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## THE BHAKTI TRADITION IN HINDUISM BHAKTI YOGA AN OVERVIEW

### I. Introduction

Yoga is one of the six orthodox (Āsthika) systems of *philosophy* (darśana) in the Indian tradition. Patanjali, the author of the philosophical text, "Yoga Sūtra" details the philosophical approach to the problems of religious experience. The central point dealt with and emphasised in the last chapter (fourth) of his work is that the individual self (Ātman, and not just the psychological Ego) attaining "release" from the "bondage" and reaching Brahman, the Absolute Reality. This is the religious goal set in Sānatana dharma (Hinduism).

This is mentioned here, even at the start, only to show that even in what is called Yoga (which in popular understanding, stands for physical and psychological development, health etc.), the emphasis really is on the *religious goal* of redemption and release. Not only the system of Yoga, the other five systems of philosophy also have this objective clearly before them. They give the *logical structure* to this defined goal to be reached by the individual.

This is with reference to the *philosophical texts* and the systems that explain the position regarding the spiritual goal of man. When we come to the specially *religious* scriptures, we find that they all emphasise the ways (Mārga) of reaching the goal of spiritual realisation. They also speak of the yoga but as mārga (means, or method, or way) of reaching the religious goal. Yoga here includes the philosophical analysis found in the 'systems' but goes further in guiding man along to reach his spiritual goal. This has to be clearly understood by the student of Hinduism in order to avoid confusion of theory with practice. Theory certainly helps practice but is not the same as practice.

## II. The Four Yogas (Mārga)

Four yogas, known as karma yoga, bhakti yoga, raja yoga and jñāna yoga, are religious methods. Although these four yogas are prescribed to be adopted by the seeker according to his individual nature, propensities, psychological traits, training and abilities, there came a time in the long history of religious practices in India, when Bhakti yoga (yoga of devotion) came to be adopted on a large scale as a symbol of religious realisation. This was because of several factors. Some of the important ones are :

- 1) The difficulty of the ordinary person to acquire *jñāna*-higher wisdom-which comes only from deep learning and mastery of the various scriptures (and these are many and highly technical in content).
- 2) The difficult and arduous nature of psychic control etc., prescribed in Raja yoga.
- 3) Even in Karma yoga where you are asked to do service, it is devotion (bhakti) that gives meaning and significance to the service (*Svetesvara Upaniṣad* 4, 3 ; *Bhagavad Gita*, 1, 5, 12).
- 4) The desire of many earnest seekers of God-realisation to avoid *dry reasoning* and satisfy the emotions of love, affection and sympathy in their religious life.
- 5) The feeling of surrender to a higher authority, in this case, to the Infinite Spirit, is a *satisfying experience* to most.

While all these general factors go to emphasise the universal acceptance of *Bhakti marga* or the path of spiritual devotion to the Supreme, special factors, social and historical, also play their part in making this religious path universally popular. This also has to be kept in mind in assessing the popularity of the Bhakti movement in the religious life of a whole people. In any age marked by restlessness of spirit, mind and body, the need of Bhakti yoga to help man find his real spiritual base and realise his true nature by seeking direct communion with the Infinite Spirit is clear. There cannot be a greater, simpler, more universal religious discipline than Bhakti for this.

Bhakti denotes the intense spiritual longing on the part of the individual soul for union with the Divine. This is really a mode of self-realisa-

tion. And this is true equally for a philosophy of Monism which regards the Ultimate Reality as One only and a philosophy of Dualism which regards the human soul to be as real as the Infinite. In the Monistic system Bhakti symbolises the intense aspiration of the soul (Sādhaka) to realise his *true nature* which is spiritual and divine and be one with the Infinite. In a dualistic system, Bhakti involves the gradual progress towards communion with God, the Infinite Reality.

### III. Evolution of the Concept of Bhakti in the Indian Tradition

In the light of the above, it will be useful to trace the evolution of the concept of Bhakti. The Ṛg Veda hymns, as is well-known, are merely songs of prayer. These prayers cannot be the same as, what has come to be regarded as Bhakti marga, a *special way* of approach of man to God. Of course, we can find elements of faith, dedication etc, in these hymns. In that sense, we may say, in a *general way*, that these hymns are also expressions of bhakti.<sup>1</sup> But a general expression of the love of God cannot be properly equated with the *specific devotional* path of bhakti. This will become clear when we see the various stages of bhakti and kinds of bhakti clearly mentioned by the later saints and Āchāryas. As Prof. M. Hiriyanna puts it, "bhakti connotes turning to God for protection, *completely surrendering oneself* to His will. This is complete self-surrender."<sup>2</sup> (italics ours). At the most, we may say that the *upāsana* mentioned in several sections of the Upaniṣads contain the rudiments of the later day concept of bhakti yoga. Dr. Radhakrishnan, on the other hand, suggests, that, 'Bhakti is a direct development of the *upāsana* of the Upaniṣads.'<sup>3</sup>

