

# LOVING DEVOTION (*BHAKTI*) AS THE BEST MEANS AND HIGHEST END IN BENGAL VAIṢṆAVISM

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## I. Introduction

In the Hindu tradition, *bhakti* or loving devotion “refers to a personal, generally emotional, relationship of belonging, participation and communion between the devotee (*bhakta*) and God, as well as among the devotees themselves.”<sup>1</sup> There are three things that strike us in this description of *bhakti*. Firstly, it is not only that the devotees love God, but God loves the devotees too: it is a reciprocal relationship of love. Secondly, *bhakti* is not merely a vertical communion with God, but also a horizontal relationship with one’s fellow devotees. Thirdly, this dual association is generally expressed in an emotional manner. The earlier somewhat placid, quiet devotion of the *Bhagavad-gītā* soon developed into an effusive, euphoric devotion, that at times even expressed itself in eccentric behaviour.<sup>2</sup>

Before we launch into Bengal Vaiṣṇavism’s understanding of *bhakti*, it is necessary to give a brief introduction to some aspects of its theology. Founded by Caitanya in the fifteenth century, Bengal Vaiṣṇavism, which is also called Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism, believes in Krishna as the Supreme Being. He has three aspects. Bhagavat, in which all the divine qualities are fully manifest, is the highest. Then comes Paramātman, in which the qualities are partially manifest. The lowest aspect is Brahman because in it all the qualities are hidden. It will be seen therefore that the Caitanya School places the Brahman of Advaita (Absolute Monism) on the lowest level. Bhagavat has a power or energy (*śakti*), which constitutes his very essence (*svar ūpa*), and is therefore called *Svar ūpa-śakti*. This power or *śakti* is made up of three *śaktis*, the most important of which is called *Hlādinī-śakti* (the power that possesses joy). Through this power God is happy and makes others happy. It is the very core of God’s essence. Hence, if Christians say that God is love, Bengal Vaiṣṇavites

1 Sheth (1984), 100.

2 Sheth (1984), 108–109, 118–126, 135–136.

proclaim that God is happiness. Paramātman has two powers. Through the *jīva-śakti* he emanates the souls and through the *Māyā-śakti* he evolves the material world. This *Māyā-śakti* also deludes the souls. Animate beings are only souls or spirits, not soul and body. It is through ignorance, that animate beings imagine that they have a physical body. This body has evolved from the *Māyā-śakti*. The three aspects of God are essentially identical (*abheda*) and essentially different (*bheda*) from each other. This is contradictory and illogical, and hence this relationship is said to be incomprehensible (*acintya*). This same incomprehensible identity-cum-difference obtains between God and his powers, as well as between God and the souls and God and matter.

Higher than the ordinary, mundane worlds are the different heavenly worlds. But above all these is Krishna's abode (*dhāman*). It is a manifestation of his intrinsic, essential power (*sva ūpa-śakti*). Together with Krishna are numerous *parikaras* or attendants. These are the various persons mentioned in the story of Krishna: e. g., his foster parents, companions, queens, the Yādava clan, the herdswomen (*gopī*), his favourite herdsman Rādhā, etc. Krishna, his attendants and the saved souls living in his eternal heaven, all have visible, tangible bodies. If Krishna did not have a body, the others would not be able to see him and enjoy the "beatific vision". However, his body, as well as theirs, is made up of *śuddha-sattva* or 'pure matter', which is different from the imperfect matter of earthly bodies, called *prakṛti*. Interestingly, while the ignorant, bound or non-liberated soul does not really have a body but only mistakenly imagines that it has a body, the soul saved through *bhakti*, does have a body.

According to Bengal Vaiṣṇavism, *bhakti* is the best means to salvation. But there are also other paths to liberation. We shall consider these first.

## II. *Other Paths to Salvation*

### 1. The Path of Action

The path of action (*karma-mārga*) is of two kinds: the road of ritual action, where one desires the results of one's actions, and that of selfless actions, where one does all actions, without desiring their fruits. (a) The way of ritual action can, at best, lead one to be reborn in *svarga*, which, although translated by the word 'heaven', is merely a temporary place of sensual enjoyment. (b) The path of disinterested action also does not lead to liberation but, unlike the path of ritual action, it does prepare one for liberation.<sup>3</sup>

