

DASHAVATAR

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Bhagvad Purana states : 'Just as from an inexhaustible lake thousands of streams flow on all sides so also from Hari come forth countless incarnations.'

Creation, preservation and destruction constitute an eternal cycle of existence. Hari, that is Vishnu, represents the principle of preservation and continuity of life. He is a supreme being, sublime source of eternal bliss, the entire universe is just a manifestation of his power. 'God creates this world, enters into it and like an actor who assumes different roles on the stage performs various acts.' (*Bhagvad Purana*). He assumes many forms to destroy evil, protect the good and restore the glory of *Dharma* (*Gita* 4.8). There are many references to his incarnations in ancient literature. Though their number differs from book to book (*Matsya Purana* : 10; *Ahimbudhnya Samhita* 39; *Bhagavat Purana* 24; *Narayaniya* section of *Mahabharata* : 6 etc.) they are generally considered to be ten. The main incarnations of Vishnu are *Matsya* (fish), *Kurma* (tortoise), *Varaha* (Boar), *Nrusimha* (Lion-man), *Vaman*, *Parashuram*, *Ram*, *Krishna* (or *Balarama*), *Buddha* and *Kalki*. These ten incarnations are called '*Dashavatar*'....

Related Myths

The myths associated with some of these incarnations are found in Vedic literature. The root of *Vamanavatar* story can be traced back to *Rigveda* and *Shatapatha Brahmana*. According to later *Brahmanas* and *Aranyakas* it was Prajapati who assumed the forms of fish, tortoise and boar. The *Taittiriya Aranyaka* says that the earth was raised out of premordial waters by Prajapati in the form of an hundred armed black boar. As per *Shatapatha Brahmana* it was Prajapati in the form of a fish who saved Manu from the great deluge. As Vishnu, who was a rather insignificant deity in Vedic times, grew in stature these mythical accounts were transferred to his name by his devotees. Epics and *Puranas* gave shape to the *avatara* concept and formed a cluster of mythology around each incarnation. The cult of

Bhagavatas started spreading all over the land. Heliodorus, the Greek ambassador to the court of Sunga king Kautsiputra Bhagabhadra erected a thirty-foot high monolithic Garuda pillar in honour of Vasudeva in the 2nd century B.C. and proclaimed himself '*Bhagavata*'. The patronage of Gupta emperors gave an impetus to the *Bhagavata* cult. Chandra Gupta II was a devout Vaishnava and he assumed the title '*Pamara-Bhagavata*' to announce his religious leanings. The Vishnu temple at Deogarh build around 500 A.D. is known as Dashavatar temple. Mamallapuram inscription of eighth century A.D. mentions ten incarnations of Vishnu. The well-known Kailasha temple and Dashavatar cave at Ellora bears the sculptural representation of some of the *avataaras* of Vishnu. There are numerous inscriptions and epigraphs referring to the one or many incarnations. We find many panels depicting divine incarnations. One such panel is in the Bharatpur Museum. The worship of Dashavatar took many forms in the course of time. Malla kings of Vishnupur are credited with the invention of Dashavatar playing cards, round in shape. The pack of 120 cards is divided into 10 groups each bearing the name of one of the incarnations of Vishnu. *Bhavishya* and *Vishnu Puranas* tell us about '*Dashavatar Vrata*' when the images of ten incarnations are worshipped for attaining Vishnulok after death.

Though the Krishna-drama is quite ancient, it is rather difficult to state exactly when the *Dashavatar* drama as such came into being. However *Puranas* do prescribe the use of dance, drama and music to appease the gods. In fact, according to tradition, drama is the best service one can offer to Vishnu. Bharata also agrees with this. He says : 'The gods are never so pleased on being worshipped with scents and garlands, as they are delighted with the performance of dramas' (XXXVI 81-2). In the *Bhagavata Purana* Vishnu says that the devotees should on festive religious occasions, enact his *leelas* before his image in the temple. A tenth century inscription refers to '*Preksha*' presented before the idol of Vishnu by the talented dancing girls of exceptional beauty and grace. It says : 'owing to the temptation of seeing the beautiful dancing girls the enemy of Madhu (Vishnu) does not leave his own image for a moment.' (Ep. Ind. Vol. XXII, p. 124) Another inscription refers to a grant made by the king to a temple for performing plays — *Prekshanakas* — before Lord Shrikrishna (I.A., Vol. XLI, 1912, p. 20). *Ubhayabhisarika Bhan* of Vararuchi refers to a musical play performed in the temple of Bhagavan Narayan Vishnu. *Rajatarangini* mentions the tradition of performing danees in the temple of Keshava (4. 269-274). An inscription attached to Anant Vasudeo temple at Bhuvaneshvar speaks about a hundred deer-eyed girls adept in the arts of dancing and singing. Naturally the stories associated with ten incarnations of Vishnu must have been transformed into musical dance-dramas for presentation. However it is around the twelfth century that we find positive literary evidence indicating the existence of a dance-performance based on the *Dashavatar* theme as such. We also have inscriptional evidence to show that such dance used to be performed in the Nata Mandir of a well-known temple.

