

Vrishni Cult in South India

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Vrishni Vira cult in North India is slightly better known than it is in Tamil country or South India. In ancient India, Vrishni were worshipped either as individual deities (heroes) or in groups (triads, tetrads or pentads). As individual deity, any of the Vrishni Viras may find his following but Samkarsana/Balarama, Vasudeva-Krishna and Ekanamsa were more popular. These three are also represented in a group which is identified as Vrishni triad. In the tetrads may be included Chaturvyuha images which have the representation of four Vrishni Viras. For the pentads, the Mora inscription makes important mention of *Vrsninam Panchaviranam* who are identified as the five Great Heroes of Vrishni – Samkarsana, Vasudeva, Pradyumna, Samba and Aniruddha.¹ These names have been confirmed by the passage of *Vayu Purana* (97.1-2) which reads ‘*Manussyaprakritin devan kirtyamanan nibhodhata samkarssanao vasudevah pradyumnah samba eva cha/ aniruddhashcha panchaite vamshavirah prakirtitah*’. *Srimadbhagavata Purana* (X.16/45) also mentions four Vrishni Heroes as Sattvat cult by the names of Samkarsana, Krishna, Pradyumna and Aniruddha. The *Mahabharata* also mentions these Vrishni Viras in a passage (13.158, 39) and also ‘*sambam cha nihatam drisva charudesanam cha madhavah pradymnam chaniruddham cha kataschukrodha bharata*’(16.3, 44-45). Earlier, Lüders had identified them as “five great heroes” mentioned in Jaina texts as Baladeva, Akrura, Anadhrsti, Sarana and Viduratha, among whom Akrura

was the commander.² The names of five Vrishni heroes as identified by Lüders cannot be out rightly rejected as they show some glimpse of historicity in them. But, the identification of Banerjea seems to be more proper as the popularity of these characters as close family members of Vasudeva-Krishna indicates. The Pancha-Vira concept of Vaishnavism had near parallels in other sects, - the Pancha-Brahmas of Shaivism, the Pancha-Buddhas of Buddhism, the Pancha-Tirthankaras of Jainism and more importantly Pancha-Viras of Yaksism. But we know little of them to say how they are linked with the principles of several religious systems.³ The important places from where evidence relating to Vrishni has been found are: Tikla, Besnagar, Malhar, Ghosundi, Nanaghat, Newal and Vraja region (Mathura, Chamunda Tila, Vrindavan, Sunrakh, Mora, Biravai and Akrur).⁴

The heroes of Vrishni dynasty who originated from the environs of Mathura were also quite popular in Tamil country as well from quite early times. A survey of the Sangam literature in its present form indicates that various Tamil concepts of worship besides the totemistic or animistic beliefs, each of five geographical divisions mentioned in it came to be associated with a major deity e.g. Mayon (Vishnu-Krishna) was the deity par excellence of mullai (pastoral), Vendan (equated with Indra) of marudam (plains), Varunan of neidal (god of coastal region), Seyon (or Muruga equated with Skanda-

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Karttikeya) of kurinji (hilly) and Korravai (equated with Durga) of Palai (desert). Apart from these major deities, Valiyon (Balarama) is grouped with other important deities Surya, Kama, Sama and Siva in *Kalittogai* (V. 26). The popularity of Samkarsana/Balarama as an independent deity is also attested to by the presence of independent temples dedicated to him.⁵ The South Indian texts also provide iconographic references of Balarama which are actually quite similar to what is observed in Balarama images of Mathura region as well as in references in North Indian texts viz. *Puranas*. So, Balarama as the elder brother of Krishna is mentioned in various works. He was a deity related with agriculture which is indicated by the presence of ploughshare (*hala/nanjil*) as chief attribute in his hand. His complexion is said to be white like milk or conch.⁶ He is called as Valiyon, i.e., possessor of strength (*bala*).⁷ He is called as the one who wears a single earring.⁸ He is said to wear a blue garment⁹ and a red garland or sometimes a white *kadamba* garland.¹⁰ He had the palmyra banner.¹¹ The story of Krishna's dalliance with Pinnai, which makes the theme of an entire chapter of *Silapaddikaram*, mentions the dance of Balarama along with Mayon (Krishna) and Pinnai (possibly Radha of later Hinduism).¹² Various childhood episodes of the life of Krishna are mentioned in a number of Tamil works which are part of Sangam literature. There is a belief among some scholars that the *Bhagavata Purana* was composed in South India around 9th century CE.¹³ All the important forms of Krishna as a Vrishni Vira, as a *vyuha* and an *avatara* had following in the Tamil country. *Paripadal* refers to the four *vyuhas* in the following verse¹⁴:

