

The Tenets of Bhakti in Madhavadeva's Works

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ATributeToSankaradeva.org presents a piece on the tenets of Bhakti in the Works of **Madhavadeva**, the foremost disciple and apostolic successor of Sankaradeva. The current piece, redacted from the *Journal of the Srimanta Sankaradeva Research Institute*, Vol I, Nagaon (1990), is authored by Dr. Karabi Deka Hazarika, Reader in Assamese, Dibrugarh University, who, in the course of her academic career, has done extensive research on the Life and Works of Madhavadeva, her doctoral thesis being on the same subject and entitled '*Madhavadeva: His Life, Art and Thought*' which has also been brought out in book-form by Bani Mandir, Guwahati. Dr. Karabi Deka Hazarika is also the first woman-editor of the Kirttana of Sankaradeva.

The *Bhagavata-purana* has given due importance to *bhakti* in the direction of realizing the Supreme. The neo-Vaisnava movement of Assam was based on the *bhakti-sutra* of the *Bhagavata-purana* and It brought the message of *prema-bhakti* to the people. **Sankaradeva**, **Madhavadeva** and their followers glorified the *bhakti* cult of the *Bhagavata* throughout their literary works and indicated to the individual that his voice could be heard by God if only it rose from a pure and sincere heart¹. Both Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva composed a good number of literary works including plays, songs and narratives giving importance on *bhakti*. Among the works of **Madhavadeva**, in the *Namaghosa*, a work of philosophical nature, the saint has announced the glory of *bhakti* and *bhakta* in an open voice. His *Bhakti-ratnavali*, a translation of Visnupuri's original work, brings together the choice verses of the *Bhagavata-purana* dealing with *bhakti*. Importance has been given on intense love towards God and complete self-surrender to Him in the plays and lyrics of Madhavadeva. In all of his works he puts *bhakti* in a higher position than *mukti*. *Dasya-bhakti* is the main significance of Madhavadeva's works which is a special attraction of his *Namaghosa*.

The Nature of Bhakti

Of all the works by Madhavadeva it is in the *Namaghosa* and the *Bhakti-ratnavali*

¹ Sankaradeva and His Times, p. 122

that we find the most elaborate discourses on the cult of *bhakti*. In his *Namaghosa* he has spoken of *bhakti* as **rasamayi**² (exhilarating), thereby expressing the intensity of his devotion. The lyrics he has composed are also expressive of his sincere devotion as well as his consideration that life without devotion is insignificant³. For him *bhakti* is not merely a feeling, he also considers it as a duty enjoined upon all. His devotion to Visnu as expressed in the *Namaghosa* is equivalent to an attitude of absolute surrender before the Supreme One. According to Narada's *Bhaktisutra*, *bhakti* signifies a state of profound and eternal love towards God⁴. Sandilya's *Bhaktisutra*⁵ defines *bhakti* as intense love for the Lord. According to *Bhakti-ratnavali*⁶, *bhakti* is love towards God as expressed through the devotee's body, words and mind. Compared with the beatific joy with which *bhakti* fills the mind of the devotee, even the joy of salvation is insignificant⁷. Nothing is unattainable by means of single-hearted devotion, because Visnu being the Supreme Giver presents the devotee with whatever he desires. But the true devotee is always selfless; he does not crave for anything except the attainment of *bhakti*. Still, such is the efficacy of *bhakti* that even without desiring it the devotee attains to salvation⁸. If a person sets on the path of devotion to Hari with some desire at heart, by and by he finds such a joy in his devotion that he forgets his earlier desire. His devotion is carried on for the joy it brings to him. Under such circumstances, his earlier desire is fulfilled by the Lord even when he does no longer seek it⁹. There is no need of one's becoming a learned man or one's acquiring the virtues of pilgrimage or other religious rituals for cultivating devotion to Hari¹⁰. Such a devotee does not go by castes; he can win the Lord's grace by serving Him with an unshaken faith¹¹. Even the most

² v. 1

³ Bargit, Nos. 23, 27, 37, 78, 80, 81

⁴ Bhagavata Bhakti Cult, p. 24

⁵ op. cit., p. 50

⁶ v. 287

⁷ *ibid.*, v. 115

⁸ *Bhakti-ratnavali*, vv. 54-55

⁹ *ibid.*, vv. 66-67

¹⁰ *Bhakti-ratnavali*, v, 146

¹¹ *Namaghosa*, vv. 479-485; *Bhagavad-gita*, 9-30, 31

wretched man can get liberation, if he seeks the devotion of the Lord sincerely¹².