Geet Govinda

In the 12th century the great poet Jayadeva composed his immortal dramatic poem *Geeta Govinda*. The Ganga rulers of the time were staunch Vaishnavites. The Puri temple of Lord Jagannatha became a great centre of Vaishnava art and culture during their rule. According to tradition Jayadeva's wife Padmavati was a temple dancer who used to perform the poem before the lord. *Prithviraj Raso* calls Jayadeva the 'Kavirayam', king among the poets and further says that he always used to sing in praise of Govinda and Govinda alone.

In the first *Sarga* of Jayadeva's *Gita Govinda* we find an *astapadi* dedicated to the ten incarnations of Lord Vishnu. Jayadeva has described in ten stanzas the incarnations of Vishnu with a great sense of devotion. He mentions Balarama as one of the incarnations of Keshava. It is a well-known fact that Jayadeva composed this poem to be danced out before Lord Jagannatha at Puri. The *Dashavatar Ashtapadi* appears at the beginning of the poem and forms the *Purvaranga* of the dance-drama. The tradition of presenting *Dashavatar* dance as a part of *Gita Govinda* dance-drama continued for centuries at Puri. The Gajapati ruler Prataprudradeva's inscription at Jagannatha temple (July 1499 AD) specifically states that *Gita Govinda* and *Gita Govinda Nat* only should be performed before the deity by the dancing girls. With the spread of *Gita Govinda* the *Dashavatar Ashtapadi* also became quite popular. It may be noted here that in the *Purvaranga* of *Kathakali* of Kerala a song from *Gita Govinda* is invariably sung. Selections from the poem are sung. Scholars have found a manuscript of *Gita Govinda* with full instructions to the dancers in the Saraswati Mahal Library at Tanjore (*Gita Govinda with Abhinaya*: Ed.—K. Vasudeva Sastri). There are evidences to indicate that in many parts of India the dance-drama of Jayadeva became quite popular and influenced local dramatic forms. According to some scholars *Krishnattam* of Kerala is one such example. *Dashavatar Ashtapadi* also became quite popular and probably its popularity might have inspired some creative minds to start the tradition of *Dashavatari* plays.

In the *Abhinayadarpan* of Acharya Nandikeshvara *Dashavatar hasta mudras* are given. By these hand-gestures a dancer can indicate various incarnations of Vishnu. There is some uncertainty about the date of *Abhinayadarpana*. Scholars have assigned different dates varying from 5th to 12th century A.D. to this treatise. Nandikeshvara does not mention *Buddhavatar*. If one accepts the premise that the treatise is written well before the time when Buddha was included in the *avatara* pantheon we can place it in the 5th century. The first mention of Buddha in the *avatara* cycle is found in the 6th century *Matsya Purana*. But at the same time one cannot rule out the possibility of Acharya Nandikeshvara being averse to the idea of the inclusion of Buddha in the *avatara* pantheon. Taking these and other relevant factors into consideration some scholars have suggested the 12th century as the

possible date of the treatise. This means Acharya wrote his treatise in the same century in which Jayadeva composed his dramatic poetry. Was Nandikeshvara aware of Jayadeva's *Astapadi* on *Dashavatar*? However it may be noted that Jayadeva has accepted Buddha as one of the divine incarnations. It may also be noted that both of them have accepted Balarama as an *avatar* of Vishnu. *Dashavatara hasta mudras* given by Acharya Nandikeshvara are as follows :

Hasta Mudras

- Matsya Hasta Mudra* : One palm on another, both pointing downwards, both the thumbs and little fingers spread out, hands at shoulder height. (216, 196).
- Kurma* : All fingers extended straight and joined together is *Patak Hasta Mudra*. When the thumb of *Patak Hasta* is separated and extended out it is *Ardhachandra Hasta*. Both palms in *Ardhachandra* joined together freeing little finger and thumb is *Kurma Hasta* (93, 197, 217) Hands at shoulder height.
- Varaha* : The middle of the *Pataka* hand is hollowed, thumb and little finger extended is *Mrigashirsha*; both the palms in *Mrigashirsha*, little finger of one *MS* touching thumb of another *MS*. (139, 198, 218).
- Nrusimha* : The tips of the middle and the third fingers are applied to the thumbs and the rest extended is *Simha Mukha* (142). Right hand in *SM Mudra* and left in *Tripatak Mudra*. When third finger of *Patak* is bent it is *Tripatak*. (142, 100, 219).
- Vamana* : The four fingers are bent into the palm and the thumb is set on them is *Mushti* (fist), when one fist is held above another it is *Vamana* (116, 220).
- Parashuram* : Left hand on hips and right in *Ardha Patak*. A little finger of *Tripatak* is also bent is *Ardhapatak* (103, 221)