#### (i) The Bhāgavata Religion and Vaiṣṇavism

Along with the spread of Jainism and Buddhism round about the region of Magadha, the Bhakti cult spread as a theistic system (within the general Hindu religion) round about the Mathura region in the West of India. It assumed the name of Bhāgavada religion, developing the idea of a Supreme God, devotion to whom was the sole means of

1. E.W. Hopkins, *Ethics of India*, p. 8. Also S. Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy*, Vol. I. p. 108.

2. Hiriyanna. *Essentials of Indian Philosophy*, p. 26.

3. Radhakrishnan, *op. cit.*, p. 525.

salvation. The worship of Vāsudeva was enjoined by this system. It is this Vāsudeva cult that formed the basis of the development of Vaiṣṇavism as a distinctive school of bhakti. The identification of Vāsudeva with Sri Kriṣṇa later became the dominant feature of this bhakti movement. This may be designated as "Bhāgavatism" developing into "Vaiṣṇavism".

There is inscriptional evidence for the spread of Bhāgavatam in Northern India before the Christian era and for its entry into Deccan and further South about the first century B.C. Entering the Tamil country in the early centuries of the Christian era, these influenced the devotional songs of the Ālvārs. The revival of the Bhakti movement in the Tamil country was essentially the work of the Ālvārs in the Vaiṣṇava tradition. The bhakti movement was also developed in the Śaivite tradition in the Tamil country by the Nāyanmārs (which we will discuss below). "The Ālvār is one who has gone deep in the knowledge of God; one who is immersed in the contemplation of Him."<sup>4</sup>

Tradition gives the name of twelve Ālvārs. Tirumalai Ālvār, Tondaradipody Ālvār, Tirumangai Ālvār and Nammālvār were some of the greatest exponents of this bhakti cult. "They yielded themselves fully to the ecstatic raptures that came in their senses through the action of song and symbol. They saw God in everything and under the most intimate terms known to human relationship, they sought to express the passionate hunger of the heart for Him. The soul cannot find rest until it finds God."<sup>5</sup>

The early Ālvārs (called Mudal Ālvārs) Bhudatt Ālvār, Pey-Ālvār and Poygai Ālvār are placed in about the seventh century A.D. Tiruppan, Tirumalasai, Tirumangai, Kulasekhara, Tondaradipody Ālvār, Periya Ālvār, Āndāl or Godā Devi belong to the seventh and eighth centuries, Nammālvār, the greatest of the Ālvārs and his pupil, Madhurakavi belong to the ninth and tenth centuries. Their works like *Nānmugan Tiruvandādi*, *Tiruvāymoḷi* etc., constitute what is called Drāviḍa Veda or Tamil Veda.

Writing about Nammālvār, Swami Govindāchārya points out, "Nammālvār says that he is overcome by bhakti-exaltation, trembling in

4. J.S.M. Hooper, *Hymns of Ālvārs*, p. 11.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 21.

every cell of his being, and he must freely and passively allow this influence to penetrate his being, and carry him beyond all known states of consciousness. Never from fear or shame, that by-standers may take him for a madman, ought the exhibition of this bhakti-rapture, that deluges his being, to be suppressed. The very madness is the distinguishing character of the enraptured saint, distinguishing from the ordinary mortals to whom such beatific experience is necessarily denied. The very madness is the bhakta's pride.<sup>6</sup>

Kulasekhara Ālvār, who was king of the Travancore state in South India, sings a *sloka* which reads:

I have no ambition either for the acquisition of merit (dharma) or for wealth, nor for the enjoyment of this world or the other. I would let things take their own course shaped by my previous deeds. I would only make one prayer and that is, that whatever may be the number of my births to come, in all of these my devotion to the feet of God may remain unchanged and firm.<sup>7</sup>

As mentioned earlier, this bhakti cult in the Tamil country was not represented by the Vaiṣṇava tradition only. The other prevalent Śaiva tradition also had several well-known leaders, saints and sages called Nāyanmārs. Sekkilar, who lived about the eleventh century A.D. is the author of *Periyapurāṇam*, which gives the life-history of a group of 63 Nāyanmārs. They were worshippers of Śiva as their Deity. The age represented a period in South India of rivalry between Buddhism, Jainism and Śaivism. The struggle against the two "Godless" systems of Buddhism and Jainism was carried on by the Śaivites. The four Nāyanmārs in the lead were Thiru Gnānasambandar, (640-658 A.D.). Appar, his contemporary, Sundarar and Manikkavāsagar. A well-known woman-saint in the Saivite tradition was Karaikal Ammai whose life was a complete devotion to Lord Śiva. She is supposed to have lived a century or two earlier than the saints, Appar, Sundarar and Sambandar. Her devotional songs running into 143 quatrains are "the warmest outpourings of a peaceful and joyous heart." It is called the *Elder Liturgy* as different from the Younger Liturgy of Appar, Sundarar and Sambandar. In the *Garland of twin gems*, Ammai addresses her own heart: "Do not wait

