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Concept of Liberation in the Viṣṇupurāṇa

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Abstract

The concept of liberation or mokṣa occupies a prominent place in Indian philosophical and religious traditions. Among the four puruṣārthas, viz., dharma, artha, kāma and mokṣa, the last puruṣārtha i.e. mokṣa is said to be concerned with the spiritual aspect of human life. Mokṣa is said to be paramapuruṣārtha, i.e. the ultimate value. This is where both the philosophy and religion meet in Hinduism.

The Viṣṇupurāṇa is one of the important Mahā-purāṇas and also the primary sacred text of the Vaiṣṇava branch of Hinduism, which today probably has more adherents than any other Purāṇas. The Viṣṇupurāṇa is regarded as a highly authoritative work from the standpoint of religion and philosophy. In this Purāṇa, the concept of liberation occupies the position of the supreme importance. It holds that the realization of identity between the self and God or Absolute breaks the fetters of this worldly existence. This state is called the state of liberation. This Purāṇa mentions the different paths of liberation of the self and at the same time emphasizes its preference for the path of devotion or bhakti. Here an attempt has been made to highlight the doctrine of liberation as depicted in the Viṣṇupurāṇa.

Keywords: mokṣa, avidyā, jñāna, karma, yoga, bhakti, puruṣārtha.

Introduction: The Purāṇas are the most important literature of India after the Vedas and the two Mahākāvyas, i.e. the Rāmāyaṇa and the Mahābhārata. The influence of the Purāṇic literature on Indian life is profound and permanent. The study of the Purāṇas is indispensable for the proper understanding of our philosophical and socio-cultural roots. The Viṣṇupurāṇa is one of the oldest and important Mahā-purāṇas, and has got the name Purāṇaratna or the gem of the Purāṇas. It is considered as a Sāttvikapurāṇa, because the worship of Viṣṇu has been given a lot of importance in this Purāṇa. It stands next to the Bhāgavatapurāṇa from the philosophical point of view.

The concept of liberation or mokṣa occupies a prominent place in Indian philosophical and religious thought. Hinduism is concerned about the philosophy of values. Liberation or mokṣa is the highest and supreme value in Indian philosophy and religion. Among the four puruṣārthas, the first three, viz., dharma, artha and kāma are said to be concerned with worldly aspects of human life. The last puruṣārtha, i.e. mokṣa is said to be concerned with the spiritual aspect of human life. Hence, all these values taken together can be said to have taken care of both the worldly and spiritual aspects of human personality. Mokṣa is not a state of attainment but is the realization of one's own intrinsic nature. It does not negate the

other three *puruṣārthas*, but is the fulfillment of all the three. Hence, *mokṣa* is said to be *parama-puruṣārtha*, i.e. the ultimate value of the four *puruṣārthas*.

The term *mokṣa* is derived from the root *muc* which means to let go, discharge, release or deliverance with suffix *ktin*.¹ In the *Amarakoṣa*,² the following terms are given to denote liberation- *kaivalya*, *nirvāṇa*, *śreyah*, *niḥśreyasam*, *amṛtam*, *mokṣa*, *mukti* and *apavarga*. All these terms are identical in primary meaning with deliverance, emancipation, freedom, liberty and release.

According to the Indian tradition, liberation is not a state to be realized but only the awareness of what already is. Regarding the nature of liberated self the *Bhagavadgītā* explains that the person who sees all beings in himself and himself in all beings - dislikes none.³ Liberation means freedom from bondage, which is due to ignorance, for we understand the unreal as real. Thus, liberation is nothing but the search for the real.

It is said in the Indian tradition that the world is a moral stage wherein the individual can practice all his activity to attain liberation. Good actions take a person to salvation; whereas bad or evil actions prevent one from attain liberation. The Purāṇas also offer a moral as well as spiritual outlook in understanding human life. It teaches how our mortal life has to be lived to lead us to immortal life. Human can thus progress from the mortal to immortal, the unreal to real and from ignorance to knowledge. However, all the Purāṇas made effort to establish the overall supremacy of the Supreme Being or God, which is in complete conformity with the monistic idea of liberation. The *Viṣṇupurāṇa* upholds that liberation consists in reaching the blessed region inhabited by Lord Viṣṇu. According to this Purāṇa, the realization of identity between the individual self and the Supreme self or God breaks the fetters of this worldly existence, which is called the state of liberation.

