

# SOCIAL FOCUS OF DEVOTION IN RĀMĀNUJA PHILOSOPHY

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The doctrine of Devotion is as old as the Vedas. From the Vedic period, devotion can be seen in different aspects of religion and philosophy. The beginnings of Devotion may be traced in the hymns of Ṛgveda.<sup>1</sup> Here, Indra is addressed as a friend and it is said that there is no limit to his friendship. In many passages of Ṛgveda Indra is referred to as a *sakha* or friend. This attitude is that of a Bhakta or devotee basing his definition of the term on concepts which developed much later. The BrhadraGyakopanicad,<sup>2</sup> Swetaswataropaniṣad,<sup>3</sup> Kaṭhopanicad,<sup>4</sup> Muṇḍakopaniṣad<sup>5</sup> etc presents the theme of devotion as a means of realization. The Brahmasūtra of Badarayaṇa presents devotion as a means of realization.<sup>6</sup> Mainly the Gita and the Bhagavata Purāṇa are the basis of devotion in the middle ages. The Bhaktisūtras of Nārada and Ṣāṇḍilya are the authentic works on the philosophy of devotion.

Viśiṣṭādvaita is a system of theism expounded by Rāmānuja. Devotion holds a higher place in it than Jñāna. According to Rāmānuja philosophy, devotion is a higher stage of meditation accompanied by love, on the nature of God, for the purpose of realizing the soul's relation to Him. *Mokṣa* comes only after death to one who has performed his devotion. Rāmānuja advocates devotion as the most important means of liberation. An aspirant has to surrender himself completely to God who alone can grant ultimate release from sufferings.

Rāmānuja made strenuous endeavor to spread the religion of devotion in a re-invigorated form. It was the great task of Rāmānuja to synthesize knowledge and devotion and to find the goal of human existence in remaining servants of God. He tried to expound the path of devotion with the help of his dialectical skill and brilliant erudition. He tried to place the devotion in the proper status that it deserves even in the domain of the realization of the Supreme. For Rāmānuja, devotion is important than knowledge and action. Knowledge shares the moments of feeling and actions whose primary source is God Himself. It is called *Bhaktirupapannajñāna* or the knowledge turned into devotion. Rāmānuja taught to worship God who is merciful, in order to be delivered from the worldly miseries and sufferings. He has combined the religious faith and the rational thought that constant meditation over God is the basic element of devotion. It should be a total surrender to God. Rāmānuja believed that devotion is an expression of knowledge. Action consists of worship and the repeated recital of the names of God. A devotee should be honest, merciful, non violent, tolerant and has control over one's own feelings and emotions. The common masses found difficulty to follow the strict rules and rituals properly, So Rāmānuja recognizes the need for another easier means of liberation, which is known as *Prapatti*. It is the easiest one among the various means of liberation. The 'Prapanna' or the surrenderer gives the false *Ahamkara* or pride, and the fruits of his actions to the Supreme and puts on the Supreme, the burden of protection and gives Him all the good and bad fruits of actions.

As a spiritual idea, the devotion of Rāmānuja highly influenced the medieval and modern society. In modern context,

the theme of devotion occupies not only the status of religio-spiritual doctrine but also as an integrating force in the socio-political realm. The reformers in Indian context used this spiritual content as an uplifting and re-orienting force of the society.

In the modern social scenario a spiritual and philosophical theme like devotion, as narrated in Viśiṣṭādvaita of Rāmānuja, can play a major role to find out a remedy for the disturbances in the individual and society. Religion in Rāmānuja's philosophy is devotion, which as much contributes to the realization of self as it is itself assisted by it. A turning of human interest to the path of devotion and seeking in the spiritual direction can save modern civilization which helps the modern man to deal with and enjoy the world and its delights, as a free person, as a master, instead of remaining its helpless victim.

Devotion has to be reinvented for love and spirituality to suit the contemporary society. It has to be scientific, modern, rational, universal and common to the whole of mankind. It is a historical fact that, in India most of the people got spiritual transformation of life due to their devotion. These devotees not only attained a great spiritual height, but they helped the whole community to maintain courage and confidence despite very adverse social and political situations. Thus, devotion brings peace and satisfaction not only to the individuals, but even to the society. The word devotion has inspired art and literature to scale new heights. Hence, devotion is valuable not only from the standpoint of spiritual attainment, it is valuable even from the views of social and individual perfection.

