

# BHAKTI-MARGA, THE PATH OF DEVOTION AND LOVE

## PART II

Lakshminath Bezbaroa

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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 II). For the other two papers click below: -

1. [www.tributetosankaradeva.org/bhakti\\_marga\\_I.pdf](http://www.tributetosankaradeva.org/bhakti_marga_I.pdf)
2. [www.tributetosankaradeva.org/History\\_of\\_Vaisnavism.pdf](http://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.

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

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## PART II

In all the great religions current in the world and worth the name the pith and marrow is bhakti. Christianity may also be considered as based on bhakti like Vaishnavism in India. Jesus Christ's teaching – love of God and love of humanity – is akin to the teachings of Vaishnavism. If, however, the Aquarian Gospel of Jesus the Christ could be taken as authority, then the idea of Krishna and Christ as regards salvation would amount to very much the same, for Jesus is reported therein to have declared, "Man is saved when he has reached Deific Life, when he and God are one".

But the Biblical idea of creation is contrary to the Hindu idea as stated in the puranas and the *Bhagavadgita*. According to the Bible, God finished the creation in six days and took rest on the seventh. The *Gita* teaches that the creation is the result of evolution from Prakriti or Nature which represents the primal elements and forces forming the material for the creation of the Universe. It consists of three gunas or qualities, viz., sattwa, rajas and tamas. Sattwa means reality and goodness. Rajas implies motion, activity and also a mixture of knowledge and ignorance. Tamas is darkness, ignorance and inertia. Light and clearness, activity and attachment and ignorance and delusion are the nature of the three gunas respectively, viz., sattwa, rajas and tamas. According to the *Gita*, the creation is the permutation and combination of these three gunas in various proportions. A man, in whom sattwa guna preponderates, is characterized by self-control, reverence and other godly attributes. Lust, anger, greed, arrogance and envy are the distinguishing traits of a man who is dominated by rajas guna. Laziness, ignorance, delusion and the like are the characteristics of tamasic nature. Unlike the theory of the Bible with regard to creation the theory or idea of creation according to the Hindu sastras - particularly of the *Gita* - is more akin to the modern sciences. The world, without doubt, has arrived at the present form by a process of gradual evolution. Geology and Biology bear testimony to the formation of the crust of the earth, mountains, and the hardened layers of mud and sands forming into rocks containing prints and marks of plants and vegetation and putrified fossils of animal species that lived upon the earth for ages gone by, and were supplanted by other more developed species that also gradually died out. The uppermost layers have revealed species allied more closely to

those that are in existence. They clearly show that man appeared latest among the living beings on earth. These clearly prove a gradual evolution, and not the instantaneous creation as the Bible would say, according to which the man was created on the sixth day of the creation, and fishes, beasts and birds preceded them. Astronomy has lent its support to Geology and Biology, showing that the heavenly bodies have passed and are still passing through the process of birth, growth and decay. They all prove that millions and millions of years have passed before the earth and its inhabitants have come to the present stage.

According to the puranas the first incarnation of God on earth was in the form of a fish, the water-animal. Then comes the tortoise, the land-and-water animal. Then appears the boar, i.e., the animal that likes to live on muddy soil. Then comes Nara-simha, half-man and half-beast. After that comes Vamana, a dwarf-man. Then Parasurama, an angry hunter. Then comes the tiller of the soil, Haladhara. Then comes Rama, the ideally perfect man made after God. Everyone of us may not accept this theory as true, but it cannot be denied that man is the evolution of ages, and not the creation after within two days of the creation of the beasts and birds.

The Sankhya and the Yoga systems inculcate the theory of evolution. The theory of illusion as the theory of creation originated with Sankaracharya, the propounder of the absolute non-dualist school of the Vedanta philosophy. He says, the world is an illusion, and it has got no reality. Brahman, through His maya or illusion, is seen as the world, just like a rope is mistaken for a snake. When true jnana dawns, the illusion vanishes and Brahman alone exists. It is through ignorance only that we see ourselves as entities separated from God. When the illusion is cast off, the realization of unity comes in. That is true salvation. Sankara's school of thought is based on the Vedanta philosophy founded on the Upanishads.

