

The Pivotal Role of *Bhakti* in Indian World Views

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Bhakti is a remarkable existential tendency that shows itself in the rich expanse of the tradition originating from the Vedas. Recognized as a prize possession of the religions, philosophies, and culture of India, it has often won fascination and admiration from students of Eastern heritage. However, its nature, role, and history remain misunderstood and have not received all the attention they deserve.¹ Its role as a gatherer of life, love, thought, and the divine is missed in its partial characterizations as "Hindu devotion" or "divine love" or "theism implicit in polytheism." Its status as a perennial thematic concept of the Indian civilization is missed when its pervasiveness is overlooked by the cultural historians preoccupied primarily with its periodic eruptions. Furthermore, the philosophical role of *bhakti* is missed when it is deemed as an alternative to *jnana* (knowledge) rather than "the living of *jnana*."

The aim of this short essay is to reassess the central role of *bhakti* in an exploration of its nature that hides itself in and provides substance to the historical unfolding of the Indian tradition. I propose that the idea of *bhakti* originated in distant antiquity and is present in the earliest hymns of the *Vedas*, and that, in showing itself in various forms and in various periods, it has moved the Eastern mind ever since.

A thoughtful study of the historical expressions of *bhakti* reveals its existential role. In the following assessment, I propose to show how *bhakti* has enabled the existential aspects of life, love, thought, and the divine to abide in the vicinity of each other, and how it has

1. M. Dhavamony, in the introduction to his valuable work *Love of God According to Saiva Siddhanta*, points toward the poor treatment of *bhakti* to date at the hands of Indologists and the scholars of religions, both Western and Indian. The role of *bhakti* remains even more misunderstood due to the fact that it has been narrowly viewed as a merely religious phenomenon. Its larger function as a distinct existential orientation manifesting itself in the philosophical, aesthetic, literary, cultural, and religious life of a historical people has mostly been missed.

been saving its practitioners from the pitfalls of their distancing from each other. *bhakti* was meant to raise the quality of the present existence rather than help in the pursuit of well-defined religious objectives. What the absence of *bhakti* brings to a lackluster existence essentially aroused dread. At the same time, it is due to their commitment to *bhakti* that Indian philosophies often earn the name of living philosophies.

The verbal root of the term *bhakti* lies in Sanskrit "*bhaj*," which means "to share," "to partake," "to resort," and "to participate."² Since sharing with persons indicates a communion, "*bhaj*" was used in the sense of love, and with respect to various aspects of love, such as to possess, to enjoy, to prefer, to adore, to worship, to commit oneself, and to be loyal, *bhakti*, then, etymologically conveys the sense of participation and sharing. In the classics of Sanskrit literature composed from the fifth century onwards, derivatives of *bhaj* are used to speak about both secular and religious love, about the relationship between parents and children, between man and woman, about reverence toward a guru, worship of the gods, man's love of God, and God's love of man. The synonyms of *bhakti* are all synonyms of *prema* (love) such as *priti*, *sneha*, *anuraga*, and *anurakti*.³

The *Rig Veda*, regarded as the most ancient composition among the body of Sanskrit literature, is an important source of information about the religion and culture of the Vedic Aryan peoples between 2000 and 500 B.C. It contains numerous hymns addressed to several gods, often personifications of the powers of nature or clan gods. If *bhakti* is an attitude of love, devotion, friendship, and reverence, it is certainly present in these human outpourings of communion with the divine. Homage is paid to, mercy is sought from, and power is recognized of major gods such as Varuna, Agni, Indra, and several minor deities. Scholars of Indology have described man's attempt to measure himself with the divine in the *Rig Veda* as polytheism, pantheism, or "henotheism" – in Max Müller's words, "the belief in individual gods alternately regarded as the highest."⁴ Although the term *Bhakti* is not to be found in the *Rig Veda* hymns, the root word *bhaj* is present.⁵ The essential tendencies of *bhakti*, such as recognition of God's charity, friendliness

2. For a comprehensive etymological and semantic analysis, see M. Dhavamony, *Love of God*, 11–44.

3. *Ibid.*, 20.

