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VAISHNAVISM IN AN INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT

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Abstract:

In the international context, Vaiṣṇava devotion has emerged as a significant religious and cultural movement. In particular, the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava tradition and ISKCON (International Society for Krishna Consciousness) have played a vital role in spreading this devotional path across the globe. The primary source of the global expansion of Vaiṣṇava devotion lies in the message of divine love (prema-bhakti) propagated by Śrī Chaitanya Mahaprabhu. Through the practice of nāma-saṅkīrtana (the congregational chanting of the holy names), he made devotion to God simple and accessible to all. His philosophical doctrine of Achintya Bhedābheda (inconceivable simultaneous oneness and difference) stands as a unique contribution to Vaiṣṇava philosophy worldwide.



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In the 20th century, A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada introduced this tradition to the Western world. With the establishment of ISKCON in New York in 1966, Krishna devotion spread widely across Europe, America, Russia, Africa, and various parts of Asia.

The development of Vaiṣṇava devotion can be observed in many countries. In the United States and Europe, ISKCON temples, Ratha Yatra festivals, Bhagavata recitations, and kirtan have made devotion increasingly popular. Major centers have been established in cities such as New York, London, and Berlin. Despite challenging political conditions, Krishna devotion has also spread significantly in Russia, where many devotees actively participate in harināma-saṅkīrtana. In Bangladesh and Nepal, Vaiṣṇava traditions have long been practiced, with devotion expressed through temples, nāma-yajña, and various festivals.

The global appeal of Vaiṣṇava devotion lies in several key aspects: its simple spiritual practices, such as chanting and kirtan; its universal acceptance beyond distinctions of caste, creed, or religion; its cultural influence through music, dance, and cuisine (prasāda); and its ability to provide spiritual peace, offering relief from the stresses of modern life. Today, Vaiṣṇava devotion is not merely a religion but has evolved into a way of life. Practices such as yoga, meditation, vegetarianism, and Krishna consciousness are gaining widespread popularity across the world.

Key Word

1. Janmashtami – The festival celebrating the birth of Lord Krishna.
2. Ratha Yatra – A grand chariot festival associated with Lord Jagannath, where deities are taken out in procession.
3. Tirupati Deva (Tirupati Balaji) – A revered form of Lord Vishnu worshipped at the famous Tirupati Balaji Temple.
4. Prabhupada – An honorific title referring to A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, the founder of ISKCON and a prominent preacher of Krishna devotion worldwide.

Discussion: Vaisnava devotion in West Bengal

Vaiṣṇava devotion in West Bengal represents a significant chapter in the broader Indian Bhakti movement. In this region, the Vaiṣṇava tradition is not only a religious phenomenon but is also deeply intertwined with social and cultural life. The foundation of Vaiṣṇava devotion in West Bengal was laid by Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu. During the 15th–16th centuries, his propagation of the



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Nāma-saṅkīrtana movement spread rapidly from rural villages to urban centers across Bengal. His devotional philosophy of Achintya Bhedābheda profoundly influenced the religious thought of the region.

Among the centers of Vaiṣṇava devotion in West Bengal, Nabadwip holds primary importance as the birthplace of Chaitanya Mahāprabhu and a major pilgrimage site for Vaiṣṇavas. Mayapur has emerged as an international hub of the modern Vaiṣṇava movement, where ISKCON has established its global headquarters. Regions such as Panskura and Medinipur are well known for their vibrant rural Vaiṣṇava culture, including nāma-yajña and kīrtana traditions.

The key features of Vaiṣṇava practice include nāma-saṅkīrtana, where devotion is expressed through the congregational chanting of the “Hare Krishna” mahāmantra. The concept of Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa prema-tattva regards the divine love of Radha and Krishna as the highest ideal of devotion. This path emphasizes simplicity in spiritual practice, focusing not on rigid rituals but on attaining God through love and devotion.

Vaiṣṇava devotion in West Bengal has had a profound impact on Bengali literature and music. Poets such as Vidyapati and Chandidas composed devotional songs (padāvali) that remain popular to this day. Musical instruments like the mṛdaṅga and karatāla, along with devotional music, have become integral parts of Bengali folk culture. Festivals such as Dol Yatra, Ratha Yatra, and Rāsa Līlā are celebrated with great enthusiasm, centered around Vaiṣṇava devotion.

Furthermore, the Vaiṣṇava tradition has played a significant role in reducing caste distinctions by uniting people through devotion. Even today, in the villages of West Bengal, gatherings such as Hari Sabha and kīrtana remain popular, reflecting the enduring legacy of this devotional movement.

