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From Vaiṣṇava Worship To The Kṛṣṇa Cult: A Historical Transformation

KIRAN SHARMA

RESEARCH SCHOLAR

PANJAB UNIVERSITY

Introduction

The evolution of Bhakti from early Vaiṣṇava religion to the Kṛṣṇa-centred devotional tradition represents one of the most significant developments in the religious history of ancient India. Rather than emerging through abrupt theological innovation, the Kṛṣṇa cult evolved over several centuries through the interaction of Vedic religious ideas, Brāhmaṇical ritualism, Upaniṣadic philosophy, Epic traditions, regional devotional movements, and the institutional growth of Bhagavatism. The *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* represents the culmination of this historical process by presenting Kṛṣṇa not merely as an incarnation of Viṣṇu but as the Supreme Reality (*Svayaṁ Bhagavān*) and by establishing *Prema-Bhakti* as the highest form of religious experience.

The historical roots of this development may be traced to the Vedic conception of Viṣṇu. Although Viṣṇu occupies a comparatively limited position in the *Ṛgveda*, the hymns dedicated to him attribute qualities that later became central to Vaiṣṇava theology. His celebrated three strides (*Trivikrama*) portray him as the deity who measures and sustains the universe, thereby establishing cosmic order:

इदं विष्णुर्वि चक्रमेत्रेधा नि दधे पदम्।

समूहमस्य पांसुरे॥

(*Ṛgveda* 1.22.17)

While this hymn does not proclaim Viṣṇu as the supreme deity, it introduces the concepts of cosmic sovereignty and divine pervasiveness that subsequently acquired greater theological significance. The Brāhmaṇa texts further expanded these ideas by identifying Viṣṇu with *yajña*, thereby associating him with the preservation of both cosmic and social order.

A further stage in this development occurred during the Upaniṣadic period, when ritual speculation gradually gave way to metaphysical inquiry. Although the principal Upaniṣads do not formulate Bhakti in its later devotional sense, they contributed decisively to the evolution of Vaiṣṇava theology by elevating Nārāyaṇa as the supreme cosmic principle. Equally significant is the reference to Kṛṣṇa Devakīputra in the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*, indicating that traditions associated with Kṛṣṇa were already known within learned circles before their systematic elaboration in Epic and Purāṇic literature.

The Epic period witnessed the progressive integration of the traditions of Viṣṇu, Nārāyaṇa, and Vāsudeva-Kṛṣṇa. The *Bhagavad Gītā* transformed Kṛṣṇa from a heroic leader into the universal Lord whose descent restores *dharma*:

**यदा यदा हि धर्मस्य ग्लानिर्भवति भारत।
अभ्युत्थानमधर्मस्य तदात्मानं सृजाम्यहम्॥**

(*Bhagavad Gītā* 4.7)

The doctrine of *avatāra* articulated in the *Bhagavad Gītā* became a defining feature of classical Vaiṣṇavism. The *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, however, advanced this theological development further by proclaiming:

एते चांशकलाः पुंसः कृष्णस्तु भगवान् स्वयम्॥
(*Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 1.3.28)

This declaration marks a decisive shift in Vaiṣṇava theology by presenting Kṛṣṇa not as one incarnation among many but as the original source of all divine manifestations. The verse subsequently became the doctrinal foundation of several medieval Vaiṣṇava traditions, particularly those associated with Vallabha and Caitanya.

The emergence of the Kṛṣṇa cult, however, cannot be explained solely through theological developments preserved in Sanskrit literature. Epigraphic evidence—including the Heliodorus Pillar, the Ghoṣuṇḍī and Hathibada inscriptions, and the Mora Well inscription—demonstrates that the worship of Vāsudeva had already become an organised devotional movement several centuries before the composition of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*. These inscriptions establish Bhagavatism as the earliest historically verifiable form of organised devotion centred upon Vāsudeva-Kṛṣṇa and illustrate the gradual institutionalisation of Vaiṣṇava worship.

Modern scholarship has interpreted this transformation from diverse perspectives. R. G. Bhandarkar regarded Bhagavatism as an independent devotional movement that was subsequently assimilated into the broader Vaiṣṇava tradition. R. C. Hazra emphasised the synthesising role of the Purāṇas in consolidating earlier religious currents, while D. D. Kosambi explained the rise of Kṛṣṇa worship in relation to the socio-economic transformation of early historic India. More recent studies by Edwin F. Bryant and Friedhelm Hardy have highlighted the literary and theological evolution of Kṛṣṇa devotion and the distinctive contribution of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* to the history of Bhakti.

Against this background, the present study examines the historical evolution of Bhakti from its Vedic antecedents to the mature Kṛṣṇa-centred theology of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*. Drawing upon literary, epigraphic, archaeological, and historical evidence, it argues that the Kṛṣṇa cult emerged through a prolonged process of religious interaction and theological synthesis rather than through a single doctrinal innovation. Viewed from this perspective, the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* represents not the beginning of Kṛṣṇa devotion but the culmination of a centuries-long historical development that transformed Vaiṣṇava religion into one of the most influential devotional traditions of the Indian subcontinent.

Vedic Foundations of Vaiṣṇava Religion

The historical evolution of the Kṛṣṇa cult is rooted in the gradual transformation of the Vedic conception of Viṣṇu into the supreme personal deity of classical Vaiṣṇavism. This development did not result from a single theological innovation but from a continuous process of reinterpretation extending from the Vedic

Samhitās through the Brāhmaṇas, Upaniṣads, Epics, and Purāṇas. The *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* represents the culmination of this process rather than its point of origin.