4. F. Max Müller, *The Six Systems of Indian Philosophy*, 40.

5. *Rig Veda*, 1–156–3; 8–32–14; 9–113–14; 9–113–2, 3; 10–151–2, 3, 7.

and deep involvement in human affairs, as well as man's self-surrendering prayer (*nivedana*), symbolic offerings (*archana*), and sweet recollections of God's goodness (*smarna*) are all evident.⁶ Elements such as wonder, grace, confession, and repentance are there, as is the recognition of the lawfulness of nature in that precursor of the concept of *karma*, the notion of *rta* (moral order). It is noteworthy that in the earliest hymns, the god Varuna is called the controller of the *rta*.⁷ The notion of *sraddhâ* (faith), the companion concept of *bhakti*, which is a religious prerequisite of all forms of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism, is certainly present in the hymns, and the term itself is used many times.⁸ Nicole Macnicol agrees with scholars like R. G. Blandarkar and E. W. Hopkins, who believe that loving devotion is already present in the *Rig Veda*, when he says: "If we place together into one pattern these fragments of many-hued intuition we may be able to realize how near they approach to the theistic conceptions of today."⁹ However, Dhavamony, who is obviously applying the model of later Shaivistic *bhakti* of South India (beginning in the sixth century A.D.), concludes: "*Rig Vedic* worshipper is yet a seeker of gods, a pious devotee, a friend of gods, god-praising. But this love of God is not at all the later Hindu Bhakti."¹⁰

We must, however, take *bhakti* in the larger sense, not overlooking its existential roles. What is most interesting is that the devotee of the *Rig Veda* constantly addresses gods as father, mother, brother, relation, and honored guest, and invokes God's friendship (*Sakhya*). This means that religious love was being measured by secular love, or that no distinction was made between *prema* (love) and *bhakti*. The relation with the divine was one of love and love's attendant expectations, offerings, and involvements. The divine was perceived as dwelling in the vicinity, not far removed either from individuals themselves or from their world. This is indicative of one of the chief roles of *bhakti*; it personalizes the deity, it does not shy away from authentic anthropomorphism. Life lovingly relates to and holds onto the divine.

For the sake of brevity we must pass over the age of the compo-

6. *Rig Veda*, 5-51-15, 10-151-5, 8-92-19, 8-102-15.

7. *Rig Veda*, 1-25-1, 2.

8. *Rig Veda*, 8-32-14, 9-113-2, 9-113-4, 10-151-2, 3, 7. See K. L. Sheshagiri Rao, *The Concept of Sraddha*, 190.

9. Nicole Macnicol, *Indian Theism*, 9.

10. M. Dhavamony, *Love of God*, 55.

sition of the *Aranayankas* and *Brâhmanas*, the appendages to the *Rig* and *Yahur Vedas*, in which *bhakti* does seem to concede ground to ritualism, yet manifests itself in the sections devoted to *upasana* (nearing of oneself to the deity) in the *Aranayankas* and especially in the *Satapatha Brâhmana*. The next era, that of the *Upanishads* (700–300 B.C.), is an age of speculation. Here, the basic existential questions are spelled out and pursued with a vigor and originality that not only set into motion various philosophical traditions, but resulted in the birth of two great religions, Buddhism and Jainism. The intellectual climate of the times is best described by T. R. V. Murti,¹¹ who maintains that both the *âtman* (soul) and *un-âtman* (non-soul) traditions were in full swing in this age. The nature of the divine, the meaning of life, the worthy objects of thought, the outlining of ethics in consistency with the ontological conclusions, were all being sought after and spelled out. It was in this age that the composition of the epics *Mahâbhârata* and *Râmâyana* had begun. *Bhakti* blossoms a second time and appears in many forms in the central Vedic tradition as well as in the heterodox traditions of Buddhism and Jainism, performing its existential and ontological roles. The theistic cults of Pâncâtârâta and Bhâgavatas were in vogue, resisting the impersonalization of *Brahman* (the absolute) and revealing the splendor of personal devotion to a personal deity. What is remarkable is that *bhakti* penetrates all speculative and spiritual endeavors of the age.

Along with the attempts to establish ontologies based on the insights of the “know thy *âtman*,” we may glean a gradual progression of monotheistic tendencies in the Vedic tradition. In the numerous references to *Purusa* in the *Rig Veda*, a concept of supreme reality began to emerge which, by the time of the composition of the *Upanishads*, is recognized as a supreme deity. Vishnu emerges as the dominant god, as his supposed incarnations, Narayana and Vâsudeva, the deities of the Pâncharâtra and the Bhâgavata cults, are adored. We read in *Mahâbhârata* that Shiva, too, received the highest devotion. Vâsudevism seems to be the largest and most popular religion of the age, for the fourth-century B.C. Greek traveler Megasthenes alludes to the worship of Heracles or Hari, a name for Vâsudeva. There are some inscriptions as old as the second century B.C. set up by devotees of Bhagavant Vâsudeva, most notably one by a certain Heliodoros, a Greek ambassador who describes himself as a *bhâgavata*, or devotee of the

