

Interpreting *Bhakti* : *Chaitanyacharitamrita*

Pranabananda Jash

The genesis of the *bhakti* (devotion) mode of religion according to the tradition is from the *Dravidadesa*, i.e. South India. It is stated:

Aham bhakti iti khyata.....

Utpanna Dravide chaham vridhdhim Karnataka gate kvachit

Kvachin Maharashtra Gurjare jirnatam gate.....

That is- “I am called *bhakti*.....I was born in Dravida, grew up in Karnataka after spending sometimes in Maharashtra, became old in Gujrata.....”.

However, the form of *Bhakti* underwent a great transformation in the middle age. The rich literature it produced is considered an important addition to the enrichment of Indian religion and culture. The *Bhakti* cult, with its direct contact between the devotee and divinity, overcame the myriad barriers of caste and community. The present paper is a holistic attempt to throw light on *Bhakti* (devotion) movement - its genesis, its special and egalitarian implication and also its metaphysical aspect that gave a fillip to the development and enrichment of several vernacular languages in medieval India. The *Bhakti* literature also portrays the rich fabrics of human life with its religio-cultural ethos of the contemporary period, as propounded by the great Bengali saint-philosopher - Sri Chaitanyadeva. (C. AD. 1485/6-1533 AD). It is the Chaitanya Mahaprabhu who enlightens the human soul with an optimistic message with regard to the permanent solution of the conflict between man and man, sect and sect rooted in religious dogma and fanaticism. He illuminates us with the concept of a new religion based on the twin principle of humanity of god and the divinity of man.

The concept of *Bhakti* (devotion) played an important role for making an egalitarian socio-religious order, irrespective of any caste, colour and sex, during the Mediaeval time.¹ Sri Chaitanya was one of the foremost personalities who took the cause of the common and divergent elements in the society and made them relevant to the *Bhakti* phenomenon for a sort of social resuscitation. Adoration to Krishna-Radha

and the doctrine of devotion are woven round the texture of the Chaitanya's School of Vaishnavism in Bengal, popularly known as the Gaudiya Vaishnavism. The rudimentary principle of this school centers round the spirit of sincere devotion of worshipper and the worshipping object and thereby growing into a deepening consciousness of the Infinite and Eternal. The concept of *bhakti* (devotion) during the time of Chaitanya and afterwards added a new impetus to the Vaishnava theology.² It plays an indomitable role not only in the religious life of the Vaishnavas in order to achieve Ultimate Reality, but it has also remained concerned with the task of organizing his followers through the *Samkirtana* and *Mahotsavas*.³

The followers as well as philosophers of Chaitanya, specially the six *Gosvamis* (Rupa-Sanatana-Raghunatha Bhatta-Raghunatha Dasa-Gopala Bhatta and Srijiva) of Vrindavana, have discussed *bhakti* in an exhaustive manner in their works like the *Bhaktirasamrita-Sindhu*⁴, *Ujjvalanilamani*⁵ and *Samkshepa-Bhagavatamrita* by Rupa Gosvami, *Brihad Bhagavatamrita* by Sanatana; the *Sandarbhas* (*Tattva, Bhagavat, Paramatma, Sri Krishna Bhakti* and *Priti*) by Jiva Gosvami, *Haribhaktivilasa* of Sanatana Gosvami and Gopala Bhatta⁶ and these works were followed by the writings of Vrindavan Dasa, Krishnadasa Kaviraja and others.

A close scrutiny of the contents of the *Chaitanya Charitamrita* by Krishnadasa Kaviraja will reveal that theology of the Gaudiya Vaishnava School founded by Sri-Chaitanya is characterized by certain distinctive features which distinguish it from other Vaishnava schools of thought. Besides its concept of *achinta bhedabheda* to explain the nature of Brahman, its ontology of Radha, its ideas on the values of human life of *purushartha*⁷, the doctrinal exposition of *bhakti* accompanied by the *rasa* theory gives it a unique position in the realm of religious history. The Gaudiya Vaishnavas accepted *bhakti* as doctrine and a part of theology. They thus evolved a system of partial religious emotionalism and explained to intricate classification and nomenclature. Again, the *rasa* theory in relation to *bhakti* and its various categories with special emphasis on the *madhura-rasa* not only exhibit the profound philosophical knowledge of the *Acharya*, but all these new and fresh ideas taken together amply demonstrate the exclusiveness and originality of the Gaudiya Vaishnavism.