Although Viṣṇu occupies a comparatively modest position in the *R̥gveda*, the hymns dedicated to him attribute characteristics that later assumed central importance in Vaiṣṇava theology. Unlike Indra, Agni, or Varuṇa, whose functions are associated with specific natural or cosmic forces, Viṣṇu is portrayed as the all-pervading guardian of cosmic order (*rta*). His most distinctive feature is the doctrine of the **Three Strides (Trivikrama)**, which symbolises his sovereignty over the universe:

इदं विष्णुर्वि चक्रमेत्रेधा नि दधे पदम्।

समूल्हमस्य पांसुरे॥

(*R̥gveda* 1.22.17)

The hymn describes Viṣṇu as measuring and sustaining the cosmos through his three strides, thereby establishing universal order. Although it does not yet proclaim him the supreme deity, it introduces the concept of a divine presence whose authority extends across the three realms of existence. This imagery later became the theological basis of the Vāmana narrative and remained one of the enduring symbols of Vaiṣṇava thought.

Closely related to this conception is the celebrated expression *paramaṃ padam*:

तद्विष्णोः परमं पदं सदा पश्यन्ति सूरयः।

दिवीव चक्षुराततम्॥

(*R̥gveda* 1.22.20)

In its original context, the verse refers to Viṣṇu's highest celestial abode, but later Vaiṣṇava theologians interpreted it as Vaikuṇṭha, the eternal abode of the Supreme Lord. Such reinterpretations illustrate how Vedic cosmological imagery was progressively transformed into the theological vocabulary of devotional religion.

The Vedic relationship between Viṣṇu and Indra further reveals the distinctive character of Viṣṇu. While Indra embodies martial power and heroic conquest, Viṣṇu represents stability, continuity, and the preservation of cosmic order. His actions are universal rather than episodic, and his authority derives not from military victory but from sustaining the structure of the cosmos. These characteristics later facilitated his elevation as the preserver of the universe within classical Hindu theology.

Modern scholarship has offered diverse interpretations of the Vedic Viṣṇu. Hermann Oldenberg and A. A. Macdonell explained him primarily as a solar deity whose three strides symbolised the movement of the sun. Jan Gonda, however, argued that the Vedic evidence points instead to a deity embodying cosmic pervasiveness and universal order. This interpretation has gained wider acceptance because it more adequately explains the theological language of the Vedic hymns and their subsequent influence upon Vaiṣṇava thought.

The philological derivation of the name *Viṣṇu* from the Sanskrit root *viś* ("to pervade") further reinforces this understanding. Whether interpreted linguistically or theologically, the name conveys the idea of divine omnipresence, a concept that later enabled Vaiṣṇava thinkers to identify Viṣṇu with the all-pervading Brahman of the Upaniṣads.

Nevertheless, the Viṣṇu of the *Ṛgveda* should not be equated directly with the Supreme Lord of later Vaiṣṇava theology. Between these two conceptions lies a long process of historical reinterpretation in which Vedic cosmology was successively enriched by sacrificial theology, metaphysical speculation, Epic narratives, and regional devotional traditions. The significance of the Vedic corpus therefore lies less in presenting a complete theology than in providing the conceptual framework from which classical Vaiṣṇavism eventually emerged.

The Vedic foundations of Vaiṣṇava religion thus reveal both continuity and transformation. The ideas of Trivikrama, *paramaṃ padam*, divine pervasiveness, and cosmic preservation remained integral to later Vaiṣṇava thought, yet each acquired new theological meanings as religious priorities shifted from ritual performance to personal devotion. This gradual reinterpretation of Vedic concepts ultimately created the intellectual environment in which the Kṛṣṇa-centred theology of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* could flourish.

From Sacrificial Theology to Metaphysical Monism: The Brāhmaṇas and the Upaniṣads

The transition from the Vedic Saṃhitās to the Brāhmaṇa and Upaniṣadic literature marks a decisive phase in the historical evolution of Vaiṣṇava thought. During this period, the conception of Viṣṇu expanded beyond his earlier role as the guardian of cosmic order to become the theological embodiment of sacrifice and, eventually, the metaphysical ground of the universe. These developments established the intellectual foundations upon which the devotional theology of later Vaiṣṇavism was constructed.

The Brāhmaṇa texts, composed primarily to explain the significance of Vedic ritual, reinterpret Viṣṇu within the framework of sacrificial theology. Rather than merely receiving sacrificial offerings, Viṣṇu is identified with the sacrificial process itself. The celebrated declaration of the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, "**yajño vai viṣṇuḥ**" ("Verily, sacrifice is Viṣṇu"), represents one of the earliest theological formulations that elevated Viṣṇu above the other Vedic deities. Sacrifice was regarded as the sustaining principle of both the cosmos and society; consequently, identifying Viṣṇu with *yajña* transformed him into the universal principle responsible for the preservation of cosmic order. This reinterpretation significantly expanded the theological scope of the Vedic Viṣṇu and anticipated his later role as the preserver of the universe in classical Vaiṣṇavism.

The Brāhmaṇas also portray Viṣṇu as the deity who attains supremacy through the perfection of sacrifice rather than through martial power. The *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa* describes him as surpassing the other gods because of his ritual excellence, reflecting a shift in religious values from heroic achievement to sacrificial efficacy. Such formulations reveal an important transformation in Vedic religious thought: divine supremacy increasingly came to be associated with the maintenance of cosmic stability rather than with military victory. This conception laid the foundation for the later Vaiṣṇava image of Viṣṇu as the benevolent sustainer of the universe.

