

महस्विनी – विद्वत्समीक्षिता सन्दर्भिता च शोधपत्रिका (ISSN: 2231-0452)

कुसुमम् : जनवरी – डिसेम्बर २०२१

सम्पुटम् : संयुक्तम् (१,२)

Daśāvatāra theory in the Gītagovinda : A Cultural Study

Dr. Pratap Chandra Tripathy*

Key Notes : *Gītagovinda*, monumental work, Odishi music and dance, Jayadeva, Society, culture of Odisha, ten incarnations of Viṣṇu, Puranic Literature, *daśāvatāra carita*, *Prāci valley* near Kenduli, the native of Śrī Jayadeva, ancient Odisha, *daśāvatāra kṣetra*, *khurdhā itihāsa*, Lord kṛṣṇa as Creator, *avatāravāda*, *daśāvatāra-stuti*, Buddha as a synonym of viṣṇu, *vaiṣṇava-saṁpradāya agni-Purāṇa*, *Jagamohan* at Puri temple, *Khaṇḍuāpāṭa*, common prayer, modern age, *daśāvatāra* painting, temple walls, natural character of the people of Odisha.

0. Introduction :

Odisha witnessed the panorama of different religious scenes which contributed substantially to enrich her culture. *Gīta Govinda (GG)*, the single monumental work of celebrated poet Jayadeva is a high water mark in the realm of devotional poetry. This immortal lyric occupies a unique place in the world literature. It is a valuable gem in the treasure of art and culture that as much as forty commentaries and a good number of imitations of this have been composed in India. As a product of Odishan culture, *GG* is the source model of Odisi music and dance. It is sung with dance performance all over India. No single literary work after *Bhāgavata (Bha)* has exercised such wide ranging influences on Indian literature and culture as the *GG*.

An attempt is made here to present the theory of *Daśāvatāra* as developed in the *GG* of poet Śrī Jayadeva and its cultural effect on the society so far.

* HoD, Sanskrit, Maa Tarini (Degree) Mahavidyalaya, Panikoili, Jajpur, Odisha.

1. Origin and development of the theory :

The *dasāvātāra-stuti* (hymn to the ten incarnations of God Viṣṇu) founded in the first canto of the *GG* is very significant from different points. This popular song of *GG* having an universal appeal to the Hindus made its author better known to the common people than the famous Sanskrit scholars of India. In His incarnations, Viṣṇu manifests Himself in different forms. But Jayadeva's *Dasāvātāra-stuti* has popularised Kṛṣṇa's incarnation which has a significant impact on the culture and religious traditions of India in general and Odisha in particular.

1.1 *Dasāvātāra* theory in Pre-Jayadeva Period:

The theory of *Dasāvātāra* was not the creation of poet Jayadeva but was known throughout India long before his days. The incarnations have been described in many celebrated works like the *Mahābhārata*¹, *Bhāgavata*² and *Agnipurāṇa*³ etc. Though 'kalkī' is accepted as an incarnation in the *Mahābhārata* but Buddha is not admitted as an *avatāra* of Lord Viṣṇu among the ten. But by the time of *Purāṇic* literature Buddha had been accepted as an *avatāra* of Lord Viṣṇu. The order and name of incarnations as found in the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*, *Varāhapurāṇa* and *Agnipurāṇa* was accepted by *Samkarācārya* as such.

¹ हंसकूर्मश्च मत्स्यश्च प्रादुर्भूतो द्विजोत्तम ।

वराह नरसिंहश्च वामनो राम एव च

रामो दाशरथिश्चैव सात्वतः कल्किरेव च ॥ (महाभारतम्- 12.3.26)

² नमः कारणमस्त्याय प्रलयाब्धिचराय च ।

हयशीष्णो नमस्तुभ्यं मधुकैटभमृत्यवे ॥

X X X

नमो बुद्धाय शुद्धाय दैत्यदानवमोहिने ।

म्लेच्छप्रायक्षत्रहन्त्रे नमस्ते कल्किरूपिणे ॥ (श्रीमद्भागवतम्- X. 40.17-22)

³ अग्निपुराणम्, अध्यायः – 2, 3, 4, 5, 12, 16

Some scholars like P.C. Bagchi say that the *Vaiṣṇava-saṁradāya* probably made a contribution to the systematisation of the theory of *Daśāvatāra*¹. But the inscription (8th C.A.D.) on the lintel above the figure of Saṁkara Narayan in the rock-cut verandah of the Varaha Perumal temple of Mahabalipuram contains the well known *purāṇic* verse on the ten incarnations of *Viṣṇu* as follows:

