

Revisit the significance of *Avatāravāda*

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Abstract: The concept of *avatāra* or incarnation of the God in different forms is a unique feature of *hindu* theology. The general purposes of *avatārhood* are twofold- Protection of the ardent devotees of God and destruction of the evil. The conception of *avatāra* exists in the Semitic religions also. It is slightly different from that of Hinduism. There the Almighty instead of appearing Himself, as in Hinduism, sends his messengers in the form of *Messiah*, Son or Prophet. Generally, in Hinduism upholding the *dharma* is the recognised purpose of the *avatārhood*. However, our modern Indian thinkers' view is far beyond from the classical view. They describe the nature and purpose of *avatārhood* in spiritual and secular terms and not in religious terms. In this paper, an attempt is taken to revisit the significance of *avatārhood*. Methodology is simply descriptive and analytic.

Keywords: *avatarhood*, *hindu* theology, spiritual, secular, modern Indian thinkers

“He who would bring the heavens here
Must descend himself into clay
And the burden of earthly nature bear
And tread the dolorous way.”
(A God's Labour-Śrī Aurobindo)

I

Introduction

The concept of *avatāra* or incarnation of the God in different forms is a unique feature of *hindu* theology. *Avatāra* literally means ‘a descent’, an incarnation on earth of a deity usually of *Viṣṇu*. Though *avatāras* are related to *Viṣṇu*, *Śiva* and *Brahmā* but it is *Viṣṇu* who is generally believed to have appeared in *avatāras*. The *Mahābhārata* speaks the mission and vision of *avatāras* and it is the *Purāṇas* that give a full account of *avatāras*.

The *Purāṇas* inform us that whenever the *devas* got into trouble created by the *demons*, they went to *Viṣṇu* with a request to appear in the world and protect them from the atrocities of *demons*. Hence, He had to descend several times on the earth. Thus, the *avatāras* took place. *Bhāgavadgītā* states the mission and vision of an *avatāra* clearly-

*Yadā yadā hi dharmasya glāniḥ bhabti bhārata/
Abhyutthānam adhamasya tadā ātmānam sṛjāmi aham//
Paritrāṇāya sādḥūnaṁ vināśhāya ca duṣhkṛtām/
Dharma-sanstḥāpanārthāya sambhavāmi yuge yuge//*¹

It means God himself assures that whenever righteousness declines and unrighteousness prevails, He manifests himself and for the protection of the righteous and the destruction of the wicked and for the establishment of religion He comes down from age to age. The source of this concept is much older than epic period. The *hymn* appearing in *Puruṣa sūkta* declares that -the one who is not born, takes many births.² It means the Supreme being though He is not the subject to normal birth with the physical body, assumes different manifestation for the good of the world.

However, modern Indian thinkers like Sri Aurobindo, Mahatma Gandhi, Dr. Radhakrishnan have given significant attention on this age-old discourse. In this paper, an attempt is taken to revisit the significance of *avatārhood*. Methodology is simply descriptive and analytic and primary sources are taken from the writings of modern Indian thinkers.

II

Legacy of *avatārhood*

The basic theory of *avatāra* as found in the *Vedas* has been further explained in the *Āgama* and later in the *Mahābhārata* and specially in the *Purāṇas*. Although *avatāras* are numberless but only ten of them are very famous popularly known as *daśāvatāra*. They are –Matsya, Kūrma, Barāha, Nṛsiṅha, Vāman, Paraśurāma, Rāma, Balarāma, Buddha, Kalki. However, *Bhāgavadpurāṇa* speaks of twenty-eight important *avatāras* starting from *Puruṣa*

and Sanat kumāras with Matsya occupying tenth place and Rāma and Kṛṣṇa eighteenth and twentieth place respectively. Having a glance of all *Purāṇas* the latter sages recognised the above ten *avatāras* only to be main and important which seem to be more rational from the view point of evolution of life and human society. It is the *Purāṇas* that give a full account of *avatāras*.

In the *Bhāgavadgītā*, the purposes and occasions of *avatāras* are explained. It is said that the Lord comes down in the mundane world for the protection of sages oppressed by evil minded persons and establish *dharma*. The Lord manifests himself in human and other forms by the will and pleasure of Himself or of His dear devotees whom He looks upon as His own-self. He appears on and on either spontaneously or at the request of *devas* a number of times on the earth, each time with a particular purpose for the benefit of human beings. We have already mentioned that primarily incarnations though many are chiefly ten. The form and purposes of each are thus described.