Closely related to this development is the gradual emergence of Nārāyaṇa in the later Vedic corpus. While early references remain limited, the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* presents Nārāyaṇa as the primordial being whose universal sacrifice establishes his supremacy over the gods. Here the ideas of sacrifice, cosmic sovereignty, and divine transcendence converge within a single theological framework. Nārāyaṇa is no longer one deity among many but the source from whom sacrificial order itself derives. Although the full identification of Nārāyaṇa with Viṣṇu belongs to a later period, the conceptual foundations of that synthesis are clearly discernible in the Brāhmaṇa literature.

The Upaniṣads transformed this ritual theology into philosophical speculation. Their primary concern shifted from the external performance of sacrifice to the realization of ultimate reality (*Brahman*) and the identity of the individual self (*Ātman*). This intellectual transition did not reject the Vedic tradition; rather,

it reinterpreted sacrificial symbolism in metaphysical terms, thereby providing new philosophical foundations for subsequent devotional traditions.

Direct references to Viṣṇu remain relatively infrequent in the principal Upaniṣads, yet the concept of Nārāyaṇa underwent profound theological development. The *Mahānārāyaṇa Upaniṣad* unequivocally identifies Nārāyaṇa with the Supreme Brahman:

नारायणः परं ब्रह्म नारायणः परः।

नारायणः परो ज्योतिरात्मा नारायणः परः॥

"Nārāyaṇa is the Supreme Brahman; Nārāyaṇa is the Supreme Reality. Nārāyaṇa is the supreme light; Nārāyaṇa is the supreme Self."

This formulation marks a decisive advance in Vaiṣṇava theology. Viṣṇu and Nārāyaṇa are no longer understood merely within the context of ritual performance but as expressions of the ultimate metaphysical reality. The personal deity and the impersonal Absolute are brought into a single conceptual framework, a synthesis that later became fundamental to classical Vaiṣṇava philosophy.

Equally significant is the brief reference to **Kṛṣṇa Devakīputra** in the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*, where he appears as a disciple of the sage Ghora Āṅgīrasa. Although Kṛṣṇa is not yet presented as a divine incarnation, the passage demonstrates that traditions associated with him were already established within learned Vedic circles before their elaboration in the Epic and Purāṇic literature. It also suggests that the historical memory of Kṛṣṇa preceded his theological elevation within Vaiṣṇavism. Scholars such as R. G. Bhandarkar and H. C. Raychaudhuri have regarded this passage as one of the earliest literary testimonies to the historical Kṛṣṇa.

The philosophical orientation of the Upaniṣads also prepared the intellectual environment for the emergence of Bhakti. By internalising sacrifice and emphasising self-realisation over ritual performance, they redirected religious enquiry towards direct spiritual experience. Although knowledge (*jñāna*) remained the principal means of liberation, the metaphysical vocabulary developed in the Upaniṣads was later appropriated by Vaiṣṇava theologians to explain devotion to a personal God. The *Bhagavad Gītā* subsequently reconciled these traditions by integrating Vedic ritual, Upaniṣadic philosophy, and personal devotion into a unified religious vision.

From a historical perspective, the Brāhmaṇas and the Upaniṣads represent successive stages in the theological evolution of Vaiṣṇava religion. The Brāhmaṇas elevated Viṣṇu through his identification with sacrifice and cosmic preservation, while the Upaniṣads transformed these ritual concepts into metaphysical principles centred upon Brahman and Nārāyaṇa. Neither corpus articulates Bhakti in its mature form; nevertheless, together they established the conceptual framework that enabled later traditions to identify Viṣṇu, Nārāyaṇa, and ultimately Kṛṣṇa as manifestations of the Supreme Reality. The devotional theology of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* thus emerged not as a departure from the Vedic tradition but as the culmination of a long process of theological reinterpretation in which ritual, philosophy, and devotion were progressively integrated into a coherent religious worldview.

The Rise of Bhagavatism and the Historical Emergence of Vāsudeva Worship

The transformation of early Vaiṣṇava religion into the Kṛṣṇa-centred devotional tradition was mediated by the emergence of Bhagavatism, the earliest historically demonstrable form of organized devotion directed towards Vāsudeva-Kṛṣṇa. This movement constitutes the crucial link between Vedic religion and the devotional theology of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*. Rather than originating within the Purāṇic tradition,

the worship of Vāsudeva developed independently over several centuries before gradually merging with the broader Vaiṣṇava conception of Viṣṇu and Nārāyaṇa. Consequently, Bhagavatism should be regarded as a historical religious movement rather than merely a theological construct.

Ancient literary traditions consistently associate Vāsudeva-Kṛṣṇa with the Vṛṣṇi, Andhaka, and Sātvata clans of the Yādava lineage, whose principal centre was the region of Mathurā. In its earliest phase, Kṛṣṇa appears to have been revered as an extraordinary clan leader whose memory gradually assumed divine significance. The *Mahābhārata* preserves both dimensions of his personality by portraying him simultaneously as a historical prince and a manifestation of the divine, while the *Harivaṃśa* further develops his genealogy and pastoral associations. These traditions suggest that the deification of Kṛṣṇa was a gradual historical process rather than an immediate theological innovation.

Among these communities, the Sātvatas occupy a particularly significant position. Initially denoting a tribal group, the term gradually acquired a sectarian meaning as the followers of Vāsudeva came to be recognised as a distinct religious community. Later Pāñcarātra literature preserved this association by referring to its theological system as the *Sātvata Śāstra*, indicating the continuity between early clan traditions and organized Vaiṣṇava theology. R. G. Bhandarkar therefore argued that the earliest Bhagavatas were members of the Sātvata community who transformed Vāsudeva from a heroic ancestor into the supreme object of devotion.