## **Action, Knowledge and Devotion**

The fact that Vedantic scholars like Śankara, Rāmānuja, Madhva, Vallabha and Nimbarka, who were proficient in knowledge, gave due importance to devotion indicates that an element of action includes in devotion. R.N.Vyas observes, “Psychologically human mind is constituted by the elements of cognition, affection and conation.”<sup>7</sup> Therefore, no human mental act is free from the combination of these three elements. Thus, the fact is that every mental act bears the impact of these three factors and all the action are based on the differing proportions of these three entities. In one act, thinking is predominant, while in the other, feeling may be more dominant. Therefore, it is true that, psychologically the path of devotion contains the element of knowledge. So that devotion is not free from the traces of knowledge. In the view of Rāmānuja, the devotion combines the good qualities of knowledge and action.<sup>8</sup> Devotion, even if considered as an independent path; it has been accepted by all the sensible scholars and spiritual teachers that, ultimately all the paths meet in the realization of the Supreme. According to Nalinikant Brahma, “Although the first steps in the various paths differ considerably from one another, still the ways unite in the goal.”<sup>9</sup> Knowledge, action and devotion are not exclusive, but emphasize the dominant aspects. Devotion coincides with knowledge, and both these issue in right action or virtuous life.<sup>10</sup>

## **Social Philosophy of Devotion**

In the *Vedarthasangraha*, Rāmānuja says, “Devotion signifies a particular kind of love (*prīti*) is a particular kind of cognition”<sup>11</sup> Devotion implies the sense of a personal relationship with God. The innate nature of all beings is to love an external

object. Devotion helps to cultivate this love. One who follows the path of devotion, can perceive the divinity in all living things because all are the parts of the same God. In the BhgavatapuraGa the king of Videha asks several questions regarding devotion and *Bhagavatadharma*, one of the great sages answers that, he is the ideal devotee who sees the presence of God in all beings and all beings in God”<sup>12</sup>

Rāmānuja explains this characteristics of a Bhakta thus: “Look up on whole beings of different forms as ‘equal’, by virtue of their knowledge of the sameness of the nature of the selves as knower in all. Therefore, they are not given ‘to take pleasure in the misfortune of others’, as such feelings proceed from one’s identification with one’s own special bodily form”<sup>13</sup>

The idea of devotion implies the conception of the deity as a person with whom man can enter in to a relationship that can be felt. Thus it indicates the idea of deity as person on one hand and of man as person on the other. A person is a spiritual or a self conscious being. In a certain sense, the development of the doctrine of devotion implies the doctrine of an essential kinship between man and God. Thus the development of devotion shows the growth of the conception of love and of the discovery formalization of the modes of symbolic and actual behavior, appropriate to the cultivation and expression of love.

Bhagavata Purāṇa. says, “When meditating on the lotus feet of *Hari* with concentrated mind, the eyes fill with tears of anxiety and the Lord was in the heart of mine, then through the intense love to him fell in to an ocean of happiness and sees nothing else o’

saint”<sup>14</sup> . Thus the structure of devotion can be classified into four forms ie; emotional, religious, theoretical and practical.

Susmita Pande observes, ”Bhakti in its emotional side indicates the awareness of diverse personal relationships, modes and sentiments appropriate to the kinship between man and God,”<sup>15</sup> Emotions are generally considered as a hindrance in perfect realization. But only certain emotions are of a binding nature, while certain other will liberate the individual from bondage. The conceptions of God does not rouse in man from any binding emotion. The conception of God and love for God, rouses the purest of emotions and it is far better than evil emotions, which over power man day and night. This is the significance of divine emotions in *Bhaktimarga*.

The Religious dimension of devotion takes a *Sadhaka* or aspirant directly to God. Devotion in this aspect, work for fulfilling the need of an individual and assist to a *Sadhaka* for realizing the Supreme. In this dimension devotion keep completely the spiritual ideal. The Gita put forward the concept of devotion, which is based on divine or spiritual humanism. It can face the challenge of anti-religious humanists, who accuse religions of being anti-humanistic. If one who well recognized his own religious scripture, he can admit the other religions with respect. The devotee should have the mind of reverence to the teachings of other religions also. Those who are antagonistic towards members of other religious groups do not really comprehend the teachings of their own religious scriptures. Such people are the real enemies of a true religion. They are killing the religion due to their narrow mind and thought day by day. The Religion is misusing by those people and it caused for communal violence. So it is necessary to abolish such pseudo religious outlooks

from the society for bringing social harmony. For this, the principle of devotion should be lit-up. The theoretical side of devotion implies a conception of the personal nature and kinship of God and man. The Gīta says, “ Those who, ever integrated with Me and possessed of Supreme faith, worship me, focusing their minds on me, are considered by Me, the highest among the Yogin”.<sup>16</sup>