- Rama* : Left hand in *Kapittha Mudra* and right in *Shikhar Mudra*. If the thumb of *Mushti* is raised it is *Shikhara*. The forefinger of the *Shikhara* hand is bent over the top of the thumb is *Kapittha*—elephant apple. (118, 121, 222)
- Balaram* : Right hand in *Patak* and left in *Mushti Hasta Mudra*. (223)
- Krishna* : Both the hands in *Mrigashirsha* facing each other; held in front of the mouth. (224)
- Kalki* : Right hand in *Patak* and left in *Tripatak Mudra* (225).

This is the *Dashavatar* iconography of dance as devised by Acharya Nandikeshvara around the twelfth century. It is possible that the *Dashavatar* dance might have formed part of the *Purvaranga* proceedings of the Vaishnava dramas performed in the temples. *Purvaranga* of *Gita Govinda* is an excellent example. It may be noted here that in one of the *Ankia* plays of Mahapurusha Shankardeva of Assam (1449-1568 A.D.) the *Mukti Mangal Bhatima*, that is benedictory verse, is devoted to the *Dashavatara*. This clearly indicates the influence of Jayadeva. This Bhatima from Keli Gopal Nat is presented in a *Satriya* Dance style as a separate item and is known as *Dashavatari* dance.

The Marathi saint-poet Ramdas who was a contemporary of Shivaji refers to *Dashavatari* plays in his well known work '*Dasbodha*'. He states :

Khelata netake Dashavatari
Tethe yeti sundar nari
Netra modati kalakusari
Pari avaghe dhatingana—Dasbodha 6-8-11.

In the *Dashavatari* play beautiful girls come on the stage and enchant the audience with the movements of their eyes. But in reality they are all male actors. From this verse we come to know that at the time of Ramdas there was a tradition of staging *Dashavatari* plays and female roles were done by male actors. Around this time *Yakshagana* theatre emerged in Karnataka. These *Yakshagana* plays are also known as *Dashavatar Ata*. *Yakshagana* plays are called *Dashavatar Ata* because they present the mythical stories connected with the ten incarnations of Lord Vishnu. The earliest available *Yakshagana* play '*Viratparva*' is datable 1564 A.D. Though known as *Dashavatar Ata* they do not depict the cycle of ten incarnations in a single play. However in the *Mangal geet* sung at the end of the *Yakshagana* plays

the *Dashavatar* are mentioned and propitiated. This is positive evidence connecting *Yakshagana* with the tradition of *Dashavatar* plays.

As we have seen earlier the manuscript of *Gita Govind* was found in the Saraswati Mahal Library at Tanjore in the distant south. Maratha rulers of Tanjore were not only great patrons of art and culture but they themselves were writers of outstanding merit. The Second Maratha ruler of Tanjore, Shahraj Bhosale (1684-1711 A.D.) wrote many plays in Telugu, Hindi, Tamil and Marathi. He was rightly known as *Kavibhoja*. One of his plays *Panchabhashavilas* is written in five languages. Five heroines of the play representing different languages sing a song in praise of the ten incarnations of Vishnu. This song is clearly inspired by the *Dashavatar Astapadi* of Jayadeva. In his play *Hariharavilas* the *Sutradhar* calls himself *Bhagavat Dashavatari*. 'You fool, you are alone. What do you mean by *Dashavatar*?', asks the surprised *Kanchuki*. Replying to his query *Sutradhara* states : 'Friend, I alone take all the roles of the ten avatars', a reference to the tradition of presenting the *Dashavatar* dance by an actor in the *Purvaranga* of the Vaishnava plays or he might have actually presented himself on stage in ten different costumes representing the ten incarnations.

This indicates for certain that in the dance-dramas of Bhagavatas many a time the *Dashavatara* item was included. At first the tradition might have started with the presentation of the *Dashavatar* song by the actor utilising gesture-language to underline its meaning in visual terms. Later on the mythical story connected with any one or two incarnations might have been enacted in addition to the *Dashavatar* song which subsequently became a part of *Purvaranga*.

Goa and the Konkan

In certain parts of the country the tradition of *Dashavatar* plays developed on different lines. Here all the ten Avatars are brought on the stage one after another and episodes connected with the major incarnations were presented elaborately. The remains of this tradition still linger in the Konkan area of Maharashtra and the adjoining region of Goa. These plays are known as *Dashavatar* plays and as their name indicates these plays present all the ten incarnations of Vishnu on stage.

