

# Incarnations of Lord Vishnu in Srimad Bhagwat



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## Abstract

Written in oral tradition in Sanskrit by Vedvyas, the Srimad Bhagwata, a bhakti text, is one of the greatest puranas which deals with the ten incarnations of Vishnu, particularly Krishna, and which has several interesting stories to motivate the reader to follow the path of devotion or bhakti in order to attain the blessings of Krishna and finally to attain salvation. It teaches how to attain salvation through cultivating a personal relationship with Vishnu in the form of Krishna. In it, Suka tells his son Parikshit the life story of Krishna beginning with his birth to his death as a result of a curse. The twelve books with 18000 stotras dealing with devotion to Krishna, practice of bhakti, description of God in human form, Bhakti Yoga which includes Samkhya, Yoga, Vedanta, and Advaita Vedanta serve the philosophy of life.

The Bhagwata approves the superiority of Bhakti to Vishnu or Krishna over the caste of man, and it rejects the superiority of the Brahmin based on birth, and allows even the members of the lower castes to attain salvation through Bhakti to Vishnu or Krishna. The essence of the text lies in its message that the world is an illusion, and that Samkhya and Yoga are the way of overcoming the dream in the aspect of Krishna. The speciality of the Bhagwata lies in the description of the ten avatars or incarnations of Vishnu- Matsya, Kurma, Varah, Vamana, Krishna, Kalki, Buddha, Parshurama, Rama and Narasimha.

The research paper is initially a theoretical study grounded in the secondary data collected from some of the selected research papers available on the internet sites. The paper is a part of the Ph. D. thesis in Sanskrit submitted by the researcher to Dr. B. R. Ambedkar University Agra in 2011 and awarded in 2013. The findings reveal the relevance of bhakti of Krishna through the bhakti of the various incarnations of Vishnu that emerged in the world at the points of time when there was a loss of the religious spirit.

**Keywords:** Incarnation, Sankhya Yoga, Vedanta, Advaita Vedanta, Devotion, Curse, Yuga, Teachings, Deities, Salvation, Renouncement, Worldly Pleasures, Preparation for Death, Stotras

## Introduction

Srimad Bhagwata is one of the greatest puranas with its special focus on devotion to the incarnations of Vishnu, particularly Krishna. Originally written in Sanskrit, it comprises twelve skandas or cantos and some 18,000 stotras. The credit of its authorship goes to Veda Vyas in the ninth or tenth century. It is a product of oral tradition. The popularity of Srimad Bhagwata lies in its Hindu traditions-based stories and the various incarnations or avatars of Vishnu and the life of Lord Krishna. Devotion to Krishna as God in human form is the central concern in Srimad Bhagwata. Of all the cantos in Srimad Bhagwata, the tenth canto which deals with the various aspects of Krishna, is the largest one and it covers up about one quarter of the entire book. This canto has an incredible collection of the stories about the life of Krishna. This canto serves as an encyclopaedia of devotion (Bhakti), as it deals with the practices, analysis and description of the various types of Bhakti. Srimad Bhagwata is in the form of a story recounting Vyasa's work being recited for the first time by his son Śuka to the dying King Parikshit, who owes his life to Krishna. Suka recites it to his son Parikshit over the course of seven days and tells him the entire life story of Krishna.

Because of its significance and popularity as a purana, Srimad Bhagwata is often referred to as the 'fifth Veda'. It makes a tremendous emphasis on the practice of bhakti, and is noted for redefining dharma, and for the extent of its description of God in a human form. It being the very

essence of all the Vedanta literature, has a deep influence on the mind of man in a way that if one enjoys the nectar of it, seems to have been free from all the worldly desires.

### **Ten Incarnations of Vishnu As Mentioned In Srimad Bhagwata**

The central focus in Srimad Bhagwata is the Bhakti of Vishnu through the worship and bhakti of the following ten avatars or incarnations of Vishnu taken in the various yugas-

1. Matsya Avatar
2. Kurma Avatar
3. Varaha Avatar
4. Vamana Avatar
5. Krishna Avatar
6. Kalki Avatar
7. Buddha Avatar
8. Parshurama Avatar
9. Rama Avatar
10. Narasimha Avatar

### **Summary of The Twelve Books or Cantos of Srimad Bhagwata**

#### **Book-I**

In the first book of Srimad Bhagwata, we are told how one day Saunaka gathers the sages in Naimisha Forest to hear Suta who describes the ten incarnations of Vishnu, and who emphasizes the bhakti to Krishna through several stories. Suta tells the sages the story of the life of Parikshit. The conclusion of Parikshit's life is the main storyline of the Bhagavata—a curse is placed on Parikshit that will cause him to die within seven days. Parikshit retires to the bank of the Ganges to fast until his death. He is accompanied by several sages including Vyasa's son Suka whom he asks how to prepare for death. What Suka suggests to Parikshit constitutes the main part of the Bhagavata.