11. T. R. V. Murti, *The Central Philosophy of Buddhism*, 10.

Bhagavant. Panini, the fifth-century B.C. Sanskrit grammarian also refers to the term *Vâsudevaka*, explained by his second-century B.C. commentator Patanjali as "the follower of the Vâsudeva, the god of gods." The deity Vâsudeva was later amalgamated with that of Krishna.¹² The terms *Bhâgavat* and *Bhagavant*, which share the root *bhaj* with *bhakti*, were especially reserved for the most superior deities. It is interesting to notice that the incarnated Lord that appear in the *Bhagavad Gita* as well as the Buddha and Mahavira, were addressed as *Bhagavant* (the Blessed one, the grand dispenser or *Vibhakta*) by their respective followers.

Thus, we notice that as the Buddha was sharing his existential insight with mankind, as Mahavira was suggesting ways to men to rid themselves of the mountain of *karma* (deeds), and as the philosophical minds were busy with the fundamental questionings and expositions of the *Upanishads*, the innocents were finding their solace by the way of *bhakti*. What is remarkable is that *bhakti* flourished underneath and as part of these three streams and never as an alternative to them. It penetrates them all. It seems that the Buddhists, Jains, and the Upanishadic thinkers had all made up their minds to retain what they regarded as indispensable in the *bhâgavata* faith.

The impress of *bhakti* on the *Upanishads* is evident in the panorama of their questions concerning the absolute and concerning the actual liberation of man. *Bhakti* not only enriches the notion of *jnana*, but also appears as a visible conviction of the Upanishadic seers that a purely intellectual solution to the mystery of Being remains ineffective in securing the goal of actual liberation. The quest for *Brahman* was not a purely metaphysical one, but the pleadings were for liberation from all existential bondage:

From the unreal [*asat*] lead me to the real [*sat*]
From darkness lead me to light;
From death lead me to immortality.¹³

The *Upanishads* contain a rich variety of speculations concerning the absolute and the innermost self of all beings and human beings. The explication of the *Brahman-âtman* equation from manifold point of departure seems to be a central aim in these treatises. However, the relevance of such a pursuit of knowledge (*jnana*) to

12. R. G. Bhandarkar, *Vaisnavism, Saivism and Minor Religious Systems*, 2-14.

13. *Brahadaranyaka Upanishad*, 1-3-28. See R. E. Hume's translation, *The Thirteen Principal Upanishads*. Hume's translations have been slightly revised for use in this and the following three quotes.

life is concomitantly explored, so that knowledge is at once an achievement, a reward, a realization, and authentic living. The futility of metaphysics for the sake of metaphysics is repeatedly exposed and the pitfalls of arid intellectualism outlined. At the same time, the limitations of the endeavors of human intelligence (*prajna*) and the necessity of grace (*prasada*) are recognized. The man-Being relationship is reciprocal, and manipulations of man must cease at some point and await the Being's intimations that appear in thought and instantly have their bearing on life. The following passages from the *Katha Upanishad* say it all:

This *Atman* is not to be obtained by instruction
Nor by intellect, nor by much learning
It is to be obtained only by the one whom It chooses;
To such a one *Atman* reveals Its own person,
Not he who has not ceased from bad conduct,
Not he who is not tranquil, not he who is not composed,
Not he who is not of peaceful mind
Can obtain It by intelligence (*prajna*).¹⁴

These passages seem to echo Socrates's assertion that only the adept in the practice of death, i.e., those who prefer the soul's satisfactions to bodily ones, those who constantly and willingly undergo death of worldliness or body, are true philosophers.

The role of the guru, an accomplished teacher who teaches by the example of his own living, had begun to be recognized in the *Upanishads*:

Not, when proclaimed by an inferior man, is It [*Atman*]
To be well understood, [though] manifoldly expressed,
Unless declared by another [i.e., the guru], there is no going thither.¹⁵

One of the functions of *bhakti* has always been to existentialize metaphysical insights, to translate into the lived world experience an abstract relationship. Holiness is to be recognized as realizable, as evident in the person of the guru. *Guru-bhakti* as well as an explicit theism emerge in the last passage of the *Svetâsvatâra Upanishad*, the passage that contains the first usage in Vedic literature of the term *bhakti* in the devotional sense:

To one who has the *Bhakti* for his god [*deva*]
And for his teacher [guru] even as for god,
To him these matters ... become manifest.¹⁶

14. *Katha Upanishad*, 2–23.

