnihotra [prescribed eating by devotees]. In Sraddhas [ceremonies for departed ancestors] also it is used as per tradition. It may also be noted that offerings to Visvaksena [like flowers, rice etc.] are not barred from utilisation. The remains of food offered to preceptor of our first kulapati Nammalvar, Senesvara [=Visvaksena] even, is not to be abandoned, is the elders’ dictum.

Bhagavatas have been performing their samskara-s like garbhadhana etc. as per Katyayana Grhya Sutra and hence, are not non-Vaidikas.

The famed Gayatri mantra, as it invokes the deity Ravi, Surya [Savita] is not to be avoided by Vaisnava Bhagavatas, as Savita, Ravi etc. are included in the thousand names of Lord Vishnu. These do not denote other deities. Bhagavatas have been doing Gayatri japa and there is no bar to call them dvija-s [twice-born].

Sri Nathamuni established the procedures for worship of Lord Vishnu in all Vaisnavite temples in accordance with this [Pancaratra] Agama. Sri Yamunacarya blessed [wrote] this work for posterity, to ensure that no objections are raised again, by resorting to sound logic and scriptural authority.

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