

BHAKTI-MARGA, THE PATH OF DEVOTION AND LOVE

PART I

Lakshminath Bezbaroa

Lakshminath Bezbaroa (1868-1938), the ‘unofficial dictator’ of Assamese literature, is best known and honoured most as an exponent of the Vaishnava faith and philosophy of Sankaradeva and of that Saint’s great contributions to the culture of Assam. He was very well equipped for the task, having been born to a family of devout Mahapurushiyas (members of Sankaradeva’s school). His father Dinanath Bezbaroa, who had written the Life of Sankaradeva and His Companion Saints (*Bar-Carita*) and copied the Book with great care for the two Sattras of Kamalabari and Barpeta, was such a passionately religious man that when he saw his own end fast approaching, he had a big merchandise boat built for him, made his way in that boat to Kamalabari Sattra (which monastery, incidentally, was built on the orange grove of his ancestor Purusottama Baruwa), and passed away there in untold bliss. He used to lie flat on the ground in obeisance as soon as the tips of the tall trees of those holy places were sighted as he approached them from a distance. Quite naturally, then, Lakshminath dived into and swam in this intensely Vaishnava atmosphere and learnt many things as naturally as learning to breathe. He passed some of his tender years in Barpeta, with its famous Sattra, and later in North Lakhimpur and other places, where he had the opportunity of knowing at first hand the practices of the monks and witnessing their dramatic shows.

When he came to Calcutta for college education, he saw how modern scholarship was applied to the study of ancient literature. The *Jonaki*, the journal with which he was at first associated, paid attention to the age of Sankaradeva but the sail caught the wind only when Bezbaroa started his monthly *Bahi* in 1909. He began to put in more and more matter about Sankaradeva, Vaishnavism and Vaishnava Saints and writers by way of editorials and independent essays. One of the significant features of the Journal in this direction was the serial publication of a redaction of an old prose biography of Sankaradeva and the other Saints (which came to be later edited and published by Dr. Maheswar Neog under the title ‘*Bardowa Guru Carita*’); and this brought much food to the modern reader too. But the importance thus given to the Sankaradeva Movement could not be tolerated by a section of people; and there ensued a full-scale battle between the *Bahi* and the journal started by the other group of people called *Asam-pradipika*. These ‘controversies’ mainly centered around two points: if Sankaradeva had anything to do with the Chaitanya Movement of Bengal; and if Assamese Brahman Saints like Damodaradeva were not in the following of Sankaradeva, a Kayastha. At the beginning, Bezbaroa was fighting all alone against the aggression of these writers, but soon he was joined by a brilliant young professor of English, Banikanta Kakati (writing as ‘Bhavananda Pathak’); and the battle brought easy victory on to the *Bahi* side.

In 1911, Bezbaroa published a small volume *Sankaradeva* (in Assamese) which gave a life-sketch of the Saint-poet and discussed a few other things. Some of Bezbaroa’s comments here on the writings of Sankaradeva touch a high level of literary judgement and mark the glorious beginning of literary criticism in the Assamese language. In 1914 came out his *Sri Sankaradeva aru Sri Madhavadeva* (in Assamese), which is based on the *carita* or biographical tradition in the Vaishnava colleges and on what he gathered from his own father. It is a ‘piece of inspired work of sustained beauty’. Written with a view to meeting needs of modern readers with their English education, it does not neglect the religious people, who do still adore this work as of much spiritual significance. In Volume VIII of the *Bahi* (1917), Bezbaroa started a series of essays under a general caption, *Sri Krsna Katha*. Volume XIV saw the beginning of another series, *Tattva Katha*. These two groups of essays on the Vaishnava faith and philosophy should perhaps

go down the pages of our literary history as giving us the best in Lakshminath Bezbaroa. They are a testimony to his deep and wide-ranging studies in kindred works and represent his mature and serious thought as he drinks deep in the fountain of Upanishadic seers' spiritualism on the one hand and of the beautiful creations of Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva on the other. There are some very marvelous passages marked by a rich and real creative urge and an excellent literary style.

