

Venkatesha Nava Darshana: Proposing An Inclusive Faith

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Differences of opinion and conflicts between different faiths has been a part and parcel of mankind since time immemorial. During the days of Adi Shankara, Ramanuja, Appayya and Bhaskararaya, people were atleast open to intellectual debates. However, seeing the condition of our planet today with all the bombs and bloodshed, all in the name of religion, nobody is even considering debate an option. Then what is the recipe for world peace?

Inclusivity. Rather than being narrow-minded, embracing other faiths is the solution. History is witness and proof of this fact. Shirdi Sai Baba beautifully blended Islam and Hinduism. Ramana Maharshi quoted the Bible frequently. When Mahaperiyava of Kanchi attained Samadhi, Muslims and Christians thronged alongside Hindus to pay respect to that Highest Soul. Being narrow-minded and exclusive takes us only to graveyards and cremation grounds. Being inclusive is the sole solution in the present age, the Kali Yuga.

So, in search of inclusivity, let us look at the above mentioned examples and their source. Shirdi Sai Baba, by some accounts, had His Guru, or by other accounts was an incarnate of Lord Venkatesha, the Kali Yuga Deivam. Ramana Maharshi was Himself named after this God, Venkata Ramana. Mahaperiyava graced some of His devotees as the God of Tirupati.

Even beyond these facts, the numbers speak for themselves. Which other sacred site, around the world, attracts 60000+ visitors everyday, earning in crores of rupees daily? Each individual hardly gets a few seconds with the Lord; yet this has not stopped thousands of people from visiting from faraway places, climbing the arduous hill by foot, waiting patiently for hours on stretch, undaunted by the crowd, noise and pushing, and getting their 'moment of bliss'. So too, various places all around India and the world too, one sees temples of this Lord consecrated and worshipped.

It is a well known fact that for the few moments in the Lord's shrine in Tirumala, the devotee forgets everything to be asked, every prayer one wanted to place before the Lord, and one simply feels this blissful blank state in the shrine. This itself is often cited as the reason for many people to want to visit Tirumala again and again.

Apart from all this, the rocks of Thirumala tell a legend of their own. The hills, themselves resembling the Lord's face and image, are geologically part of the Eparchean Unconformity, dated to between 1600 and 2100 million years old, such ancient geological features seen elsewhere only in the Canadian Rock Shield. Studies have been made of the flora and fauna species of the hills, to be seen nowhere else on Earth.

Even these numbers are easily eclipsed before a crucial truth. No other deity in no other temple is filled with controversies and claims, by various different sects, each passionately claiming Venkatesha to be their own. All major sects of Hinduism are easily covered here. Vaishnavas, no doubt say Tirumala is the Kali Yuga Vaikuntham. Shaivas say Appayya Dikshitar saw Shiva in Venkatesha, and that the Lord Himself emerged from a Shivalingam in Thiruparkadal is enough evidence for this. Devi Bhagavatham talks about Shakti as Venkateshwari of Thirumala; Mahaperiyava and images of Bhagawathi in Cherpu and Pudukode seem to agree. Peyalwar in

Moondram Thiruvandhadhi, verse 63 describes Venkatesha as a Hari Hara Swaroopa.

Dvaita and Advaita in the various philosophies of Hinduism are not difficult to reconcile either. Venkatesha, in Oppiliappankoil summarizes the Bhagavad Gita in His right hand as the verse “Maam Ekam Sharanam Vraja” of Gita 18:66. Shankara, Ramanuja and Madhvacharya have beautifully interpreted the whole of Bhagavad Gita in the outlooks of both dual and non-dual views, which means that Venkatesha summarizes all these in His hand as well. Appayya Dikshithar composed works in all these outlooks, indicating that while dualist views are the more easily accessible lower reaches of the spiritual mountain, non-dualism is its peak, higher in altitude but considerably more difficult to access, and both are equally necessary for a successful mountaineering trek.