3 Chakravarti (1969), 170-173.

## 2. The Path of Knowledge

Similarly, the path of knowledge (*jñāna-mārga*) is of two types. (a) The way of knowledge (*jñāna*), unmixed with devotion (*bhakti*), leads to the lowest type of liberation, which consists in the soul's complete identity with the lowest aspect of God, viz., Brahman. This liberation corresponds to the one attained by the followers of Advaita (Absolute Monism) of such teachers as Śaṅkara. Unlike the path of devotion, this is an arduous path, involving a lot of effort. In addition, it is not necessarily a permanent state of liberation, for it is possible for a person to become deluded and fall away from this state.<sup>4</sup> (b) Those who follow the path of knowledge, mixed with some devotion, attain a higher stage of salvation. Devotion helps them to merge into Brahman more easily than the first group, since God gives them grace. In fact, ultimately, God separates them from this merger with Brahman and bestows on them a still higher level of communion with a higher aspect of himself.<sup>5</sup> It will be seen therefore that both the types of liberation attained by knowledge are not absolutely permanent. Unlike Advaita, the emphasis is not on knowledge, but on loving devotion, which does not depend on or presuppose knowledge; rather, it brings in its wake a wisdom far superior to that attained through the path of knowledge. What is valued is not the loss of one's identity into an indeterminate, colourless Brahman, but engaging oneself in the love and service of God.

## 3. The Path of *Yoga*

The way of *yoga*, which includes self-control, physical postures, breathing techniques and meditation, leads to a higher state than the path of knowledge. It unites one with a higher aspect of God, viz., Paramātman. However, this road is incapable of leading one to the highest union with the Bhagavat. For this it needs to be supplemented with devotion. *Yoga* mixed with devotion is a form of *bhakti*, but it is placed on a lower rung than even *Dāśya-bhakti* (service of God as his servant), the lowest form of pure *bhakti* (*Śuddha-bhakti*). Since *yoga* mixed with devotion makes one calm and quiet, it is called *Śānta-bhakti* (Quietist Devotion).<sup>6</sup>

4 Chakravarti (1969), 173–174.

5 Kapoor (1977), 179.

6 Chakravarti (1969), 176–177.

### III. *Loving Devotion (Bhakti)*

From the metaphysical point of view, *bhakti* is a special state of God's *Hlādinī-śakti*, the most intrinsic essence of the Bhagavat, the highest aspect of God. *Bhakti* therefore consists of pure bliss. As a manifestation of God's intrinsic power (*śakti*), *bhakti* resides in God, and depends on him for its very being. On the other hand, it is also placed in the devotee, who burns with an intense desire to lovingly serve God. *Bhakti* thus causes bliss in God as well as his devotees.<sup>7</sup>

As a manifestation of God's energy of bliss (*hlādinī-śakti*), *bhakti* exists in every soul, at least in a latent state. In fact it is the natural function of the soul, since it brings happiness to the soul: loving someone who is dear brings happiness, and Bhagavat is the most dear. In its higher forms, it is not motivated by the desire for anything other than what brings pleasure to the Bhagavat.<sup>8</sup> Unlike the paths of knowledge (*jñāna*) and *yoga*, which come to an end once the goal, viz., liberation, is attained, *bhakti* continues even after salvation is reached. It is thus both a means and an end.<sup>9</sup> As the *summum bonum* or highest good, *bhakti* is not really a result; it is an eternally established fact, and is not something that is produced.<sup>10</sup>

According to Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism, *bhakti* involves the devotee's complete surrender to God in words, body and mind. This submission to God is the essential characteristic of *bhakti*, while the granting of the desires of the devotee and such like other qualities are merely accidental characteristics.<sup>11</sup>

### IV. *The Superiority of Bhakti*

The paths of action (*karman*), knowledge (*jñāna*) and *yoga* may lead one to Brahman or Paramātmān, both of which are only partial and less important aspects of God, while *bhakti* leads one to Bhagavat, the highest and fullest aspect of God. Hence *bhakti* is superior to the other ways of salvation. The other paths cannot achieve higher results, without the help of *bhakti*: all the effort in the world is incapable of helping the soul reach the highest aspect of God because the limited soul is under the spell of God's unlimited *Māyā-śakti*. *Bhakti*, however, which is independent of the other means of salvation,

