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Srivaishnavism

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## The Literary and Devotional Legacy of Srivaishnavism

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### Abstract

*Śrivaishnavism is a devotional tradition within the Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta school, centered on the worship of Mahāviṣṇu, accompanied by Śrī (Mahālakṣmī). The tradition, shaped by the philosopher Rāmānuja, integrates threefold religious activities: Upaniṣadic philosophy, Āgamic temple rituals, and the Tamil Prabandha devotional poetry of the Ālvārs. Bhakti (devotion) and kainkarya (service) are central tenets, with the ultimate goal being mokṣa (liberation), defined as eternal service to Viṣṇu. Śrivaishnava practice involves daily observances (āhnikas) and participation in temple worship, with rituals such as Pañca-saṃskāra—a fivefold purification rite including branding, marking the body, adopting a devotional name, receiving mantras, and performing acts of surrender (śaraṇāgati). The sect is divided into Tengalai and Vadagalai branches, differing in philosophical interpretations and religious practices. The role of the Ācārya (spiritual teacher) is crucial, acting as a mediator between the jīva (soul) and Lord Viṣṇu. The tradition's literature, composed in both Sanskrit and Tamil, emphasizes devotion, discipline, and spiritual surrender (Śaraṇāgati). The extensive body of Śrivaishnava texts addresses theological doctrines, ritual practices, and metaphysical debates, making it a rich and enduring religious tradition.*

**Keywords:** Śrivaishnavism, Viśiṣṭādvaita, Rāmānuja, Bhakti, Mokṣa, Pañca-saṃskāra, Ācārya, Tengalai and Vadagalai, Temple worship, Śaraṇāgati

### Introduction

Śrivaishnavism is deeply rooted in the worship of Lord Viṣṇu alongside Śrī (Mahālakṣmī), embodying devotion (bhakti), ritual practices, and philosophical doctrines. Emerging from the teachings of Rāmānuja, one of the most influential Ācāryas, Śrivaishnavism harmonizes the threefold religious activity of thought, action, and emotion. The sect draws from Upaniṣadic wisdom, Pāñcarātra and Vaikhānasa Āgamas, and the Tamil devotional hymns of the Ālvārs, creating a holistic spiritual path.

Central to Śrivaishnavism is the concept of nitya-kainkarya (eternal service) to Viṣṇu, which is equated with mokṣa (liberation). Rituals and daily religious observances, known as

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āhnikas, play a significant role in a devotee's life. These include the Pañca-saṃskāra rite, symbolizing the initiation and spiritual rebirth of a Śrivaishṇava through acts such as bearing Viṣṇu's marks, receiving mystical mantras, and practicing complete surrender (śaraṇāgati).

The sect also exhibits a rich philosophical and literary tradition, with texts emphasizing devotion, surrender, and the role of the Ācārya as the spiritual mediator. The theological nuances between the Vadagalai and Tengalai subsects highlight the diversity in practice and interpretation, while temple worship and idol veneration remain central expressions of devotion. Through its blend of spiritual discipline, theological depth, and devotional fervor, Śrivaishṇavism continues to be a profound and enduring religious tradition.

### **Meaning and Significance of Śrivaishṇavism**

Śrivaishṇavism, a compound of the words Śrī and Viṣṇu, denotes "the path centered on Viṣṇu who is with Śrī" or "Viṣṇu and Śrī" together. Both interpretations hold significance concerning the status and form of Mahālakṣmī (Śrī) in relation to Mahāviṣṇu. The Tengalai sect, by and large, does not uphold the notion of Lakṣmī's absolute equality with Viṣṇu but regards her, though his consort, only as a representative of the jīvas. In contrast, the Vadagalai sect perceives Mahālakṣmī as entirely equal to Viṣṇu in every aspect, considering her his very power.

### **The Threefold Religious and Philosophical Activity**

During Rāmānuja's era, religious and philosophical activity took a threefold form: the first representing the Upaniṣadic thought of Viśiṣṭādvaita, the second comprising the Pāñcarātra and Vaikhānasa Āgamas related to temple worship, and the third being the Tamil Prabandha school of the Āḷvārs. Rāmānuja harmonized the principal elements of these three—thought, action, and emotion. Due to this synthesis, Rāmānuja's system became not only practical and popular but also appealing to both the common people and the learned.

### **Bhakti and Mokṣa in Śrivaishṇavism**

Bhakti serves as the foundational support of any religious system, and Śrivaishṇavism is no exception. Rāmānuja presented the religiously inclined with the concept of Mahāviṣṇu as the Brahman of the Upaniṣads. Such a supreme entity, being the cause of all causes, must be served by all—nitya, mukta, and baddha jīvas—for their ultimate welfare and eternal service to him. According to Rāmānuja, nitya-kainkarya (eternal service) constitutes mokṣa. The Sanskrit literature on this topic, especially in recent times, has been extensive.