Arunagirinathar dedicated 6 Thiruppugazhs to the Venkata Subramania Murugan, lover of the sacred hills. Modaks are offered in Tirumala viewing Venkatesha as the elephant-faced Lord. The Lord shines with effulgence and splendor when He mounts the seven horse chariot as Surya Narayana in Thirumala. Kapalikas of the dangerous Nallamalla hills say He is Bhairava. Kurubas of the erstwhile Vijayanagara kingdom say He is Birappa Veerabhadra. In Durga Kund of Kashi, there is a temple with twin shrines dedicated to Anjaneya and Venkatesha, calling both, Balaji. In Thirukodikaval, Universal Mother Lalitha Maha Tripurasundari gave Darshan to Alwars as Venkatesha.

The claims do not stop with Hinduism alone. Sheikh Mastan, a Muslim devoutly saw Allah in Venkatesha and offered Him the golden lotuses for Ashtadala Pada Padma Aradhana, a practice carried to this day. The Bukkaraya Sandhi treaty of Mysore kingdom states that Venkatesha is the Arishta Neminatha Tirthankara of Jains. An entire book is written about how Venkatesha resembles and is the Padmapani Avalokiteshwara, the Buddhist ocean of compassion, whose image in the Ajanta caves bears resemblance to the deity in Tirumala. Everyday, the temple of Venkatesha resounds with the chant of Govinda, a name given to the Lord as Krishna by Indra Himself. Mahaperiyava and Prabhupada alike have mentioned children in India often named after Krishna as Krishta, the attractor, and how they resemble Christ, the son of God, as also claimed in the Bhavishya Purana; the tomb of Rozabal in Srinagar, with the footprints showing crucifixion wounds is a testimony to this equivalence of Venkatesha-Govinda-Krishna-Krishta-Christ.

Without an iota of doubt, one can confidently say that no other deity in no other shrine, anywhere in the world has been put to so many claims from so many different faiths. None of these claims has been or can be completely disproved. At the same time, none of these can be completely proved either, to the extent of disproving of other claims. This is to be seen as an unique act of God Himself, something beyond the reach of human reasoning and intellect.

Looking at these claims, the facts and figures, as well as the great 'unifiers of faiths' such as Sai Baba, Ramana and Periyava, one can come to one solid conclusion, which seems very sensible: As per ancient recorded literature, Venkatesha's reason for manifesting on Earth is to grace, bless and give salvation to humanity in the present age of Kali Yuga. So too, in Bhagavad Gita 9:29 the Lord says “I am equally present in all beings; there is none hateful or dear to Me”.

So, if the Lord's word and His reason for manifestation both are true, then Lord Venkatesha must necessarily be venerated among all faiths, not just one. That is, a person of every faith must see reason to celebrate, adore and worship Venkatesha. This is what one sees proved in the myriad

claims of different faiths. There are features in the Lord's appearance, legends, history etc that give room for the rise of these claims, none of which can be completely proved or disproved, but still is passionately celebrated among the respective faiths. It is all the divine play of Lord Venkatesha.

So, one can clearly see that Venkatesha is indeed the point of origin from where inclusive thoughts of broad mindedness emerge in the present Kali Yuga. It is this Divine Light of tolerance and peace that has been carried forward by saints such as Sai Baba, Ramana and Mahaperiyava.

With this truth in mind, I have been impressed to write this article, more as a proposal to humanity, for an inclusive system of faith and spirituality. We name this Venkatesha Nava Darshana, or even simply Nava Darshana, the 'New Outlook'.

As a key basis for the Nava Darshana, centering on Lord Venkatesha, here is a listing of the various categories or Mathas, both within and outside Hinduism, where Venkatesha is viewed as the principal deity of that Matha. References and necessary details supporting each of these is also given. The image highlights all these Mathas, with necessary photos. In the description, the deities with photos are marked with ^ (main photo of the frame) or * (for insets).

I. VAISHNAVAM:

The Venkatesha Sahasranama Stotra praises the Lord as all the ten Avatharas of the Vishnu, and one can see such an image of Venkatesha in Veppancheri^. Among the traditions of Lord Vitthala, another aspect of Vishnu, the temple of Sogane houses the idol of Venkatesha Vitthala*. In 'Tvameva Sharanam', Annamacharya praises Venkatesha as the famous Lord Jagannatha* residing in Venkata hills. In Nachiarkoil, Venkatesha as Srinivasa, does the Pancha Samskara for Thirumangai Alwar, including the Shankha-Chakra Vishnu symbol. The opening lines of Venkatesha Suprabhatham address the Lord as "Kaushalya Suprajaa Raama". The temple of Triplicane enshrines Venkatesha as Venkata Krishna Parthasarathi. There is a tradition of the Sringeri Acharya worshipping Venkatesha as Narasimha, and the Lord roaring from the sanctum as approval. Venkatesha Alankara is also done to the Varaha Narasimha temple in Simhachalam.