Of the three paths prescribed for the attainment of the Lord, namely, *jnana* (knowledge), *karma* (renunciation) and *bhakti* (devotion), the highest importance has been attached to *bhakti* in the *Bhagavata-purana*, though all the three paths are mutually interlinked¹³. Only *bhakti* can free people from worldly attachments by ridding them of all doubts¹⁴. Without being assisted by *bhakti*, *jnana* and *karma* cannot lead one to the attainment of salvation. *Bhakti*, however, can alone fulfill one's desires without the assistance of either *jnana* or *karma*¹⁵. After repeatedly asserting that *bhakti* is superior to *mukti* (salvation), Madhavadeva further states that, after attaining to the state of salvation, the finally released one does not forsake the path of devotion to **Hari** even after being free from the cycle of re-birth¹⁶.

The close association with *bhaktas* has been regarded as a necessary precondition for arousing the attitude of *bhakti*. By associating with saintly persons one can purify one's mind by driving out all evil desires and the path of *bhakti* is thereby cleared¹⁷. Just as, the presence of fire can help one in getting rid of the fear of cold and darkness, so also the association of a saint can save people from all attachments to *karma*, worldly fears and the darkness of ignorance¹⁸.

¹² *Bhagavata-purana*, 6.2.18; Namaghosa, v. 484

¹³ *Bhagavata-mahatmya* (*Padma-purana*), vv. 11-71

¹⁴ *Bhakti-ratnavali*, v. 282; *Bhagavata-purana*, 1. 5.12

¹⁵ Namaghosa, v. 200

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, vv. 251, 282, 283, 288.

¹⁷ Namaghosa, v. 214

¹⁸ *ibid.*, vv. 437-438

Classification of bhakti

The *Bhagavata-purana* has mentioned various forms of *bhakti* on various occasions. The classification of *bhakti* in this book extends from three forms¹⁹ to as many as thirty-six forms²⁰. Of these, **nine forms of *bhakti*** have found frequent reference in the neo-Vaisnavite doctrine of Assam²¹. These nine forms are:-

1. *sravana* (listening to the recital of the Name and Glories of Hari)
2. *kirtana* (recital of the Glories and Name of Hari)
3. *smarana* (recalling of or meditation upon the Lord's Form)
4. *arcana* (worship of the Lord's image with flowers, etc.)
5. *vandana* (obeisance)
6. *padasevana* (personal services)
7. *dasya* (a servant's devotion to the Lord)
8. *sakhya* (a friend's love to the Lord) and
9. *atmanivedana* (self-surrender at the Lord's Feet)

A few other forms of *bhakti* have been noted in the *Bhakti-ratnavali*, namely, *bhagavati-bhakti*, *prema-bhakti* and *kevala-bhakti*. *Bhagavati-bhakti* is that state of the highest form of devotion by which the devotee attains to full wisdom by means of *Bhakti* and offers all activities and near and dear ones at the Feet of the Lord²². Fortified by a profound devotion, such a devotee is blessed with all the benefits of a religious life even though he does not perform his daily round of worship and services²³. As regards *prema-bhakti*, the *Bhakti-ratnavali* notes that, endowed with this purely emotional or loving

¹⁹ 2.1.5; 6.2.3

²⁰ 11. 3. 23-31

²¹ Kirtanaghosa, Prahlad-carita, based on Bhagavata-purana, Book VII.

²² Bhakti-ratnavali, v. 184

²³ op. cit. v. 183

devotion, the devotee, out of sheer love of the Lord, alternates between laughter and weeping. Shedding fear of social disapproval and false sense of shame, he loses all attachments. Even while uttering the **Name of God**, his voice is surcharged with the emotion of love²⁴. This feeling of devotion which, to such a devotee, brings joys even higher than the joy of salvation, is regarded as *prema-bhakti*. Regarding *kevala-bhakti* or *antaranga-bhakti* (intimate or all-loving devotion), the *Bhagavata* has mentioned²⁵ that the Lord Himself had advised Uddhava about this form of *bhakti*. Even the worldly-minded people can rid themselves of all sins by means of *kevala-bhakti*. Everyone including the Candala or the lowest in the social hierarchy can become pure through devotion²⁶.