7 Chakravarti (1969), 186-187.

8 De (1961), 355-356.

9 Kapoor (1977), 178.

10 Chakravarti (1969), 197-198.

11 Chakravarti (1969), 193.

can help the limited soul precisely because *bhakti* is the manifestation of the *Hlādinī-śakti*, which is a power of God higher than the *Māyā-śakti*. Knowledge, detachment, self-control, peace and other such results of the other paths follow more easily in the wake of *bhakti*. Knowledge and *yoga* are difficult paths and cannot be practised by all people, at all times and under all circumstances. They require intellectual abilities, self-control, detachment, etc., while *bhakti* is very easy and can be practised by one and all, by high and low castes, by men and women,<sup>12</sup> by saints and sinners, and on all occasions and in all situations. Even those who are condemned to the temporary purgatories (*naraka*) can resort to *bhakti*. *Bhakti* can of course be practised also by those who are always in the state of salvation or have reached it. Thus *bhakti* is open to one and all. Those who practice the paths of knowledge and *yoga* are somewhat selfish because they at least desire salvation. Hence, even if they are used as (unnecessary) aids for the practice of *bhakti*, they may be utilized only in the early stages of *bhakti* and must be abandoned when one reaches the stage of pure devotion (*śuddha-bhakti*), where one does not even desire salvation, but only the supreme pleasure of the Bhagavat.<sup>13</sup> Among the schools of Vaiṣṇavism, the Caitanya School is unique in holding that the best type of devotion is not only independent of action, knowledge and *yoga*, but is, by its very nature, unmixed with them.<sup>14</sup>

### V. *Stages in the Development of Pure Bhakti*

Although *bhakti* is an eternally existing reality, devotees resort to various means of devotion<sup>15</sup> in order to make manifest in their lives the *bhakti* already existing in God and in their hearts. Depending on the dispositions and tendencies of the devotees, *bhakti* may spring from lowly passions such as pride, envy, etc. or be motivated by higher desires, even that of salvation. However, in pure (*śuddha*) *bhakti* one does not even long for salvation: one seeks only the pleasure of the Bhagavat.<sup>16</sup> It is this selfless *bhakti* that properly deserves to be called *bhakti*, and it is this true or pure *bhakti* that Bengal Vaiṣṇavism elaborately analyses.

12 Unlike the path of knowledge, which is traditionally only for men, and that too only of the higher classes.

13 Kapoor (1977), 177–180, 183.

14 Chakravarti (1969), 193.

15 For a comparison of Hindu forms of devotion with those of Christianity, see Sheth (1999).

16 De (1961), 173, n. 1; 361.

The pure (*śuddha*) or true *bhakti* has three forms: *Sādhana-bhakti*, *Bhāva-bhakti* and *Prema-bhakti*.

### 1. *Sādhana-bhakti* (Instrumental *Bhakti*)

*Sādhana-bhakti* is realized through the instrumentality of the external senses, as opposed to *Bhāva-bhakti* or inward emotion. This *bhakti*, achieved through extraneous means, is of two kinds: *Vaidhī* and *Rāgānugā*.

#### (a) *Vaidhī* Bhakti (Injunctive *Bhakti*)

In *Vaidhī* Bhakti the devotees follow the injunction (*vidhi*) of the Vaiṣṇavite Scriptures, whereas in *Rāgānugā* Bhakti they are urged by the spontaneous feeling of attachment (*rāga*) towards God. In *Vaidhī* Bhakti the devotees carry out various devotional exercises out of fear of transgressing the commands of Scripture, and not because of a spontaneous feeling of attachment towards the Lord.<sup>17</sup>

Jīva Gosvāmin, a very prominent theologian of the Caitanya tradition, enumerates eleven stages of *Vaidhī* Bhakti: (1) *Śaraṇāpatti*: Taking refuge in the Bhagavat as one's only protector. (2) *Guru-sevā*: Devotion to the spiritual guide. Spiritual guides initiate, instruct and help the disciples to assimilate the religious teachings. (3) *Śravaṇa*: Listening to the narration of the name, form, qualities and deeds (*īlā*) of God. (4) *Kīrtana*: Chanting God's names, narrating to others the name, form, qualities and deeds of God, and singing his praises. This form of devotion holds a very important place in the religion of Caitanya, who recommended congregational chanting (*saṁkīrtana*). This is noteworthy because congregational prayer is traditionally not a common practice in Hinduism. Particular importance is given to the chanting of God's name, which is not an ordinary word or sound, but God himself who becomes present on the tongue of the devotee in the form of the Name. Among all the names of God, the name 'Krishna' is the best. Loud chanting is better than silent utterance of the Name, because others, including animals and birds, can profit by hearing it. (5) *Smarāṇa*: Remembrance of, or meditation on, the name, form, qualities and deeds of God. (6) *Pādasevā*: Service at the feet of God. This includes such activities as seeing, touching, circumambulating the image of God, following the procession of the image, etc. (7) *Arcaṇā*: Ritual worship of the image of God through offerings.<sup>18</sup> (8) *Vandana*: Bowing or pros-

<sup>17</sup> Chakravarti (1969), 213.