II. SHAIIVAM:

The legend of Thiruparkadal near Vellore highlights how Lord Shiva as Doosheshwara Lingam^ transformed into Venkatesha to bless sage Pundarika and complete his Ekadashi austerities. While Venkatesha gave Darshan as Lord Shiva to Appayya Dikshithar, Adi Shankara praises the Lord as Chandramauli, emphasising Shaiva Vaishnava unity. Thirumoolar in Thirumanthiram 232, praises Venkatesha as Shiva along with His mount Nandi. Srikara Bhasya, the principal treatise of Karnataka Veerashaivas praises Veerabhadra as Venkatesha-Vitthalesha. Correspondingly, one can see in the temple of Lepakshi, the deity as Vitthal Birappa, giving Darshan as Veerabhadra*. In Entha Mathramuna, Annamacharya says that the Kapalikas, possibly from Nallamalla hills and Bhairavasela, worship Venkatesha as the Aadi Bhairava*. Apart from this, there is the temple of Siddhishwara in Palamalai near Mettur, visited by Mahaperiyava, where Shiva is worshipped to the chants of Govinda, Govinda. Thus, Archana made of Bilwa leaves, favorite of Lord Shiva, to Tirumala Venkatesha is in summary, not that surprising.

III. SHAAKTHAM:

Devi Bhagavatham praises Shakthi as Venkateshwari of Tirumala. Mahaperiyava too highlights the Goddess aspect of Venkatesha, referring to the turmeric water ablutions on fridays, the saree Alankaras, and the Simha Lalaatam or lion emblem. Images of Shakthi as Bhagavathi Durga in

Cherpu[^], Puduccode Annapoorneshwari and Malayalapuzha Bhagavathi bear exact resemblance to Venkatesha. During Brahmotsavams in Tirumala, Venkatesha rides the Hamsa Vahanam giving Darshan as Goddess Saraswathi*, playing the Veena. In Kolhapur, Alankara is done for Mahalakshmi* as Venkatesha. Finally, there is the legend where Venkatesha, the Govinda Krishna saves Radha from her suspicious relatives by donning the form of Kali, and this Krishna Kali* is popularly worshipped in Vrindavan and Bengal.

IV. SAURAM:

Sandhyavandanam, the oldest extant liturgy containing Gayatri Mantra, the most potent of chants, typically ends with worship of the sun as Surya Narayana. Giving Darshan of this very form, Venkatesha mounts the Suryaprabha Vahanam[^] in Thirumala. As such, Muthuswami Dikshithar praises Surya as “Bharaathisha Hari Hara Athmane” or the form of the Trimoorthis Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva. So too, in the Sarva Bhoopaala Vahanam*, Venkatesha gives Darshan as the protector of the worlds. As such, Venkatesha is venerated as the directional guardians or the eight Dikpaalas, namely the Vedic deities of Indra, Agni, Yama, Niruthi, Varuna, Vaayu, Kubera and Eeshana. Identifying these Vedic deities with Venkatesha also corresponds to identifying the forces of nature as animist and shamanist deities of various belief systems around the world, such as Maori, Roman, Celtic, Egyptian, Mesoamerican etc. Venkatesha is the singular aggregate representation of all the forces of nature worshipped as different deities in different cultures.