Sengatkari karungan vellai

pon kat pachchai painganma-al

The above verse means, the dark complexioned Vasudeva with red eyes, the white complexioned Baladeva with dark eyes, the green complexioned Pradyumna and the soft eyed Aniruddha respectively.

Pradyumna is generally identified with Kama in the Sangam literature. For Pradyumna specifically, references are almost negligible. In *Kalittogai* and *Paripadal*, Kama is called as 'Mal Magan' which means son of Mal, i.e., Vishnu. Sama, the younger brother of Kama may be identified with Vrishni Vira Samba where he is grouped with other deities such as Balarama, Surya, Kama and Siva.¹⁵ There is no particular reference to five Vrishni Viras as such in Sangam literature as we find in a verse of *Vayu Purana*, but the Vrishni Viras were well

known to them and were also worshipped.

The important evidences of Pancha-Vrishni cult in South India in sculptural art are as follows:

Kondamottu Panel (Pl. 1)

A very important sculptural panel found from Kondamottu in Guntur District of Andhra Pradesh is now housed in the State Museum, Hyderabad.¹⁶ In this panel all the five Vrishni Viras are carved in their proper genealogical order. Carved from left to right is Samkarsana/Balarama holding a mace in the right hand and a ploughshare topped by a lion-face in the left hand. Next to him is Vasudeva-Krishna with his right hand in *abhaya-mudra* and the left hand holding a conch-shell and placed on hip. The next figure is of Narasimha which clearly indicates towards the merger of Sattvat cult with the Pancha Vrishni Vira cult. The next figure is of Pradyumna who holds a bow in his left hand and an arrow in his right hand. To his left is the figure of Samba who holds a wine goblet in his right hand whereas his left hand placed on his waist. The last figure is that of Aniruddha who is holding a sword in his right hand and a shield in his left hand. This sculpture is dated to about late third - early fourth century CE and confirms the popularity of Sattvat as well as Pancha Vrishni Vira cult in Andhra Pradesh by that time.

Tiruvallikkeni Temple, Chennai

This temple popularly known as Partha-Sarathi Temple is situated at Tiruv-Allika-Keni in Chennai city. In its sanctum-sanctorum by the side of main deity Vasudeva-Krishna stand five other stone images (Pl. 2) which are of Rukmini (consort), Samkarsana/Balarama (brother), Pradyumna (son), Aniruddha (grandson) and Satyaki (a kinsmen) which become clear as the officiant pronounces their names while performing the temple rituals. All the images including the chief deity are two-handed, not so tall and not very richly ornamented except for the chief deity. Details of these are not much clear since because of the current practice, these are always dressed up and their photography is strictly prohibited.

Tiruvallikkeni is referred to in the Tamil scriptures of the Vaishnavas known as *Nalayiraprabhandham* by the saints Peyalvar, Tirumalaisai-Alvar and Tirumangai-Alvar.¹⁷ There is no clue to the exact date of actual construction of this temple except for a reference in Tirumangai-Alvar's hymn in *Peritirumozhi* (verse 130)

to a Tondaiyar-kon (Pallava) who is said to have built it.¹⁸ From the stone slab inscription found near the sanctum sanctorum, it is presumed that the present temple was built by the Pallava-malla Dantivarman (CE 770-830) and he may be the king who is mentioned by Tirumangai. According to an inscription of CE 1564 belonging to the period of Vijayanagar ruler Sadasivadeva Maharaya, images of Krishna, Rukmini (Yugamani), Bala (deva), Madana (Pradyumna), Aniruddha (Anuruddhiran) and Satyaki (Sattigai Alvar) were installed in the temple.¹⁹ It should actually be understood as a reinstallation.