Dicussion: Vaisnava devotion in Odisha

Vaiṣṇava devotion in Odisha forms a profound and traditional stream within Indian religious and cultural life. In this region, devotion developed primarily around the worship of Lord Jagannath and gradually assumed a universal and inclusive character. Although Odisha had an ancient tradition of Vaiṣṇava devotion, it gained renewed momentum in the 16th century with the arrival of Sri



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Chaitanya Mahaprabhu. Residing for a long time in Puri, he infused the worship of Jagannath with the spirit of divine love (prema-bhakti).

The Jagannath Temple stands as the principal center of Vaiṣṇava devotion in Odisha. Here, Lord Jagannath is worshipped along with Balabhadra and Subhadra. Jagannath is revered as a “universal deity,” embodying an inclusive spiritual vision that transcends distinctions of caste, creed, and religion.

A significant contribution to the devotional tradition of Odisha came from the Panchasakha (the Five Saints), including Balaram Das, Jagannath Das, and Achyutananda Das. These saint-poets composed rich devotional literature in the Odia language. Among them, Jagannath Das’s Bhagavata played a crucial role in spreading devotional ideas among the common people.

The key features of Vaiṣṇava practice in Odisha include nāma-saṅkīrtana (chanting of the holy names) and bhajana (devotional singing). The distribution of mahāprasāda (sacred food) and the spirit of seva (selfless service) are central aspects of devotional life. Here, devotion is not merely ritualistic but forms an integral part of everyday living.

The Ratha Yatra is the most prominent Vaiṣṇava festival of Odisha, during which the chariots of Lord Jagannath are ceremonially pulled by devotees. Other important festivals such as Snana Yatra and Nabanna are also closely associated with Jagannath devotion. In this way, a wide range of rituals and festivals are deeply interwoven with the devotional culture of Odisha.

Discussion: Vaisnava devotion in Nepal

Vaiṣṇava devotion in Nepal constitutes an important part of the religious heritage of the Indian subcontinent, where this devotional tradition has developed through a harmonious synthesis of Hindu and Buddhist cultures. In Nepal, devotion is primarily expressed through the worship of Lord Vishnu and his incarnation, Krishna.

The Vaiṣṇava tradition has been present in Nepal since ancient times. During the Licchavi and Malla periods, the worship of Vishnu received strong royal patronage. In later times, the influence of Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu further contributed to the spread of Krishna devotion in the region.



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Among the centers of Vaiṣṇava worship in Nepal, the Changu Narayan Temple is one of the oldest Vishnu temples and is recognized as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The Budhanilkantha Temple is also highly known for its magnificent reclining statue of Lord Vishnu. Kathmandu serves as the religious and cultural hub of Nepal, housing numerous Vaiṣṇava temples and āśramas.

The key features of Vaiṣṇava practice in Nepal include temple-centered devotion, where daily worship, āraṭi, and festivals play a vital role. Practices such as bhajana, sankīrtana, and recitation of the Bhagavad Gītā are widely popular. Devotion remains vibrant through various religious festivals celebrated across the country.

Among the major festivals, Krishna Janmashtami is celebrated with great enthusiasm and grandeur. Harishayani Ekadashi is another significant religious observance, holding special importance for devotees of Vishnu. Various forms of Ratha Yatra and other local Vaiṣṇava festivals are also observed in different regions.

A distinctive feature of Nepalese religious culture is the harmonious coexistence of Hinduism and Buddhism, which has also influenced Vaiṣṇava devotion. This devotional spirit is reflected in music, dance, and ritual practices, where Vaiṣṇava ideals continue to thrive as a living cultural tradition.

Discussion: Vaisnava devotion in the American context

In the American context, Vaiṣṇava devotion emerged in the 20th century as a new religious and cultural movement. It gained widespread popularity particularly through ISKCON and has today developed into a well-organized devotional community in the United States. The foundation of Vaiṣṇava devotion in America was laid by A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, who arrived in the United States in 1965 and established ISKCON in New York City in 1966. Through his efforts, the “Hare Krishna Movement” rapidly spread among the youth.

New York City became the first major center of Vaiṣṇava devotion in America. Los Angeles later developed into an important administrative and cultural hub of ISKCON. In San Francisco, the



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first Ratha Yatra festival in the West was held in 1967, marking a significant milestone in the movement's expansion.