### **Rituals and Practices in Śrivaishṇavism**

Rāmānuja is credited with the work Nityam, which outlines the daily religious duties of a Vaiṣṇava. The next milestone is the work of Vedāntadeśika, who authored Saccaritrarakṣā in Sanskrit, delineating the prescribed conduct and lifestyle of a Śrivaishṇava. As schisms emerged among the Śrivaishṇavas, minor variations in practices arose without compromising the core principles of Viśiṣṭādvaita. Thus, codes of conduct were formulated, largely based on the practices of śiṣṭas (elders), and came to be known as āhnikas—daily observances. These āhnikas also include directions for observing special occasions such as Kṛṣṇajayantī, Rāmanavamī, Nṛsimhajayantī, and Ekādaśī.

### **Philosophical and Literary Contributions**

Even works on philosophical subjects emphasized the performance of these duties rather than intellectual comprehension. For instance, Arthapañcaka by Pillai Lokācārya from

the 13th century, written in Tamil, deals with five topics: the nature of Īśvara, the nature of jīva, the ultimate goal, the means of attaining that goal, and the obstacles. The work predominantly highlights kainkarya—service to the Lord. This text was later rendered into Sanskrit with the same title by Gargya Veṅkaṭācārya in the 18th century.

Similarly, Natvadarpaṇa by Śrinivāsācārya (18th century), Natvatattvapariṭrāṇa by Śrinivasadāsa, Natvacandrikā by Kṛṣṇatātārya (both from the early 19th century), and Natvopapatti-bhaṅgavāda by Tirumalācārya (19th century) are significant works discussing the meaning of the letter *na* in the word Nārāyaṇa. The central debate concerns whether the letter refers to a specific entity or has a secondary application. The term Nārāyaṇa holds prime importance in the two mystical mantras—the Aṣṭākṣara and the Dvayam—making the discourse on this word essential.

This leads to the topic of mantras. Every Vaiṣṇava must be acquainted with three mystical mantras known as Rahasyas. These three esoteric spells are thoroughly elaborated upon by Vedāntadeśika in his magnum opus Rahasyatrayasāra. To receive these mantras, one must follow a certain discipline and procedure. During his time, Rāmānuja introduced a rite called Pañca-samskāra for all Śrīvaiṣṇavas, symbolizing unity and recognition, if not identification. This practice continues to this day under the guidance of all Ācāryas. These life-purifying acts are: Tapa, Puṇḍra, Nāma, Mantra, and Yāga. The first, Tapa, involves bearing the marks of Viṣṇu's disc and conch on one's shoulders. (The Madhva-sampradāya prescribes not only the five chief Āyudhas of Viṣṇu but also the Padma, making them bear six mudrās as opposed to the two of the Śrīvaiṣṇavas.) This act is performed by the Ācārya through the necessary preliminary rites, applying the heated Āyudha emblems—warmed in a holy fire to a bearable degree—onto the disciple.

The next act, Puṇḍra, involves applying a caste-mark on twelve specified parts of the body above the navel. This is done using white-colored sacred mud, obtained from a designated place, with the design resembling the mark on a serpent's hood.

The third act, Nāma, consists of adopting a dāsya name, such as Keśava-Rāmānuja-dāsa or Madhava-Rāmānuja-dāsa. All devotees are referred to as Rāmānuja-dāsas, with distinct names like Keśava or Madhava added before to differentiate them.

Following this, the mystical mantra is whispered into the disciple's ear by the Guru, while the recipient repeats it twice. The Guru or Ācārya also imparts, in addition to the three principal mantras, other necessary mantras required for the disciple's worship (pūjā) of Lord Viṣṇu.

The final act is called Yāga, also known as Bharanyāsa or Śaraṇāgati. This is typically performed by the Ācārya for the disciple after a certain period, anticipating the disciple's mental maturity and receptiveness.

An individual who has undergone the first four acts described above is considered a true Vaiṣṇava, regardless of birth into a Vaiṣṇava family.

This practice has naturally led to the composition of independent works citing authoritative texts to support the tradition. Texts such as Taptacakrādyaṅkana-pramāṇani by an unknown author, Tapta-mudrādharaṇa-pramāṇadarśa by Lakṣmaṇācārya, Tapta-mudrādharaṇa-pramāṇa-saṅgraha by Campakeśācārya, and Tapta-mudrā-vilāsa by Nṛsimhadvaita, all focus on the necessity of bearing Viṣṇu's marks. The Sudarśana-mīmāṃsā deals with the same subject in the Madhva-sampradāya.

