

Gita's Concept of *Bhakti*

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Abstract

Bhakti as a method involves surrendering, reverence, love and adoration to Lord. In this sense it appears to be purely a theological concept. But so far as Gita's treatment of bhakti is concerned it is seen that here the concept is not confined to the sphere of theology only. The article deals with the general concept of bhakti by enumerating some of the most significant conditions of it. It is seen that most of the conditions are applicable to Gita's concept of bhakti uncontroversially excepting the last two conditions. It is seen that though in the Bhakti yoga of the Gita it has been maintained that the best and easy method for the realization of the highest stage there is also mentioning of different types of devotees leading to a distinction between pure bhakti and jnanamisra bhakti that is devotion along with knowledge. A joint emphasis on jnana and bhakti happens to be one of the unique recommendations of the Gita. The attempt has been taken does the Gita promote dualism in respect of the concept of bhakti? Further taking a look on the characters of a devotee as per the yard stick given in the Gita it can be pointed out that there has been more moral recommendations in order to become a true devotee. It is concluded that bhakti is such a concept that assimilates two important goals, namely the ethical and the religious.

Key words: *Conditions of bhakti, pure bhakti, jnanamisraa bhakti, moral aspects of bhakti*

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Introduction

The Concept of *Bhakti*

'*Bhakti*' or 'devotion' happens to be a key concept in the field of religion; so also in the *Bhagavad Gita*. *Bhakti* refers to a special type of activity of a being through which one can become the nearest and dearest of the Lord. It is treated to be the easiest and surest means of God-realization. *Bhakti* as a method involves surrendering, reverence, love and adoration. Panini's understanding is that *bhakti* is a *bhava* that includes the devotion to Lord through speech, action and mind or thought. Taking the root word of the term *bhakti* it can be said that the term can be used in the cases of reverence, love, adoration, honour, etc.. In the *Bhakti Sutra*, *bhakti* has been described by Narada as utter love for the object of devotion. It is tinged with love (*paramapremaropaa*). In this kind of love there is no place for passion. The love is so intensified that there is no scope for entertaining any other thought other than the object of devotion. In the similar way Ramanuja has expressed *bhakti* to be constant remembrance of Lord. Some of the fundamental conditions of *bhakti* happen to be:

i) To aim at an intimate relationship between the *bhakta* (divotee) and the *Bhagabana* (Lord). It implies that there must be the aim to establish a rapport between the individual and the Lord. It refers to that process by which an intimate relationship between the *bhakta* (divotee) and *Bhagabana* (Lord or the object of devotion) can be established. Such an aim involves the condition of faith.

ii) A strong and unconditional faith on Lord

Another important factor involved concerning *bhakti* is that it is based on the understanding of faith on Lord. Without strong faith no genuine *bhakti* can be possible. Those who think that they can obtain knowledge without the grace of Lord and those who think that they are self-sufficient without God's mercy they are wrong and in illusion. The individual is mere an instrument. So long the individual thinks that he is doing something and he can achieve something for him, neither knowledge nor *bhakti* can be possible for him. There is the requirement of a feeling that nothing can be achieved without His grace. There has been a very popular saying in this respect that *viswaselabhiva Krishna tarkevahudura* (Krishna can be available in faith but is far off in the reasoning.). In other words, the method of the reaching Krishna, who happens to be the ultimate reality, is faith; through the method of reasoning it is either too difficult or not possible. Thus to establish the rapport faith is an essential condition. Such a faith can be possible with the help of another condition of surrendering everything.

iii) Total surrendering before the Lord

Total surrendering includes surrendering of the ego-sense and all activities. In the framework of *bhakti* the expressions like 'I', 'me', 'mine', etc. are insignificant.

One loses his individual identity when he surrenders himself before the Lord. For him God is the chief architect behind all his actions and no independent action is possible without His desire. It is as good as conceiving the affair in the model of placing the Lord in the center of our heart and proceed as per the directions received from the centre.¹

IV) The Lord or the object of devotion happens to be personal.