We present below a brief introduction to the nine forms of *bhakti* as discussed by Madhavadeva: -

- Sravana: - Madhavadeva considers *sravana* as an excellent path to *bhakti*. Just as the appearance of autumn serves to purify water, similarly by listening to the recital of Hari's Glory or Name, a person's mind gets purified²⁷. Those who are indifferent to the chanting of Hari's Name and engage in worshipping other deities by sacrificing animals and birds are sure to be thrown into hell²⁸. They are like animals, concerned only with the need for food and sleep²⁹. On the other hand, people who find joy in the Name of the Lord, which is as sweet as nectar, experience a feeling of devotion that increases day by day, attain to a state of pure happiness with their hearts purified, acquire real knowledge, and are received into Vaikuntha (the

²⁴ *Bhakti-ratnavali*, vv. 229-230

²⁵ *Bhavartha-dipika*, XI. 28

²⁶ *Namaghosa*, v. 481, *Bhakti-ratnavali*, vv. 213-233

²⁷ *Namaghosa*, v. 15

²⁸ *Bhakti-ratnavali*, vv. 561-563

²⁹ *ibid.*, v. 576

Highest Abode)³⁰. The real devotees are aware that *sravana-bhakti* is higher than even *mukti*. Hence what they desire is only the joy of listening to the Glories of Hari from the lips of the saints³¹.

- Kirtana: - On several occasions both Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva have noted that the best way out of this dreadful world is *sravana* and *kirtana*. Even a sinner like Ajamila could earn salvation by simply uttering the Name of the Lord³². Only the fools seek Him by such methods as chanting obscure and difficult *mantras* and taking to other painful ways. His soft-sounding and short names such as **Rama** and **Krsna** are enough to bestow upon one the rewards of *dharma*, *artha*, *kama* and *moksa*³³. The tongue can very well serve as a bridge between men's soul and the goal of final release. By crossing this bridge through the recital of **Krsna's Name**, the devotee can easily win his heart's desire. The recital of the playful actions of God in His various incarnations on different occasions is the best path to *bhakti* during the *Kali-yuga*³⁴.
- Smarana: - One of the ways of attaining to the mood of *bhakti* is calling to mind the forms and actions of the Lord. Those who recall His form during the final hours of their lives are blessed with what is known as *sarupya-mukti* or liberation with the same form as of the Lord³⁵. Even those who

³⁰ *ibid.*, vv. 388-389

³¹ Namaghosa, v. 664

³² Kirtana, Ajamila-upakhyān, based on Bhagavata-purāna, Book VI, Namaghosa, v. 89

³³ Namaghosa, v. 766

³⁴ *ibid.* vv. 398-401

³⁵ *Bhakti-ratnavali*, v. 891

recall Him as an enemy are not deprived of such a bliss³⁶. By remembering Him in a mood of fear or anger also, one can easily attain to this form of liberation. The *Gopis* or the milk-maids won His favor by virtue of their constant meditation on Him in a mood of passionate desire³⁷. Hence, the devotee can have all his desires fulfilled if he meditates on Him with firm conviction.

- Padasevana: - When a person surrenders himself at the Feet of the Lord, those Feet serve as a boat enabling the person to cross the rough sea of the world. Thus a *bhakta* can cross the shore-less ocean of the world without building any bridge³⁸. Unlimited is the significance of surrendering oneself at His Feet. Even a low-caste *Candala* serving at **Visnu's Feet** is superior to a brahmana who does not serve at His Feet³⁹. Such is the joy a devotee derives from serving at the Lord's Feet that he does not seek *sayujya-mukti* or liberation by merging into the Lord because such a liberation deprives him of serving at the **Divine Feet**. Indifferent to all forms of worldly enjoyments, such a devotee only aspires after the fortune of touching with his head the dust of **Krsna's Feet**⁴⁰.
- Arcana: - To worship Visnu, Who is the Cause of the Universe, is to worship all gods and goddesses. Just as the water poured into the roots of the tree reaches its branches and leaves as well, so also the worshiping of Visnu pleases the other deities⁴¹. Though God Himself, being full of His own glory,

³⁶ Rajasuya, vv. 647-651

³⁷ Bhagavata-purana, 10, 44. 55

³⁸ Namaghosa, vv. 640, 723

³⁹ Bhakti-ratnavali, v. 1007

⁴⁰ Bhakti-ratnavali, v. 1028

⁴¹ Bhagavata-purana, IV. 39. 24. ; Bhakti-ratnavali, v. 1028

is not keen on being worshiped, any worship offered with sincerity pleases Him. He only accepts such worship as is offered selflessly, with a firm conviction. *Bhakti* needs a selfless service of God⁴². Since He exists in everybody's heart, by worshiping Him the devotee worships his own self⁴³.