6. Govindācharya, *Divine Wisdom of Dravida Saints*, p. iii.

7. S.K. Iyengar, *Some Contributions etc.*, pp. 273-74.

till the last day. O, my dear heart, when your life ebbs out think of the Lord even now, utter His name incessantly. Think of Him as your only refuge."

In Karnataka also, Bhāsavēsvara of the twelfth century A.D., led this bhakti movement. Unswerving devotion to Śiva was the heart and soul of this saint and his new faith is known as *Virasaivism* or *Lingāyatism*. Though he was learned in Sanskrit, Bāsavesvara did all his preaching in Kannada language. He was able to introduce on a large scale a new and effective idiom of expression known as *vacana*. These are concise, poetic and meaningful compositions in prose, conveying high thoughts in simple words.

Sri Ramānuja preceded Bāsavesvara in the eleventh century A.D. and was the founder of the Viśiṣṭādvaita philosophy. He and his successors also came into contact with Karnataka and contributed greatly to the Bhakti movement greatly in the vaiṣṇava tradition.

The last phase of the movement in Karnataka was the Bhakti movement of the Haridāsa. Originating with Madhvācārya, the Dvaita philosopher, it reached its culmination in the sixteenth century A.D. and has survived to this day. Like the followers of Bāsavesvara, who were devotees of Śiva or Hara, Haridasas were the firm votaries of Hari or Viṣṇu. They surrendered themselves completely to Hari. The word, dās in their designation implies implicit faith in and whole-hearted submission to the will of the Master. This movement aimed at cultivating in the hearts of men pure devotion and abiding faith in Hari. The philosophy underlying the Haridās movement was that of Madhvācārya. Kirtans and verses in Kannada were widely popularised by this school. In popularising this tradition, three direct disciples of Madhvācārya played a leading part. They were Narahari-tīrtha, Sri-pādarsy (15th century A.D.) and Vyāsa-tīrtha (16th century A.D.). In the hands of Purandara Dāsa (1484-1565 A.D.) and his successors in the sixteenth century A.D., the movement "assumed splendour, attaining the apex of influence and popularity."<sup>8</sup> Singing their soul-stirring rhapsodies, they went from place to place kindling the lamp of devotion. Purandara Dāsa has left a voluminous devotional literature. His songs end with dedication to God Viṭṭala. Here is a sample :

8. P.B. Desai, "Bhakti cult in Karnataka"—*Bhakti cult and Ancient Indian Geography*, Ed. D.C. Sircar, (University of Calcutta), pp. 98-99.

The world moveth when Hari moves  
The world speaketh when Hari speaks  
The world seeth when Hari sees  
The world breatheth when Hari breathes  
Hari alone is the All-doer, O purandara Viṭṭala  
Regard everything you do as service to Sri-Hari  
There is no place where he is not . .

In the Kerala region of India also we find the spread of the bhakti cult, both in the Śaivite and Vaiṣṇavite tradition. Of the sixty-three Śaiva Nāyanmārs' Viran Miṅṭṭan and Cheraman Perumāḷ were from Kerala. Both of them were contemporaries of Sundaramūrti of Tamil Nadu and were his friends. The Vaiṣṇava saint, Kulaskhara Ālvār (767-834 A.D.) was a Prince. He abdicated the throne and settled down in the Pāndya country (new Tamil Nadu). His *Mukundamāla* in Sanskrit continues to be recited daily in several Hindu homes in India.

It is clear that the Nāyanmārs and the Ālvārs flooded the country with their devotional hymns, crossing the barriers of caste. The Vaiṣṇavite tradition of the bhakti cult spread in Mahārāṣṭra, Rājasthān, Bengal and several regions of North India. Jīva Gosvāmi, Mīra bhāi, Nāmdev, Tukkāram, Rāmdās, Badānand Sarasvatī are names that shine in the history of the bhakti movement in this part of the country.