The key features of American Vaiṣṇava practice include nāma-saṅkīrtana, where the chanting of the “Hare Krishna” mahāmantra is performed even on city streets. The study and discussion of the Bhagavad Gītā form an essential part of spiritual learning. The distribution of vegetarian food as Krishna Prasadam is also widely practiced and appreciated.

Vaiṣṇava devotion has had a notable influence on American society. It became closely associated with the Hippie Movement, during which many young people, in search of spirituality in the 1960s, were drawn to the Vaiṣṇava path. Additionally, the widespread popularity of yoga and meditation in America has further supported the growth of this tradition. As Vaiṣṇava devotion aligns with practices such as yoga, meditation, and a vegetarian lifestyle, it has been able to expand its influence more effectively across diverse sections of society.

Discussion: Vaisnava devotion in South India

Vaiṣṇava devotion in South India represents one of the most ancient and profound streams of the Indian Bhakti movement. It developed primarily in the regions of Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, and Kerala. In this region, devotion is not limited to religion alone but is deeply interconnected with philosophy, literature, and temple culture.

Although the roots of Vaiṣṇava devotion in South India can be traced back to ancient times, it attained a well-organized form between the 6th and 9th centuries through the Alvars—a group of saint-poets who composed devotional hymns in praise of Lord Vishnu and his incarnations. Their compositions are collectively known as the Divya Prabandham.

Among the philosophers and ācāryas of this tradition, Ramanujacharya holds a central place. He propounded the philosophy of Vishishtadvaita (qualified non-dualism) and provided a strong philosophical foundation to Vaiṣṇavism. Madhvacharya, the founder of the Dvaita (dualism) school, played a key role in spreading Vaiṣṇava devotion in Karnataka.

South India is home to several prominent Vaiṣṇava pilgrimage centers and temples. The Tirupati Balaji Temple is one of the richest and most famous Vaiṣṇava temples in the world. The



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Srirangam Temple is the largest Vaiṣṇava pilgrimage site in South India. Additionally, the Udupi Krishna Temple, established by Madhvacharya, is another important center of devotion.

The key features of Vaiṣṇava practice in South India include temple-centered worship, where daily rituals, āraṭi, and festivals play a central role. Devotional music, especially the hymns composed by the Alvars, forms an integral part of spiritual expression. Philosophical study and scriptural interpretation—particularly of the Bhagavad Gītā, Upaniṣads, and Brahma Sūtras—are also emphasized.

Important festivals and rituals include the Brahmotsavam of Tirupati, one of the annual celebrations, and Vaikuntha Ekadashi, which holds great significance for Vaiṣṇava devotees.

Conclusion: The Confluence of Vaiṣṇava Devotion in India and Abroad

The convergence of Vaiṣṇava devotion in India and across the world has, in the modern age, become a significant religious and cultural phenomenon. Originating from Indian spiritual traditions, this devotional stream has now transformed into a universal global movement.

In India, the foundation of Vaiṣṇava devotion was laid by Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, whose ideals of prema-bhakti (divine love), nāma-saṅkīrtana, equality, and fraternity continue to inspire people worldwide. On the other hand, A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada established this tradition on the international stage.

ISKCON serves as the principal bridge connecting Vaiṣṇava devotion between India and the rest of the world. Spiritual centers in Mayapur and Vrindavan are complemented by international hubs in cities such as New York City, London, and Berlin.

Several fundamental aspects of Vaiṣṇava devotion remain consistent both in India and abroad. First, nāma-saṅkīrtana, particularly the chanting of the “Hare Krishna” mahāmantra, is universally practiced. Second, devotion to Radha and Krishna—the Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa prema-tattva—holds equal importance everywhere. Third, practices such as the distribution of prasāda, vegetarianism, and devotional rituals show remarkable similarity across regions.



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At the same time, there has been a creative cultural exchange. Indian kīrtana has blended with Western musical styles to create new forms of devotional expression. Vaiṣṇava festivals such as Ratha Yatra and Krishna Janmashtami are now celebrated in many countries around the world. Sacred texts like the Bhagavad Gītā and other scriptures have been translated into numerous languages, making them accessible to a global audience.

This devotional tradition is inclusive, transcending barriers of caste, creed, and religion, allowing people from diverse backgrounds to participate. As a form of spiritual unity, it brings together individuals from different cultures under a shared devotional experience. Ultimately, Vaiṣṇava devotion has gained worldwide popularity as a path to inner peace and relief from the stresses of modern life, evolving into not just a religion but a global way of life.

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