#### **Book-II**

In the second book, Suka teaches Parikshit several things that should be accomplished before death in order to die successfully. They include—freedom from the fear of death, renouncement of all the worldly pleasures, home, and family, control of the breath and mind, concentration on the sacred Aum, development of yoga and bhakti, bhakti to the deities. Suka also throws light on creation and various avatars of Vishnu in the world at different periods of time.

#### **Book -III**

In the third book, there is a description of Vidura's pilgrimage to various holy places which provides the backdrop for the stories and spiritual teachings made in Book-III. The text informs about the meeting of Vidura with Uddhava who informs about the Kurukshetra war and death of Krishna. This book further informs about Vidura's meeting with the sage Maitreya who instructs on the creation of the world, the divisions of time, and other subjects. The same book gives room to the birth of Hiranyakasipu and Hiranyaksa and Hiranyaksa's death at the hands of Varaha, the boar avatar of Vishnu, and the story of Devahuti and her son Kapila, whose Samkhya teachings lead her to final liberation.

#### **Book -IV**

The stories of Daksha's sacrifice as a result of his mocking Shiva in the presence of his own daughter and Shiva's consort Dakshayani, Dakshyani's self immolation, the legend of Dhruva's penance and devotion to Vishnu, King Prithu etc. find sufficient room in this book. Each of the stories are told by Suka quite elaborately. The book ends with the recounting of the renunciation and liberation of the Pracetas brothers.

#### **Book -V**

The fifth book deals with the story of Manu's sons and his grandsons which eventually leads to the description of the world, the planets, the regions below the earth and the twenty eight hells. It has much to focus on the creation of the world, hells and planets. The description clarifies that the planets influence man and the wicked people are finally sent to one or the other of the twenty eight hells in accordance with their karma in the world.

#### **Book -VI**

The sixth book reveals the attainment of salvation through the utterance of the name of God through the story of Ajamila, who attained heaven as a reward for uttering the word Narayana over again and again in order to call his son Narayan on his deathbed. In addition, the stories of the son of the Praceta brothers, victory of Indra over Visvarupa and the birth of the Maruts are also recounted in this book.

#### **Book -VII**

The seventh book is very important and interesting as it tells several interesting stories, such as, the story of the atheist Hiranyakasipu who did not believe in God and his powers, his son Prahalada who had an unshaken faith in God, and the death of Hiranyakasipu at the hands of Narasimha (an incarnation of Vishnu). The book establishes Prahalad's superiority over his wicked father, and describes Prahalad as a great devotee of Vishnu with an immense bhakti for Bhagwan. This book is also taken as an authentic document on dharma, varnas and four ashrams or stages of life.

#### **Book -VIII**

The eighth book describes the six past ages or time periods and the seven future ages of Manu includes several stories, many involving the avatars of Vishnu. Nine chapters of the book are dedicated to the Vamana Avatar of Vishnu and his defeat of Bali. It is in this book that the story of churning of the ocean of milk is recounted with the help of the Kurma avatar of Vishnu.

#### **Book -IX**

The ninth book celebrates the current age of Manu at length, traditional history of solar dynasty founded by Ikshvaku and the lunar dynasty of Pururavas. In addition, herein is also described the history of Panchala, Magadha, Kuru, Anu, Druhyus, Turvasu, and other dynasties leading up to the Yadu dynasty and the birth of Krishna to his parents Vasudeva and Devaki.

#### **Book -X**

The tenth book is the lengthiest of all the twelve books of Srimad Bhagwata. Dedicated to Krishna's life, the book includes the childhood and

adolescence stories of Krishna as well as the stories that tell how the godlike Krishna holds the entire universe within himself, who slays and kills demons and moves the entire mountain with a single finger, and who enslaves all the gopis of the Braja kshetra. This book shows Krishna simply engaging in various lilas, or divine and intimate play with his devotees.