No history of the bhakti movement in India will be complete without considering the brief but considerable impetus given to it by Śri Ramakrishna (1836-1886), the saint of modern India.<sup>9</sup> He practised and preached a gentle faith of selfless devotion to God and ultimate absorption into His grace. "He personified the rebirth of an ancient tradition in the midst of an era of increasing westernisation and modernization".<sup>10</sup> In his life he typified the wide-ranging different aspects of bhakti mārga and represented the spirit of Indian renaissance in the 19th century. His life and teachings became known to all-India and the world, at large. Sri Ramakrishna showed in his life and taught to his famous disciple, Vivekananda (and through him to the world)

9. N. Hay, "Sri Ramakrishna - Mystic and Spiritual Teacher" - *Readings in Cultural Heritage of India*, Sixth edition, (Rajendra Prasad Institute of Communication and Management, Bombay) p. 111.

10. D. Raghavan, "The Indian Renaissance", *Ibid*, p. 109.

how "the love that worshipped finds the object of its worship embracing it and feels itself merging into complete unity with its Beloved."

(ii) *The Merits of Bhakti*

Bhakti, as we saw, is a discipline that teaches us how to have *direct* communion with the Divine. It is pointed out by some spiritual teachers, that even in bhakti, the easiest form is *Nāma japa* - repetition of the name of God with devotion, sincerity and concentration. But it is also interesting to note that the Bhakti cult in this country has been developed with such detailed analysis of the nature of bhakti, the emotions involved, the varieties of expression of bhakti, the classes of devotees etc., that whole volumes of literature with details have sprung up regarding this mārga.

To give just *two* examples:

(1) Devotion can be of four kinds: *dāśya*, *vatsala*, *sakhyā*, and *kāntā*. The first is to approach God as His *servant*. The second is to approach Him as a *relation*, the third is to approach Him and worship Him as a *friend*. The fourth is to approach Him as a Beloved one.

In *dāśya mārga*, the devotee regards himself as the devoted servant of God. He constantly reflects on this relation and finds joy in serving Him. In *sakhyā mārga*, God is pictured as a close friend of the devotee. "Those who are tranquil, equal and pure, who have good will for all creatures, and who look upon God as their dear friend, quickly attain to his spiritual abode." (*Bhāgavata Purāṇa* x, 14, 32).

(2) Single-minded devotees are of two kinds. (A) those who have already acquired intense love for God: It is their supreme good and (B) those who have *not* yet acquired the full love of God. Among the first are those who fancy that they are comrades of God, always in His holy company. The second pray for the vision of God, his appearance and His benediction.

It is clear that the powerful bhakti movements spread in the North and in the South of India under the inspiration of the Bhāgavathās in the North and the Ālvārs and Nāyanmārs in the South. In the second millenium A.D., we see the formal development of the tenets



of the Bhakti movement by Ramanuja, Ramananda, Chaitanya, Sūradasa, Tulsidāṣa, Sankaradeva and Mādhavadeva in Assam, Janānadeva and Tūkkarāma in Maharaṣṭra, Narsi Mehta in Gujarat, Mirābai in Rajasthan and the other Saiva saints (already mentioned) in South India.

Special mention is necessary about the Chaitanya school of bhakti propounded by his saintly disciples, Sanātana Gosvāmin, and Rūpa Gosvāmin who developed a śāstra out of a deeper analysis of human feelings and sentiments.<sup>11</sup> Bhakti was accepted as one of the main *rasas* in Aesthetics—the bhakti rasa. The complete self-surrender at the feet of the Divine Master was treated as a characteristic *rasa*. It was the inspiration of several lyrics like these of Jayadeva, Vidyāpati and Mīrabāi and their appeal is full of sweetness and fragrance for all time. Especially the Rajasthanī lyrics of Mīrabāi are rare effusions in the field of bhakti.<sup>12</sup>

All those who have followed the path of bhakti in the long history of its tradition in India, have given expression to their beatific experience, while admitting, at the same time, that the *full expression* of this experience is not possible. It is an insight, an inner experience, a vision of the Infinite Spirit. Short of this vision and the consequent transformation, they feel, nothing can be the real goal of a being like man.

And all the bhaktas in this land point out either directly or indirectly that the philosophical questions about the nature of the Deity, the world, man etc, however relevant in their own way, do not make any difference to their attitude to the Infinite Spirit. Whether the Ātman rid of the ego, is *identical with* the Supreme Spirit, Brahman (Sankara's position) or Brahman is *immanent* in Ātman and the universe (Ramanuja's position) or Brahman is *totally different* from Ātman (Madhva's position) is not quite relevant to them, their quest, their fulfilment.

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11. Annie Besant, "Hinduism", *Ibid.* p. 137.

12. V.S. Agrawala, "Bhakti cult in Ancient India", *Bhakti Cult and Ancient Indian Geography, op. cit.* p. 23.