- Matsya- for restoring the *Vedas* from flood
- Kūrma- for conferring immortality on the *devas* through *amṛta* obtained by churning the milky ocean with *mandāra* as churning stick
- Varāha- to save the world from the group of the demons
- Narasiṁha- to kill the great giant Hiraṇyakaśipu and save his devotee son, Pralāhada, subjected to various tortures by his father on account of his devotion to lord Nārāyaṇa
- Vāmana- for cleansing the world of its sins and to ruin the ego of the famous king Bāli.
- Paraśurāma- for the annihilation of wicked persons who by their physical power might oppressed the weak
- Rāma- for protecting those who took refuge in him, for establishing righteousness in the world by killing Rāvaṇa
- Balarāma- for killing the *asura* Pralamba
- Buddha- for establishing peace and spread the message of compassion

- Kalki- upcoming future *avatāra* for liberating the world from vices

III

Hidden science

It is claimed that the ten *avatāras* represent the evolution of life on earth. Matsya or fish represents life in water. Kūrma or tortoise represents the next stage, amphibian. The third Varāha, or boar animal symbolizes life on land. Narasiṁha, the man-lion symbolizes the commencement development of mammals. Vāmana or dwarf symbolizes the incomplete development of human being. Then, Paraśurāma, the forest-dwelling hermit implies completion of the basic development of human. The king Rāma shows man's ability to govern nations and indicates man's advancement in culture and civilization. Balarāma, whose weapon was a plough could stand for the development of agriculture. Buddha, the enlightened one, shows the spiritual advancement of man. Perhaps, Kalki will bring social justice for mankind. Thus, the discourse of *avatārhood* represents the evolution of life and society.

IV

Modern thinkers' view regarding *avatārhood*

Among the modern thinkers' **Sri Aurobindo** (1872-1950) has given his interpretation on *Gītā* in the light of his inner experiences. Though it is not a verse-by-verse commentary on *Gītā*, it is a very faithful and innovative commentary. In his writings, he has given a special attention to the doctrine of *avatāra*. According to him, establishing justice is not the only mission of *avatārhood*. He argued that kings, sages, *vibhūti*s (who have a special divine power) can also do this. Moreover, upholding of the *dharma* is only one aspect of the *avatārhood*. Sri Aurobindo added to this that the supreme and divine purpose of *avatārhood* is guiding man towards attaining divinity which is often overlooked by scholars and commentators. The *avatārs* serve as gates for the

mankind to pass into the divine. In this regard, he looks at Kṛṣṇa, Christ and Buddha all has having the same nature. He opined-

‘...the Christ, Krishna, Buddha stands in its centre as the gate, he makes through himself the way men shall follow. That is why each Incarnation holds before man his own example and declares of himself that is the way and the gate....’³

Therefore, the manifestation of the divinity in the form of the *avatāra* helps human being to discover his own divinity and find out the way to realise it.

In his scholarly annotations on the *Gītā*, Aurobindo emphasized on the inward mission of the *avtārhood*. According to him, the higher purpose of an *avatāra* is the manifestation of divine nature in human nature. He emphasized on the two aspects of *avatāra*:

- The descent of the divine into human form
- The divine consciousness within human form

He described the nature and purpose of *avatārhood* in spiritual terms and not mere in religious terms. He defined the term ‘*avatāra*’ thus-

“An Avatar, roughly speaking, is one who is conscious of the presence and power of Divine born in him or descended into him and governing from within his will and life and action; he feels identified inwardly with this divine power and presence.”⁴ According to him, each of the *avatars* “leads after he has finished his earthly manifestation to a profound and powerful change not only in the ethical but in social and outworld life and ideal of the race”.⁵

The purpose of descent of God is to help man to ascent to the level of Godhead or to have full communion with God. Sri Aurobindo believed that descent or incarnation is incomplete without the ascent of man.

Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948) treated the question of *avatāra* specially in his discourses on the *Gita*, where he commented on the classical statement of the *Gita* on *avatārahod*. Gandhi’s

understanding of *avatāra* however is slightly different from the traditional view. Gandhi's view of *avatāra* easily fitted in with his overall *Advaitic* concept of the Absolute. Every *ātman* is fundamentally identical with *Brahman*. Therefore, every *ātman* has the potential of a total merge with the Absolute in *mokṣa*. As God is omnipresent, he is everywhere and dwells within every human being and all may therefore be said to be incarnations of Him. Though in reality every living being is an incarnation of God but they are not recognized as incarnation. He indicated that one who has done some extraordinary service for mankind should be considered as an incarnate. In his voice-

*“In Hinduism incarnation is ascribed to one who has performed some extraordinary service of mankind.’ All embodied life is in reality an incarnation of God, but it is not usual to consider every living being an incarnation. Future generations pay this homage to one who, in his own generation, has been extraordinarily religious in his conduct.”*⁶

According to Gandhi, *avatāra* is not just the decent of God to manhood but the ascent of man to Godhead. However, Kṛṣṇa or Rāma is God for him, as every other human being is considered as a manifestation of the Almighty. For Gandhi, any man who has excelled in life is more God like than the vast majority, should be called as an *avatāra*. In his own words, - “...future generation pay this homage to one who is his own generation has been extraordinarily religious in his conduct.”⁷ When it is said that God incarnates Himself in the form of a human being it is just one aspect of the whole truth. We only say that God incarnated in the form of a man only means that man has more Godliness in him than other men. *Avatārhood* is not a supernatural miraculous intrusion of the divine into the historical sphere but the attribution by men of a little on someone of exceptional spiritual accomplishment.