Before coming to the point of our discussion it is a pre requisite to have an idea about the meaning of the term '*Bhakti*', and its transformation from time to time during the pre-Chaitanya period. The word *Bhakti* is derived from the root '*Bhaj Sevayam*' by adding the suffix '*ktin*', which means 'service with love for God'. *Bhagavati anurakti* ('love for God') from these two words the first and last letter, when combined gives the word - '*Bhakti*' - "an intense love for God". Thus '*Bhakti*' is a spontaneous feeling which implies a person to be devoted and faithful to another... Going a step further the root '*bha*', expresses love of the devotee for God and also of God for the devotee"; thus it is a mutual relationship of 'reverential devotion' and 'loyal love'.⁸

It is to be noted that *bhakti* in some form or other was not unknown in the Vedic and Upanishadic ideas.⁹ But it is to be noted that the idea of devotion or the doctrine of *bhakti* which form the salient feature of Vaishnavism are not very conspicuous in the Vishnu worship of the Vedas and the Brahmanas more closely associate with *yajna* than with *bhakti* or *prasada*.¹⁰ Yet from the time of the Svetasvatara Upanisad onward *bhakti* became an indispensable term for using the sense of faith and devotion.¹¹ The Ashtadhayi of Panini and Buddhist works speak of this in the sense of the love directed to God. By the time of the composition of the Bhagavata Gita (c. second century B. C.), it is established as a technical religious term. Like *Jnana-Karma-Yajna*, *Bhakti* is also considered as one of the powerful avenues for realizing the ultimate reality which reaches its acme of perfection (*parama*).¹² It is of the nature of *amrita* (nectar or immortality) or 'it also means that it is undying in nature'.¹³ Sandilya explains the term as 'absolute devotion to God' (*sa paranuraktrivare*)¹⁴ and Svapanesvara illustrates the devotion by describing it as a function of the mind with reference to the supreme being similar to what is evinced in regard to worldly objects under particular circumstances.¹⁵ In the later devotional literature a distinction is drawn between *bhakti* and *premam*. *Bhakti* is the spontaneous attachment for the desired object, God, being entirely possessed by and absorbed in him. *Premam* is the most concentrated love for God which is full of the most intense attachment, and which purifies the heart completely. Divine love (*prema*) is the completion and perfection of devotion (*bhakti*).¹⁶

In order to create popular interest of the concept of *bhakti*, the *Puranas*, especially

the *Bhagavata-Purana*, looked at the ideas of devotion with a new dimension in addition to its earlier bearings. The Puranas introduce emotional joy and ecstatic flavor into it. *Bhakti* or devotion is now loving, joyous and voluntary homage. The *jiva* by means of devotion realizes his intrinsic nature of partnership with god who is kept in obscurity by *maya* which represents the principle of illusion.

But the interpretation of devotion (*bhakti*) is further illustrated in an in-depth and subtle manner by Chaitanya and his followers in the subsequent period. According to the Gaudiya Vaishnavas, *bhakti* has broadly classified as *Sadhana-bhakti*, *Bhava-bhakti* and *Prema.-bhakti*, and each of these three is the representation of different stages of realization.

Sadhana-bhakti is attainable by the senses like hearing the Lord's name, singing His *kirtana* (name) and seeing His beauty. It can be practiced under some given circumstances when the devotee completely disregards the obligations of the *Varnasrama-dharma* (*Sammatambhaktivignanam bhatvangatvam na karmanam*)¹⁷ and does not covet sensual enjoyment and liberation.¹⁸

The Vaishnava Acharyas ordain sixty four rites and rituals for a devotee to attain *Sadhana-bhakti*, like submitting to the *guru*, accepting *mantra* or initiation and learning *bhakti* from him; serving the *guru* faithfully, performing *nama samkirtana*, etc.¹⁹ *Sadhana-bhakti* is also of two kinds- *Vaidhi-bhakti* and *Raganuga-bhakti*. When a devotee (*bhakta*) practises *Sadhana-bhakti* being inspired by the procedures of the scriptures, it is called *Vaidhi*²⁰, but it is called *Raganuga* when such a *bhakti* flows spontaneously without any scriptural injunctions or procedures.²¹ The *Raganuga-bhakti* is again of two types - *Prema* or *Karma-rupa* and *Sambandha-rupa*. The source of the former is the passionate desire to be Krishna's beloved like the *Gopis*, while the latter seeks establishing relationship with Krishna as His servant, friend or parents.