There is another school of thought based also on the Vedanta led by Ramanujacharya. This school is called Visistadvaitavad, or qualified monism. Vaishnavism, speaking very generally, follows this path, and among others, Nimbadiya, Vishnusvami, Vallabhacharya, Sankaradeva and Chaitanyadeva are the most prominent. They hold that the world is a true evolution of ekamevadvitiya Brahman and not an illusion, and it is His various manifestations. They hold that the universe evolves under

Divine Will. Bhakti, they say, is the principal means to come to God. Jivatma, the individual self, has been separated from Parmatman or Brahman by His will, and it cannot be united with God without His mercy. Bhakti is the stepping stone to mukti, the highest stage of bliss, after which there is no rebirth.

The *Gita* follows the view of Vedanta that God is the only reality and that the universe is a veil thrown over Him. The Supreme Spirit pervades and sustains the universe, and He is the cause of creation, existence and extinction. The *Gita* takes the world as a real, and points out the way to be free from it, and return to the Supreme Maker. It inculcates the doctrine of karma, and says that there is no escape from reincarnation, and to suffer pain and pleasure in accordance with his karma unless he leads the life of a bhakta and prays to God for escape. Bhakti, says the *Gita*, is the easiest way to accomplish this object.

The Biblical idea of salvation is almost the same as what we find in our scriptures called Vedas viz., happiness and pleasure to be enjoyed in paradise earned by good deeds in this world. The *Gita* does not hold it as the highest ideal.

**Sri Krishna** towards the latter part of His discourse in the *Gita* gives out the “**Greatest Secret**” to Arjuna and says: -

**Manmana bhava madbhakto madyaji mam namaskuru |  
Mamevaisyasi satyam te pratijane priyo ‘asi me<sup>1</sup>. ||  
sarva dharman parityajya mamekam saranam vraja |  
Aham tvam sarva papebhyo moksaisyami ma sucah ||**

**‘O Arjuna, you fix your mind on Me, love Me, worship Me and salute to Me. Leaving all the dharmas, take shelter in Me. I will free you from all sins. I tell you all this because I love you.’**

Bhakti is anuragatmika, i.e., of the nature of attachment. Attachment gives pain when separation comes in. This is applicable only to worldly attachment and not to the attachment or ardour of love for God, because there is no separation in this case and,

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<sup>1</sup> Nama-ghosa, 612

therefore, no pain. It is the source of eternal happiness. Therefore, Bhakti is superior to jnana and yoga. The Gita says: -

**yoginamapi sarvesam madgatenantaratmana |  
sraddhavan bhajate yo mam sa me yuktatamo matah ||**

The signs of prema are regard (prema), great respect (bahumana), love and affection (priti), separation (viraha), non-dependence on others with eagerness or doubt (itaravicikitsa), uttering the Glory (mahimakirtana), and living only for the beloved and the act of belonging to him or her (tadiyata), single-minded devotion, and having the heart solely set on the object of love, etc. As for example, the regard and respect of the Pandavas and their mother, Kunti, for **Krishna**. Prahlada, only on seeing the character, 'ka' (**K**), remembered **Krishna**. This is bahumana. Vidura's love of Krishna is an example of priti. The gopis' are the well-known pangs of separation. Bhisma and Veda Vyasa's narrating and uttering the **Glories of Krishna** is an example of mahimakirtana. The gopis' living only for Krishna, Hanuman's living only for Ramachandra, Bali's single-minded devotion are other great examples.