V. GAANAPATHYAM:

There is a tradition of offering Modaks to Venkatesha on Ganesha Chaturthi, celebrating the elephant faced God Ganesha. So too, with Venkatesha as Vishnu enshrined in Srirangam, Muthuswami Dikshithar praises the Lord Ranganatha as “Ganapathi Samaana Vishwaksenam”[^] in Ranganayaakam Bhaavaye. Shaiva-Vaishnava Worship and traditions, and even descriptions highlight this oneness of Ganapathi and Vishwaksena. In Shirdi, one finds the temple of Vishnu Heramba Ganapathi*, the elephant faced God, sporting Shankha and Chakra, seated on the serpent Adishesha with Goddess Lakshmi on His lap. Aptly, the Shuklambaradharam chant, at the beginning of every activity highlights this Venkatesha-Vishnu-Ganapathi oneness.

VI. KAUMAARAM:

Arunagirinathar dedicates 6 Thiruppugazhs, from 524-529 to Venkatesha as Subrahmania*, calling Him the “Guha Sendha Mayura Vada Venkata Maa Malaiyil Uraivone”. So too, an image of Lord Murugan was unearthed and consecrated in Valasarawakkam, sporting the Amsas of Skanda and Venkatesha, including the Chakra. The great devotee Kripanandavarya christened the deity Venkata Subrahmanya[^]. Muthuswami Dikshitar sings “Venkatesha Naama Roopena Vichitra Vishakha Mahotsavena” in Subrahmanyena Samrakshithoham.

VII. GURU:

Venkatesha Sahasranamam praises the deity as Trimoorthis, indicating the three faced Dattatreya. So too, as an Avatara of Dattatreya, Shirdi Sai Baba is praised in Sai Ashtottara as “Venkatesha Ramana”[^]. While 500 names each of the Venkatesha Sahasranama are seen to extoll Hari and Hara, Peyalwar in Moondram Thiruvandhadhi verse 63, praises Venkatesha as Hari hara Roopa, leading to representations of Venkatesha as Shaastha*, the Hari Hara Putra. In Sabarimalai, as Ayyappa, Shaastha is venerated as the Guru of Gurus, expounding the philosophical statement “Tattvamasi”. Unsurprisingly, Shaastha is worshipped in Tummagunta as Gurunatha, while Taittiriya Aranyaka 3-11-2 says Shaastha is the Sarva Aatma residing in the hearts of all. Thus, one sees the identity of Venkatesha as Guru, as both Hari-Hara-Brahma Roopa Dattatreya and Hari-Hara Roopa Shaasta.

Further, being an incarnation of Hara, Anjaneya of Sholingur* sports the Shankha Chakra giving Darshan as aspect of Hari, further highlighting the concept. Dattatreya, Sai Baba, Shaastha, Ayyappa and Anjaneya are all seen in the form of Guru, expounding Jnaana and Bhakthi.

VIII. PARABRAHMAM:

Worship of Venkatesha is often done with the chant “Om Sri Srinivasa Parabrahmane Namah”, asserting that the Lord is the Absolute, Formless, Impersonal, Nirguna Parabrahman. So too, while Parabrahman is described in the Upanishads as Existence-Sentience-Bliss or Sat-Chit-Aanandam, Venkatesha's temple in Tirupati is known as Aananda Nilayam*, whereas Oppiliappankoil* is known as Shuddha Aananda Nilayam. Both signify Venkatesha as the very form of pure unalloyed bliss. The tradition of Advaita concerns with transcending the limited, false identification of oneself with the perishable body and mind, and the illusory world, and seeking one's true nature, as the blissful Self or Atman, which is viewed as the Parabrahman itself, establishing one's identity as Venkatesha (Aham Brahmaasmi). This Parabrahman is viewed as Om, the foremost of chants, revered not only in Hinduism, but also by the Sikhs in the Mool Mantra “Ek Onkar”.