Another very significant aspect about this shrine is that it has four other separate shrines dedicated to Varadaraja, Narasimha, Rama and Ranganatha but it is only the shrine of Narasimha which has a separate Flag-staff installed in front of the deity. Now, this feature needs to be looked in relation to the Kondamottu relief described above. There also in the centre the prominent position is occupied by Narasimha and same is the case in Tiruvallikkeni Temple. It suggests that there was a merger of Sattvat cult with the cult of Narasimha (which later on became a very important part of Vaikuntha *murti*) in about early centuries of the Christian era in the Tamil country. This aspect needs to be studied further.

Nachchiyar-Koyil Temple, Kumbhakonam

The other temple where a group of Vrishni Viras is enshrined in the *garbhagraha* is the Vishnu Temple at Tirunaraiyur or Nachchiyar-Koyil, about 10 km distant from Kumbhakonam in Thanjavur district. The temple is believed to have been raised by Koch-chenganan (Red-eyed king)²⁰ who is usually assigned to the period immediately after the close of the Sangam age, i.e., fourth-fifth centuries CE or even slight earlier. The present day temple is a renovated one and is dedicated to the Lord Srinivasa or Venkatesha. It is popular as Nachchiyar-Koyil (the temple of goddess) who is the enshrined consort of Srinivasa. But the images of Srinivasa and his consort are not the only ones set up in the shrine but four more images - those of Balarama, Pradyumna, Aniruddha and Samba are there. This temple differs from Tiruvallikkeni in the inclusion of Samba in the group of Vrishni Viras in place of Satyaki. So, this group in Nachchiyar-Koyil represents more of a family link of Krishna than the Tiruvallikkeni Temple.

Temple at Tiruttangal, Sivaganga

At Tiruttangal, 3 km from Sivaganga in Ramanathapuram district is another group of temples where Vrishni Viras are found to be in worship. On a hillock are three temples and the one at the top is dedicated to Vishnu as Ninra-Narayana. Though this temple was renovated in the thirteenth century, it dates from a very early period as the god of the temple has been sung by the Vaishnava Alvars of seventh-eighth centuries CE. The shrine houses a number of images among whom the pride of the place is assigned to Krishna (Ninra-Narayana) himself. To his right are the images of two of his consorts, one of whom is Jambavati. The line of image breaks, then, to the right and left; on the right are the images of Pradyumna and Garuda. On the left are Usha, Aniruddha and Bhrgu.

At the conclusion of this brief study of Vrishni cult in South India, it can be said with certainty that the cult was widely popular in the region as was the case with the North India. How it spread there, is a matter of further research but it should be believed that it should have been popular by the early centuries of the Christian era since we get a number of references related with some Vrishni heroes. Trade activities and mass movement of people from north to south might be one of the reasons of this cult reaching south. The incorporation of local deities mentioned in Sangam literature in the cult of such prominent deities also requires further research. Whether the Vrishni cult forms some kind of relation with northern Mathura and the southern Mathura (i.e., Madurai) may also be looked at but it is quite interesting to note that there is not a single temple in existence in North India dedicated to Vrishnis while in South India we have three such temples. There must be various missing links in between which would come up to our knowledge with future research and field-work.

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- 7 *Purananuru*, V.56, 1.12; *Silapaddikaram*, V. 1.171.
- 8 *oru kulai yoruvan*, *Paripadal*, V.1, 1.5.
- 9 *Kalittogai*, V.124, 1.3.
- 10 *Kalittogai*, V.105,1.11; *Paripadal*, V.15,1.19.
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Rangarajan and Gupta, Pl.1: Vrishni Vira panel from Kondamottu, State Museum, Andhra Pradesh



Rangarajan and Gupta, Pl. 2: Sculptural panel, Tiruvallikkeni Temple, Chennai



Vysakh, Pl. 1: Cave at Piralimattom