The earliest literary evidence for this movement appears in Pāṇini's *Aṣṭādhyāyī* (fifth–fourth century BCE). Although primarily a grammatical treatise, it preserves derivative forms such as *Vāsudevaka*, indicating the existence of identifiable communities associated with Vāsudeva. Such grammatical evidence demonstrates that Vāsudeva had already become more than a personal name; he represented a recognised religious identity. While Pāṇini provides no theological explanation of these communities, his testimony confirms that the worship of Vāsudeva had acquired sufficient social prominence to be reflected in the linguistic conventions of the period.

A century or two later, Patañjali's *Mahābhāṣya* provides stronger evidence for the consolidation of the Bhagavata tradition. His references indicate that devotion to Vāsudeva had become publicly recognised and institutionally organised. The use of expressions referring to the followers of Vāsudeva suggests that the Bhagavatas had developed into an established religious community rather than remaining a localized clan cult. Equally significant are Patañjali's allusions to dramatic performances depicting episodes from Kṛṣṇa's life, implying that narratives concerning Vāsudeva had entered popular religious culture and were no longer confined to hereditary traditions.

Independent confirmation of the antiquity of Bhagavatism is supplied by the Greek ambassador Megasthenes, who visited the Mauryan court during the late fourth century BCE. His description of the people of the Śūrasena country as worshippers of Herakles, centred upon the city of Mathurā, has generally been interpreted by modern historians as a reference to Vāsudeva-Kṛṣṇa. Although the precise identification has occasionally been questioned, the geographical context and the heroic characteristics attributed to Herakles correspond closely with the traditions surrounding Kṛṣṇa. More importantly, the account demonstrates that the religious importance of Mathurā and its principal deity had already attracted the attention of foreign observers during the early historic period.

Mathurā itself played a decisive role in the expansion of Bhagavatism. Situated at the intersection of important commercial routes linking north-western India with the Gangetic plain, the city emerged as a major centre of economic, political, and cultural exchange. These conditions facilitated the dissemination of devotional ideas beyond their original tribal context. Unlike Vedic sacrificial religion, which depended upon elaborate ritual and priestly mediation, Bhagavatism emphasised personal devotion to Bhagavān

Vāsudeva. Its relative simplicity, ethical orientation, and accessibility enabled it to attract merchants, urban communities, and diverse social groups, thereby extending its influence far beyond the Yādava clans.

The emergence of the concept of **Bhagavān** further illustrates the theological maturation of the movement. While the term originally functioned as an honorific denoting divine excellence, it gradually became associated specifically with Vāsudeva, whose followers regarded him as the supreme Lord. The corresponding designation **Bhāgavata** therefore came to signify not merely an admirer of Kṛṣṇa but a devotee who acknowledged him as the highest object of worship. This development marks an important departure from earlier Vedic religion, shifting the emphasis from sacrificial reciprocity with multiple deities to exclusive devotion directed towards a single supreme God.

From a historical perspective, Bhagavatism represents one of the earliest organized devotional traditions in South Asia. Literary evidence from Pāṇini, Patañjali, the *Mahābhārata*, the *Harivaṃśa*, and the testimony of Megasthenes collectively demonstrates that the worship of Vāsudeva had already acquired institutional form by the centuries immediately preceding the Common Era. The movement thus provided the historical and theological foundation upon which later Vaiṣṇava traditions were constructed. It also transformed the character of Indian religious life by introducing a form of personal devotion that increasingly displaced the ritual centrality of Vedic sacrifice.

The significance of Bhagavatism extends beyond the deification of Kṛṣṇa. It initiated a fundamental reorientation of religious practice in which faith, devotion, and personal allegiance to a single deity assumed greater importance than ritual performance alone. This transformation prepared the way for the theological synthesis achieved in the Epic and Purāṇic traditions, where Vāsudeva was gradually identified with Viṣṇu and Nārāyaṇa, ultimately culminating in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*'s proclamation of Kṛṣṇa as **Svayaṃ Bhagavān**.

Epigraphic Evidence and the Institutionalisation of Bhagavatism

While literary traditions provide valuable insights into the early development of Bhagavatism, its historical authenticity rests upon a substantial body of epigraphic and archaeological evidence. Inscriptions dating from the second century BCE to the early centuries CE demonstrate that the worship of Vāsudeva had already evolved into an organised religious tradition with established communities, permanent places of worship, image cults, and theological concepts well before the composition of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*. These records not only corroborate the literary evidence but also reveal the gradual transformation of Bhagavatism from a regional devotional movement into an integral component of classical Vaiṣṇavism.

Among these records, the **Heliodorus Pillar** at Besnagar (ancient Vidisā), dated to the second century BCE, occupies a unique position in the history of Indian religion. Erected by Heliodorus, the Greek ambassador of the Indo-Greek king Antialkidas to the court of the Śuṅga ruler Bhagabhadra, the inscription identifies its donor as a **Bhāgavata**, a devotee of Vāsudeva, and describes the monument as a **Garuḍa-dhvaja** dedicated to **Devadeva Vāsudeva**:

देवदेवस वासुदेवस गरुडध्वजो अयं कारितो हेलियोदोरेण भगवतेन...

The historical significance of this inscription extends far beyond its religious content. It constitutes the earliest unequivocal epigraphic evidence for the existence of an organised Bhagavata community and demonstrates that Vāsudeva had already attained the status of the supreme deity among his followers. Equally remarkable is the fact that this public declaration of devotion was made by a foreign diplomat.