<sup>18</sup> For a detailed study of *arcaṇā* and its comparison with the Eucharist, see Sheth (1998), 690-699, 754-768.

trating in front of God's image. (9) *Dāsya*: The service of God as his servant. (10) *Sakhya*: Friendship with God. This form of devotion is superior to *Dāsya* since the relationship with God is more intimate. (11) *Ātmanivedana*: Dedication or surrender of one's self to God. It consists in dedicating to the Lord one's soul, and whatever one possesses: body, mind, senses and activities, as well as one's family and belongings. Depending on one's character, spiritual and psychological needs, etc., one may concentrate on one or other of these elements (*aṅga*) of *Vaidhī Bhakti*, or practise several or all of them together.<sup>19</sup>

(b) *Rāgānugā Bhakti* (*Bhakti* which imitates the attachment of the Bhagavat's attendants)

*Rāgānugā Bhakti* is the devotional emotion that follows (*anuga*) or imitates the attachment (*rāga*) found in another form of *bhakti* called *Rāgātmikā Bhakti*. This latter type of *bhakti* is practised by the various attendants of Krishna in his heavenly worlds (*dhāman*). *Rāga*, or a spontaneous, natural excess of attachment, is the very soul or essence (*ātmika*) of their *bhakti*. Whether the soul intends it or not, the senses are naturally attracted to their corresponding objects: the sense of sight is naturally inclined towards beauty, that of smell towards fragrance. Similarly, the attendants of Krishna cannot but be attracted to Krishna: it is a spontaneous, natural attraction. From the point of view of the intensity of their attachment, there are four grades of *Rāgātmikā Bhakti*: the attachment of some of the attendants expresses itself eternally as *Dāsya-bhakti*, in which they regard themselves as his eternal servants (*dāsa*). Even though Krishna is a benevolent and affectionate master, the *bhakti* of these attendants implies a sense of inferiority and distance on their part. Secondly, the attachment (*rāga*) of those who are the eternal friends or companions of Krishna is superior because they look upon Krishna as their equal. This is called the devotion of companionship (*sakhya-bhakti*). The third stage is that of parental attachment (*vātsalya-bhakti*): here the attendants regard themselves as superior to Krishna, their son: their love is more intense than mere friendship: they bestow anxious parental care and love on him, and their loving sense of superiority is bold enough to scold and punish him, if he is mischievous. Finally, the fourth level is that of the sweet *Madhurya bhakti*, in which the herdswomen look upon Krishna as their beloved. Here the attachment takes on the form of intense, passionate love (*preman*). It should be noted that in the eternal play (*līlā*) of Krishna, there are also people who attain salvation through hatred of Krishna.<sup>20</sup> In Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism,

19 Kapoor (1977), 187–194.

20 Sheth (2000).

such emotions are considered unsuitable for the ideal forms of *Rāgātmikā Bhakti*.

Let us now turn to the *Rāgānugā Bhakti*, which imitates the *Rāgātmikā Bhakti* of Krishna's attendants. While the *Vaidhī* is based on the injunctions of Scripture, and is therefore artificial and weak, the *Rāgānugā* imitates the natural emotions of Krishna's attendants, and is therefore spontaneous and intense. It is independent of the scriptural injunctions.

As long as devotees are bound by their ordinary, physical body, consisting of the imperfect matter of *prakṛti*, it is impossible for them to practise the *Rāgātmikā Bhakti* of Krishna's attendants, who have bodies made up of the perfect 'pure matter' (*śuddha-sattva*). Their *Rāgānugā Bhakti* consists therefore in merely an imitation of the *Rāgātmikā Bhakti*. This imitation, however, will eventually prepare them to attain the latter type of *bhakti*, in the other world, where they would possess transcendental, perfect, bodies. The devotees adopt this or that attendant's particular mood or attachment, as expressed in that attendant's specific deeds, dress and nature. In other words, they try to imitate the *Dāśya*, *Sakhya*, *Vātsalya*, or *Mādhurya* forms of *Rāgātmikā Bhakti* practised by the attendants, each succeeding form of devotion of course being regarded as superior to the previous one — just as in the case of *Rāgātmikā Bhakti*. In this imitation, even the male devotees can and are encouraged to imitate the female attendants, particularly the herdswomen (*gopī*) who practise the highest type of *bhakti*, viz., *Mādhurya-bhakti*.

In *Rāgānugā Bhakti* the devotees do not have a direct personal contact with Krishna, but it prepares them for it through a vicarious enjoyment of one or other devotional mood or sentiment of the attendants that serves as a model for the devotees.