Bezbaroa's daughter and son-in-law lived in the state of Baroda, where the latter was an officer of the Gaekwad. In that connection, he came to Baroda and came into close contact with the Maharaja. The Maharaja, impressed greatly by Bezbaroa's scholarship, requested him to deliver a series of two lectures. It was a rare honour, for it is only great persons like Rabindranath Tagore, Dr. S Radhakrishnan, Sir CV Raman and Dr RG Bhandarkar who were invited to give talks in the palace. He chose for his subject a general account of Vaishnavism in India with special reference to Assam and an interpretation of the *Rasa* of Krishna. The two lectures were delivered in 1934 in the Baroda durbar and was attended and much appreciated by the Maharaja among others. They were later published by the Department of Education in the form of two small books.

Two essays on Bhakti Marga were also prepared by Bezbaroa to be delivered somewhere, but they were not actually so delivered. These four essays (now brought out as *Religion of Love and Devotion*, Dr. Maheswar Neog ed.) are remarkable for their easy grasp on the subject, and a form of expression characterized by sincerity and self-confidence.

On receiving a copy of Bezbaroa's first lecture, Prof. Banikanta Kakati wrote to him: -

"It is so beautiful and penetrating in its simplicity. Nowhere is there a rush of redundant matter or any vague confusion of conceptions; - it showed as if everything comes from the intuitions of the soul like the simple and deeply significant writings in the Bible. Had it not been so, would the Raja of a Native State of Western India risen to greet you like what he did? You have rendered bright by dint of the glistening lustre of your feelings whatever was unclear or hazy in my tiny book. My feeble voice is certainly there in the echoes of praises that reverberate in our papers."

[From *Religion of Love and Devotion*, Introduction by Dr. Maheswar Neog, (edited)]

We, at ATributeToSankaradeva.org, do feel proud to present three of these excellent essays of Lakshminath Bezbaroa. The current piece deals with Bhakti Marga (Part I). For the other two papers click below: -

1. www.tributetosankaradeva.org/bhakti_marga_II.pdf
2. www.tributetosankaradeva.org/History_of_Vaisnavism.pdf

Readers will note that most of the slokas quoted by Bezbaroa, esp. those from the *Bhagavad-Gita* and the *Srimad-Bhagavata*, in these lectures, are exactly those chosen by Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva for rendering in their own works. Some of these slokas are indicated in the footnotes. The sources have been unearthed by Dr. M. Neog (op. cit). Bezbaroa's speeches also highlight the sastric basis of the faith of Sankaradeva.

Editing Notes: - The slokas as well as quotations given in Devanagari in the original paper have been transliterated.

BHAKTI-MARGA, THE PATH OF DEVOTION AND LOVE

PART I

Hindu sastras indicate four principal margas or paths leading to union with God. A man may attain salvation by following any one of these paths. They are Karma Marga or the path of action, Yoga Marga or the path of psychic concentration, Jnana Marga or the path of knowledge and Bhakti Marga or the path of devotion and love. The aim of all these margas is the same, though their methods are different. Karma Marga, as I have just said, is the path of action. At the beginning a man does Karma or action, being guided by worldly desires. The second stage is: instead of desiring to enjoy the fruits of his actions in this world a man desires the fruit in the world to come i.e., heaven. In the third stage, he renounces all fruits of his action and dedicates them to God, and looks forward to the eternal bliss of union with the Supreme Maker. This is called Karma Yoga. There is yet a fourth (the highest) stage. In this stage the devotee does Karma pertaining to God and God only. Without thinking for a moment anything about the consequence, because his love and devotion to God become a part and parcel of Him, and he merges his self completely in Him. His love of God becomes entirely free from any consideration whatsoever and becomes his svabhava i.e., nature, as it happened in the case of the milkmaids of Vrindavana.

The knowledge of the essential nature of God or Brahman is the path followed by the votaries of Jnana Marga. It may be called also the path of wisdom. The great Sankaracharya represents this second school of thought. Patanjali is the exponent of the school of thought called Yoga Marga, which may be translated into English as the path of psychic concentration.