In its practical side, the moral and social conduct, which express the ideal of the devotee and correspond to the stage of his spiritual progress. Rāmānuja observes, “He who is free from desires, ie; who has no longing for anything except the self, who is pure, namely, whose body is nourished on the food prescribed by the Śāstras; who is an expert namely, who is an expert in performing actions prescribed by the Śāstras, who is indifferent, ie; not interested in matters other than those conjoined by the Śāstras, who is free from agony, ie; of pain caused by heat, cold contact with coarse things etc. Which are inevitably associated with the performance of rites prescribed by the Śāstras, who renounces all undertaking i.e, who renounces all undertakings except those demanded by the Śāstras, the devotee who is like this, dear to Me.”<sup>17</sup>

According to the philosophy of Viśiṣṭadvaita in this world God is filled in every speck of space. The whole world is clothed with the glory of God. The saint and the sinner, the virtuous and the vicious, the good and the bad, the man and the animal- all are forms of God. Rāmānuja says in the *Gīta Bāṣya.*, “He (*Narayaṇa*) is the great ocean of countless auspicious attributes, which are both inherent in Him, and beyond all limitation in excellence- some of them being knowledge, power, lordship, energy, potency and splendor”<sup>18</sup>

## **Devotion and Social Up-gradation**

Devotion tries to change the selfish attitude and gives right perspective towards life. It tries to wean this gross, selfish attachment of an individual towards worldly objects, in a very psychological and simple manner. Devotion gives one an attachment for any deity instead of an attachment for riches, a woman and such other objects. The sense of attachment is not destroyed, but it is transformed. People do not need the destruction of the current of hearty affection, but it is necessary to the simple diversion of the current. Then there happened a change towards the entire attitude of life. The strength does not make them disorderly and power does not corrupt. Then one can cross the frontiers of narrowness of every kind and every description. Each devotee should be a powerful lighter against the forces of injustice and social degradation. Devotion can be of great utility here. A devotee is able to bear all storms of life with a smiling face. Devotee is confident that, he would be helped by God and all the problems and difficulties shall be duly solved. So it is necessary to do all his duties with the remembrance of God.

By the faith towards God, the devotee works like a powerful auto-suggestion and can help him in any hour of experiment and distress. Harry Brooks observes: , “Religious minds who wish to associate the formula with God’s care and protection might do so after this fashion day by day, in every way, by the help of God, I am getting better and better. It is possible that the attention of the unconscious will thus be turned to moral and spiritual improvements to a greater extent than by the ordinary formula.”<sup>19</sup>

## **Devotion and Ethical Development**

Ethics is the science of conduct, the systematized principles on which a man should act.<sup>20</sup> The science of ethics is relative to the man himself and to his surroundings. It is the principle of harmonious relations, needs in a person in family, society, nation and in the world for a peaceful and virtuous life. By establishing harmony, ethics establishes happiness in the whole world. The deep inner, enduring bliss is meant by happiness, which is the satisfaction in the self. According to Gita, “Where one knows that infinite happiness, which can be grasped by the intellect, but is beyond the grasp of the senses, where in established one swerves not from that condition.”<sup>21</sup>

The main object of ethics is to bring about universal happiness, universal welfare, by uniting the separated selves with each other and with the supreme self. The principles of devotion help a person to develop his ethics. It gives the conviction that, the God whom worshiped in Temples, lives in the hearts of his creation. The principles of devotion hold that, the individual soul is a portion of Divine.<sup>22</sup> But that it will nevertheless eternally retain its individuality, and that men of all castes can be saved through devotion towards God. It must include all things with in its circle for all, without exceptions are rooted in the self. Gita says, “I am the self, O’ Arjuna, dwelling in the heart of all beings. I am the beginning, the middle and also the end of all beings.”<sup>23</sup> He then names Himself as many objects, as sun and moon, as mountain and tree, as horse and cow, as bird and serpent, and many others, and sums up in one all embracing declaration. Gita says, “I am also that which, is the seed of all beings. O’ Arjuna, Nothing that Moves or does not move, exists without Me.”<sup>24</sup>