In the *bhakti* framework the Absolute is not conceived to be abstract or impersonal one. He is taken as a living entity who can be served and loved. The intensity of love and attachment is the mark of the intensity of the devotion. Here the devotee tries to become extremely possessive, as if Lord alone is there for him. Such an attitude is considered as 'individuating aspect' of *bhakti*.

V) *Bhakti* presupposes the duality between Lord and the devotee.

The relation between them is mostly conceived in this following model. The devotee although shares the divinity in him as the life-element but he is ignorant about it. In relation to Lord he is a servant (*daasa*). In order to achieve something he has to offer devotion to Lord.

The tradition unfolds seven factors in respect of the cultivation of *bhakti*. Those are *viveka*, *vimoka*, *abhyaasa*, *kriyaa*, *kalyaana*, *anavasaada*, and *anuddharsa*. One who is interested to travel in this path he should have certain standards. First of all he should possess the noble conscience (*viveka*). He should have freedom from negative propensities, like, passion, anger, etc.. It is *vimoka*. One should be prepared to go for certain practices (*abhyaasa*). The performance action to this effect is *kriyaa*. The practice of virtues like, truthfulness, compassion, benevolence, etc. stands for *kayana*. The strength to overcome the effect of past miseries and frustrations is known as *anavasaada*. And lastly, to be unaffected by elation and disappointment is *anuddharsa*. In a sense all these are pre requisites for the cultivation of *Bhakti*. In a disturbed mind devotion is not suitable. For the devotion with the concentration of mind these practices are necessary. It is certainly not mere sentimentality. It is *yoga* in the sense of *saadhanaa*.

Gita's Concept of *Bhakti*

Bhagvad Gita is otherwise known as *Yogassastra* or a treatise on *yoga*. All the eighteen chapters are named as some kind of *yoga*. Sri Krishna is considered as Yogeswar or the Lord of yoga who has taught various yogas to his disciple Arjuna while clarifying his doubts in the battle field. In the *Gita*, the chapter ten and twelve respectively named as *Vibhuti yoga* and *Bhakti yoga* mostly in the sense of yoga of divine glories and yoga of devotion.

A chapter, on the 'Path of Devotion' (*Bhakti Yoga*), has been maintained in the *Gita* describing the means of the realization of the ultimate reality through *bhakti*. It is the usual understanding of the *Bhakti Yoga* of the *Gita*. In this chapter of the

Gita it has been preached that devotion happens to be a surest and easiest means for God's grace as well as salvation.

The overall approach of the *Gita* is found to be very much in tune with the upanisadic tradition. It has been maintained in the second verse of the *Isopanisad* that man has to perform most of his actions by surrendering to God so that those actions help them to achieve the goal of their life. It is because man due to ignorance thinks that he has to live about hundred years by performing his day to day actions and he is not aware that none of these actions is of any use for him ultimately.² Thus man has to perform actions by surrendering those to the Supreme. That is possible only when *bhakti* is there for Supreme. Let us have a look on what has been said in the *Bhakti Yoga* of the *Gita*.

It is mentioned in the above that seven factors are needed for the cultivation of devotion. In this respect there has been categorical mentioning of the full-fledged criteria of a devotee. It has been said that the devotee should be free from expectations (no cravings), pure, skillful in action (*daksa*), unconcerned (impartial), untroubled, given up initiative in action or risen above all distractions, renounced the feeling of doorship, - given up rejoicing and hating, free from grieves and desires, renounced good and evil,- behaving alike to friend and foe, having equal feeling for honour and ignominy, having equal reaction to heat and as well as to pleasure and pain, free from attachment - becoming content with anything the comes, and free from the attachment to home.³ Thus according to the *Gita* a devotee being endowed with these characters and concentrates his mind on me being a true devotee he is dear to Lord.

It is seen that all the above conditions mentioned previously to be the features of *bhakti* are found to be there in the *Gita*. For example, the individuating aspect of the *bhakti* is very much clear in the expression "Arjuna, he who always and constantly thinks of Me with undivided mind, to that yogi always absorbed in Me, I am easily attainable."⁴

The spirit of the view of the *Gita* is that if one keeps himself in the place of a devotee and treats Sri Krishna to be the Lord concentrating on Him one can achieve the Supreme. Here Lord has been conceived in the personal form. In this way *bhakti* constitutes the acceptance of the object of devotion to be the Supreme and there must be someone (*bhakta*) to accept the Supreme to be the source of the grace. Here Lord is considered to be the only solace and goal Who can be approached through *bhakti*.