Radhakrishnan's (1888-1975) view regarding the *avatārhood* is expressed in his commentary on *Gītā* and other writings. He used the word *avatāra* in a general sense. According to him, when an individual manifests divinity he is considered as

an *avatāra*. Such a manifestation does not take away anything from or add anything to the divine reality. The *avatāra* is the demonstration of man's spiritual resources and later divinity. It is not so much the contraction of divine majesty into the limits of the human frame as the exaltation of human nature to the level of Godhead by its union with the divine. He exemplified the word *avatāra* in the case of God's manifestation in Kṛṣṇa. Kṛṣṇa is an incarnation or descent of the divine into the human frame. Kṛṣṇa is the human embodiment of Viṣṇu. Kṛṣṇa is the divine 'Who' limiting himself to human form but possessing the fullness of knowledge. Radhakrishnan argued that the divine consciousness which present in human nature is the eternal *avatāra* while Kṛṣṇa *avatāra* is an illustration of the revelation of the spirituality in us. In his writings, '*Kalki or the Future of Civilization*' Dr. Radhakrishnan said about the advent of *Kalki* and the possible order which the *avatāra* may establish in the world. Under the caption '*Reconstruction of Society*' Dr. Radhakrishnan gave the picture of an ideal society that will be possible in *Kalki* or the future civilization.

V

Conclusion

The term '*avatāra*' literally means coming down. With reference to God, it indicates the descent of the Supreme being from His divine abode to a lower level. He appears on either spontaneously or at the request of *devas* a number of times on the earth, each time with a particular purpose for the benefit of human beings. The general purposes of *avatārhood* are twofold- Protection of the ardent devotees of God and destruction of the evil. The conception of *avatāra* exists in the Semitic religions also. It is slightly different from that of Hinduism. There the Almighty instead of appearing Himself, as in Hinduism, sends his messengers in the form of *Messiah*, Son or Prophet. Generally, in Hinduism upholding the *dharma* is the recognised purpose of the *avatārhood*. However, our modern Indian thinkers' view is far beyond from the classical view. They describe the nature and

purpose of *avatārhood* in spiritual and secular terms and not in religious terms. Aurobindo in his '*Essays on the Gita*', stated that the supreme and divine purpose of *avatārhood* is the guiding man towards attaining divinity. The *avatāras* serve as the gates for the mankind to pass into the divine. In this regard, he looks at Kṛṣṇa, Christ and Buddha all has having the same purpose and same nature. He includes Christ and Buddha in order to universalize the discourse. In his '*Anasakti Yoga*', Gandhi elucidated that *avatāra* is not the descent of God into man. The rise to godhead for Gandhi through grater goodness is an ascent rather than a descent. When Radhakrishnan stated that *avtāra* is an illustration or demonstration of the presence of spiritual resources in us, he meant the same thing that it is for the purpose of spiritual upliftment of man or to save mankind. Therefore, we may say that our modern Indian thinkers give a spiritual, secular and humanitarian dimension of this age-old discourse.

End notes:

1. *Bhagavadgītā* 4-7/8
2. *ajāyamāno bahudhā vijāyate. Puruṣa-sūkta* (Yajurveda recension) II.3.
3. *Essays on the Gita*, CWSA19:146-157
4. *Letters on Yoga*, P-406
5. *Essays on the Gita*, CWSA19:201
6. M. K. Gandhi, *Collected Works*, vol-XLI, P-94
7. M. K. Gandhi, *Collected Works*, vol-XXXII, P-188-189

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3. Hadnagy Paulette, (comp.) *Avatarhood* (a compilation from Sri Aurobindo's writings), Puduchery: Auroville, 2010.

4. Pani Susmit (Ed.), *Gandhi Aurobindo and Radhakrishnan on Bhagavadgita*, New Delhi: Kunal Books and Publishers, 2009.
5. Radhakrishnan S., *Bhagavadgita*, London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1970.
6. Radhakrishnan, S., *Indian Philosophy*, London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1977.
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8. Si Aurobindo, *Essays on the Gita* Calcutta: Arya Publishing house, 1922.