The fact of unity is the most sublime form of devotion. The God is to be worshipped not only in the temples but also in the hearts of all. A devotee always aims to reach God who lives in the hearts of all His creations. He should be a well-wisher of all living things and will be a man of full of pity and kindness. He does not cause to fear any one.<sup>25</sup> Therefore, a devotee cannot hurt his fellow beings, physically or mentally. He will be a well-wisher of the society, treating a friend and foe alike. Gita says, "He who regards with an equal eye to well wishers, friends, foes, the indifferent, neutrals, the hateful, the relations and even the good and the sinful- he excels."<sup>26</sup>

The compassion towards his fellow-beings, which leads him to creative activity. When the devotee realizes that, the world is a place, where the God is at work, He also becomes ready to take part in that incessant activity. Gita says, "For even by working for My sake you will attain perfection."<sup>27</sup> Selfless activities form to be a worship of God. God has created everything for helping each other and thereby for nourishing each other. The violation of this law is regarded as a sin.

### **Devotion and Social harmony**

In philosophical concept, devotion had been fully enunciated in the Upaniṣads and subsequently, the Gita emphasized love and Bhakti as pathways to God. In the 6th century A.D, the Bhagavata Purāṇa placed the concept of devotion on a very high pedestal. During the post Bhagavata phase, passionate love and devotion to one personal God became a characteristic feature of the Indian religious thought.

But the concept of devotion was placed on a firmer ground in South India, when Ṣankaracārya revived the philosophy of

*Advaita*. After Śankara twelve Tamil *Vaiṣṇava* saints collectively known as Alvars made the concept of devotion more popular. The Alvars were followed by the *Vaiṣṇavacāryās* and they gave metaphysical foundation to the devotional cult. According to this school of thought, the Supreme-being is not 'attribute less' but *Saguṇa*, possessing qualities of goodness and beauty to an infinite degree. Ramananda, the disciple of Rāmānuja, carried the devotional movement to North India and is rightly regarded, as a bridge between the South and North. Tulasidasa, a well known poet of devotional literature in middle age, inspired new faith and confidence in Hindu society, through his various works. Kabir brought about a spirit of reconciliation between religious factions. Both of them believed in social harmony and also well tried for establishing it through devotion. The concept of Swarj is linked to the ideals of devotion by Blagangdhara Tilak. The integral yoga of Aurobindo seeks to fulfill the ideal of social harmony through the realization of the infinite. Mahatma Gandhi used the spiritual elements to fight a unique battle of non- violence against the biggest and the mightiest empire of the world. For the achievement of social harmony he used the ideals of *Ahimsa* (Non- Violence) and *Niṣkamakarma* (Selfless action), which are based on the Bhakti principles of the Gita. Swami Vivekananda, a man of spiritual incarnation, considered the service of fellow beings as the service to God, and motto has been given to his mission is that, '*Ātmano mokṣārtham Jagadhītāya ca.*' The primary signs of the true meaning of *Bhaktisādhana* are gentleness, humanness, sympathy and consideration for fellow beings. The natural characteristics of a devotee are openness and generosity of mind and heart. The devotee is the highest and the most sublime form of humanism.

The ideal of devotion enables man to love and serve the society as a spiritual worship. Which assist a devotee to uplift the social welfare, and also helps to keep the value of life. Gita illustrates king Janaka as a real devotee who work for the welfare of the society and an ideal man of social harmony.<sup>28</sup>

The blending of devotion and the ideal of social harmony helps to empower an individual to become a Devotee. A devotee will be an active, dynamic, useful and responsible member of the society. It can equate, service to society to service to God. In reality, service to society is itself an expression of devotion to God. Service to society and personal salvation can be achieved simultaneously. Devotion, in its most sublime form, becomes an integrated and complete vision of devotion to God.

The social aspects of devotion give noble motive for social service. One cannot be a sincere devotee, without become a servant of society. Unlike a man of knowledge, who can renounce the world to seek his liberation, a devotee is a person who does not want any liberation leaving his fellow beings behind,<sup>29</sup> the whole world is one indivisible whole for a devotee.

In the history, it can be seen that a number of devotees lead a life of supreme dedication and self renunciation. Devotion becomes very desirable on account of its social value.

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