There has been clear mentioning that "I am the source of all creation. Everything in this world is active because of me. Wise men knowing this worship Me with full devotion."⁵ When it has been stated as the statement of Sri Krishna and he addresses it to Arjuna obviously the later is taken as the devotee and the former as the object of devotion. Arjuna also in return says that "You are the Supreme

Eternal, the ultimate resort, the greatest purifier, all the greatest seers consider you as eternal divine Person, the prime Deity, unborn and all pervading.”⁶ All the characteristics used in this verse are only applicable to the ultimately powerful one, the Divine. So obviously He is the object of devotion.

Here the basic understanding is that the consideration of the Supreme is not mere an abstract concept or idea. The Supreme has been conceived in the form of living entity can be found in personal form. Only when he is conceived in the personal form service and offerings can be given to Him. Thus *bhakti* starts with the constant remembrance to Lord, continues with intense attachment with Him, it culminates in total surrendering before the object of devotion and finally ends with a tie between the being and the Supreme Being. To this kind of devotion Gandhi would call as ‘single minded devotion’ explaining in the following words. “He who believes, not merely with his reason but with his heart, that no creature can live or act without His permission or except as He wills, yokes himself to Him in single-minded devotion,”⁷In the framework of *bhakti* all the works and thoughts are God oriented. Panigrahi mentions that “For a devotee all actions are performed with the God in view. His entire existence is attuned to the nature and will of God. His life and existence is devoted to living in consonance with His will. All his thoughts and actions become God-centric.”⁸

The Gita also holds the view that to be one with Srikrishna faith and single minded devotion happen to be the easiest and quickest means. Varma mentions Gita’s stand referring to 6-7 verses (XII) that “When the mind of a devotee is so deeply and fully concentrated on God that no other feeling or idea centers it except the passion of the divine devotion and all actions are surrendered to God, he has no other object of worship and totally dependent on God, such a devotee is readily and quickly delivered by God from this material world and blessed with Moksha (salvation).”⁹Not only it is the quickest method it is also the easiest method as compared to all other methods. The reason in support of considering this method of *bhakti* to be easiest is that Supreme is not only abstract but also available in manifested form. SriKrishna himself is the manifestation of the Supreme. Prabhupada goes one step further to apply the understanding in the present day situation in the following manner that “God has authorized representation in the Deity form which is *arcaa-vigraha*. This *arcaa-vigraha* is an incarnation of the supreme Lord. God will accept service through that form. . . . So for a devotee there is no difficulty in approaching the supreme immediately and directly, but for those who are following the impersonal way to spiritual realization the path is difficult.”¹⁰

Now if someone will be critical about the method of *bhakti* to be easiest and quickest, he may find many difficulties in the following manner. It has been maintained in the same chapter that if Arjuna will fail in following the path of *bhakti* the alternatives available that ‘Yoga of practice’ (*abhyaasayogena*), knowledge