- Vandana: - By making obeisance (vandana) to Visnu, the Lord of the Universe, man can achieve final release. Whenever a person is afflicted with some injury or some illness, he recalls the **Name of Hari** almost spontaneously. And yet, even by such involuntary invoking of the **Glorious Name**, he is easily placed with the Grace of Visnu⁴⁴.

- Dasya: - So long a devotee does not *surrender himself* at the Feet of Visnu, he lives as a prisoner within the four walls of his domestic life. When he sacrifices all his worldly possessions, his house and his kith and kin, at the Feet of the Lord and also considers himself as the servant of the Lord, he becomes free from all responsibilities and worries, and attains to salvation by his single-minded devotion to the Lord. **A devotee's ultimate goal of life is to become a servant of the Lord.** He considers the Master-servant relation with the Lord as the most desirable and seeks nothing other than the pleasure of worshiping His Feet as a servant⁴⁵.

- Sakhya: - This form of devotion is of utmost joy to a devotee. Any friendship with a human being involves many anxieties such as those of possible separations, etc.; but there is no such fear of separation from

⁴² Bhagavata-purana, 1. 2. 6

⁴³ *ibid.*, 11. 12. 15

⁴⁴ Namaghosa, v. 7

⁴⁵ Namaghosa, vv. 800, 801, 802, 803, 804

God who is omnipresent. The milkmen and the milkmaids of Vrndavana and even the birds and animals of that place enjoyed the fruits of friendship with the **Lord Krsna**⁴⁶. The deep feeling of joy arising out of a friend's love of God has found expression in Madhavadeva's *Namaghosa* as well⁴⁷. The friendly form of devotion is regarded as an easy path to attain to salvation.

- Atma-nivedana: - By coming closer to God through the path of self-surrender or *atma-nivedana*, the devotee gets rid of all worldly worries. God, too, is pleased with a devotee whose only concern is *bhakti* and He blesses him with the final release that is of the (nature of being on the) same level as Godhead. God demands a ***complete, willing self-surrender*** on the part of a devotee⁴⁸.

Classification of *bhaktas*

About the characteristics of a *bhakta*, Madhavadeva mentions that a *bhakta* in the real sense is desirous of good to all, full of forgiveness, quiet and saintly. By sacrificing everything including wealth, family and friends in favor of God, he devotes himself single-mindedly to the *sravana*, *kirtana* and *smarana* of Hari's Name and Glory, and directs his heart only to Hari⁴⁹. He is free from anger and never desires anything more than what is necessary for keeping his body and soul together. A man of devotion is solely attached to God and mentally detached from worldly pleasures and aspirations. He is free from any trace of selfishness⁵⁰.

Sankaradeva, in his ***Bhakti-ratnakara***, has divided the *bhaktas* into three categories,

⁴⁶ *Bhakti-ratnavali*, v. 1123

⁴⁷ v. 128

⁴⁸ *Bhagavata-purana*, 11. 12. 15; *Bhakti-ratnavali*, vv. 1134-1137

⁴⁹ *Bhakti-ratnavali*, vv. 323-324

⁵⁰ *Bhagavata-purana*, 8.1.10

(i) *uttama*⁵¹ (the best), (ii) *madhyama*⁵² (the mediocre) and *prakrta*⁵³ (the lowest). The *Bhakti-ratnavali* of Madhavadeva narrates the greatness of all these three categories of *bhaktas*, and by giving the accounts of various anecdotes pertaining to *nirguna bhaktas* (devotees without any desire), has glorified *nirguna-bhakti*. A devotee without desire finds God in his own heart. Those who are *saguna bhaktas* (devotees with some desire) also gain through their devotion.

Of all the different tenors of *bhakti*, Madhavadeva concentrated upon *dasya-bhakti*. It is the frequent eulogisation of this variant of *bhakti* which gives the *Namaghosa* and other works of him a distinctive stamp of tremendous impact and a distinctive quality among the prevalent Hindu tradition of the time.

⁵¹ ch. 16

⁵² ch. 17

⁵³ ch. 18