

Devotion, Devotee and their Social Role – The access of Bhagavad-Gītā

Sreelakshmi Saneesh

Bhakti or devotion is a popular theme in the Indian life structure. It has greater socio-religious and philosophical values. It appears in tradition as a means of liberation. Different philosophical schools and religious sects adapted devotion as the path to reach the eternal goal and sometimes the end itself. Bhakti or devotion means unselfish love. The word is derived from the root 'to serve' or 'deeply interested in'. Bhakti is therefore, an intense attachment to God or deep interest in God. According to Nārada Bhakti sūtra, "this higher feeling is indescribable in word". i.e, "अनिर्वचनीयं प्रेमस्वरूपम्" ¹, "मूकास्वादनवत्" ²

The state of Bhakti has to be sincerely experienced by the devotee. Self surrender is the highest form of Bhakti, which means the surrender of ego or individuality. A devotee fixes his attention in the feet of God alone, and he is attached to god whole heartedly. No other desire or aspiration can find place in the heart of a true bhakta. When one becomes attached to God, he is detached from all sensual objects.

The basic element of bhakti is faith or श्रद्धा। The Brhadāranyaka Upaniṣad describes faith as one of the features of the mind. This श्रद्धा has an element of love. When the love becomes perfect, then it is termed as "Bhakti". Bhakti implies a sincere service to God, prompted by intense love based on a sense of supreme faith.

According to Nārada Bhakti sutra, “the profound and immortal love for god is known as Bhakthi”, and it is the nature of nectar”.
“ सा त्वस्मिन् परमप्रेमरूपा^३ । अमृतस्वरूपा च ।”^४

This Bhakti can be cultivated through good company (सत्सङ्ग), faith (श्रद्धा), freedom from worldly attachments etc. Bhakti softens the heart and removes evils like jealousy, hatred, lust, anger, egoism, pride and arrogance. It infuses joy, divine ecstasy, bliss, peace and knowledge. All worries, anxieties and mental torments entirely vanish. The devotee attains the immortal abode of everlasting peace.

Bhagavad-Gīta – The song of Divine

Bhagavad-Gīta is an inspired poetical work with a philosophical theme. It is rightly called the ‘Song Divine’. The Gīta occupies a very prominent place in Indian thought and culture. The prominent Ācāryas like Śankara, Rāmānuja, Madhva, Vallabha and the modern thinkers like Aurobindo, Tilak, Gandhiji, Radhakrishnan etc. had highly praised it. Both the logic and lyric of Gīta seeks to answer the eternal human question: How to find the absolute freedom, infinite joy and ultimate fulfillment in life? According to Gīta this quest for perfection has to be realized through one’s own effort while pursuing the path of ज्ञान, कर्म and भक्ति, depending upon the aptitude of the seeker. It appears that the Gīta attached more importance to devotion than to knowledge. KarmaYoga, Jñāna Yoga and other yogas, are said to be the means of liberation and the cultivation of these means can be easy, when it is based on Bhakti. Gīta stresses that Karma Yoga and Jñāna Yoga are incomplete without Bhakthi Yoga. On the other hand, Bhakti Yoga incorporates Karma Yoga and Jnana Yoga, both in its fold, since a devotee has first of all to become ethical in action and virtuous in knowledge. It is for this reason, that Bhakti has been described as an end in itself.

Theme of Devotion in Bhagavad-Gīta

The Gīta teaches the path of devotion or Bhaktiyoga, which is the science of all science as purifying and directly qualifying men for mokṣa. Devotion is undivided love for God Untainted by any selfish motive. It involves constant thought of God and dedication of all actions to Him. God is easily accessible to one who constantly thinks on Him, surrenders himself completely to Him, takes shelter in Him, and gives up his whole being to Him.

“अनन्यचेताः सततं यो मां स्मरति नित्यशः।
तस्याहं सुलभः पार्थ नित्ययुक्तस्य योगिनः॥”⁵

Constant utterance of the name of god (जप) and chanting his glory (कीर्तन) generate primary devotion.

“सततं कीर्तयन्तो मां यतन्तश्च दृढव्रताः।
नमस्यन्तश्च मां भक्त्या नित्ययुक्ता उपासते॥”⁶

The Gīta is of the opinion that anyone who cultivates an intense devotion for God, transcends the three gunas and becomes entitled to realize the Supreme. Kṛṣṇa asks Arjuna emphatically to be His devotee. “Fix yours mind on Me, cultivate devotion for Me, worship Me, salute Me, If you dedicate yourself to Me in this manner, you shall attain Me.”⁷ He assures Arjuna that if anyone becomes so attached to God, then his well being is looked after by the Supreme. Thus the spiritual as well as material prosperity is guaranteed to the devotee by the Gīta. The Gīta directs the path of devotion, because the path of knowledge is too tough to follow by all. Gīta says :- “There is no restriction of any caste or sex or anything else in the domain of faith”.⁸ Even a confirmed culprit, a habitual sinner can get solace and affection if he turns to God with warmth and sincerity. God doesn't want anything more. He is pleased with the spirit of utter

self-surrender and complete dedication. Such persons get the highest state because they are loved by God himself. Therefore God declares to every seeker of the supreme to resort to this path of dedication and hearty surrender.