The coastal region of Goa and Konkan is known from ancient times as a cradle of dramatic arts. The Tamil classic *Silappadhikaram* mentions Konkan actors and dancers who entertained the Chera King Sanguttuvan. Vaishnava drama flourished in the region under the patronage of temple institutions. *Jagar* is the oldest extant dramatic form of Goa. Rich in metaphysical content it presents the mythical story of slaying demons Madhu and Kaibhata by Vishnu. According to *Natyashastra* the Lord killed the demons with 'varied pure, expressive, and graceful *angaharas*'. The *vrittis* emerged out

of this combat. (NS 22. 1-16). *Ranamale*, *Tratika*, *Putana*, *Virabhadra*, *Balakrida Kala*, *Gaulan Kala*, *Gopal Kala* are some of the dramatic forms of Goa connected with the *Dashavatara* themes.

The prevalent dance forms like *Goff* and *Ras* are also connected with the *Krishnavatar* of Vishnu. These plays are presented at temple festivals and *Jatras*. *Dashavatar* is the most developed dramatic form of the region. According to some scholars it came to Goa from Karnataka. Goa and Karnataka were under the Vijayanagar empire from A.D. 1367 to 1468. Up to 1781 some parts of Goa were under Kanaree Sondkar rulers. Though the *Yakshagana* of Karnataka is known as *Dashavatar Ata* there is hardly any resemblance between *Dashavatar Ata* of Karnataka and *Dashavatar* of Goa and Konkan except that we find some Kannada words and songs included in *Dashavatar* plays. All the forms of Vaishnava drama are interrelated in the sense that they are regional variations of the countrywide theatre movement inspired by the *Bhagavata* cult. *Krishnattam* and *Kathakali* of Kerala, *Yakshagana* of Karnataka, *Kuchipudi* of Andhra, *Bhagvatmela* of Tamilnadu, *Ankia Nat* of Assam, *Leela* plays of Uttar Pradesh, *Ras* of Gujarat and Manipur belong to the same tradition. These are in one way or another connected with *Dashavatar* themes, though their execution differs. In the *Ras leela* of Vrindavan sometimes the ten incarnations are shown on the stage. In the *Kuchipudi* play '*Bhama Kalapam*' the heroine Satyabhama while describing Krishna, mentions his ten incarnations and shows all of them on the stage through dance and *abhinaya*. This portion is known as *Dashavatatrabhinayam*. *Lalit* is the most ancient dramatic form of Maharashtra in which *Dashavatars* are mentioned in the *Purvaranga*. Of all the dramatic forms mentioned above the *Dashavatar* of Goa and Konkan is unique in the sense that in it efforts are made to accommodate in a single performance as many of the incarnations as possible. Of course some of the incarnations like *Matsyavatar*, *Nrusimhavatar*, *Vamanavatar*, *Ramavatar* and *Krishnavatar* are played prominently. The play, after elaborate *Purvaranga*, opens with the *Matsyavatar*. Demon Sankasura steals the *Vedas* from Brahma, and Vishnu after killing the demon recovers them. Sankasura of *Dashavatar* is the villain and the jester combined in one. Buddha and Kalki incarnations are not shown on the stage. Actors in the guise of Parashuram, Kurma and Varaha do appear on the stage but no episode related to these incarnations is shown on the stage. Dramatised episodes from Rama and Krishna incarnations occupy an important position in the scheme of the *Dashavatar* play. The tradition of presenting *Dashavatari* plays in temples still lingers in Goa, though in quite an abridged form. Sometimes the show ends with *Matsyavatar*. This portion of the play is called *Sankasur Kala* also.

Krishna-drama is at least as old as the *Balacharitam* of Bhasa. This play written about 400 B.C. in its opening *shloka* mentions some of the incarnations of Vishnu like Narayana, Vishnu-Vaman, Ram and Krishna. In the play *Karnabharam* he has mentioned the *Nrusimhavatar*—man-lion incarna-

tion. The concept of incarnations of Vishnu as we have seen earlier, grew with time. Dr. Haraprasad Shastri in his 'Note on Vishnupur Circular Cards' (Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, Vol. LXIV, No. 3, 1895, p. 284-5) opines that 'the antiquity of orthodox list (of *Darhavatars*) goes back to Jayadeva in the 12th and Kshemendra in 11th century.' We may give the credit of bringing *Dashavatar* concept into the fold of theatrical arts to Jayadeva and certainly the credit of developing it into a full fledged dramatic form goes to the people of Goa and Konkan.