IX. SRI VIDYA:

In all of the above mentioned traditions, be it with form (Saguna) or the formless (Nirguna) Parabrahman, the respective deity is seen as the Supreme Absolute Almighty, from which the universe and all creation originated. The origin of all existence, as well as a deity that takes care of and protects devotees: these features place the deity in the light of a Mother, since these are the features of a Mother. Thus, worshipping the Absolute in the form of Mother forms the basis of the esoteric tradition called Sri Vidya, simply translated as the 'Honoured Wisdom'. In Sri Vidya, this Universal Mother is referred to as “Lalitha Maha Tripurasundari” or 'The Playful, Most Beautiful One Transcending the Triple Realm of Wake, Dream and Sleep'. Lalitha, the Parabrahman itself is seen as the Mother of, as well as manifesting as the deities Shiva, Vishnu, Shakthi, Ganesha, Skanda, Surya and Guru. In the temple of Tirukodikaval, one sees that Lalitha Maha Tripurasundari^ gives Darshan as Venkatesha, to Alwars, who were redirected from Tirupati by an Ashareeri or heavenly voice. Consequently, the Universal Mother is seen in Venkatesha's four armed form. Thus, as the Universal Mother of Sri Vidya the honoured tradition, Venkatesha's name “Srinivaasa” simply refers to the residence (Nivaasa) of such honour (Sri), or in other words, the Universal Mother Herself.

X. BAUDDHA:

As Vishnu, one of the foremost names of Venkatesha is Keshava. In Pralaya Payodhi, Jayadeva sings Keshava Dhrutha Buddha Shareera, calling Venkatesha the Shakyamuni Buddha, as does Annamacharya in Dolayam Chala Dolayam and Adi Shankara in Venkatesha Bhujangam. Books written by Sadasivan claims Venkatesha as the Maitreya Buddha, while Jamnadas claims Venkatesha with resemblance to the Padmapani Avalokiteshwara Bodhisattva^ of the Ajanta caves.

XI. JAINA:

The Bukkaraya Sandhi treaty of the Mysore kingdom, describing a compromise between Tirupati and Shravanabelagola, mentions Venkatesha of Tirumala as the 22nd Tirthankara Neminatha*, possessing effulgence of the sun and known as Arishta Nemi, the cousin of Lord Krishna. The fifth canto of Srimad Bhagavatham describes Venkatesha, as Vishnu, incarnate as Rishabha Deva, the first Tirthankara.

XII. MUSLIM:

It is recorded history that the worship of Thirumala Venkatesha using Ashtadala Pada Padma Aradhana was started by a devout Muslim devotee, Sheikh Mastan. In Thiruvattar, there is also the tradition of worshipping Venkatesha as “Thiru Allah” Aadi Keshava* with a 21 day festival started by the Nawab, where the Lord is decorated with the Muslim cap. As Vishnu, Venkatesha is known to have attracted the devotion of Muslim rulers and devotees time and again, as seen with the marriage celebrations of the Lord with Thulukka Nachiar of Srirangam, and also in Ramanujacharya's recovery of the Melkote Cheluva Narayana idol from Delhi.

XIII. CHRISTIAN:

Bhavishya Purana mentions a certain Isa Masiha*, as the Son of God, whose descriptions coincide with Jesus Christ. Mahaperiyava describes the name Yeshua or Jesus or Isa to refer to Eesha or God. Both Mahaperiyava and Prabhupada have mentioned the name Christa to be derived from Krishta, meaning the Attractor, and one of the popular variants of Krishna, who is Govinda Venkatesha Himself. While there are views about Jesus spending His early, learning years in India, there are also references about His attaining Samadhi in Kashmir, particularly the Rozabal tomb of Yuz Asaf in Srinagar. This is established by the fact that the tomb is aligned east-west as per Jewish tradition, rather than the Muslim Qibla orientation, as well as the footprint of Christ showing the wounds of crucifixion in both feet. The fact that Venkatesha the Govinda is indeed Krishta the Attractor is seen easily by the sheer number of people visiting Tirumala everyday.

XIV. JEWISH:

The mystic tradition of Kabbalah in Judaism extols the God Yahweh in an expanded form as ten Sephiroth, representing spiritual principles and emanations of God. This is called the Tree of Life or Etz haChayim, representing creation and life itself. In Tirumala, Venkatesha embodies this concept riding the Tree of Life as the Kalpavriksha Vahanam*.