Although the *Rāgānugā* is concerned with the inward feeling of attachment, it is still external, compared to the next stage of *Bhāva-bhakti* because it involves external effort, viz., the imitation of the feelings and actions of the eternal attendants of the Bhagavat.<sup>21</sup>

## 2. *Bhāva-bhakti* (Emotional *Bhakti*)

*Bhāva-bhakti* is generally a further flowering of the two types of *Sādhana-bhakti*, but on some occasions it may also be generated by the grace of Krishna or of fellow devotees. Even if it is preceded by *Sādhana-bhakti*, it is not directly caused by extrinsic means but it springs up as a spontaneous innate emotion. Higher than *Rāgānugā Bhakti*, it is the first dawn of *Preman*, the next

21 Chakravarti (1969), 214-222; De (1961), 176-179; Kapoor (1977), 194-198.



rung in the ladder of *bhakti*. It brings about a smoothness of the heart, arising from relish (*ruci*). This relish consists in a strong desire for the Bhagavat. *Bhāva-bhakti* is accompanied by various signs, such as peace of mind, distaste for sense-objects, etc.

If this spontaneous emotional attachment (*rati*) is accompanied by desires for worldly enjoyment (*bhoga*) or even for salvation (*mokṣa*), it is merely a semblance of attachment (*ratyābhāsa*), and not the real thing. However, this semblance may at times suddenly change into real attachment (De 179-181).

### 3. *Prema-bhakti* or *Prīti* (Passionate *Bhakti*)

*Prema-bhakti* or *Prīti* is the third and highest form of *bhakti*, the *summum bonum*, the highest good. It is a further blossoming of *Bhāva-bhakti*. *Prema-bhakti* consists in the emotion (*bhāva*) crystallizing into love (*preman*). It makes the soul absolutely smooth and is distinguished by an exclusive and loving attachment.

In itself, *Prīti* is one just as the Bhagavat, to whom it refers, is one. However, depending on the disposition of the devotees, the type of devotional relationship (master-servant, lover-beloved, etc.) practised by the devotees, it manifests itself in different forms and degrees.

*Prīti* or *Prema-bhakti* has two grades. The first level progresses through eight stages: (1) Faith (*Śraddhā*), which manifests itself in the firm belief that devotion to Krishna is the highest duty and that through it all other duties are fulfilled; (2) Association with good people (*sādhu-saṅga*) who are devoted to Krishna; (3) Acts of worship (*bhajana-kriyā*); (4) Withdrawal from unworthy things (*anartha-nivṛtti*) which stifle the growth of *bhakti*; (5) Steadiness (*niṣṭhā*), which results when all impediments are removed; (6) Relish or Taste (*ruci*); (7) Emotion (*bhāva*) or Delight (*rati*); and (8) Love (*preman*), an unbreakable bond of affection, which is not severed even in adverse circumstances. In the state of *Preman* the devotees do not in the least seek their own happiness, but are ready to go to any length to ensure the happiness of their beloved God. It is a state that goes beyond ordinary comprehension. Devotees in this state are so madly in love, that they sing, dance, laugh, weep, etc.

The last two stages of this first level, viz., *Bhāva* or *Rati* and *Preman*, can be practised while still living, while the grades pertaining to the second level are possible only after one is freed from the (apparent) contact with one's physical body and, after death, is endowed with a body made of 'pure matter' (*śuddha-sattva*).<sup>22</sup>

22 Chakravarti (1969), 223-224; Kapoor (1977), 202-203.

9. *Sneha* (Affection). With this stage, one steps on to the second level of *Prīti*. In *Sneha* the bond of affection is stronger and it causes greater melting of the heart when the devotees see, hear or remember Krishna. They always long for the sight of Krishna and cannot bear his absence even for a moment. In the expression of *Sneha* devotees may maintain a certain respectful distance or be more familiar with Krishna. E. g., the attendant Candrāvalī will not dare to let her feet touch Krishna, while Rādhā will even go to the extent of planting her feet on his head, if it increases his pleasure.

10. *Māna* (Pretended Repulse). Hiding the intensity of their emotion, the devotees pretend a playful adverse response to their Beloved Krishna, which gives him added pleasure.

11. *Prāṇaya* (Loving Confidence). This loving confidence manifests itself in a feeling of oneness with Krishna. The devotees feel that their body and mind, their very life, is identical with the body, mind and life of their Loved One. It is not a metaphysical identity, but a psychological identity with him. It is due to this feeling of oneness, that the companions of Krishna have no qualms in climbing on to his shoulders or offering him items of food which they have already chewed upon.

12. *Rāga* (Transformation of sorrow into joy). In this state even suffering is experienced as happiness, if it brings with it the thrill of meeting Krishna. Although her feet are burning and bruised due to climbing up a rocky hill in the heat of the sun, Rādhā is oblivious of the pain because her whole body, from head to foot, is filled with the soothing bliss of seeing Krishna.

13. *Anur āga* (Freshness of love). The form, qualities and love of the Beloved appear as fresh and new. Although Rādhā has always been in Krishna's company, he always appears new to her, as if she was seeing him for the first time.