Bhava-bhakti is the direct outcome of inner emotion of Krishna, but this is something different from love. *Bhava-bhakti* which is the ultimate stage of *Sadhana-bhakti* has been described by Rupa Gosvami as follows:

“When the *bhakti* for Krishna develops in one’s mind, he becomes impatient; no one does waste his time unnecessarily. He begins to sing His name constantly and eulogies him. He then longs for union with Him and starts loving his abode. Outward calm is followed by modesty and indifference to the sensual enjoyments. Yet, he remains firm in his hope of attaining Him.”²²

On attaining *Prema-bhakti* which is considered as the final stage of devotion and the culmination point of all forms of devotion or *bhakti*, the devotee feels that Krishna is something like his own possession which he would like to keep with love. This form of devotion (*bhakti*) reveals gradually in nine distinct succeeding stages with the cultivation of the following deeds, like faith (*sraddha*), holy company (*sadhu-samgata*), spiritual practice (*bhajana kriya*), removal of constraints in the spiritual path (*anartha nivrittih*), devotedness (*syattate nishtha*), the taste for the state of devotedness (*ruchistath*), attachment to that State (*athasakti*), emotional feeling (*bhava*) and *premam*.²³

Without going through further elaborate interpretation about the various classification of *bhakti-bhava* (like *vaidhi-bhakti* or *raganuga-bhakti* or *Prem-bhakti*), we may note that the Gaudiya Vaishnavas regard Lord Krishna, the ultimate ideal, as an object of love and devotion. The devotee considers Him as the beloved. The exchange of loving reciprocation between the lover (devotee) and the beloved (Krishna) is called *bhakti-rasa* (love sentient), which according to the Vaishnava scriptures are of twelve kinds:

1. *Santa-rasa* (quiet devotion);
2. *Prita-rasa* (devotion as his faithful);
3. *Preya-rasa* (devotion as a friend);
4. *Vatsalya-rasa* (devotion as parents);
5. *Madhura-rasa* / *ujjala-rasa* (devotion with erotic);
6. *Hasya-rasa* (comic);
7. *Adbhuta-rasa* (marvelous);
8. *Vira-rasa* (heroic);
9. *Karuna-rasa* (pathetic);
10. *Raudra-rasa* (furious);

11. *Bhayanaka-rasa* (terrible) and

12. *Vibhatsa-rasa* (ghastly).

Of these the first five are *mukhya* or primary, while the remaining seven are considered as *gauna* or secondary.²⁴ According to the Gaudiya Vaishnavas, Lord Krishna can be realized by practicing these twelve kinds of *bhakti-rasa* (love sentient). However, the primary *rasas* are remaining constantly within the heart of the devotees, whereas the seven others appear and disappear. A devotee adopts a particular devotional attitude according to his inclination and leaning. But *madhura-bhava* (an attitude of conjugal love) is the best sentient (*rasa*) for realizing Lord Krishna.²⁵ The expression of *madhura-bhava* is distinctly projected in the concept of Radha and her love for Krishna. Her love for Krishna transcended all barriers of this mundane world. Sri Chaitanya introduced Radha as the idealized representative of bliss. From the philosophical perspective it may be said that it is the Gaudiya Vaishnavism which presents the concept of Radha-Krishna-tattva in its most mature and developed form. A super mundane (*Paramarthika*) is transferred semantically to empirical reality (*Vyavaharika*). Such a form of all absorbing love advocated by the Chaitanya School of Vaishnavism through *madhura-bhava* has been expressed in the following;

Yuvaker arti yatha yuvati dekhiya I

Sei rupa arti ar na dekhi bhaviya II

E karane bhaktagana bhaje Yadupati I

Patnibhava tar prati sthir kari mati II²⁶

i.e. “as a young man yearns for his sweet-heart, in the same manner the human soul may yearn for Krishna. In order to imbibe the same yearning, the Vaishnavas worship Yadupati (Krishna) with an attitude of conjugal love.” But it is very difficult to perform this kind of worship,²⁷ because the love sentient entertained by Radha towards Krishna was entirely different from the ordinary earthly passion.²⁸ *Premam* (love for god) and *Kama* (lust or earthly passion) characteristically differ from each other as iron from gold, in colour and element. Earthly passion (*kama*) denotes sensual enjoyment of one’s self while *premam* devotes to make Krishna happy.²⁹ In order to practice *madhura-rati*