In to-day's article, instead of dilating upon the above three Margas or paths, I will come straight to **Bhakti Marga** or the path of devotion and love, the subject-matter of my discourse. The great Ramanuja Acharya, and after him a host of followers of his school and others, including **Sri Sankaradeva** of Assam, and Sri Chaitanyadeva of Bengal, who is reputed to be a follower of Madhvacharya and to belong to the Madhva Sampradaya or sect, expounded the philosophy and merit of this path, and propounded the cult throughout the length and breadth of India.

The inimitable *Bhagavadgita*, a book that has no equal throughout the world, has dealt with and harmonized all these different schools of thought in a remarkable manner. Although the votaries of each school of thought have variously interpreted the teachings of the Gita to suit their own paths, the *summum bonum* of the teachings of the Gita is **Bhakti**, which it says is *guhyatama*, i.e., the “Greatest Secret”. Of all the paths, **Sri Krishna** gives prominence to bhakti-yoga without the least doubt. The mahapurana *Srimad-bhagavata* is replete with words giving prominence to bhakti throughout the Twelve Cantos it is composed of. In fact, Krishna reconciles the conflicting views of the different schools of thought, and teaches the religion of devotion and love, of viewing all creatures as one’s own self and of dedication of every action to the service of God. Bhakti is the only way to attain mukti or salvation or eternal bliss which is, and ought to be, the main endeavour of mankind.

What is bhakti? Bhakti means intense love of God. According to Veda-Vyasa unswerving attachment to the worship of God is bhakti. This will lead to love or prema. When prema ripens into maturity, the outward worship will drop down as the dower of a fruit.

According to Garga the hearing and reciting of God’s Name and His *lila* is bhakti.

According to Sandilya, to be immersed completely in Paramatman and thus to enjoy full bliss is bhakti.

Narada says: When after dedicating all actions to God and resigning one’s self entirely to Him, one happens to lose sight of Him and, in consequence thereof, becomes disconsolate and almost distracted, then the real bhakti creeps in. When a man in all sincerity and from the very bottom of his heart can say: ‘O God, I am doing everything, having been guided by you; I am a mere machine, and you are the only mechanic; and all my thoughts and deeds are only for your adoration and worship’, then nothing remains to be said or done. But in the midst of this, if his ego comes in and says, ‘I am the doer’, or even the slightest feeling of egoism creeps in, then God disappears from his mind, and until by totally discarding that feeling, the original feeling of selflessness is restored, the true state of real bhakti, with which God is inseparable, does not come in. Mother Yasoda

with all her resources could not tie up Krishna to the husking machine until her feeling of egoism, viz., that ‘I am the mother of Krishna, and I will tie him up to the husking machine’, vanished away from her mind. Every time the ropes she had brought to tie up Krishna were found short by the breadth of two fingers. She ransacked her whole house and brought all the ropes she could lay her hands upon and joined them together; yet at the time of tying, they were found likewise short. After the failure of all her endeavours, when the feeling of resignation came into her mind and the egoism vanished, Krishna of His own accord accepted the tie, and the length of the rope sufficed. Similarly, when the Vraja gopis’ search for Krishna with a view to be able to find Him out became fruitless, and they returned to their original place, viz., the bank of the Yamuna, where they were with Krishna before His disappearance, and commenced praying and crying for Him with all the earnestness they could command, Krishna reappeared before them. That is why **Mahapurusha Madhavadeva**, the great disciple of the Vaishnava reformer **Sri Sankaradeva** of Assam, did put the following sloka at the beginning of his renowned book of psalms, called *Namaghosa*: -

**ye muktavapi nisprah pratipadpronmiladanandadam
yamasthaya samastamastakamanim kurvanti sve vase |
tan bhaktanapi tancha bhaktimapi tam bhaktapriyam SriHarim
vande santamarthaye ‘nudivasam nityam saranyam bhaje ||**

**‘To those Bhaktas, Who have no longing even for mukti or salvation and
Whose sole aim is the love of God, I bow down my head with all reverence. I devote
my whole existence to Him, Who is attached to His Bhakta.’**

In short, the least trace of egoism such as ‘I am’ and ‘This is mine’, is a great bar between God and the devotee. Of course, it is very difficult to shake off the ego and in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred it has been found impossible. Ramkrishna Paramhansa, the saint of Dakshineswar, has, therefore, said, “Since it does not go, let it remain as dāsa-āmi i.e., a slave ego of God”.