14. *Bhāva* or *Mahābhāva* (Supreme Love). This is the highest form of love, which can be reached only by the herdswomen (*gopī*). Even the wives of Krishna are unable to attain this supreme joy. The herdswomen are so immersed in *Mahābhāva* that even their mind melts into it so that their senses are controlled not by the mind but by *Mahābhāva*.

There are two levels of *Mahābhāva*:

- (1) *Rūḍha*: Whether in union or in separation, this is characterized by inability to bear separation even for a moment, dejection due to apprehending some cause for Krishna's suffering even in the presence of happiness, forgetfulness of oneself even in the absence of fainting, etc.

(2) *Adhir ūḍha*: This is a higher stage and has two grades:

- (a) *Modana*: This is realized in Rādhā and only in the herdswomen who are her companions. In the state of separation, *Modana* becomes more intense and is called *Mohana*. Only Rādhā is capable of experiencing this "bitter-sweet chalice of love". It is excruciatingly joyful and joyfully excruciating. Hearing her weep, even the animals shed tears. She even yearns to die so that the various elements of her body may dissolve into the various things that come in contact with Krishna. E. g., she longs that the water element of her body may mingle with the water in which he swims, the earth element may become one with the land on which he walks, etc. Experiencing a divine madness, she may resort to helpless activities and movements or babble words that are now resentful, chiding, and jealous, now anxious and concerned about Krishna.
- (b) *Mādana*: This is the absolute climax of *Mahābhāva* and is experienced only by Rādhā. In *Mādana* she *simultaneously* enjoys *all* the emotions, even the contradictory ones, both those pertaining to union with Krishna as well as those relating to separation from him.

These, then, are the various stages and degrees of *Prīti-bhakti*. Depending on the basic underlying emotion (*sthāyī-bhāva*), that devotees have in relationship to Krishna, they will be able to reach a higher or lower stage of *Prīti-bhakti*. (1) Those whose feelings are subdued and placid, who practise the quiet devotion (*śānta-bhakti*), i. e., bhakti which is mixed with knowledge (*jñāna*) or yoga, and therefore relate either to the Brahman or Paramātman respectively, can only reach up to the stage of *Bhāva* or *Rati*. (2) Those whose devotion is unmixed, but merely consider themselves as Krishna's servants (*dāsa*) or inferior relatives (*lālya*) are able to proceed up to the level of *Rāga*. (3) Those who practise the devotion of friendship (*sakhya-bhakti*) attain the first stage of *Anurāga*. (4) Those who have parental affection (*vātsalya*) towards Krishna are able to reach the last stage of *Anurāga*. (5) Krishna's queens, who look upon him as their beloved, can go one step further, i. e., to the first stage of *Mahābhāva*, viz., the *Rūḍha* level. (6) The herdswomen advance up to the *Modana* stage of *Mahābhāva*. (7) Only Rādhā is capable of reaching the highest stage of *Mahābhāva*, viz., *Mādana*.<sup>23</sup>

23 Kapoor (1977), 203-212.

## VI. Bhakti as a Rasa

In Sanskrit Poetics (*alaṅkāra-sāstra*, *rasa-sāstra*), an emotion (*bhāva*) that is physical and personal can, through poetic devices, be transformed into an impersonal state of pure aesthetic relish (*rasa*), which transcends the physical and selfish pleasure of the senses. Now, basing itself on the theories of Poetics or Aesthetics, Bengal Vaiṣṇavism conceives *bhakti* as a *rasa* (aesthetic relish).<sup>24</sup>

According to the school, there are five primary *bhakti-rasas*, viz., *śānta* (quietude), *dāsyā* (servitude), *sakhya* (friendship), *vātsalya* (parental affection) and *mādhurya* (sweet, lover-beloved relationship), each succeeding *rasa* being superior to the preceding one.

We have space only to briefly indicate how the basic emotion of love is elevated to the state of aesthetic relish (*rasa*) in the case of *mādhurya* (sweet, lover-beloved relationship), which is the best *rasa*.<sup>25</sup> In *mādhurya* the devotee's basic or permanent underlying feeling (*sthāyī-bhāva*) of sweet love (*madhur ā ratī*) that the devotee has for Krishna is raised to the state of sweet aesthetic relish (*madhura-rasa*): (1) by excitants or exciting conditions (*vibhāvas*), which make the basic underlying feeling capable of being relished: there are (a) substantial (*ālambana*) excitants, e. g., Krishna and his beloved herdswomen (*gopīs*), and (b) enhancing (*uddīpana*) excitants, like Krishna's physical appearance, dress, ornaments, smile, flute, and so on; (2) by ensuants (*anubhāvas*), which follow and foster the basic emotion, such as dancing, singing, sighing, rolling on the ground, laughing, etc.; (3) by involuntary external manifestations of inner feelings (*sāttvika-bhāvas*), for instance, perspiration, thrilling of the body, trembling, tears, and the like; (4) and by auxiliary feelings (*vyabhicāri-bhāvas* or *sañcāri-bhāvas*), which are transient and accompany or interrupt the basic emotion, without replacing it, e. g., joy, sadness, distraction, longing, madness, etc.<sup>26</sup>