Whether Heliodorus formally embraced Bhagavatism or adopted its symbols out of political diplomacy, the inscription clearly indicates that the movement possessed sufficient prestige and institutional stability to attract recognition beyond the Indian cultural sphere. As Upinder Singh observes, the Heliodorus Pillar provides one of the earliest archaeological testimonies to the public prominence of Vāsudeva worship in early historic India.¹

Further evidence for the institutional growth of Bhagavatism is provided by the **Ghoṣuṇḍī** and **Hathibada** inscriptions of Rajasthan, generally assigned to the first century BCE. These inscriptions record the construction of sacred enclosures (*prākāras*) dedicated to **Samkarṣaṇa** and **Vāsudeva**, indicating that organised temple worship had already become an established feature of the Bhagavata tradition. Unlike the temporary sacrificial altars characteristic of Vedic religion, these permanent structures reflect the emergence of enduring centres of devotion supported by local patrons and organised religious communities. Their existence illustrates an important transition from sacrificial ritual to institutional worship centred upon temples and sacred precincts.

The joint worship of Samkarṣaṇa and Vāsudeva also reflects an intermediate stage in Vaiṣṇava theology. Originally remembered as members of the Vṛṣṇi lineage, these heroic figures were gradually elevated into divine personalities whose collective veneration anticipated the more elaborate theological formulations of the Pāñcarātra tradition. Thus, the inscriptions reveal that theological development accompanied institutional expansion, transforming ancestral traditions into a coherent devotional system.

The **Mora Well inscription**, discovered near Mathurā and generally dated to the early first century CE, marks another significant stage in this process. It records the installation of images of the **five Vṛṣṇi heroes**—Vāsudeva, Samkarṣaṇa, Pradyumna, Aniruddha, and Sāmba—demonstrating that image worship had become firmly established within Bhagavatism. This evidence is particularly important because it reflects the gradual evolution of the religious movement from hero worship to systematic theology. The inclusion of Pradyumna and Aniruddha anticipates the later Pāñcarātra doctrine of the **Caturvyūha**, while the installation of permanent icons indicates the growing importance of congregational worship and temple ritual in early Vaiṣṇava practice.

Numismatic evidence reinforces this conclusion. Coins issued by several Indo-Greek and regional rulers depict symbols closely associated with Bhagavatism, including the Garuḍa standard, the mace, and the plough. Although coins rarely provide explicit theological statements, their iconography demonstrates that these symbols had acquired sufficient public recognition to function as markers of religious identity across political boundaries. Their circulation over extensive commercial networks further suggests that Bhagavatism was no longer confined to the Mathurā region but had begun to acquire wider geographical influence.

Taken together, these inscriptions and archaeological remains fundamentally reshape our understanding of the origins of Vaiṣṇavism. They demonstrate that Bhagavatism was neither a retrospective creation of the Purāṇic authors nor a purely literary phenomenon. Rather, it was a historically verifiable religious movement possessing organised communities, permanent places of worship, institutional patronage, image cults, and an increasingly sophisticated theological structure several centuries before the composition of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*. The archaeological record thus bridges the chronological gap between the literary references of Pāṇini and Patañjali and the mature devotional theology of the Purāṇas.

The epigraphic evidence also illustrates the gradual integration of regional Vāsudeva worship into the wider Brahmanical tradition. The movement retained its distinctive devotional character while progressively assimilating Vedic concepts, philosophical speculation, and emerging temple practices. This interaction enabled Bhagavatism to transcend its original clan affiliations and evolve into a broadly

accepted religious tradition. By the beginning of the Common Era, the historical foundations of classical Vaiṣṇavism had already been firmly established through the convergence of literary authority, institutional organisation, and public religious practice.

Consequently, the inscriptions of Besnagar, Ghoṣuṇḍī, Hathibada, and Mathurā constitute far more than isolated archaeological discoveries. Collectively, they document the institutionalisation of Bhagavatism and provide the earliest historical evidence for the emergence of organised Vaiṣṇava devotion. They also demonstrate that the theological achievements of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* were rooted in a long-standing religious tradition whose historical development can be traced through both textual and material sources. The rise of the Kṛṣṇa cult, therefore, should be understood as the culmination of a centuries-long process in which devotional practice, institutional organisation, and theological reflection evolved simultaneously to produce one of the most influential religious traditions of ancient India.

The Theological Synthesis of Viṣṇu, Nārāyaṇa and Vāsudeva

The emergence of classical Vaiṣṇavism was neither the continuation of a single religious tradition nor the outcome of an isolated theological reform. Rather, it resulted from the gradual convergence of three distinct yet complementary streams of religious thought: the Vedic worship of Viṣṇu, the metaphysical conception of Nārāyaṇa developed in the later Vedic and Upaniṣadic corpus, and the Bhagavata devotion centred upon Vāsudeva-Kṛṣṇa. Their eventual synthesis transformed a regional devotional movement into a comprehensive theological system capable of reconciling Vedic orthodoxy, philosophical speculation, and popular devotion.

Originally these traditions possessed separate historical identities. Viṣṇu belonged to the Vedic pantheon as the guardian of cosmic order; Nārāyaṇa emerged in the Brāhmaṇas and Upaniṣads as the primordial source of creation and the embodiment of the Supreme Reality; Vāsudeva, by contrast, originated within the heroic traditions of the Vṛṣṇi-Sātvata clans and became the central figure of Bhagavatism. Their gradual identification was neither accidental nor instantaneous but reflected the broader tendency of Brahmanical religion to assimilate regional cults without abandoning its Vedic foundations.