15. *Kena Upanishad*, 2–28.

16. *Svetâsvatâra-Upanishad*, 6–23.

In his commentary, Sankara explains that without the guru's grace, knowledge of the absolute is very rarely possible¹⁷ (*Gurukrpa vihaye brahmvidya durlabhati*). Thus, *jnana* was kept closely allied to life, and the value of a spiritual interpersonal *bhakti* between the seeker and his guru was acknowledged in the *Upanishads*.

Bhagavad aita is the first explicit affirmation of theism in Vedic thought. It is at the same time a summary of the insights obtained hitherto by the Vedic and Upanishadic philosophical quest. It fuses into a meaningful synthesis the Vedic cult of sacrifice (*yajna*), the Upanishadic speculation about the *Brahman-âtman* equation, the theism of the Bhâgavata cult, and the Samkhya and Yoga systems. *Bhakti* is not only given a new legitimacy, it pervades the whole theistic insight of the *Gita*. Dhavamony informs us that in all the 43 cases of the usage of the root *bhaj*, it is nowhere employed in the sense of secular love, sexual or asexual.¹⁸ That means that *Bhakti* in the *Gita* means strictly a relation between man and the *Bhagavant*.

However, despite this etymological evidence, *bhakti* in the *Bhagavad Gita* continues to found itself on the model of the highest love between persons. Whereas the notion of *avatarata* (incarnation) indicates God's love and care for man's spiritual condition, it is also indicative of the faith that human form can be the recipient of divinity to the ultimate extent. *Avatara* is not merely God come hither, it is also guru gone thither. Furthermore, *bhakti* as human love is evident in the relationship between Arjuna and the *Bhagavant*, the two interlocutors in the *Gita*. Both allude to *Sakhya* (friendship) between them. The term *Shraddhavan* (faithful) is often applied to human beings of convictions and commitments. In Chapter 4, the *Bhagavant* declares: "Verily there exists nothing in this world purifying like knowledge (*na hi jnanena sadrsam pavitram iha vidyata*),"¹⁹ and then conjoins, "the man with *sraddha*, intent on this, with senses restrained, attains this *jnana* (*sraddhavan labbhate jnanam tat-parah sanyatendriyah*)."²⁰ *Shraddhavan* are those who, as noted in the *Svetâsvatâra Upanishad*, have faith in the guru and the *deva* alike.

The warm personal devotion summoned by the *Gita* goes hand in hand with the reflective and thoughtful orientations of the Upanishadic insights. Thus the theism that emerges in it remains

17. *Svetâsvatâra-Upanishad sanuvad sankrabhasyasahit* (*Svetâsvatâra Upanishad with the Commentary of Sankara*), 263.

18. M. Dhavamony, *Love of God*, 38.

19. *Bhagavad Gita*, 4-38.

20. *Ibid.*, 4-39,57.

short of a strict monotheism, which accounts for the fact that the *Gita* will remain a thought-provoking mirror for the Indian mind for centuries to come, and will become a definitive text for all the schools of *Vedanta*, however diverse from each other, as well as for the Vaisnavite and Shavistic religious movements.

In the *Gita*, the significance of the ways of *karma*, *jnana*, and *bhakti* is alternatively explicated with the message that none is to be allowed to captivate us exclusively at the cost of the others. When *bhakti* is drawn near to *karma*, the age-old problem of the freedom from the law of *karma* (deeds) is resolved. *Karma* is to be performed as if it were an offering to the *Bhagavant*; the preoccupation with its fruit is to be relinquished in a realization that the best creations are accomplished when they are done for pure creativity's sake. *Bhakti* must remain allied to *jnana*, or else knowledge will become divorced from life and there will be confusion as to what is worth knowing. The real knowledge is of course knowledge of the Self:

Some look upon It [the self] filled with wonder [*ascaryavat*]
Others speak of It as wonderful [*ascaryavad vadati*]
Others again hear of It as a wonder [*ascaryavac*]
Still others, having heard It, do not know it at all.²¹

However, "to the *Brahamana* [scholar] who has known the self, all the Vedas are of as much use, as a pool of water is, in the midst of great flooding."²² It is noteworthy that Arjuna wants to know the human characteristics of the ideal *yogi* whose "intellect is not tossed about by the conflict of opinions"²³ as he pleads the *Bhagavant*:

What, O Keshava, is the description of the man
Of steady wisdom merged in *samadhi* [meditation]?
How does he speak, this man of steady thought?
How does he sit? How does he walk?²⁴

In response, the *Bhagavant* not only paints a picture of the man of steady wisdom (*shita-prjnasya*) in the second chapter, but continues to do so throughout the *Gita*, while in Chapter 16, he describes the characteristics of the men of non-divine (*asura*) nature, who believe that "this world is devoid of truth, it has no moral basis, no

21. *Ibid.*, 2-29, 34.