## The Role of the Ācārya

These works underscore the importance of the Ācārya in this system. Even in the Rāmāyaṇa, the commentator Govindarāja highlights the Ācārya's role as a Ghaṭaka (mediator) between the Jīva and Īśvara. According to him, Hanumān is the supreme Ācārya in the epic, serving as the perfect Ghaṭaka. In his Nyāsaviṃśati, Vedāntadeśika clearly defines the Ācārya's role in both the second and final verses. This role is commonly referred to as Puruṣakāra, and in Śrīvaiṣṇavism, Mahālakṣmī fulfills this function in the presence of Mahāviṣṇu, interceding on behalf of the Jīvas.

Mahālakṣmī's role has inspired several works by both factions of Śrīvaiṣṇavism. The Puruṣakāramīmāṃsā by Śrīvatsāṅka Vipaścit and Śrī Śaila of the previous century, the Śrīyaupayatva-vicāra by an unknown author, and the Śrīyaupayatva-samarthana by Raghunātha from the early 19th century, all explore Mahālakṣmī's role.

Other texts such as Śrīyassaranyatvavicāra, Śrītattvaratna, and Śrīvibhūtvāsamārthana by Raghunātha Sūri (19th century) discuss Mahālakṣmī's nature (svarūpa), her equal power to Viṣṇu, and her shared divine glories.

Śrītattvasudhā and Lakṣmī-maṅgala-dīpikā by Virarāghava (19th century) discuss Mahālakṣmī's subordinate (Śeṣa) nature to Viṣṇu and her role as the representative agent of the Jīvas before Mahāviṣṇu.

## Differences between Tengalai and Vadagalai Sects

The Vadagalai sect emphasizes absolute loyalty and unwavering support for religion and the Ācārya by practicing ācāmana with water sanctified by the Ācārya's right toe. The texts Śrīpādatīrthagrahaṇa and Śrīpādatīrthavaibhava, of unknown authorship, expound on this tenet.

The Tengalai sect, however, does not follow this practice. There are around eighteen practical differences between the two sects, codified in the Aṣṭādaśa-bhedanirṇaya by Raṅganātha Sūri (19<sup>th</sup> century).

Among these eighteen differences, three pertain to religious practice and one to metaphysical doctrine. The three practical differences are: muccar, saniccar, and sadaccar. The Tengalai sect avoids consuming pañcagavya (a purifying mixture of five cow products), sea bathing, and bathing in the Ganges, whereas the Vadagalais prescribe all three.

The metaphysical difference concerns the Jīva's role in mokṣa. The Vadagalais emphasize the Jīva's volition, while the Tengalais attribute it entirely to Īśvara. This difference has led to the analogies of Markaṭa-kiśora-nyāya (monkey-clinging effort) and Mārjāra-kiśora-nyāya (kitten's passive dependence).

## Temple Worship and Idol Veneration

With the temple-cult being integral to Śrīvaiṣṇavism, the Arca form of Viṣṇu (idol-worship) in His fivefold manifestation (Para, Vyūha, Vibhava, Antaryāmi, and Arca) is the theme of several texts. Works such as Arcādarpana, Arcādīpya-prabhāva, and Arcakhaṇḍana (of unknown authorship) and Arcāvatāra-pramāṇya by Virarāghava Sūri (19<sup>th</sup> century CE) discuss the significance of idol-worship and the divine presence in consecrated idols.

The day of a Śrīvaiṣṇava is divided into five parts: abhigamana, upādāna, ijjā, svādhyāya, and yoga. This daily regimen, known as pañcakāla-kriyā, is detailed in texts such as Pañcakālakriyādīpa by Śatakratu Śrīnivāsācārya (early 19th century) and Pañcakālanuṣṭhānakrama by an unknown author.

## Daily Regimen and Surrender in Śrīvaiṣṇavism

The life of a Śrīvaiṣṇava is incomplete without the act of surrender (śaraṇāgati or prapatti), which falls into three categories: svaniṣṭha, ukṭi-niṣṭha, and ācārya-niṣṭha.

### Conclusion

Śrīvaiṣṇavism stands as a unique and intricate tradition that encapsulates the essence of devotion, discipline, and philosophical inquiry. Rooted in the teachings of Rāmānuja and the poetic expressions of the Ālvārs, it offers a spiritual framework that intertwines daily rituals with metaphysical contemplation. The sect's emphasis on eternal service to Viṣṇu, complemented by the grace of Śrī, provides its followers with both a devotional path and a theological grounding.

The enduring legacy of Śrīvaiṣṇavism is evident in its rituals, temple worship, and rich literary contributions. The sect's internal diversity, reflected in the doctrinal distinctions between the Vadagalai and Tengalai schools, showcases its adaptability while preserving core principles. Despite the differences, the shared commitment to bhakti, surrender, and the role of the Ācārya unifies its followers in their spiritual pursuit. As a living tradition, Śrīvaiṣṇavism continues to inspire generations with its devotion, discipline, and unwavering commitment to Viṣṇu.

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