God is aja, i.e., self-existent, without birth. Yet, out of His kindness for people, He takes birth and assumes form. His birth and actions are supernatural. One who keeping this in mind loves and worships Him, gets salvation. The *Bhagavata* says, '**anugrahaya bhaktanam manusam dehamasritah**', 'To favour His bhaktas He takes recourse to a body as that of a man'. Sandilya says in his *Bhakti-sutra*, '*mukhyam tasya karunyam*'. But, in reality, Krishna Vasudeva's body is unlike the body of a mortal man. It is sat-chit-ananda-vigraha. It is like a material (sthula) expression to enact His supernatural *lila*. All the principal sastras declare this with one voice. In the *Gita* Krishna says: -

**yasmatksaramatito 'hamaksaradapi cottamah |  
ato 'smi loke vede ca prathitah purusottamah ||**

**'Because I am beyond kshara, i.e., perishable, and also superior to akshara, i.e., imperishable, I am called Purushottama.'**

Again: -

yo mamevamasammudho purusottamam |  
sa sarvavidbhajati mam sarvabhavena bhārata ||

‘One who knows Me like this, i.e., as Purushottama, he knows all, and he loves me leaving out everything else.’

There are nine kinds of bhakti mentioned in the Bhagavata viz.,

**sravanam kirtanam visnoh smaranam padasevanam |**  
**arcanam vandanam dasyam sakhyamatmanivedanam ||**

**Sravana** is listening to **God’s Names and Actions** called *lila*. **Kirtana** is the reciting of them. **Smarana** is the thinking and remembering of them. **Pada-sevana** is the act of offering Him service. **Archana** is the worship of his idols. **Vandana** is salutation to Him. **Dasya** is the servitude to Him as of a servant. **Sakhya** is the loving of Him as of a real friend. **Atma-nivedana** is self-resignation to Him. These are the nine types of bhakti. Out of these, **Sravana and Kirtana** have been given prominence and prescribed for the Kali-yuga, because people in this yuga are incapable of undergoing the austerities and penances prescribed for the three preceding yugas. Therefore, sastras loudly proclaim: -

**Harernama Harernama Harernamaiva kevalam |**  
**kalau nastyeva nastyeva nastyeva gatiranyatha ||**

**God’s Name** alone can give salvation in the Kali-yuga.

**dhyanam tapah satyayuge tretayam yajnakarma ca |**  
**dvapare pujanam danam Harernama kalau yuge<sup>2</sup> ||**

‘**Tapasya** is for the **Satya-yuga**, **yajna** and **yaga** is for the **Treta**, **puja** or **worship** is for the **Dvapara**, and **God’s Name** is for the **Kali-yuga**.’

Sandilya says, *ragarthaprakirtisahacaryaccetaresam*, ‘The reciting of the **Name of God** with regard and earnestness induces bhakti that leads to God. Krishna says in the Gita: -

**satatam kirtayanto mam yatantasca drdhavratah |**  
**namasyantasca mam bhaktya nityayukta upasate<sup>3</sup> ||**

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<sup>2</sup> Nama-ghosa, 399

<sup>3</sup> Nama-ghosa, 617

**‘Bhaktas recite My Name with unwavering rigidity, and always salutes and worships Me.’**

Sukadeva tells Raja Parikshita that **Sravana and Kirtana** are the chief dharma in the Kali-yuga. Without any distinction of caste, creed or color, everyone can come to God by the reciting and hearing of **God’s Name**. It is within the reach of all, and is so easy that even gods of svargas long for being born as men in the Kali-yuga so that they could practise it and thus attain moksha. Even an evil-minded person can be free from sins by taking to **Hari-nama**, because its nature is to destroy sin, as the fire by its nature burns things.