22. *Ibid.*, 2-46, 36.

23. *Ibid.*, 2-53, 37.

24. *Ibid.*, 2-54, 37.

God, and no causation other than lust.”²⁵ The attitude toward possessions, interrelationship, and even the food habits of people under the spell of three *gunas* (qualities) are identified in Chapters 17 and 18. *Bhakti* clearly appears along with the tendencies to existentialize the metaphysical thought as the needs of the human heart are taken into account in the *Gita*.

When we study the origins of Buddhism and Jainism, we notice that these traditions also embraced the way of *bhakti* from their very inception. Not only did they inherit the convictions concerning *karma*, rebirth, and the necessity of final liberation from the Vedic tradition, but also the spiritual ethos of *bhakti*. *Bhakti* faith that was always the faith of the masses was essentially opposed to the caste-system and was characterized by an adoration of the spiritual stalwarts in human form. A proselytizing spirit always pervaded it. The *bhaktas* old and new were never obsessed with their private salvation, but always wanted to share their joyful insights with the masses. Also, the messages of *bhakti* were always transmitted in the common language, not in Sanskrit. It is likely that all these elements were present in the Bhâgavata and Pâncharâtra cults as well as social life at the time of the appearance of the Buddha and the Mahariva. They simply adopted all the above-mentioned features of the *bhakti* faith in their new systems. After the attainment of enlightenment, the Buddha had no qualms about sharing his *aryasatyas* (noble truths) with mankind. Buddhism and Jainism were both opposed to the caste system, and their founders and saints had a missionary spirit, and spread their word in the common language, at least in the first few centuries. The hierarchies of spiritual status among the *tathagatas*, *arhants*, *jinās*, and *viras* (titles indicating spiritual attainment of the saints) within Buddhism and Jainism kept alive a modified *guru-bhakti*.

This is not to say that Jainism and Buddhism do not offer original ontologies. They clearly seem to be reacting to the Vedic assumptions. Buddhism offers an explicitly humanistic and antimetaphysical philosophy. Nonexistential questions were dismissed by it as unfruitful, and the Buddha exercised his majestic silence about theistic speculation, as we read in the *Majjhima Nikaya*, in the so-called “arrow sermon” of the Buddha:

The religious life, Malunkyaputta, does not depend on the dogma that the saint exists...[or] does not exist after death;...whether the dogma obtain that the world is eternal or not eternal, there still remain birth,

25. Ibid., 16–8, 132.

old age, death, sorrow, lamentation...for the extinction of which in the present life I am prescribing. Accordingly, Malunkyputta, bear always in mind what it is that I have not elucidated. I have not elucidated...that the world is finite, that the world is infinite...that the soul and body are identical...that the soul is one thing or body another....And why have I not elucidated this? Because...it profits not, nor has to do with fundamentals of religion, nor tends to absence of passion...supreme wisdom of Nirvana.²⁶

The Buddhists were exhorted to exercise *bhakti* in the form of *karuna* (sympathy) not only toward fellow subjects of the *dukkha* (unsatisfactoriness) of existence, but also toward all beings. The Mahayana Buddhists elevated the figure of the Buddha to an object of worship, as a personification of the law (*Dharma*). The spell of the Vedic gods, especially that of Vishnu, is clearly visible in the historical unfolding of Buddhism. The Buddha's status as a deity and a savior is implicit in the daily prayer of Buddhists, recited to this day: *Buddham sharnam gachchami* (I seek refuge in the Buddha).

Indian philosophical and religious authorities and the adherents of various Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain sects were already convinced of the legitimacy, potency, and fascination of the path of *bhakti* in the first centuries of the Christian era. We learn about the *bhakti* ethos of this age from the epics and the *Puranas*. Not only was the divine status of Krishna and Rama further entrenched, both being recognized as incarnations of Vishnu, but the *bhakti* of Shiva was also in vogue in other circles. The impact of the epics, especially of the careers of their supreme deities, has been so overwhelming that countless poets, dancers, musicians, painters, and sculptors have been enacting and retelling their sagas for centuries. From the sixth century onward, further developments took place in the march of *bhakti*. The devotional poetic lives and creations of Vaisnavite Alvar and Saivite Nayanar saints in the south supplied new vigor to theism and heralded what is known as the earlier *bhakti* movement. In the north, bhagavatism produced yet another *bhakti* classic in the form of *Bhāgavata Purana*.