(conjugal love attitude to Krishna) the devotee have to undergo a series of succeeding stages, such as, *rati*, *premam*, *sneha*, *mana*, *pranaya*, *raga*, *anuraga*, *bhava* and *mahabhava*. *Mahabhava* is regarded as the supreme form of the realization of love for Krishna. In fact, there are many other stages in between these succeeding stages, but we have hardly any scope to analyze them in an amplified form.³⁰

Thus while dealing with the evolution of the concept of devotion (*bhakti*) it may be said that earlier Vaishnava Acharya had extolled *bhakti* as a religious attitude, but it is the contribution of Mahaprabhu Sri Chaitanya and his disciples and / or followers to present *bhakti* not only as a path but they interpreted it also as a *rasa*. They accepted *bhakti* as a doctrine and a part of theology. The Gaudiya Vaishnavas thus evolved system of practical, religious emotionalism and explained its intricate classifications and nomenclature. So Chaitanya transformed the *bhakti* form of ritualistic procedure into a devotional (*bhakti*) movement which for a long time over flooded Bengal, its neighboring regions and even touched the far off southern soil. To him love and devotion to Krishna would lead to the illumination of the mind and to ultimate salvation. He recommended dance and music to produce a state of ecstasy in which the *bhaktas* could have a vision of god. What *bhakti* accomplished in a practical sense to unify the country culturally through music, dance, literature, painting, sculptures, temple architecture and allied activities cannot even be measured. The entire country from Kashmir to Kanyakumari and Gujrat to Bengal the atmosphere was surcharged with devotional flavor (*Bhakti*). No doubt, several Vaishnavite Acharyas like Madhavendra Puri, Advaitacharya, and Srivasa and others flourished before the advent of Chaitanya, “but the advent of Chaitanya” as observed by S.B. Dasgupta, “was something like a fruition of all their devotional penances, and it was an event which was really epoch-making in the religion and literature of Bengal. Chaitanya, as he is interpreted by his followers, embodies in him the quintessence of both Radha and Krishna, and is both the realizer and realized in the same personality.”³¹

Notes and References:

1. *Chaitanya Charitamrita* by Krishnadasa Kaviraj, Basumati Publication, Calcutta.
2. Jash, Pranabananda, *History and Evolution of Vaishnavism in Eastern India*, Calcutta, 1982. pp. 202
3. It is well known that Chaitanya adopted effective, though simple, methods to strengthen his movement by performing *Samkirtana* and *Mahotsavas* for propagation of his faith, and also for holding the community of his followers together. *Samkirtana* is an informal mode of group singing to accompaniment of musical instruments, reciting the name of Krishna loudly with devotion. The *Mahotsavas* (grand festivals) ceremony, also known as *macchavas* helped Chaitanya to keep in touch with the Vaishnava devotees. Such festivals were generally organized at the time of the inauguration of temples or when wealthy devotees volunteered to arrange them for purpose of community gatherings. These *Mahotsavas* were preceded and followed by *Kirtanas* and attracted large crowds.
4. It expounds systematically the theory of *bhakti-rasa* and its emotionalism. It is divided into four *vibhaga-Purva*, *Daksina*, *Paschima* and *Uttara*, and each of these *vibhagas* are subdivided into two *laharis*. Any way, the *Purva-vibhaga* explains different types of *bhakti*, the *Daksina* treats *bhakti* as a *rasa*, and the *Paschima* describes the five *mukhya* and the *Purva* to unfold the history of the seven secondary *rasas*.
5. *Madhura-rasa* or *ujjala-rasa* is explained separately because of its prime importance in the *bhakti-rasa*. The text consisting of fifteen *Prakaranas* (divisions) deals with Krishna as a hero and his eternal consort Radha (Radha-Prakarana) exhaustively. The succeeding stages of *Madhura-rasa* are also mentioned in an elaborate manner.
6. For all these textual information please consult S.K. De, *Early History of the Vaishnava Faith and Movement in Bengal*, Calcutta, Second edition, 1961. Also see B.B. Majumdar, *Chaitanya Charitera Upadana*, where best possible details are provided regarding the literary works of the Gosvamis.
7. Chaitanya considers love for god as the fifth or *Panchama Purushartha* instead of