This *madhura rasa* may be experienced as love-in-union (*sambhoga*) or love-in-separation (*vipralambha*): in the latter case, the aesthetic relish can be more intense. The *madhura rasa* may also express itself as *svakīya* or *parakīya*: in the former, devotees consider themselves as 'belonging to' (*svakīya*), i. e., as wives, of Krishna, while in the latter they look upon themselves as 'belonging to another' (*parakīya*), so that Krishna is their paramour. The

24 Secular Poetics generally does not admit *bhakti* as a *rasa*, but considers it merely as an emotion. However, the Caitanya school argues against this view: see De (1961), 401-403.

25 For the other four primary *rasas*, see De (1961), 194-197.

26 De (1961), 182-193.

*parakīya rasa* is more intense because of the natural impediments and obstacles that have to be overcome in order to gain access to the beloved.<sup>27</sup>

## VII. *Salvation*

*Prīti* is the highest kind of salvation, the *summum bonum*. However, Bengal Vaiṣṇavism also admits lower forms of salvation.

### 1. Salvation while Alive (*jīvan-mukti*)

When a person attains *jīvan-mukti* or liberation while alive, he will not be born again to enjoy or suffer the consequences (*karman*) of his accumulated past deeds (*sañcita-karma*): these effects are nullified or obliterated. Similarly the actions that are accumulating (*sañcīyamāna-karma*) will also not bear fruit in the future. However, the deeds that have already begun to bear fruit (*prārabdha-karma*) have to run their course, and that is why the soul who is liberated while alive (*jīvan-mukta*) still continues to live, and maintains the apparent contact with the body. Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism accepts the possibility of this type of liberation only in the case of those who follow the path of knowledge (*jñāna-mārga*). In other words, in this form of liberation the soul considers itself as identical with Brahman, the lowest aspect of God. Bengal Vaiṣṇavites acknowledge the possibility of such a soul experiencing devotion to the Lord, but such experiences are only occasional; they are not continuous as in the case of the forms of salvation attained after death (*videha-mukti*), which, precisely because they are reached through devotion, are of a much superior type. *Jīvan-mukti*, therefore, is, in the eyes of the Caitanya School, only a quasi-liberation, not a full-fledged salvation.<sup>28</sup>

### 2. Salvation after Death (*videha-mukti*)

Bengal Vaiṣṇavism accepts, with some modifications, the traditional five forms of salvation after death. It should be remarked, however, that *Prīti* is far superior even to the best of these five types of salvation. We shall now present them in their ascending order of importance.

- (1) *Sāyujya*: Absorption into Brahman (the lowest aspect of God) or into Bhagavat (the highest aspect of God). (a) Becoming immersed in Brahman:

<sup>27</sup> Kapoor (1977), 215, 221–230.

<sup>28</sup> Chakravarti (1969), 236–237.

The soul experiences bliss, even if it is of an inferior kind compared to that experienced in higher stages of salvation. The soul becomes so absorbed in Brahman, that it is unaware of its distinct identity. This state of salvation is similar to that in Advaita but, unlike in the latter, there is never a complete identity between the soul and Brahman. In the latter case, there is bliss, but no subject experiencing the bliss. But, in *Sāyujya* with Brahman, the soul does experience bliss, even if it is unaware of its distinct identity. However, precisely because of its almost total oneness with Brahman, the bliss enjoyed by the soul in this state is far inferior to that in the higher stages of salvation. God can, through his grace, lift such a person to a higher level of salvation. (b) Becoming immersed in the body of Bhagavat: The bliss of Brahman (*brahmānanda*) experienced by the soul in *Sāyujya* with Brahman is even less than a drop compared to the ocean of bliss enjoyed by the soul which is immersed in Bhagavat's body. Unlike in the *Brahman-sāyujya*, where the soul is able to experience only a limited, colourless joy that lacks variety, in the *Bhagavat-sāyujya* the soul experiences the rich varieties of bliss through the spiritual body of Bhagavat, which it has entered.<sup>29</sup> However, the soul in this state cannot practice devotion to, and service of, the Bhagavat. This type of salvation, therefore, is not desired by the true devotee. In this case too, God can raise the soul to a higher kind of salvation.<sup>30</sup>