(*jnaana*), meditation (*dhyana*), and renunciation of the fruit of action (*karmaphalatyaga*). It has also been suggested that all these alternatives are there in order of superiority from lower to higher. Taking these above mentioned alternatives it appears that *bhakti* path is easier. But *bhakti* does not constitute reciting some devotional songs or prayers or offering some sacrifices in the name of God. These are external activities can be performed by anyone even without having proper *bhakti*. In the true sense the basic necessities of *bhakti* constitutes surrendering all actions to Lord, surrender of ego-sense and the single minded concentration on the object of devotion. The performance of all the three is never an easy task for a common man. Prabhupada considers the task to be very easy by saying that it can be performed by any one at any time. He mentions that “The process is very simple: one can devote in his occupation and engage at the same time in chanting Hare krsna, Hare Krsna, Krsnakrsna, Hare Hare/ Hare Rama, Hare Rama, Rama Rama, Hare Hare. Such transcendental chanting attracts the devotee to the personality of Godhead.”... “Simply by chanting the holy name of Krsna- Hare krsna, Hare Krsna, Krsnakrsna, Hare Hare/ Hare Rama, Hare Rama, Rama Rama, Hare Hare—a devotee of the Lord can approach the supreme destination easily and happily, but this destination cannot be approached by any other process of religion.”¹¹ But this assumption of Prabhupada does not appear to be effective in majority of the cases. Mere chanting is as good as mechanical recitation of words without having any involvement and concentration. If the individual will attach involvement and concentration to this chanting he cannot do any other work simultaneously. So mere chanting would be purposeless and it cannot be helpful to realize the supreme which happens to be the highest goal in this field. In this frame chanting and prayer is supposed to be the very initial stage to move in the path of *bhakti*. If the individual develops kin interest in this kind of activities then for him losing ego-sense and surrendering to Lord would be easier. But in Prabhupada’s approach chanting appears to be the end of the process than the initial stage.

Among the three paths, namely, knowledge, action and devotion highest place is also given to devotion by Narada. He considers devotion to be superior for the reason that knowledge and action are not self-sufficient whereas *bhakti* is self-sufficient.

Jnaanamishraa Bhakti

Here onwards it will be attempted to make an analysis of the *Gita*’s concept of *bhakti* to examine the philosophical importance of the concept. It seems that the concept of *bhakti* is normally understood as purely a theological concept. To say that it is a theological concept it is to say that it involves blind faith on the Almighty. In this theological sense the emphasis on faith refers to the blind faith which has been treated as dogmatic. This approach restricts the philosophical significance of the concept as well as the text. But the proper message of the *Gita* does not appear to

restrict *bhakti* to the realm of theology alone. In the Gita it has been maintained that proper devotion to lord is the goal of wise as well as the common man. Here there has been made a difference between the practice of *bhakti* to be the goal by wise man and common man. It means the practice of *bhakti* with and without knowledge is different.

It is seen that though in the *Bhakti yoga* of the *Gita* it has been maintained that the best and easy method for the realization of the highest stage there is also mentioning of different types of devotees leading to a distinction between pure *bhakti* and *jnanamisra bhakti* that is devotion along with knowledge. A joint emphasis on *jnana* and *bhakti* happens to be one of the unique recommendations of the *Gita* in the following manner.

The message of the *Gita* appears to be that a true *jnani* is a true devotee and a true devotee becomes a true *jnani*. It is because who has surrendered his ego-sense and has become a true devotee *jnana* automatically comes to them. This is how devotion is best cultivated along with the knowledge. So also knowledge finds its fulfillment in proper devotion. Highest knowledge constitutes that Supreme is placed in all the creatures. Without devotion such knowledge is as good as some information. Only the devotion can make someone realized that the Supreme dwells in everyone. This is how *Gita* admits that knowledge and devotion are not opposed to each other rather complementary.

In the *Gita* there has been clear mentioning of the types of devotees with the identification of the best category of devotees. There are four types of devotees, namely, the men in distress (*aarto*), seekers of knowledge (*jijnaasu*), seekers of wealth or material objects (*arthaathee*) and the man of wisdom (*jnaani*).¹² Out these categories God likes the best one, that is, the man of wisdom. It resembles with the view given in the *Bhakti-rasaamrtaSindhu*¹³ the characteristics of the better devotion (*sheelanaambhaktiruttamaah*) happens to be the devotion without having any expectation of material gain as well as unattached with the action and knowledge. One has to transcend all kinds of desires to qualify for the best category of devotee. *Gita* admits the special advantage of *jnanamisraa bhakti* is to attain state of reciprocity of dearness with the Supreme. The Lord is extremely dear to the devotee and the devotee is extremely dear to the Lord.¹⁴ The souls of this kind of devotees are as good as My own self (*aatmaiva me*).¹⁵