- the traditional four, i.e. *dharma*, *artha*, *kama*, and *moksha*. According to the Chaitanya School, *Panchamapurushartha* or 'love for god' is the superior of all goal aspired for; and for that matter, they ignored the importance of *varnasrama-dharma* when compared to love for God. For details, see Pransbananda Jash, *Glimpses of Hindu Cults and Culture*, Chapters - IX - X, PP. 95-119
8. Dr. Matiasusai Dharamony, *Thus Spoke Krishna*, Delhi, 1998, P.43
 9. *Svetasvatara Upanishad*, VI, 23
 10. Keith A.B., *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 1915, p.834; Banerjea J. N., *Development of Hindu Iconography*, pp 73-74
 11. Pranabananda Jash, *op.cit.*, pp.203-204
 12. *Narada Bhakti Sutra* (Swami Bhuteshananda) 2: *Sa tvasmin Parama-Premarupa* 0:1
 13. *Ibid*, 3; *Amrita-Svarupa ca.*
 14. *Sandilya-sutram*, 1.1.2.
 15. Svapnesvara on *Sandilya-Sutra*
 16. *Cultural Heritage of India*, Ramkrishna Mission, Calcutta, vol, IV.
 17. Rupa Gosvami, *op.cit.* Purva II, p.151
 18. *Ibid*, p.44:
Bhakti mukti sprha yavat pisacihridi vartate I
Tavat bhakti sukhasyatra kathan abhyudaya bhavet II
 19. *Ibid*, pp. 73-77
 20. *Ibid*, p.33:
Yatra raganavaptatvat Pravritrupajayata
Sasananaiva Sastrasya sa vaidhi baktirupeyate
 21. *Ibid*, pp. 162-63:
Iste svarasiki ragah Paramavistara bhavet
Tanmayi ya bhavedbhakti sastra ragatmikodita
 22. Rupa Gosvami, *op.cit.* Purva III, p. 196-197
 23. *Ibid*, Purva-IV, p.218 Acyutananda writes that the five associates (*Panchasakha* – Jagannatha, Balarama, Achyutananda, Yasovanta and Ananta) participated in the Kirtana processions of Chaitanya. The word *sakha* had a theoretical implication. In

Orissa and Bengal, these five *sakhas* of Chaitanya in the Kaliyuga were supposed to have impersonated the five companions of Krishna in Dvaparayuga who were Dama, Sudama, Srivasta, Suvala and Suvahu. It is stated that the love-fluid Of Radha-Krishna is *Prema-rupa* manifested in the eternal *rasa* exploit.

24. Rupa Gosvami, op. citDakshina-V, p.601;

*Mukhyastu Panchadhas sntah Pritah Preyanissa Vatsalah
Madhurascatyami jneya yatha Purvamanuthamah
Hasyadbhutastalah Virah KaruneRaudra ityapi
Bhayanaka savibhatsa iti gaunascha saptadha.*

25. Rupa Gosvami in his *Ujjavala Nilamani* (Navadvipa, 1st edition, 469 Gaurabda, 1955 AD, Verse-2, p.20 designed it as 'bhakti-rasa raja'

26. *Govinda Daser Kadacha*, p.10.

27. *Ibid*, p.13:

*Prem prem kare save prem Jane keva I
Premer ki tattva haya ramanira seva II
Abheda purushe nari jakhana janive I
Hridaye premer tatva apani sphurive II*

28. Krishnadasa Kaviraja in his *Chaitanya Charitamrita* (Madhya II, p. 680) mentions that love for Krishna is as the water of the Ganges and it is clearly distinguished from earthly love.

29. *Ibid*, *Adi*, Chapter-4

*Karma Prema domhakara Vibhinna Lakshmana I
Huna ar hema jaicne svarupe Vilakshna II*

30. For details, See *Ujjavala Nilamani* of Rupa Gosvami, pp. 225-291

31. Dasgupta S.B., *Obscure Religious Cults*, Calcutta, pp. XV-XVI.