Vedic insights were turned into systems by some remarkable philosophical minds. Sankara (eighth century), Ramanuja (eleventh and twelfth centuries), Madhava (thirteenth century), and Vallabha (fifteenth and sixteenth centuries) respectively founded the *advaita*, *vishishtadvaita*, *dvaita*, and *shuddhadvaita* schools of Vedanta. While these thinkers were primarily preoccupied by the pursuit of *jnana*

26. *Majjhima-Nikaya*, H. C. Warren, trans., *Buddhism in Translations*, 122.

(knowledge), none of them deemphasized *bhakti*. Even though he was an astute theoretician, Sankara regarded *bhakti* as a genuine instrument of realizing the Supreme, and he himself wrote hymns and devotional texts. His refusal to be *sanyasi* (a homeless religious seeker) without his mother's consent, and his insistence on performing her funeral rites, a forbidden activity for *sanyasi*, show a *bhakti* free of abstractions.

Besides the various treatments of *bhakti* in the basic texts of the *Vedas*, *Upanishads*, epics, *Puranas*, and in the works of the philosophers, we also find some works devoted exclusively to *bhakti*. In these, *bhakti* is not discussed merely as one of the paths to spiritual achievement, but its nature is discussed in depth. Among the works of this class, *Sandhilya Bhakti Sutra* and *Narada Bhakti Sutra* are regarded as the classics. The connection between *bhakti* and love is succinctly traced in *Narada Bhakti Sutra*. Believed to be composed around A.D. 1000 by an unknown author, the work consists of eighty-four *sutras*, or aphorisms. This exposition seems to meet the expectation that a philosophy should not only explain things but must explore the possibilities of better living. Let us explore in detail the nature of *bhakti* as described by the *Narada Bhakti Sutra*.²⁷

At the outset, the first *sutra* promises to explain the doctrine of *bhakti* and the second asserts that *bhakti* is indeed of the nature of supreme love (*parama-prema-rupa*). It means that *bhakti* is called the highest attainment of *prema* (love), and that the *rupa* (nature) of *bhakti* and *prema* is the same. The third *sutra* conjoins "also of the nature of immortality" (*amrta-sva-rupacha*). The text provides the insight that the ultimate urge in love is the urge for immortality, i.e., an escape from mortality or from the everydayness or bland ordinariness of human (mortal) existence. The drive in love is one that seeks elevation from the lower existence toward a higher (more fulfilling) existence. The fourth *sutra* says:

Having gained this [*paramaprema*] man becomes accomplished [*shiddha*], immortal [*amrta*], content [*trpta*]

The text seems to be saying: this gain of supreme love is a remarkable attainment. It gives one a taste of immortality and yields to one the ultimate satisfaction.

The Sutrakara (the author of the *Sutras*) states further that his love is not of the nature of lust (*sa na kamayamana*), but rather that a

27. For the complete text and a translation, see *The Sacred Books of the Hindus*, Vol. 7. The texts cited below have been translated by the author of this essay.

kind of renunciation is a natural result of it (*nirodhrupatvat*),²⁸ for this renunciation is the detachment from all religious and secular commerce.²⁹ He means to say that the supreme love is not a lustful love but one that finds both ritualism and conventional worldly excitements uninteresting. Next, the Sutrakara considers definitions of *bhakti* given by other well-known seers, and advises that it should be pursued exactly as described by these divine men, and that the devotee should let *bhakti* be just as the love of the *gopis* (cowherd women) for Krishna (*yatha brajgopikanam*). Such a love is not a love of abstractions, but comparable to the human yet world-renouncing concrete love of the *gopis*.

In *Sutras* 23 and 24, it is said that love without knowledge of the true nature of the beloved is like an illicit love, which is characterized by the absence of happiness-in-the-happiness-given-to-another (*tatsukhsukhitvam*). In other words, in authentic love, knowledge of what the beloved is and what his or her preferences are, is a prerequisite, as his or her happiness becomes one's own. The happiness referred to here is not a matter of giving or receiving or even sharing. One's own happiness lies in and consists of the happiness of the other.