मत्स्य कूर्म वराहः नरसिंहश्च वामनः ।

रामो रामश्च रामश्च बुद्धः कल्कि च ते दश ॥

In the above verse the first *Rāma* refers to *Paraśurāma*, the second denotes to *Dāśarathi Rāma* and the third to *Balarāma*. By this time Buddha had been accepted as an incarnation of Lord *Viṣṇu*. The *Viṣṇusahasranāma* includes Buddha as a synonym of *Viṣṇu*.²

In the field of classical Sanskrit literature of the pre-Jayadeva period the first '*Daśāvatāra-stotram*' written by the great *Samkarācārya* popularised the invocation of the ten incarnations of *Viṣṇu*. Here Kṛṣṇa has been involed as eighth *avatāra*. *Samkarācārya* doesn't accept *Balarāma* as an incarnation. *Kṣemendra*, the great Sanskrit poet of Kashmir (1030-1080 A.D.) has followed the *Daśāvatāra-stuti* of *Samkara*. In the second verse of his poem '*Daśāvatāra-carita*', poet *Kṣemendra* first mentions the name of the ten incarnations which follows the description of all the incarnations in ten verses³. *Daśāvatāra-stuti* of *Śrītharṣa* is the longest one in Sanskrit literature.⁴ Nala, the hero of the famous *Naiṣadhāyacarita* has offered prayer to them, the ten incarnations

¹ History of Bengal, Dacca University, p.403

² *Viṣṇusahasranāma*, Gita Press, Gorakhpur, Verse-40

³ मत्स्यः कूर्मो वराहः पुरुषहरिवपुः वामनो जामदग्न्यः ।

काकुस्थः कंसहन्ता स च सुगतमुनिः कल्कि नामा च विष्णुः ॥ (दशावतारचरित- 2)

⁴ *Naiṣadhāyacarita*, Canto-21, Verse-55-92

of *Viṣṇu*. Here *Kṛṣṇa* and *Balarāma* have been accepted as a single one and *kalkī* as the tenth incarnation.¹ Odishan poet *Śrīharṣa* flourished before a few years of *Śrī Jayadeva* and it is assumed that *Jayadeva's Daśāvatāra* must have been influenced by poet *Śrīharṣa*.

1.2 *Daśāvatāra* theory in *Jayadeva's* Period :

The benedictory verses of the Ajmer stone inscription had formed the introduction of a poem written in the 12th C.A.D.² It contains the invocation to the ten incarnations of *Viṣṇu*. Here *Kṛṣṇa* is accepted as the eighth incarnation.

Thus, by the time of *Śrī Jayadeva* there were two schools of which one was proclaiming *Balarāma* as the eight *avatāra* whereas the greatest philosopher and reformer *śrīsamkaracarya* accepted *Kṛṣṇa* as the eighth *avatāra*. This view was followed by *Kṣemendra* and the author of Ajmer stone inscription. But *Śrīharṣa* made an attempt to conciliate the two schools by advocating that both *Balarāma* and *Kṛṣṇa* formed a single *avatāra*. But *Jayadeva* in his *GG* accepts *Balarāma* as the eighth incarnation because he openly admits the supremacy and superiority of Lord *Kṛṣṇa* as the very creator or progenitor (*daśakṛtikṛt*) of the ten *avatāras*.

1.3 *Daśāvatāra* theory in Post *Jayadeva* Period :

Jayadeva's attempt to establish the supremacy and superiority of *Śrīkṛṣṇa* over other *avatāras* of *Viṣṇu* steadily attained success and the worship of *Kṛṣṇa* became wide spread and deep rooted in the Hindu

¹ धूमवत् कलयता युधि कालं म्लेच्छकल्पशिखिना करवालम् ।

कल्किना दशतयं मम कल्कं त्वं व्युदस्य दशमावतारेण ॥ (नैषधीयचरितम्, 21.79)