Nature of Liberation: According to the *Viṣṇupurāṇa*, *avidyā* or ignorance is the cause of bondage of the individual self. *Avidyā* consists in the cognition that the not self is the self (*anātmani ātmabuddhiḥ*) and in the notion of property in what is not one's own (*asve svamiti matiḥ*). These are the two seeds of the tree of *avidyā* or ignorance.⁴ In the *Viṣṇupurāṇa*, it is mentioned that the self is distinct from the body, which is composed of five elements, viz., ether, air, fire, water and earth. Even then the embodied being, bewildered by the darkness of fascination, asserts that 'This is I' thinking the body on the self.⁵ The self is pure and ever free; and is composed of happiness and wisdom. Thus, bondage is not natural to the self. Actually the properties like ignorance, impurity and pain etc. belongs to *prakṛti* or the matter, not to the self.⁶ When the self is associated with

¹ *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, Vol. VIII, p.770

² AK, 1.5.6

³ sarvabhūtaśamātmānam sarvabhūtāni cātmani /
īkṣate yogayuktātmā sarvatra samadarśanaḥ // SBG, VI.29

⁴ anātmanyātmabuddhiryā cāsve svamiti yā matiḥ /
saṁsāratarusambhūtibījametaḍ dvidhā sthitam // VP, VI.7.11

⁵ cf., *Ibid.*, VI.7.12-13

⁶ nirvāṇamayā evāyamātmā jñānamayo'malaḥ /
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prakṛti, it is vitiated by *ahamkāra* etc. and assumes the form of *prakṛti*. Such association of the self with *prakṛti* is produced by *avidyā*. When *avidyā* is destroyed through right knowledge, then the self realizes its own nature, which is pure and liberated. The realization of the true nature of the self is called *mukti* or *mokṣa* or liberation.

In the *Viṣṇupurāṇa*, the *avidyā* or ignorance is classified into fivefold heads, i.e. *tamas* (darkness), *moha* (delusion), *mahāmoha* (deep delusion), *tāmisra* (gloom) and *andhatāmisra* (dark gloom).⁷ The *Viṣṇupurāṇa* also describes the threefold pains, viz., *ādhyātmika*, *ādhibhautika* and *ādhidāivika*; the twenty-eight kinds of *vadhas* or disabilities,⁸ which are known as *aśakti* in Sāṃkhya philosophy,⁹ and also mentions the various types of miseries, viz., *janma*, *jarā*, *ajñāna*, *mṛtyu*, *naraka* etc.¹⁰ According to the *Viṣṇupurāṇa*, the self always immersed in these. One can get relief from these pains only with the path of liberation.¹¹

The *Viṣṇupurāṇa* establishes that the union of the individual soul with the Supreme soul or God as the ultimate goal of human life. According to this Purāṇa, liberation is nothing but the attainment of the divine being, which is the state of unlimited bliss or happiness.¹² The essential nature of the self as bliss is concealed by pain, which is produced by ignorance. In the absence of *avidyā* or ignorance, pain disappears, and the nature of the self as unmixed bliss manifests itself. Thus, it can be said that the Purāṇic conception of salvation or liberation does not differ from the Vedic or the Upaniṣadic conception. Both the Vedas and the Purāṇas agree that liberation is a state of complete bliss and highest pleasure that can be conceived of.

Means of Liberation: For the attainment of liberation, the *Viṣṇupurāṇa* prescribes several ways or paths, such as *jñānayoga*, *karmayoga* and *bhaktiyoga*. However, these different means or ways of liberation are not opposed to each-other; they are mutually interdependent. The *Viṣṇupurāṇa* advocates the knowledge or *jñāna* as an essential means for attaining liberation. It is said that those who realize the truth through knowledge, meditation or concentration have attained freedom from existence for ever.¹³ The *Viṣṇupurāṇa* also regards the whole world as the nature of knowledge. The knowledge that

duḥkhājñānamayā dharmāḥ prakṛteṣu tu nātmanāḥ // Ibid., VI.7.22

⁷ tamo moho mahāmohastāmisro hyandhasamjñātaḥ /
avidyā pañcaparvaiṣā prādurbhūtā mahātmanāḥ // Ibid., I.5.5

⁸ Ibid., I.5.11

⁹ vide, SK, 47

¹⁰ Ibid., VI.5.1-9

¹¹ iti saṃsāraduḥkhārkātāpatāpitacetāsām /
vimuktipādapacchāyāmṛte kutra sukham nṛṇām // Ibid., VI.5.57

¹² nirastātiśayāhlādasukhabhāvāikalakṣaṇā /
bheṣajam bhagavatprāptirekāntātyantikī matā // Ibid., VI.5.59

¹³ tattattvavedino bhūtvā jñānadhyānasamādhibhiḥ /
avāpurmuktimapare puruṣā dhvastabandhanāḥ // Ibid., I.18.23

this world is a manifestation of God and this is the pure knowledge.¹⁴ The pure knowledge of God or the union with God is the end of human life.