"Because of God's dislike for egoism and because of his love for the meek, *bhakti* alone is superior to *karma* and *jnana*."³⁰ The Sutrakara seems to say that love is what saves one from egoism. Love is not a device to procure satisfaction for the ego, but a moment in which ego is irrelevant. Opportunities of love, or *bhakti*, remain open for the meek and innocent even as they are open for the haughty and the scholarly. Thus, the path of *paramaprema* is preferable to that of *jnana* and *karma*.

"The nature of *prema* cannot be put into words [*anirvachaniya premasvarupam*], for it is comparable to the taste enjoyed by the dumb [*muka-asvadana-vat*, i.e., love is indescribable, leaves one speechless], but it is found to manifest itself in some rare deserving recipients of it."³¹ Love has the nature of sheer immediate experience (*anubhava-rupam*).³² "Just as the being of God is not dependent on any proofs, love is its own proof [*svayam-pramanatvat*]."³³ The Sutrakara seems to be saying that love is to be witnessed in the

28. *Narada Bhakti Sutra*, *Sutra* 7.

29. *Ibid.*, *Sutra* 8.

30. *Ibid.*, *Sutra* 25.

31. *Ibid.*, *Sutras* 51, 52, 53.

32. *Ibid.*, *Sutra* 54.

33. *Ibid.*, *Sutra* 59.

lives of those who have sought it and deservingly found it. It is not to be found in the books of the scholars. Those who possess it do not have to prove it. It shows through their personality; it shows in their life.

Narada Bhakti Sutra confirms that *bhakti* essentially is an elevation of "personal love," i.e., it is not a different kind of love. Its rewards are the well-known rewards of *prema* (love). The *Sutra* expounds the Indian concept of love based on an overcoming of egoism in a release from the narrower confines of one's superficial self.

The age-old *bhakti* blossomed into what has been called the *bhakti* movement, which truly moved the people of India, and placed before them a prospect of poetic living. The period between the thirteenth and seventeenth centuries saw a transformation so great in the religious and cultural life of India that it seemed that the spiritual revolution was under way. The aims of spiritual life shifted toward a passionate and loving preoccupation with one God, called by the names Rama or Krishna. Ritualism, scriptural scholarship, meditation by the priesthood, and asceticism were regarded as superficial and unnecessary. Love as *bhakti* became widely recognized as the soul of all religious, ethical, philosophical, and aesthetic quests. These were also the times that saw the growth of Indian common languages, or vernaculars, as Sanskrit no longer was the first choice of the creative minds. The literature of modern Indian languages was born in the cradle of the *bhakti* movement, and thus classical literary values remain closely allied to the measures of *bhakti*. *Bhakti* saints and gurus emerged in all religions of India, and their amazingly devoted lives and poetic and musical creations won the hearts of millions.

The devotional religion impressed upon the people that the bond with Ishrava (the object of devotion, God) requires nothing but love, and the kindness of Ishrava knows no distinctions of caste, class, or sectarianism. The path of *bhakti* offered a much-needed strength to population tired and weakened by oppressive ruling classes, often comprised of foreign military adventurers. They were also weakened by a corrupt priesthood, as well as by a firmly entrenched caste-system. *Bhakti* offered dignity, strength, and joy of life to masses in all parts of the sub-continent, as the lovers and bards of the almighty brought the gift of their love songs.

The *bhakti* movement included an accomplished exponent from

Panjab in the person of the Guru Nanak (1469–1539), who founded Sikhism, the fourth major religion originating in India. The guru inspired his *Sikhs* (*Shishyas*, or disciples) to gain union with the almighty through *Nama*, the recalling of God's name in love-laden silent thought.

The work of *bhakti* holy men is characterized by a very personal and passionate longing to identify with the object of devotion (*Ish*). The role and the superiority of the way of *bhakti* is very succinctly explicated in the following words of the sixteenth-century *bhakti* holy man Eknath (1548–1608):³⁴

Though one restrains the senses, yet they are not restrained. Though one renounces sexual desires, yet they are not renounced. Again and again they return to torment one. For that reason, *the flame of Hari-bhakti was lit by the Veda*.³⁵ There is no need to suppress the senses; desire of sensual pleasure ceases of itself. So mighty is the power that lies in *Hari-bhakti*....

The senses that *Yogis* suppress *bhaktas* devote to the worship of *Bhagavant*, offer to *Bhagavant*. *Yogis*...suffer in the flesh; the followers of *bahakti* become forever emancipated. Though he has no knowledge of the *Vedas*, still by one so ignorant may the real Self be apprehended. The condition of *Brahman* may be easily attained and possessed....