The *Mahābhārata* provides the earliest systematic evidence for this process of theological integration. Although the Epic preserves traditions that portray Kṛṣṇa as a historical prince, political strategist, and friend of the Pāṇḍavas, it simultaneously elevates him to the status of the cosmic Lord. This dual representation reflects successive stages in the religious development of the text and demonstrates how historical memory was progressively transformed into sacred theology. The *Nārāyaṇīya* section of the *Śāntiparvan* advances this synthesis further by identifying Nārāyaṇa with Vāsudeva and presenting him as the eternal source of creation, thereby bridging the gap between Upaniṣadic metaphysics and Bhagavata devotion.

The incorporation of Nārāyaṇa into Bhagavatism profoundly altered the character of Vaiṣṇava theology. The *Mahānārāyaṇa Upaniṣad* had already proclaimed Nārāyaṇa to be the Supreme Brahman and the ultimate reality underlying the universe. When this conception became identified with Vāsudeva, devotion was no longer directed merely towards a deified heroic figure but towards the metaphysical ground of existence itself. Consequently, Bhakti acquired philosophical depth while preserving its intensely personal character. The personal deity and the impersonal Absolute were no longer regarded as mutually exclusive; instead, the former came to be understood as the fullest manifestation of the latter.

The *Bhagavad Gītā* represents the decisive stage in this theological evolution. It synthesises the ritualism of the Vedas, the metaphysical enquiry of the Upaniṣads, and the personal devotion of Bhagavatism within a single religious framework. Kṛṣṇa declares:

अहं सर्वस्य प्रभवो मत्तः सर्वं प्रवर्तते।
इति मत्वा भजन्ते मां बुधा भावसमन्विताः ॥

"I am the source of all; from Me everything proceeds. Knowing this, the wise worship Me with devotion."
(*Bhagavad Gītā* 10.8)

This declaration redefines the relationship between knowledge and devotion. True knowledge culminates not in abstract metaphysical speculation but in loving devotion to the Supreme Lord. The verse simultaneously affirms Kṛṣṇa's cosmic supremacy and establishes Bhakti as the appropriate response to the realization of ultimate truth. In this respect, the *Bhagavad Gītā* serves as the principal intermediary between the historical Bhagavata movement and the mature devotional theology of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*.

An equally important development during this period was the emergence of the **Pāñcarātra** tradition, which provided one of the earliest systematic formulations of Vaiṣṇava theology. Seeking to explain how the transcendent Supreme Being could simultaneously remain beyond the material universe while actively participating in creation and redemption, the Pāñcarātra theologians developed the doctrine of the **Caturvyūha**. According to this system, the Supreme Lord manifests Himself successively as Vāsudeva, Saṁkarṣaṇa, Pradyumna, and Aniruddha. These manifestations do not represent separate deities but distinct modes through which the one Supreme Being governs the cosmos.

Historically, the doctrine reflects the theological transformation of the Vṛṣṇi heroes into cosmic manifestations of a single divine reality. The Mora Well inscription demonstrates that these figures had already acquired collective religious significance before the doctrine received its classical formulation in the Pāñcarātra Saṁhitās. The system thus represents an attempt to reconcile historical memory, clan traditions, and philosophical speculation within a coherent theological framework. As Jan Gonda has observed, the Pāñcarātra achieved this synthesis by preserving both the transcendence and the immanence of the Supreme Lord, allowing Him to remain the eternal Absolute while simultaneously entering history through multiple manifestations.

This theological integration also fulfilled an important historical function. By identifying Vāsudeva with Viṣṇu and Nārāyaṇa, Bhagavatism acquired the authority of the Vedic tradition, while Vedic religion, in turn, absorbed the emotional and personal dimensions of Bhakti. The synthesis appealed simultaneously to Vedic ritualists, philosophical thinkers, urban devotees, and pastoral communities, thereby enabling Vaiṣṇavism to transcend regional and sectarian boundaries. It combined scriptural antiquity, metaphysical sophistication, and devotional accessibility in a manner unmatched by earlier religious systems.

From a historical perspective, this convergence explains the remarkable expansion of Vaiṣṇavism during the early centuries of the Common Era. The movement no longer represented a local cult centred upon the memory of a heroic ancestor but a universal religious tradition grounded in Vedic revelation, philosophical monism, and personal devotion. The *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* inherited this theological synthesis and carried it to its logical conclusion by proclaiming Kṛṣṇa not merely as an incarnation of Viṣṇu but as **Svayaṁ Bhagavān**, the original source from whom all divine manifestations proceed.

The synthesis of Viṣṇu, Nārāyaṇa, and Vāsudeva therefore constitutes the decisive turning point in the historical evolution of Vaiṣṇavism. It reconciled ritual, philosophy, and devotion within a unified theological vision and transformed Bhagavatism from a regional devotional movement into the doctrinal foundation of classical Vaiṣṇava religion. The mature Kṛṣṇa theology of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* should consequently be understood as the culmination of this centuries-long process of religious assimilation and theological reinterpretation rather than as an entirely new religious departure.

The Emergence of the Kṛṣṇa Cult: From Bhagavatism to the Theology of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*

The historical evolution of Bhagavatism reached its fullest theological expression through the gradual transformation of Vāsudeva-Kṛṣṇa from the supreme deity of an organised devotional movement into the universal and transcendent Lord of classical Vaiṣṇavism. This transformation was neither abrupt nor confined to doctrinal innovation. It emerged through the reinterpretation of historical memory, Epic tradition, and devotional experience, culminating in the theology of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*. The *Harivaṃśa* and the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* occupy a pivotal position in this process, for together they reshaped the image of Kṛṣṇa from a heroic figure into the Supreme Reality and established Bhakti as the highest religious ideal.