According to the *Viṣṇupurāṇa*, knowledge is of two kinds, viz., *śāstrajanya* or that which is derived from scripture and *vivekaja* or that which is derived from reflection. By scriptural knowledge one can attain Śabda-Brahman and by reflective knowledge one can attain Para-Brahman.¹⁵ In the *Viṣṇupurāṇa*, Parāśara refers to Manu who said that there are two forms of Brahman – one is Śabda-Brahman and the other is Para-Brahman. After being well versed in Śabda-Brahman, the spiritual aspirants attain Para-Brahman.¹⁶ The *Viṣṇupurāṇa* mentions that *ajñāna* means utter darkness; the knowledge of scripture shines like a lamp and the knowledge of reflection breaks the obscurity like the sun.¹⁷ This implies that the scriptural knowledge destroys ignorance to some extent, just as the light of a lamp can remove darkness to some extent. While through the reflective knowledge, ignorance can be completely remove, just as the sun destroys darkness totally.

The *Viṣṇupurāṇa* mentions that *karman* or action is also another necessary means in the path of liberation. There are two types of action, viz., *pravṛtti* (active) and *nivṛtti* (quiescent). By both of which the universal person is worshipped by mankind.¹⁸ *Pravṛtti* means the path of action. *Upasanā* (meditation) and *yoga* (concentration) etc. are the *nivṛtti* (quiescent) form of action.¹⁹ The *Viṣṇupurāṇa* also mentions that by doing *karman* without any expectation leads to liberation.²⁰

The path of *yoga* has been frequently mentioned in the *Viṣṇupurāṇa*. The whole course of *Yoga* succinctly told in the dialogue of Keśidhvaja and Khāṇḍikya in the last part of the *Viṣṇupurāṇa*.²¹ It shows that it is the Vaiṣṇavite *yoga* with Vedāntic basis. The *aṣṭāṅgayoga* or the eightfold methods of *yoga* is discussed in the *Viṣṇupurāṇa* which is almost similar to that of the Yoga philosophy. Observation of the five *yamas*, like *ahimsā*, *satya*, *asteya*, *brahmacharya* and *aparigraha*; and the five kinds of *niyamas*, i.e. *śauca*, *santoṣa*, *tapas*, *svādhyāya* and *Īśvara praṇidhāna* are common to the Yoga system. The yogin should exercise the *yoga* practices through the help of any kind of *āsana* (posture), such as *padmāsana*, *bhadrāsana* etc. According to the *Viṣṇupurāṇa*, *prāṇāyāma* or breath control is the art of controlling breath through exercise. Breath control may be divided into two types

¹⁴ Ibid., I.4.40-41

¹⁵ āgamotthaṁ vivekācca dvidhā jñānaṁ taducyate /
śabdabrahmāgamamayaṁ paraṁ brahma vivekajam // Ibid., VI.5.61

¹⁶ dve brahmaṇī veditavye śabdabrahma paraṁ ca yat /
śabdabrahmaṇī niṣṇātaḥ paraṁ brahmādhigacchati // Ibid., VI.5.64

¹⁷ andhaṁ tama evājñānaṁ dīpavaccendriyodbhavam /
yathā sūryastathā jñānaṁ yadviprarṣe vivekajam // Ibid., VI.5.62

¹⁸ pravṛttaṁ ca nivṛttaṁ ca dvidvidhaṁ karma vaidikam /
tābhyāmubhābhyāṁ puruṣaiṣsarvamūrtirssa ijyate // Ibid., VI.4.41

¹⁹ cf., Ibid., VI.4.43

²⁰ tadevāphaladaṁ karma paramārtho matastava /
muktisādhanabhūtatvāt paramārtho na sādhanam // Ibid., II.14.25

²¹ Ibid., VI.7.30-95

– *sabīja* and *nirbīja*, i.e. accompanied or non- accompanied with the mental pronunciation. It consists in slow and deep inspiration (*puraka*), retention of breath (*kumbhaka*) and slow expiration (*reacaka*). *Pratyāhāra* means the withdrawal of the external sense organs from their object.²² *Dhāraṇā* or fixed attention is binding the mind to God. The yogin should mediate on the complete form of God. The author gives the different mental representations of Viṣṇu, on which yogin should mediate in a serial order.²³ Undisturbed and continuous attention to a particular limb of God is known as *dhyāna* or meditation. When the mind becomes unattached and withdrawn from sense-objects, then the yogin realizes the essential nature of the soul. This is called *samādhi* or concentration. In this stage, the yogin can realize his oneness with Paramātman.²⁴