XV. TAOIST:

Chapter 42 of the Tao Te Ching mentions the manifestation of One from the Dao, Two from the One, Three from the Two and the universe from the Three. The Three spoken of is revered as the Three Pure Ones, also corresponding to the Three Treasures of Shen, Qi and Jing, representing the spiritual, life-force and creative energies respectively, manifesting in that order from subtle to gross. These correspond in principle to the descriptions of Ishwara, Hiranyagarbha and Virat of the Upanishads, and also to the descriptions of Shiva-Shakthi-Vishnu as per Dharma-Dharmin Yoga philosophy followed by Appayya Dikshitar and Bhaskararaya. As per identification of Venkatesha as Shiva (Shen), Shakthi (Qi), Vishnu (Jing) earlier, Venkatesha can thus be identified with the Three Pure Ones. One can see Venkatesha as this triad of Shiva-Shakthi-Vishnu together in the famous image of Meenakshi Kalyanam in Madurai.

From the above listing, one can see that in every belief system, there is reason to worship Venkatesha. In this connection, it is necessary to remember Annamacharya's opening statement in “Entha Mathramuna”: In whatever form, to whatever extent a devotee worships Venkatesha, He happily accepts it, and manifests in that form, to that extent, for the devotee. As per this statement, if we approach Venkatesha with the broad outlook of Nava Darshana embracing all faiths, Venkatesha will no doubt accept the worship and bless us as the Universal God, answering our prayers, granting peace and bliss. This fact precisely establishes the rationale of Nava Darshana.

In conclusion is an attempt to answer the question: What are the characteristics of an adherent of Nava Darshana centering on Venkatesha?

1. One follows whatever system of belief or faith one chooses to, without hesitation.
2. Among all teachings, tenets and philosophy expounded by the faiths, whatever is inclusive, one readily accepts, adores, follows and cherishes.
3. So too, in the followed faiths, one ignores outright, whatever is exclusive, with attempts to downgrade, degrade, alienate or even create a feeling of distinction and inequality between faiths.
4. One understands that Venkatesha indeed is the deity honored by one's faith. Necessary evidences to understand this is seen in the above listing.
5. One also understands that Venkatesha indeed is the deity honored by the other faiths too. All worship the same deity, but in different ways. Understanding this removes all unfavorable feelings towards other religions and faiths.
6. Venkatesha is the God of the present times, is therefore a Tech-savvy God, who is reported to grace and bless devotees even through statues, photos, wallpapers, digital media etc. Thus, one's own home can become a sacred place of worship even with a simple photo, statue of Venkatesha or even with Calligraphy of His name and constantly remembering and chanting His name.
7. It is important to remember the essence of the concept of Venkatesha. In Oppiliappankoil, one sees written in His right lower hand "Maam Ekam Sharanam Vraja". The concept of Sharanam or surrender is one common to all faiths. Bhagavad Gita 3:27 states that all actions are performed only by the Divine Will; only an ignorant fool thinks he is the doer. The Lord's Prayer in Christianity says "Thy Will be done". Muslims exclaim "Insha Allah" and "Masha Allah", referring to God's Will. The key understanding here is that everything that is happening is by God's Will alone; man has absolutely no say in it and is just an instrument of God. Understanding this leads to complete surrender to Venkatesha, accepting either the performance or non-performance of any action as His Will alone. If this is achieved, Dharma or rules, dos and donts cease to have any meaning, since whatever He does through us is the real Dharma. Thus understood, one becomes peaceful, content and ceases to have any wants or Sankalpas, since these do not affect God's Will anyway.
8. It must be understood beyond doubt that everything the Lord performs through us has one and only one motive – spiritual progress leading to our salvation. An ideal way to view this is seeing Venkatesha as the Mother, who gave birth to us, now is separated from us since we are in Earth, and is eagerly trying to get us out of Earth and back into union with Her, forever. This understanding removes all worries from us completely, since we understand that Venkatesha, our Mother will definitely out of eagerness do everything possible for us to spiritually progress. Understanding this, one becomes blissful, and free from worries. This is the essence of the Lord saying Maa Shuchah in Gita 18:66.

Thus, these are the characteristics of a Venkatesha Nava Darshana adherent, which is followed with diligence, sincerity, integrity and firm faith. The following image illustrates the Nava Darshana images of Venkatesha marked earlier with ^ and *. The panels correspond to Vaishnavam, Shaaktham, Shaivism, Bauddha/Jaina/Islam/Christian/Tao/Jewish, Parabrahmam/SriVidya, Sauram, Ganapathyam, Guru and Kaumaram.