The *Harivaṃśa*, generally regarded as a supplement to the *Mahābhārata*, represents the earliest sustained attempt to construct a sacred biography of Kṛṣṇa. While the Epic primarily portrays him as a statesman, counsellor, and divine incarnation, the *Harivaṃśa* expands the narrative by incorporating traditions relating to his birth, childhood, pastoral life, and youthful exploits in Vraja. These narratives transformed local pastoral traditions into sacred history and introduced the theological concept of *līlā*, according to which Kṛṣṇa's earthly activities were understood not as ordinary historical events but as manifestations of divine play. Through this reinterpretation, the human and the divine became inseparably united within the personality of Kṛṣṇa.

The theology of *līlā* marked an important departure from earlier religious conceptions. Vedic religion emphasised cosmic order maintained through sacrifice, while the Epic tradition highlighted the restoration of *dharma* through divine intervention. The *Harivaṃśa*, however, presented divine activity as spontaneous, joyous, and motivated by compassion rather than necessity. Kṛṣṇa's childhood miracles, his subjugation of demonic forces, and his intimate relationship with the pastoral community of Vraja collectively established a new devotional paradigm in which God became personally accessible to His devotees. These narratives provided the emotional and symbolic foundations upon which later Bhakti traditions flourished.

The theological synthesis achieved by the *Harivaṃśa* was subsequently carried to its highest expression in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*. Drawing upon the Vedic conception of Viṣṇu, the Upaniṣadic doctrine of Nārāyaṇa, the historical development of Bhagavatism, and the devotional traditions surrounding Kṛṣṇa, the text articulated a comprehensive vision in which all earlier currents of Vaiṣṇava thought were integrated into a unified theology. Unlike previous literature, the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* unequivocally proclaimed Kṛṣṇa as the original and supreme manifestation of the Divine:

एते चांशकलाः पुंसः कृष्णस्तु भगवान् स्वयम्॥

(*Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 1.3.28)

This declaration represents the decisive theological innovation of the text. Earlier Vaiṣṇava traditions generally regarded Kṛṣṇa as an incarnation (*avatāra*) of Viṣṇu. The *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* reversed this relationship by presenting Kṛṣṇa as **Svayaṃ Bhagavān**, the original Supreme Being from whom all incarnations emanate. In doing so, it elevated the Kṛṣṇa tradition from one branch of Vaiṣṇavism to its highest theological expression.

The distinctive contribution of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, however, extends beyond the doctrine of divine supremacy. It fundamentally redefined the nature of religious life by placing **Bhakti** at the centre of spiritual experience. Whereas the Vedas emphasised ritual action (*karma*) and the Upaniṣads privileged liberating knowledge (*jñāna*), the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* proclaimed loving devotion (*prema-bhakti*) as the highest means of attaining the Divine. Liberation was no longer conceived merely as release from rebirth

through knowledge or sacrificial merit but as the natural consequence of complete and selfless devotion to Kṛṣṇa.

This devotional ideal finds its most profound expression in the Tenth Skandha through the narratives of the cowherds of Vraja, particularly the **Gopīs**, whose unwavering love for Kṛṣṇa is presented as the highest form of spiritual realization. Their devotion is characterised neither by ritual obligation nor philosophical speculation but by absolute surrender, complete self-forgetfulness, and uninterrupted remembrance of the Divine. The celebrated **Rāsa-līlā** therefore functions not as a romantic narrative but as an allegory of the soul's longing for union with God. Medieval Vaiṣṇava theologians, including Vallabhācārya, Nimbārka, and Caitanya, regarded these episodes as the supreme expression of devotional spirituality, profoundly influencing the later Bhakti movements across the Indian subcontinent.

The *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* also transformed the understanding of divine grace. Salvation is no longer portrayed as the exclusive reward of ritual correctness or philosophical attainment but as the consequence of God's compassionate response to sincere devotion. This universalisation of religious experience significantly broadened the social appeal of Vaiṣṇavism. Bhakti became accessible irrespective of birth, learning, or ritual status, thereby extending participation in religious life beyond the traditional boundaries of Vedic orthodoxy. Such inclusiveness contributed substantially to the remarkable expansion of Vaiṣṇava devotion during the early medieval period.

From a historical perspective, the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* should therefore be understood not as the origin of the Kṛṣṇa cult but as the culmination of a long process of religious and theological evolution. The cosmic Viṣṇu of the Vedas, the sacrificial theology of the Brāhmaṇas, the metaphysical Nārāyaṇa of the Upaniṣads, the organised devotion of Bhagavatism, the theological synthesis of the *Mahābhārata*, and the sacred biography of the *Harivaṃśa* all converge within its pages. By integrating these diverse traditions into a coherent devotional philosophy, the text established the doctrinal foundations of classical Kṛṣṇa Bhakti and profoundly influenced the subsequent history of Hinduism.

The historical significance of this transformation extends beyond theology. The emergence of the Kṛṣṇa cult reflects the broader capacity of Indian religious traditions to accommodate continuity and change simultaneously. Rather than rejecting earlier beliefs, Vaiṣṇava thinkers reinterpreted Vedic cosmology, philosophical monism, regional cults, and historical traditions within an increasingly devotional framework. This process of synthesis enabled the Kṛṣṇa tradition to preserve the authority of the Vedic heritage while responding to the evolving religious aspirations of Indian society.

The evolution from Vaiṣṇava worship to the Kṛṣṇa cult thus represents one of the most remarkable examples of religious adaptation in South Asian history. It illustrates how historical memory, theological reflection, devotional practice, and institutional development interacted over many centuries to produce a religious tradition that united scriptural authority with personal spirituality. The *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* stands as the mature expression of this historical process, transforming Kṛṣṇa from the heroic Vāsudeva of Bhagavatism into the Supreme Lord of universal Bhakti and establishing *prema* as the highest ideal of religious life.