Sri-Krishna at the time of sending Uddhava to Vrindavana, carrying His message of consolation to the gopis, spoke to him thus: -

**ta manmanaska matprana madarthe tyaktadaihikah |
mameva dayitam presthamatmanam manasa gatah |**

ye tyaktalokadharmascha madarthe tan bibharmyaham ॥
mayi tah preyasam presthe durasthe gokulastriyah ।
smarantyo'nga ! vimuhyanti virahautkanthyavihvalah ॥
dharayantyatikrccrena prayah pranam kathancana ।
pratyagamanasandeshairballavyo me madatmikah ॥

‘O Uddhava, the gopis have entirely dedicated their mind to Me. I am their life and soul. For Me only they have completely discarded their personal and social usages, and have ignored the injunctions of dharma-sastras. One who acts like this, I always protect him. The gopis know me to be their dearest of the dear. I am away from them, but they feel My separation so intensely that they have lost self-consciousness. Their life still continues only because of their expectation of My return to Vrindavana. I am their soul, and they are Mine.’

Bhakti is nirodha. The full renunciation of social and Vedic actions is nirodha. It is Samnyasa. When a bhakta takes shelter in God, the social and Vedic actions drop off of their own accord. That class of bhakta is free from the jnana of dharma and adharma. His complete devotion to God frees him from any desire except the Love and Service of God. But up to the time when a novice bhakta does not come up to the standard, he ought to follow the injunctions of the Vedas and smritis of course do those actions that are not inimical to bhakti. The sastric actions naturally drop off of themselves from the life of a matured devotee without any effort.

Even in such a state the gopis did not forget that Krishna is the Paramatman, God; so says the *Bhakti-sutra* of Narada: -

**tatrapi na mahatmyajnanavismrtyapavadah ।
tadvihinam baranamiva ।**

‘Love generated from want of *mahatmya-jnana*, i.e., the knowledge of the divine nature of the person who is the object of love, is like the tainted love of a dissolute.’

In their excursion to Vrindavana in the night of the full-moon, to meet their beloved **Sri Krishna**, when the gopis heard Krishna speaking to them unpleasantly about the impropriety of meeting Him there, they were mortified. And after recovering from the shock, they replied to Him as under: -

**maivam vibho 'rhati bhavan gaditum nrsamsam
santyajya sarvavisayamstava padamulam |
bhakta bhajasva duravagraha ma tyajasman
devo yathadipuruso bhajate mumuksun ||**

'O Krishna, Thou shouldst not have spoken to us cruelly like this. We have come to Thee, leaving everything of ours, knowing that Thou art the Friend and the Soul of universe and the basis of all religious duties. We are certainly conscious that, as the Supreme Being assumed form only to save and protect the gods of suraloka, Thou hast taken birth to save and protect the people of Vraja.'

Again: -

'We know for certain, O Govinda, that Thou art not the son of Yashoda, but You have come to Yadukula as the protector of the world at the request of Brahma.'

Nanda and Yasoda also loved Krishna extremely; yet in their love the idea of Krishna as a divine being was not absent, although the excessive love for Krishna as their darling son used to cloud their mind every now and then. The Pandavas in their sakhya love were also conscious of the divine nature of Sri Krishna. Kunti, the mother of the Pandavas, had that consciousness or knowledge always in her mind with regard to Krishna more than anybody else amongst the Kauravas.

Narada says in his *Bhakti-sutra*, *sa tu karmajnanayogebhyo 'pyadhikatara*, 'Bhakti is superior to karma, jnana and yoga'. In the Bhagvad-gita, Krishna Himself says: -

**tapasvibhyo 'dhiko yogi jnanibhyo 'pi mato 'dhikah |
karmibhyaschadhiko yogi tasmad yogi bhavarjuna ||
yoginamapi sarvesam madgatenantaratmana |
sraddhavan bhajate yo mam sa me yuktatamo matah ||**

Also: -

samam sarvesu bhutesu, etc.