² Epigraphia Indica – Vol. XXIX, p.179

~~~~~  
society. There are ten villages around Kenduli in the Prachi valley in the name of ten *avatāras*<sup>1</sup> as follows :

1. Matsyapura or Māchhapur – Matsya Avatāra
2. Kūrmapura or Kūrmapada – Kūrma Avatāra
3. Barāhapura – Varāha Avatāra.
4. Narasinghapur śāsana – Narasimha Avatāra
5. Dadhi Bāmanapur – Vāmana Avatāra
6. Bhārgabapur (now extinct) from which Bhārgabi river has originated – Paraśurāma Avatāra.
7. Rāmacandrapur śāsana – Rāma Avatāra
8. Balabhadrapur śāsana – Balarām Avatāra
9. Bouddha Khaṇḍa (Bodhipada) – Buddha Avatāra
10. Kaliyuga Bhāgalpur – Kalkī Avatāra

In Post-Jayadeva Period *Kṛṣṇa* was accepted as ‘Bhagavan’ (*Kṛṣṇastu Bhagavān svayam*) in each and every Hindu Family. Particularly in Odisha it is almost a house hold book that is worshiped along with home deities. Common people of India started to believe *Kṛṣṇa* as the almighty only after the famous hymn of *daśāvatāra* to *Jagadīśa* or *jagannātha* of Puri.

In Post- Jayadeva period different kinds of *avatāras* have also been enumerated where *Kṛṣṇa* is accepted as an incarnation and *Balarāma* has been ignored. In this particular work *Jagannātha* is

---

<sup>1</sup> G.K. Dash, Incredible Prachi Valley, p.42

glorified. *Jagannātha* is beyond the concept *Avatāra* and *Avatārin*. On the wall of the Jagamohan at Puri temple, *Jagannātha* replaces Buddha. This is a recent construction which may confuse the researchers, and hence should not be taken as authentic.

## 2. *Daśāvatāra* theory in Ancient Odisha :

From the archeological evidences, it can safely be ascertained that the theory of *Daśāvatāra* had gained much popularity in Odisha at least from the 8<sup>th</sup> C. A. D. Two unique Viṣṇu images worshipped in the villages Sainatala of Bolangir district of Odisha furnish definite evidence regarding the development of *Daśāvatāra* theory<sup>1</sup>. Here the figures of ten incarnations are carved on the right and left sides of the pedestal stand. Here *Balarāma* is accepted as the eight incarnation. The representation of the ten incarnations carved in those two images completely tallies with their description given in the famous *Daśāvatāra-stuti* of the GG.

In a place called Trithamatha presently situated in the Erasama P.S. of Jagatsinghpur district there was an ancient temple containing very beautiful images of the ten incarnations of *Viṣṇu*, of which the figures of *Paraśurāma*, *Rāma* and *Balarāma* are still preserved, while others are perhaps buried in a mound near by. These can be assigned to the 7<sup>th</sup> C. A. D.<sup>2</sup> The images of *Kākaṭpur* in Puri district. It was destroyed by the muslims. The figures of ten incarnations are found carved on the Lintel over the lions gate of the *Jagannātha* temple of Puri. It is unanimously admitted to have been constructed by Chologanga Deva between (1112-1147 A.D.)<sup>3</sup>. There is a maṭha called *Daśāvatāra Maṭha* near *guṇḍicā* temple of Puri where the ten incarnations are worshiped. Near

---

<sup>1</sup> A Descriptive Catalogue of Sanskrit Manuscripts, Vol. II, p.XLVII

<sup>2</sup> A Descriptive Catalogue of Sanskrit Manuscripts, Vol. II, p.XLVIII

<sup>3</sup> K.N. Mohapatra, Khurdha Itihasa, p.33

~~~~~  
svetagaṅgā of Puri *Matsyamādhava* is worshiped. *Śrīkūrma* and Simhacalam built before the days of Jayadeva are dedicated to *Kūrma* and *Narasimha Avatāra* (1113 C.A.D). Besides these the *Daśāvatāra* images were found in Prachi valley, temple walls and Odishan art and sculpture¹. Even before Jayadeva's GG, many *Daśāvatāra* images were found worshiped in Puri, the land of Lord *Jagannātha*. Therefore Purusottama Kṣetra was famous as *Daśāvatāra Kṣetra* in those days².

Thus, the *Daśāvatāra* theory had gained much popularity in Odisha long before Jayadeva's GG. It was systematised some where in North India and was followed by the sculpture of Odisha in the subsequent centuries³.

2.1 *Daśāvatāra* in Present Odisha :

Coming to the modern age we find that the *Daśāvatāra* paintings are popular among the common people. *Daśāvatāra* pictures are found woven in textiles popularly known as '*Khaṇḍuā*'. The influence of the GG is so intense that the *Daśāvatāra* dance has been indentified with Odisi dance. The lyrical quality of the *Daśāvatāra* stuti is so sweet and captivating that in Odisha people recite this as a matter of routine without even being able to realize the meaning of it. It is sung as a regular prayer by the common people too.

2. Last Line :

Thus, the *Daśāvatāra* theory influenced the art and cultural tradition of our country to such an enormous degree that it influenced the

¹ K.N. Mohapatra, Sri Jayadeva and GG, pp.101-103

² ibid, p.103

³ A Descriptive Catalogue of Sanskrit Manuscripts of Odisha, Vol.II, p.II

महस्विनी – विद्वत्समीक्षिता सन्दर्भिता च शोधपत्रिका (ISSN: 2231-0452)

कुसुमम् : जनवरी – डिसेम्बर २०२१

सम्पुटम् : संयुक्तम् (१,२)

~~~~~  
life style of the people. Hence, consisting of such concepts the *GG* surpasses the narrow limits of place and frontier, language and literature, and which is so dear to people, is bound to reflect the natural character of the people of Odisha.