Women, *Sudras* and all the others...can be borne by the power of *Shraddha* and *bhakti* to the other bank...[of the Ocean of *Samsara* (world)].

Wherever the *bhakta* sets his foot that path is god. Then in every step he takes, his *bhakti* is an offering to *Brahman*.

According to Eknath, reason's efforts to suppress the instincts were found not only futile but unnecessary by the *bhaktas*. The path of love offers a better life and assured fulfillment. One's lack of scholarship, gender, and caste status were no hindrance in the way of realization (*prapatti*) of *Brahman*. Eknath affirms that a *bhakta* is able to know divine immanence "wherever he sets his foot," and every step he takes (everything he does) is "an offering to *Brahman*." Here is the insight of *Bhagavad Gita* reaffirmed by Eknath, that ethical living is not necessarily the result of ethical programs worked out by reasoning. Ethics without tears, the ethics of love is better than the ethics of exertions. As one recognizes the fundament of all one's involvements, that is worth being the origin and goal of one's love and thought, all intentional moral interven-

34. Quoted by Nicole Macnicol, *Indian Theism*, 270. Translation revised by the author.

35 *Italics mine*. Eknath seems to be convinced that *bhakti* originated in the ancient *Vedas* and not with the so-called *bhakti* movement.

tions are rendered unnecessary.

The march of *bhakti* continues in contemporary India and the *bhakti* movement continues, in a way, to this day. People's respect for all claimants of the *bhakta* status continues, as holy men, *gurus*, *sadhus*, *swamis*, and *mahatamas* emerge in all regions of the land to interpret the age-old religious concepts for the people in their own diverse languages. The call to shun ritualism and formal sectarianism and to embrace the path of *nama* and *seva* (service) is often heard coming from the more authentic of such leaders of people's religion. The method of *bhakti* continues to be regarded by many as the most potent and delightful.

A look at the history of its manifestations shows us that *bhakti* has always been the soul of Indian philosophical and religious heritage. It pervades all periods of the cultural history of the subcontinent. Yet, its appearance has been diverse and colorful, sometimes subdued and sometimes passionate. It has worked on behalf of life, love, thought, and the divine, and has demanded from all traditions all aspects of human existence be gathered together.

Bhakti, we notice, has always advanced the cause of life. The wholeness of existence, its substantiation in death, the life-world situation, and the need to be authentically active and involved, were all exposed by *bhakti*. How to be liberated from the ills of life, from its harshness, its *dukkha* (unsatisfactoriness), how to cross over the ocean of *samsara* (world cycle) were the questions to be dealt with. How can existential concerns be transformed into love's gentle occupation? *Bhakti* let religion unfold its answer to the love in the human heart and meet the heart's expectations. It let religion be personal religion. *Bhakti* calls for the familiar instances of *prema* to be transformed into *parama-prema*.

Bhakti worked on behalf of thought, for it always saved it from the stony structures of metaphysics. It pointed toward the pitfalls of quantitative learning, scholarly haughtiness, elitism, and dogmatism, and kept the core philosophical questioning alive. It exhorted thought to remain concerned with its source and be sure about what is worth thinking. The Buddhist meditative practices and the *bhaktas'* preoccupation with *nama* are all instances of man's attempts to establish a two-way attunement to Being in thought.

Bhakti has never let the divine be out of sight. It pointed out the futility of knowing the divine metaphysically. It let the divine retain its unknowableness by attempting to know it through love as far as possible. *Bhakti* never lets the human-divine involvement

be subsumed under formulas such as henotheism, polytheism, monotheism, etc. It does not let the divine be reduced to an object, but invites it to dwell nearby in one's own world. The divine is always received as one's own, for the expectation of own-ness is natural in love. The composer of the Hindi version of *Ramayana*, the *bhakta* poet Tulsidasa, is reported to have created a stir while visiting a Krishna temple. He declared that unless the temple idol had a bow and arrow in its hands, he could not pay obeisance to it. Tulsidasa's love was fully committed to Rama.

Thus life, love, thought, and the divine were held closely knit and fused together by the way of *bhakti* that originated along with the ancient *Vedas*. As a distinct orientation pervading all Indian religions and philosophies, *bhakti* has always preserved the vitality of the age-old spiritual world views of India. It continues to offer religion as a personal, fascinating, and creative experience.

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