#### **Book -XI**

The eleventh book of Srimad Bhagwata describes the destruction of the Yadav dynasty, that is, the death of Krishna and all his kinsmen as a result of the curse of a Brahmin who is said to have been instigated by Krishna himself in order to meet his end, and to prove that man is mortal. This book celebrates the idea that the Yadavas kill each other in a drunken fight and Krishna dies as the result of a metal-tipped arrow striking his foot. Krishna's ascent to Vaikuntha is elaborately described in the last chapter of the book. It also includes the last discourse of Krishna the Uddhava Gita, which he addresses to his dear friend Uddhava.

#### **Book -XII**

The twelfth book predicts the future rulers of Magadha and the evils of Kali Yuga and the destruction of the world eventually. Towards the close of the twelfth book, we are told how finally a snake bites King Parikshit. The book ends with the brief description of the ten characteristics of a purana, the life of Markandeya, a summary of the Bhagwata.

#### **Objectives of the Study**

1. To produce the glimpses of the Hindu mythology
2. To highlight the significance of Srimad Bhagwata in the Hindu mythology
3. To produce an overview of Srimad Bhagwata
4. To make the reader familiar with the teachings of Srimad Bhagwata
5. To deal with the various aspects of Srimad Bhagwata
6. To produce the gist of the important stotras of Srimad Bhagwata
7. To point out the things referred to in the stotras of Srimad Bhagwata
8. To discuss the status of Lord Vishnu in Srimad Bhagwata
9. To concentrate and discuss the various incarnations of Vishnu
10. To interpret the influence of the teachings of Srimad Bhagwata on the people

#### **Review of Related Literature**

M.P. Bhattathiri (1999) in his research article, Bhagavat Gita and Management observes that Sri Krishana elaborates two types of work culture-daivi sampat or divine work culture and asuri sampat or demonic work culture and advocates daivi sampat as the right and true way of managing business. The researcher stresses that Bhagavad Gita tackles the issue from grassroots level of human thinking.

Arun Kumar (2004) in his published research work, "Management Leadership through Bhagwat Gita", made an in-depth study with a view to explore, identify and formulate the wisdom of Bhagwat Gita in the field of leadership and team building, philosophy of life, work ethics, decision-making, motivation, communication and human relations in business and

industry. The study concluded that by the synthesis of Bhagwat Gita philosophy, beliefs, attitudes and values with Western thought and techniques, Indian managers would be able to fulfill their Indian cultural specific roles not only in Indian corporate scene but in the world corporate scene also.

Prema Sagar and Ashwani Singla (2004) in their paper, "Trust and Corporate Social Responsibility: Lessons from India", found that the deeply engrained belief in Karma as espoused by Bhagwat Gita extends into the role of business in the society, breaking across the barriers of culture, religion and language.

Dharminder Singh Ubha (2007) in his paper, Corporate Governance: Solutions through Indian Spiritual System, aimed at formulating and systematizing the intuitive wisdom of the Indian Scriptures in the field of ethics in corporate governance. The study depicts that The Bhagwad Gita is basically concerned with the science of right and wrong in human actions and accordingly a manager needed to awaken the hidden Krishna in his conscience for the right path. The Bhagwad Gita can provide direction to the corporate mentors to attain twin objectives of high principles and high profits.

Narayanji Mishra (2007) in his book titled, "Better Management and Effective Leadership through the Indian Scriptures", discusses various concepts of foreign thinkers and concepts of Indian scriptures in the light of each other and finds that what the foreign thinkers have said is a part of all that is already contained in the Indian scriptures. It was found that the ancient scriptures like the Vedas and Srimad Bhagwat were replete with highly developed principles of managerial functions like leadership, supervision, discipline, training, money management, communication, crisis management etc.

Shiv K. Tripathi (2007) in his research work, "Managing Business as a Spiritual Practice: The Bhagwadgita way to Achieve Excellence through Perfection in Action", did a conceptual study to identify ways to supplement western framework of management principles and functions by incorporating the principles of three paths of human salvation recommended in the Bhagwad Gita. The study asserts that the essentials of any action should be clarity of the objective behind action, knowledge of the instruments of action, coordination of different efforts for the action, dedication and devotion to action and non attachment to results of the action as preached by Bhagwad Gita.