Narada says, “Hari-nama is my life, and it is the only thing to give salvation in Kali-Yuga. I say this not only once, but thrice do I assert it with absolute certainty”. *Candalo ‘pi dvijasresthah haribhaktiparayanah*, **‘Even a Hari-bhakta Chandala is superior to a Brahman who is not a Hari-bhakta’**. Hari-nama is the last word to sanctify the rites and ceremonies performed in accordance with the injunctions of Vedas and Vedangas. The *Bhagavata* says,

**Kirata Hunandhra Pulinda Pukkasa Abhira Kanka Yavanakhasadayah  
ye ‘nye ca papa yadupasrayasrayah suddhyanti tasmai prabhavisnave namah ||**

**‘Kiratas, Hunas, Andhras, Pulindas, Pukkakas, Abhiras, Kankas, Yavanas, Sakas  
and other like them even, become purified by Krishna-Nama and I bow down to  
such a Krishna, the Lord of the Universe.’**

In the First Book of the *Bhagavata* it is said by Narada that Brahma, the creator, had gone through the four Vedas thrice, and gathered the substance, viz., that nothing else but **Hari-Kirtana** could bring salvation to people. For the hour of death, **Hari-Nama** only is prescribed, and not yaga, yajna, dana, homa and tapasya. In the grantha, called *Hari-bhakti-vilasa*, it is similarly said: -

**namaikam yasya vaci smaranapathagatam shrotramulam gatam va<sup>4</sup>  
[...]**

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<sup>4</sup> Nama-ghosa, 655 (There are variants of vaci and -janata- as jihmam and -vanita-. Sankaradeva interprets vyavahitarahitam as namaparadharahitam)



The meaning of this sloka is almost similar to that given above. Ramkrishna Paramhansa also speaks about the effectiveness of **God's Name** in the same strain (vide *Ramkrishna-kathamrita*, Vol II, Chap. V).

When the **King Parikshita** was cursed by the son of Sringeri Muni for insulting his father that Parikshita would be bitten by the snake Takshaka within seven days from that date, Parikshita sat down on the bank of the Ganges fasting, and all the noted saints and sages assembled there. He asked their advice as to what is to be done within that short period so as to be able to attain salvation. From amongst them, some advised yajna, some dana, some tapasya, some homa. The result was a heated debate among them. Then, all of a sudden, the great **Sukadeva**, the son of Badarayana Vyasa, turned up there. The King with all the rishis and munis rose up from their seats in great veneration and welcomed him. The Raja informed Him all about the critical situation and asked his advice. Sukadeva advised him to do nothing but chant **Hari-Nama** and listen to the narration of **God's Acts** (lila), which is the only boat in which to cross the ocean of bhava-sagara, and at the earnest request of the Raja and by the unanimous consent of all the sages and saints assembled there, he commenced narrating the *Bhagavata*. At the conclusion of the narration, Parikshita had a sense of great solace, and left his mortal coil peacefully before the fatal bite of the serpent could touch him.

That is why **Nama-Dharma** bhakti is called the prince among all the religions, particularly in this Kali-yuga. Everyone, irrespective of caste, creed and colour and in spite of the bars of adhikari and unadhikari distinction that are incumbent on one in the practice of other religious methods can easily and with full right practise it and secure salvation. Therefore, a bhakta's humble submission is: -

**naham vipro na ca narapatirnapi vaisyo na sudro  
no va vanni na ca grhapatirno vanastho yatirva |  
kintu prodyannikhilaparamanandapurnamrtaabde-  
gopibharttuh padakamalayordasadasanudasah<sup>5</sup> ||**

**'I do not care to belong to any one of the four varnas or castes; nor do I like to be included in the four asramas; nor I do want to pass for a pious man or a gift-giver or a pilgrim to sacred tirthas; but I do want to become a slave of the slaves of God, the great ocean of full bliss.'**

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<sup>5</sup> Nama-ghosa, 670

yaniha visvavilayodbhavavrttihetukarmanyantavicitrani Harischakara |  
yastvamga gayati shrnotyanumodate va bhaktirbhavedbhagavati hyapavargamarge<sup>6</sup> ||

**‘God does wonderful, endless and various deeds for creation, maintenance and destruction of the world. One who recites, one who hears, and one who admires Them, – they all attain the Best Bhakti that leads to the Lotus Feet of the Great God, that is, salvation.’**

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

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<sup>6</sup> Nama-ghosa, 651