The historical evolution of Bhakti from early Vaiṣṇava religion to the Kṛṣṇa-centred devotional tradition represents a gradual process of religious continuity, theological reinterpretation, and institutional development extending over several centuries. The evidence examined in this study demonstrates that the Kṛṣṇa cult did not emerge as an isolated doctrinal innovation, nor was it the exclusive product of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*. Instead, it developed through the interaction of Vedic cosmology, Brāhmaṇical ritual theology, Upaniṣadic metaphysics, Epic traditions, regional devotional practices, and the organised Bhagavata movement. The *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* therefore stands not at the beginning but at the culmination

of a long historical process in which diverse religious traditions were progressively integrated into a coherent theology of devotion.

The earliest foundations of this development may be identified in the Vedic conception of Viṣṇu as the all-pervading guardian of cosmic order. Although occupying only a modest position within the Vedic pantheon, Viṣṇu possessed characteristics—cosmic sovereignty, universal pervasiveness, and the maintenance of *ṛta*—that enabled subsequent generations to reinterpret him as the Supreme Being. The Brāhmaṇa texts expanded these ideas by identifying Viṣṇu with *yajñā*, while the Upaniṣads transformed sacrificial theology into metaphysical speculation through the elevation of Nārāyaṇa as the Supreme Brahman. These developments provided the conceptual vocabulary through which later Vaiṣṇava theologians articulated the relationship between the personal deity and the ultimate reality.

The emergence of Bhagavatism constituted the decisive historical turning point in this process. Literary testimony preserved in Pāṇini, Patañjali, the *Mahābhārata*, and the *Harivaṃśa*, when considered alongside the independent observations of Megasthenes, demonstrates that devotion to Vāsudeva had already assumed organised form during the centuries preceding the Common Era. This conclusion is further strengthened by epigraphic evidence. The Heliodorus Pillar, the Ghoṣuṇḍī and Hathibada inscriptions, and the Mora Well inscription collectively establish the existence of organised Bhagavata communities, permanent religious institutions, image worship, and an increasingly sophisticated theological tradition long before the composition of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*. These archaeological sources firmly anchor the rise of Bhagavatism within the historical landscape of early India and dispel the notion that Kṛṣṇa devotion was solely a literary construction of the Purāṇic age.

Equally significant was the gradual theological synthesis through which Vāsudeva became identified with Viṣṇu and Nārāyaṇa. Rather than displacing earlier traditions, Vaiṣṇava theologians integrated Vedic cosmology, Upaniṣadic metaphysics, and regional devotional practices into a unified religious system. The *Mahābhārata*, particularly the *Bhagavad Gītā*, provided the first comprehensive articulation of this synthesis by presenting Kṛṣṇa as both the historical guide of the Pāṇḍavas and the universal Lord whose manifestation restores *dharma*. The subsequent development of the Pāñcarātra tradition further systematised this theology by explaining the relationship between the transcendent Supreme Being and His manifestations within the cosmos. Through these developments, Bhagavatism evolved from a regional devotional movement into the doctrinal foundation of classical Vaiṣṇavism.

The *Harivaṃśa* and the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* completed this historical evolution by redefining the religious significance of Kṛṣṇa. The *Harivaṃśa* transformed pastoral and heroic traditions into sacred history through the doctrine of *līlā*, while the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* proclaimed Kṛṣṇa as **Svayaṃ Bhagavān**, the original source of all divine manifestations. More importantly, it elevated **Prema-Bhakti** above ritual observance and philosophical speculation, presenting loving devotion as the highest expression of religious life and the most direct means of attaining liberation. In this way, the text brought together centuries of theological reflection into a comprehensive devotional philosophy that profoundly influenced the subsequent development of Hindu religious thought.

The historical trajectory reconstructed in this study also illustrates the dynamic character of Indian religious traditions. Religious continuity was achieved not through the preservation of static doctrines but through continuous reinterpretation of inherited ideas in response to changing social, cultural, and intellectual circumstances. The transformation of the Vedic Viṣṇu into the Kṛṣṇa of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* exemplifies this process of creative synthesis. Vedic symbolism, Brāhmaṇical ritualism, Upaniṣadic philosophy, regional hero worship, and Bhagavata devotion were not competing traditions but complementary strands that gradually converged to produce one of the most influential devotional movements in South Asian history.

From a historiographical perspective, the evidence examined here supports the view advanced by scholars such as R. G. Bhandarkar, R. C. Hazra, Jan Gonda, Thomas J. Hopkins, Edwin F. Bryant, and Friedhelm Hardy that classical Vaiṣṇavism emerged through a cumulative process of religious integration rather than through abrupt theological innovation. At the same time, the combined literary and archaeological evidence demonstrates that neither purely textual nor exclusively socio-economic explanations adequately account for the historical development of the Kṛṣṇa cult. Its emergence was shaped by the interaction of doctrinal evolution, institutional expansion, political patronage, and devotional practice, each contributing to the formation of a religious tradition that transcended regional and sectarian boundaries.

The transformation from Vaiṣṇava worship to the Kṛṣṇa cult, therefore, should be understood as one of the most significant developments in the religious history of ancient India. It represents the gradual convergence of Vedic theology, philosophical speculation, organised devotion, and institutional religion into a coherent devotional tradition centred upon Kṛṣṇa as the Supreme Reality. The *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* did not inaugurate this process but gave it its most systematic and enduring expression. By integrating diverse religious currents into a unified theology of Bhakti, it established the intellectual and spiritual foundations of later Vaiṣṇava traditions and secured Kṛṣṇa's position as the central figure of one of the most influential devotional movements in the history of Hinduism.

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