Without God's Grace, Bhakti is not attainable. Gajendra, the king of the elephants, got mukti without the help of jnana. Bhakti is not dependent on jnana or any other method. It does not depend upon learning, the offering of gifts, sacrifices, or austerities. Absolute resignation to God is the main way, jnana or knowledge alone cannot give salvation to a man without the help of bhakti. For example, you know all about your king,

such as that he is kind, handsome, learned, brave, popular, so on and so forth. But is this knowledge of any avail? Suppose, you know that sweets are prepared with sugar, ghee and other tasteful ingredients. Does that knowledge give you satiety? Or does it drive away your hunger? That is why Paramhansa Ramkrishnadev used to tell his disciple, “You have entered into a mango garden full of ripe and luscious mangoes. Why waste time in trying to count the number of the mango trees, or discussing about the status or position and other qualities of the owner of the garden. These discussions will not satisfy your hunger”.

Narada says, *phalarupatvat*, ‘Bhakti is the fruit of knowledge’. The followers of jnana-marga, of course, disputes this.

As I have already said, Bhaktas of the highest plane do not care for salvation. They care for bhakti and bhakti alone i.e., the service of God. But as a matter of course, salvation or mukti follows them.

God is sama, i.e., even and just to everyone. He has got no partiality for any one. Yet He is like a kalpa-vriksha. He gives what one sincerely prays for. He is bhakta-vatsala, i.e., attached to His devotees. He cannot give up His bhakta as His bhakta is unable to give Him up, because He is the life and soul of His bhakta, and he cannot live without Him. God follows His bhakta, having His Name in his mouth, like a cow following a man carrying her calf with him.

“The first step for a bhakta is to associate with a bhakta and with due respect and earnestness, to listen to his advice and please him with personal services, to avoid the company of people plunged in the worldly affairs and also to avoid people who indulge in gramya katha i.e., vulgar talk. Then, following the directions of the bhakta Whom you should regard as your preceptor, you are to worship God, dedicating the fruits of all your actions to God. Recite **God’s Name**, and pray to Him with all the earnestness you can command. Think of Him and Him alone in your heart, and do not get yourself implicated in the affairs of the world, which are fleeting and transitory. Show regard to every form of

life as the seat of God in it¹” - Such was the advice given by the great **Prahlada** to the children of the Daityas, who were his school-mates.

To attain Bhakti a man should be extremely eager, and his mind should be concentrated in it, otherwise it will flag. For house-holders and rulers and kings the method prescribed by Vasistha, the preceptor of **Ramachandra**, is the best. He said: -

**antareko bahirnana hyantarbodho bahirjadam |
antastyagi vahihsamgi loke vicara Raghava² ||**

‘In your heart, view only one God without a second, but in the outside world see Him as many, i.e., in His multifarious manifestations. You have jnana or knowledge in your heart, but remain as jada or inert or stupid in your behaviour with the outside world. Be tyagi or relinquishing in your mind, but show samga or attachment in society.’

In the Third Canto of the *Bhagavata*, **Kapila** advises his mother, Devahuti, “O Mother, bhakti is differentiated in accordance with the nature of man. A man naturally given to anger, enmity, pride and boasting can give Me bhakti that is called tamasa bhakti. One who worships me in a pratima i.e. idol, being actuated by motive of gain of wealth and fame, does rajasa bhakti. The bhakti of one trying to be free from sin, and desiring to please God through yajna, yaga and other actions of merit by dedicating the fruits of his actions to God is sattvika bhakti. But the bhakti of one whose heart and soul naturally flows towards Me, i.e. God, as the water of rivers flows towards the ocean and one, whose mind, without the slightest tinge of self, is devoted to Me and who listens to, and recites **My Name**, and thinks of Me incessantly, is called *nirguna bhakti-yoga*. This class of bhakta does not care for the five different kinds of mukti or salvation, such as salokya, sarupya, etc., even when offered. He wants to devote his life wholly to My Service and to nothing else. This kind of bhakti is also called *aikantika* and *atyantika bhakti* i.e., bhakti or love with a singleness of purpose. A bhakta of this class considers all creatures of the world as his kin, shows respects to the superior, kindness to the poor, and genuine friendship to equals. He subdues his passion and desires, takes recourse to straightforwardness in his actions and dealings with others without an exception,

¹ Kirttana-ghosa, Prahlada Caritra, 160-62

² Nama-ghosa, 597

associates with good and pious people, and discards pride and prejudice altogether. These bhaktas attain Me easily.