Sudhakar Reddy (2009) in his paper, —Business Principles from the Bhagavad Gita, undertook a conceptual study to highlight the relevance of Bhagwad Gita to business practices, with an objective to attune the Western model of efficiency, dynamism and striving for excellence to the ideals of the Indian holistic attitude of lokasangraha – for the welfare of many, for the good of many and to develop India centric management skills. The study found that to attain sound mental health, a manager should try to possess and maintain internal constancy, mental peace, a calm mindset and a positive poise even in adverse situations and should stay away from the

feelings of greed, envy, egotism, suspicion and anguish as advocated by Bhagavad Gita.

#### Hypothesis

1. Hindu mythology is a great source of the Hindu life
2. Sanskrit literature entertains the Hindu mythology as a great source
3. The Puranas teach several valuable things to the Hindus and prescribe them ways of living
4. Srimad Bhagwata is one of the greatest puranas
5. The central concern in Srimad Bhagwata is Lord Vishnu and the incarnations of Vishnu
6. Srimad Bhagwata describes the life of Krishna as a human being
7. Srimad Bhagwata teaches the lessons of creation of the world, deities, Bhakti or devotion to Lord Krishna
8. Srimad Bhagwata is very significant to the devotees of Lord Krishna as it makes them familiar with the life and teachings of Lord Krishna
9. Srimad Bhagwata paves a path of salvation through bhakti
10. Salvation is possible only to those who devote themselves to the bhakti of the various incarnations of Lord Vishnu as referred to in the various stotras of Srimad Bhagwata

#### Research Methodology

The paper is a part of the thesis submitted for the degree of Ph. D. in Sanskrit literature in 2011 to Dr. B. R. Ambedkar University Agra, and awarded in 2013. The method adopted for the purpose includes the selection of the title from one of the chapters of the research thesis, review of related literature available on the various sites of internet in the form of research papers of the journals, formulation of working hypothesis, determination of the specific objectives, research design making the work qualitative, literary, interpretative and explanatory, content analysis of the secondary data, generalization. For the purpose, considering the Srimad Bhagwata the basis of the entire study, the researcher went through all the twelve Cantos, Skands or Books of Bhagwata thoroughly concentrating the various important stotras so as to grasp their gist. Thereafter, a few of the relevant studies available on the various internet sites were picked with a view to making their review. The special focus throughout the study was made on all the ten incarnations of Vishnu. Hypothesis on the various aspects was formulated so as to cover up all the aspects of the text and to discuss the principles and teachings of Srimad Bhagwata. A research design was prepared so as to make the work qualitative and interpretative. Finally, major findings were made focusing the relevance of Srimad Bhagwata to the people.

#### Key-Findings and Conclusion

1. Originally written in oral tradition in Sanskrit by Vedvyas in the ninth or tenth century, Srimad Bhagwata is one of the greatest puranas with its special focus on devotion to the incarnations of Vishnu, particularly Krishna.
2. It is primarily a bhakti text, with an emphasis on achieving salvation through cultivating a personal relationship with Vishnu in the form of Krishna
3. Srimad Bhagwata was recited by Suka to his son Parikshit over the course of seven days
4. It comprises of twelve books

5. There are 18,000 stotras in Srimad Bhagwata that serve the philosophy of life.
6. Devotion to Krishna as God in human form is the central concern in Srimad Bhagwata
7. The tenth canto or Book of Srimad Bhagwata which deals with the various aspects of Krishna through the stories, is the largest one and it covers up about one quarter of the entire book
8. Srimad Bhagwata makes a tremendous emphasis on the practice of bhakti, and is noted for redefining dharma, and for the extent of its description of God in a human form
9. Bhakti Yoga is the prominent teaching which includes Samkhya, Yoga, Vedanta, and Advaita Vedanta
10. Srimad Bhagwata teaches the nine activities of Bhakti Yoga, namely, meditating on the lila of Krishna; hearing and singing about Vishnu or Krishna; remembering, serving, and worshipping him; dedicating all of one's actions to him etc.
11. It establishes the superiority of Bhakti to Vishnu or Krishna over the caste of man
12. It rejects the superiority of the Brahmin based on birth, and allows even the members of the lower castes to attain salvation through Bhakti to Vishnu or Krishna
13. It celebrates the idea that the world is an illusion and the individual is a dreaming and waking state; Samkhya and Yoga are the way of overcoming the dream in the aspect of Krishna
14. The Bhagwata teaches Advaita, Dharma, Yoga and Siddhis
15. It enlists the following ten incarnations of Vishnu-Matsya, Kurma, Varah, Vamana, Krishna, Kalki, Buddha, Parshurama, Rama and Narasimha

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