It is very much clear that though *bhakti* is treated to be a separate means for God realization but the limitation of this method has also been articulated that in this way it may not be possible to become free from the desires. With desire it cannot be the best one. In order to be the best one there is the necessity of knowledge. So knowledge with devotion is always higher and preferable. Thus knowledge is a pre-requisite of *uttamaa bhakti* and also a corollary of it. Panigrahi puts it as “True knowledge is discriminative in nature. It enables one to discriminate between the

field, knower of the field and the *Purusottama*. But mere theoretical knowledge would not secure one the state of highest union. It is achieved when there is deep yearning in the individual to be established in that state.”¹⁶ Now it may be clear to learn that knowledge and devotion need not be taken as two distinct methods, rather to be pursued together to attain a single state. It means a true jnani cannot be differentiated from a true devotee and *vice versa*. But such a view point is not acceptable for Sri Ramanujaacharya. He considers devotion to be higher state that includes knowledge within it. The highest knowledge takes the shape of full devotion (*bhaktiroopaanaamjnaanam*).¹⁷ This view of Sri Ramanujaacharya has been supported by Vallbhacharya also.

Does Gita promote Dualism?

It has already been pointed out that Gita subscribes the upanisadic stand. As there is no scope for dualism in the Upanisads so also is the case with the Gita. But taking the *bhakti* concept into consideration an inconsistency seems to appear in the manner that how can Lord and devotee be placed in one category? If not, then obviously there is dualism. But scholars overtake such a possibility by pointing that “The Gita identifies Krsna with the impersonal *aatman* of the *Upanisads*. The Gita advocates the devotion to the unmanifest and impersonal God.” He points out that “According to Gita, the *bhaktawho* takes refuge in God ‘attains Him’, ‘enters into Him’, ‘abides in Him’, and ‘lives in Him’. Krsna says, ‘The *bhaktas* are in Me and I am in them.’, ‘They enter into Me’, ‘those who worship Me are fitted for becoming *Brahman*’ and the highest yogi sees all in me and me in all’. So there is no scope for dualism.”¹⁸ He has taken attempt to explain in the manner that the basic difference between the individual and the Lord is the difference between two different stages of the same reality, namely, stage of imperfection and the stage of perfection. The thirst for the union with the Lord is attend the stage of perfection or ‘the fervent yearning for perfection.

If the impersonal aspect of the God is to be accepted then the above mentioned fourth and fifth features of *bhakti* cannot be maintained. Let us see if it can be accepted that Gita advocates in support of both the personal and impersonal aspects of God. At the initial stage *bhakti* starts with the personal form of the Lord. With the addition of knowledge (*jnana*) *bhakti* the *bhakta* moves from personal level to the impersonal level. Such stand seems to be conceived in the *Bhagavata Purana* where *bhakti* is treated to be a means for *jnana*. So God can be conceived as personal. But He is not limited to personal level only. To treat Him to be only personal is the indication of limited knowledge of the devotee. The followers of Sankara may like to explain it as two distinct visions referring to *vyavahaarika drsti* and *paaramaarthika drsti*. God is impersonal from transcendental point of view and personal from empirical point of view.

Theological Vs Moral

Taking a look on the characters of a devotee as per the yard stick given in the Gita it can be pointed out that there has been more moral recommendations in order to become a true devotee. It is only a morally perfect individual can aspire to become a devotee. Anyone who is engaged in chanting the prayers meant for Lord irrespective of his moral background cannot be a true devotee. The recommendations to become a devotee do not appear to be theological. Rather the real emphasis has been attached on the moral strength of the individual desiring to become a devotee. A devotee should be capable of behaving equally to friend and the enemy or being free from grieves and desires shows that moral perfection is essential rather than observation of any religious formalities or rituals. *Bhakti* is such a concept that assimilates two important goals, namely the ethical and the religious. It is in the sense that the end of these two lines of approaches in respect of *bhakti* constitutes the two things together, namely, becoming morally perfect and the identification with the ultimate reality.

References:

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- 13 1.1.11
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- 15 *SBG, vii/18*
- 16 Panigrahi, p.120
- 17 *Shreebhaasya, I.ii.23.*
- 18 Panigrahi, pp.122,123