“There are some people who, neglecting all these, tries to please Me by worshipping pratima or idols. Their efforts bear no real fruit. I pervade the whole universe. To worship only idols with a view to getting Me is like pouring clarified butter on ashes. He is boastful and no better than an enemy to Me. He cannot have peace in his mind. Although he worships Me in My idols with innumerable offerings, I am never pleased with him. He can of course worship Me in My idols until he realizes and sees Me seated in his own heart. I do not consider any body superior to the *aikantika* and *atyantika* bhakta”.

The best example of such a bhakta is **Prahlada**. Narasimha offered to give him boons. Prahlada refused to have any, saying, “O Lord, one who, after seeing You, prays for worldly welfare, cannot be called Your servant. He must be demented. I am Your *niskama bhritya*, and not a bania to ask for a price of my services to You”.

Mahamuni Durvasa gave offence to **King Ambarisha**, the great bhakta of Vishnu. The Sudarsanachakra of Vishnu was always near Ambarisha to guard him. Seeing Durvasa very rudely insulting Ambarisha, the Sudarsana got angry and began to chase Durvasa. Durvasa ran for his life. He roamed throughout the world, but none could dare save him from the wrath of the Sudarsana. At last Durvasa, followed by the Sudarsana came to Vaikuntha and implored Vishnu to save his life. Vishnu spoke to Durvasa (as narrated in the Ninth Book of the *Bhagavata*), “O Durvasa, a bhakta is My heart and I am the heart of the bhakta. He does not think of anything else but Me. I too do likewise. So go back to Ambarisha and ask for his pardon. I cannot save you if he does not.

So Durvasa had to return to Ambarisha, still followed by the Sudarsana, and the Bhakta King not only pardoned him, but behaved so ideally as a true bhakta does that Durvasa and all others were greatly surprised.

That is why in differentiating between jnana and bhakti the great saint of Dakshineswar, I mean Ramkrishna Paramhansa Deva, compared bhakti to a lady having

free access to the andarmahal of a zamindar or a great man, likened jnana to a male visitor who had to wait outside for permission to enter.

God's Mercy, as well as the kindness of a bhakta-preceptor, is the only way to bhakti that eventually leads to salvation. In the Fifth Book of the *Bhagavata*, **Jada-Bharata** speaks to King Rahugana, "O Rahugana, bhakti cannot be attained to by tapasya, nor by yaga or other karmas, nor by the renouncing of the world by taking recourse to yoga, nor by the studying of the Vedas and the Vedanta nor by the performing of sandhya, nor by ablutions in the holy waters and by the offering of tarpana to the manes, nor by agnihotra and other yajnas, nor by austerities such as suryopasthapanana or grismatapasevana, but it comes by the Grace of God and God's Bhaktas". That is why the *Bhagavata* has repeatedly asserted that **satsanga, the association with Bhaktas**, is the surest way to Bhakti. Narada says in his *Bhakti-sutra, tasmistajjane bhedabhavat*, 'There is no difference between God and His Bhakta because God is attached to Bhakta. The Lord thus said to Narada: -

**naham tisthami vaikunthe yoginam hrdaye na ca |
madbhakta yatra gayanti tatra tisthami narada³ ||**

'O Narada, I do not stay in Vaikuntha, nor in the hearts of yogis. I stay where My Bhaktas recite My Name and pray.'

Friends, Bhakti is the unparalleled royal road to God, illumined by the instructions of the Guru. So let us follow the path, following the footsteps of the mother Sruti so that there cannot be any slip.

**Haribhaktirajamarge Gurupadanakhacandrikadhaute |
srutijanani padapaddhatimanusaratam na kuto 'pi skhalanam⁴ ||**

[Reproduced from *Religion of Love and Devotion*, Dr. Maheswar Neog ed., Asam Sahitya Sabha, 1968]

³ Nama-ghosa, 4

⁴ Nama-ghosa, 624