

Origin and Antiquity of Vaishnava Thought and Art in Kashmir

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Kashmir has been a great centre of Buddhist and Brahmanical art and religion in ancient and medieval times. There are historical notices available to establish the view that Buddhism as a religion and faith in Kashmir enjoyed supremacy over other religious creeds and cults, which has already been formed or were in the process of formation. Though Buddhism was the dominant creed, Kashmir had a well-entrenched history of Shaivism, which can be traced back to its hoary past. The popular form of *linga* worship was practiced by the mass of people. It is, therefore, safe to aver that there was a process of interaction going on between Buddhism and Shaivism. Meanwhile new developments were taking place in the field of religion and art in the Indian sub-continent. The Vaishnava cult and credo was emerging with new perspective leaving its deep imprint on inquisitive minds and general mass of people. This cult found its way into Kashmir, which possessed rare intellectual and imaginative genius to assimilate the spirit of the new religious mode of thinking.

The synthesis and assimilation has been the keynote of the Kashmiri culture. There has been a close association between the cult of Nagas and that of Shaiva. The Nagas became Vishnu in the *seshashayi* form, which belongs to water cosmology, and his images are made accordingly. Buddhism, Shaivism and Vaishnavism with their cult resulted in a new mould of religion, ritual, worship and myth-making.

Vaishnavism in Kashmir with its protracted history can be said to reflect a synthesis of various Vaishnava cults. The religious aspect of it included the concept of the Vedic Vishnu, Vishnu in *Pancharatra* School, the religion of Satvatas and finally the religion of Krsna and Rama.

Vaishnavism played a very significant role in socio-religious and artistic expressions of Kashmir. Names of lakes, mountain-peaks and places are evidence enough to establish the well-entrenched presence of Vaishnavism in Kashmir. The Kashmiri contribution to the Vaishnava sculptural art has been peculiar and enormous. There are various facets of Vaishnavism in Kashmir with particular reference to the Vaishnava icons and art. The popularity of Vaishnava thought-process has continued till present days in the form of the local textual, ritualistic and artistic traditions.