Devotee –The Gīta’s characterization

“अद्वेष्टा सर्वभूतानां मैत्रः करुण एव च ।
निर्ममो निरहङ्कार समदुःखसुखः क्षमी ॥
सन्तुष्टः सततं योगी यतात्मा दृढनिश्चयः ।
मय्यर्पितमनोबुद्धिर्यो मद्भक्तः स मे प्रियः ॥”⁹

These verses explain the characteristics of the best of devotees. Such a person hates none and loves all, is kind to all and treats everyone alike. For him, there is no attachment to any particular person. He has no pride, regards misery and pleasure alike forgives all, and practices spiritual Sādhana regularly. Through his spiritual discipline, he is able to control his senses. In the 12th chapter of Bhagavad-Gīta, verses 13 to 20 describe the virtues, which an aspirant should acquire on the path of perfection.

There are four kinds of devotees –

1. Those who turn to God as a refuge from sorrow and suffering in the world are called आर्त ।
2. Those who seek Him as giver of prosperity in the world are called अर्थार्थी ।
3. Those who come to Him in the desire for knowledge are called जिज्ञासु ।
4. Those who adore Him with knowledge are called ज्ञानी ।

While all these devotees are dear to the Lord, ज्ञानी is the dearest of all. ज्ञानी worships him ever in purity of spirit. He sees the Lord in everything and everything in the Lord. He has single-minded

devotion to Him, and always united with Him. In other words, the Bhaktha who is also a ज्ञानि, is most excellent of all.

The devotee is confident of the guarantee given by the Lord – “Never does my devotee perish” “न मे भक्तः प्रणश्यति।”¹⁰ and “the doer of good never comes to grief”

न हि कल्याणकृत् कश्चिदुर्गतिं तात गच्छति।”¹¹

Complete surrender to God and taking refuge in Him are essential to the cult of devotion. The grace of god is its cardinal doctrine. He can be known in His real nature by undivided devotion.

Bhakti – A Source of Social Harmony and Human Development

Bhaktiyoga of the Gīta has used devotion along with other elements of the Indian tradition in trying to bring social harmony through religious tolerance. The relationship of a Bhakta with society is stressed in the verse “अद्वेष्या सर्वभूतानां मैत्रः करुण एव च।”¹² Bhakta has no ill-will towards any being, and is friendly and compassionate to all. Serving the world and thus serving god’s will is the surest way of salvation and this way can be followed by remaining in the world and not turning away from it. Those who follow the bhaktimarga of the gita, become oriented to the social concerns, and they can do a lot for bringing a sense of harmony and unity in the society. Gīta summarizes supreme devotion to God as being synonymous to “regarding all beings as alike” [समः सर्वेषु भूतेषु मद्भक्तिं लभते पराम्।]¹³, which is closely linked with Lokasamgraha. It is reflected in the well-known Indian dictum that “मानवसेवा माधवसेवा।” ie “service of man is service of God’.

Bhakti tries to give right perspective towards life. Bhakti tries to remove the selfish attachment of an individual towards the worldly

objects in a psychological and very simple manner. The devotee as per Gīta is a powerful fighter against forces of injustice and social degradation.

Man's sensitive mind has become susceptible to many worries – financial, emotional etc. the necessity of mental hygiene is pressing under the different circumstances. The secret of mental hygiene lies in making the mind strong. Bhakti can be a great utility here. A man of devotion is able to bear all the storms of life with a smiling face. He is confident that, "he would be helped by his Lord and all the problems shall be solved. [मञ्जित्तः सर्वदुर्गाणि मत्प्रसादात्तरिष्यसि।]"¹⁴

In social life, a devotee contributes the achievement of social progress and human prosperity. He preaches the gospel of universal love and respects everybody. A man of devotion leads a life of supreme dedication. The true devotees are invariably ideal social beings. Bhakti does not lack the element of knowledge. A true devotee never forgets that the supreme truth is one and non-dual in character.

“भक्त्या मामभिजानाति यावान् यास्मि तत्त्वतः ।
ततो मां तत्त्वतो ज्ञात्वा विशते तदनन्तरम्।।”¹⁵

Bhakti is unique merit. In view of its importance the Bhāgavata has rightly declared that even the knowledge, and action attain beauty only when Bhakti becomes associated there with. Bhagavadgita also states this point in –

“भक्त्या त्वनन्यथा शक्यः अहमेवाविधोऽर्जुन ।
ज्ञातुं ब्रह्मं च तत्त्वेन प्रवेष्टुं च परन्तप।।”¹⁶

Bhaktiyoga offers several possibilities of organizing community level programs, in which men and women of all age groups and

coming from different background can join in a spirit of harmony. The path of bhakti is thus a valuable medium for realizing the Supreme. But its utility is equally great in the domains of individual perfection and social development.

References:

1. Nārada Bhakti Sūtra -51
2. ibid. -52
3. ibid. -2
4. ibid. -3
5. Bhagavadgīta (8-14)
6. ibid. 9-14
7. ibid. 9-3
8. Ibid. 9-26
9. ibid. 12-13,14
10. ibid. 9-31
11. ibid. 6-4
12. ibid. 12-13
13. ibid. 18-54
14. ibid. 18-58
15. ibid. 18-55
16. ibid. 11-54