It is noteworthy that *bhakti* or the path of devotion occupies the predominant position in the Purāṇas. The *Viṣṇupurāṇa*, like the Purāṇas, clearly mentions that one who wishes to get the four goal of human life, i.e. *dharma*, *artha*, *kāma* and *mokṣa*, he or she should be propitiated to God.²⁵ It is also mentioned that he who adores the divine Hari, the Supreme Soul, who is the Supreme Brahman, obtains the eternal liberation, which is difficult of attainment.²⁶ In this way, the *Viṣṇupurāṇa* asserts that *bhakti* is higher than any other means to salvation. It is not a means to any other end, but is the *summum bonum* of life.²⁷ By attaining *bhakti* or devotional love of God, *bhakta* becomes immortal and fulfilled. *Mukti* is not hankered for those devotees who have tested *bhakti-rasa* which is nectar in *kali* age. That reward which a man obtains in the *kritayuga* by abstract meditation, in the *tretāyuga* by sacrifice, in the *dvāpara* by adoration, he receives in the *kali* age by merely reciting the name of Keśava.²⁸ Thus, it is the easiest path for the attainment of the final beatitude.

Conclusion: From the above discussion, it is clear that the concept of liberation occupies an eminent position in the *Viṣṇupurāṇa*. In accordance with the Indian philosophical tradition, the *Viṣṇupurāṇa* holds that ignorance is the cause of bondage and the right knowledge is the cause of liberation. However, the concept of liberation of the *Viṣṇupurāṇa* fundamentally differs from the Sāṃkhya-Yoga concept of liberation. According to the Sāṃkhya-Yoga system of Indian philosophy, liberation is the *viyoga* or separation of *puruṣa* from *prakṛti*;²⁹ while according to the *Viṣṇupurāṇa*, liberation means *saṃyoga* or union of the individual self with the Supreme self or God. Thus, the *Viṣṇupurāṇa* define the word *yoga* as the spiritual union with God or Brahman through the concentration of the

²² Ibid., VI.7.36-45

²³ Ibid., VI.7.80-90

²⁴ Ibid., VI.7.91-95

²⁵ dharmamarthaṃ ca kāmaṃ ca mokṣaṃ cānvicchatāṃ sadā /
ārādhaniyo bhagavānanādipurūṣottama // Ibid., I.14.16

²⁶ paraṃ brahma paraṃ dhāma yo'sau brahma tathā paraṃ /
tamārādhya hariṃ yāti muktimapyatidurlabhāṃ // Ibid., I.11.46

²⁷ Ibid., III.7.20-25

²⁸ dhyāyankṛte yajanyajñāistretāyām dvāpare'rcayan /
yadāpnoti tadāpnoti kalau saṃkīrtya keśavam // Ibid., VI.2.17

²⁹ SS, III.71, 72; SK, 62, 63; YS, II.17, 18, 23 etc.

mind.³⁰ Whereas, according to Patañjali, the word *yoga* does not mean union but spiritual effort to attain perfection through control of the body, mind and senses, and through right discrimination between *puruṣa* from *prakṛti*.³¹ Moreover, the *Viṣṇupurāṇa* uphold that liberation consists in reaching the blessed region inhabited by the Lord Viṣṇu. Thus, it is clear that the *Viṣṇupurāṇa* made efforts to establish the overall supremacy of the Lord Viṣṇu, which is in complete conformity with the monistic idea of liberation. Hence, it can be said that the *Viṣṇupurāṇa* has adopted the Vedāntic view of emancipation against the background of Sāṃkhya metaphysics.

Besides this, the Sāṃkhya-Yoga systems of thought have not admitted the manifestation of everlasting happiness in the ideal plane of salvation. According to them, liberation is a state of absolute negation of sufferings. It does not consist in the manifestation of bliss, since bliss is an attribute and the self is always free from attributes. On the other hand, the *Viṣṇupurāṇa*, like the other Purāṇas, holds that the state of liberation is purely a state of unlimited bliss and happiness.

Further, though the *Viṣṇupurāṇa* accepts the path of knowledge or the path of action, as the paths to attainment of liberation, it upholds the path of devotion or *bhakti* to be the predominant one. According to the *Viṣṇupurāṇa*, the devotion towards the Supreme Lord gives all desired objects of worldly life. Thus, it is clear that though the chief emphasis of the *Viṣṇupurāṇa* is on devotion, it stresses the other paths also. According to this Purāṇa, truth can be realized in any ways, such as, through the path of knowledge, the path of action or through the path of devotion. In other words, an individual can attain liberation following the paths of *jñāna*, *karma* or *bhakti*, but he or she must have God's grace for attaining the same.

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8. *ENCYCLOPAEDIA OF RELIGION AND ETHICS*, Vol. VIII, James Hastings, Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1908

³⁰ tasyā brahmaṇi saṃyogo yoga etyabhidhīyate / VP., VI.7.31

³¹ yogaścittavṛttinirodhaḥ, YS, I.2