- (2) *Sālokya*: Residence in the same region as God. Discarding its gross and subtle bodies, made up of imperfect *prakṛti*, the soul acquires a perfect body, made of 'pure matter' (*śuddha-sattva*), and resides in the divine world of God. Of course, there are also the eternally free souls, who always have perfect bodies and are always in God's abode.
- (3) *Sārṣṭya*: Glory or power similar to that of God. It should be noted that, while the soul possesses many miraculous powers, such as causing distant objects to come near and transforming material things, yet, compared to God, its capacity is limited. E. g., the soul cannot emanate, preserve or dissolve the universe.
- (4) *Sārūpya*: Similarity of form with God. In the different heavenly eternal worlds (*dhāmans*) God displays himself in diverse forms. A soul may acquire an appearance similar to one of these forms. Generally, one attains a form similar to the form of God on which one meditates. However, the soul never becomes absolutely identical with God.<sup>31</sup>

29 Kapoor (1977), 137-139.

30 De (1961), 388-389.

31 Sinha (1983), 211-213.

(5) *Sāmīpya*: Proximity to God. In this type of salvation one enjoys an intimacy with God which is superior to the *Sālokya*, *Sārṣṭya* and *Sārūpya* varieties. In these latter one has an internal vision (*antaḥ-sākṣātkāra*) of God, while in the former one has an outward vision (*bahiḥ-sākṣātkāra*) of God. The outward experience is considered richer and more direct.<sup>32</sup>

If devotees practising *prīti-bhakti* seem to desire *Sārṣṭya*, *Sāmīpya*, etc., this is not for their selfish enjoyment, but to attain the capacity and powers of these types of salvation in order to serve the Bhagavat all the more. The true devotee seeks only to please the Bhagavat.<sup>33</sup>

It will thus be seen that, although Bengal Vaiṣṇavism believes in essential identity-cum-difference, yet, in its treatment of the ideal forms of both *bhakti* as well as salvation, the emphasis is on the difference, not on the identity.

### VIII. *Comparison with Christianity and Concluding Remarks*

Christianity too is a devotional religion, emphasizing love rather than knowledge. However Christian devotion is rather sober, placid and staid, in comparison with the highly emotional, euphoric devotion of Bengal Vaiṣṇavism. We do find a spontaneous devotional outpouring of feelings in charismatic groups, but even this is rather pale in comparison with the strong emotional colouring of *bhakti* in Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism. Furthermore, the latter has raised *bhakti* to a religiously aesthetic experience, called *Rasa*, and has made a deep analysis of its various moods, colours and shades.

Even if Christianity has not coined technical names for each of them, many of the forms of devotion found in the Caitanya School are also in Christianity, e. g., listening to and repeating God's names, singing God's praises, meditation, relating to God as one's master or parent or friend, self-surrender to God, etc. On the other hand, certain other forms of devotion are conspicuously absent in Christianity. For instance, parental affection (*vātsalya*) towards God. Christianity has always had a filial, rather than a parental, attitude towards God. Yet, when we come to think of it, the feast of Christmas is an excellent time indeed for Christians to practise this parental love towards the baby Jesus. However, most of us approach the baby Jesus on our knees, singing, e. g., the carol *Venite, adoremus* (Come, let us adore). Our carols portray the infant Jesus as Lord, and not as a cute, cuddly, helpless child that invites parental love. It looks as if we do not take the incarnation seriously, although

32 Kapoor (1977), 139.

33 De (1961), 391.

we believe that Christ has become a human being, like us in all things except sin (Heb 4. 15). On the other hand, in Bengal Vaiṣṇavism the bodies of Krishna and his descents (*avatāras*) do not have any human (or other) imperfections, since they are made up of the perfect 'pure matter' (*śuddha-sattva*), and not the imperfect matter (*prakṛti*).<sup>34</sup> Even in the case of ordinary human beings, the soul is not really in contact with the body, since all animate beings are pure spirits. Hence it is all the more noteworthy that Vaiṣṇavites celebrate the birthdays of Krishna and Rāma by rocking them in their swings, singing lullabies to them, etc.<sup>35</sup> And, on the other hand, even the image of the Infant Jesus of Prague depicts him as a king.

While repeating the name of God has been popular in Eastern Christianity, it has, unfortunately, not been very much in vogue in the Roman Church. Latin Christians need to realise the importance of this Prayer of the Name and practise it regularly. Then, indeed, will we discover more and more the significance of what we say in the Our Father: holy be your Name. It is heartening to see an increasing number of Roman Catholics practising the now well-known Jesus Prayer.<sup>36</sup>

It is obvious that Bengal Vaiṣṇavism stresses the importance of grace rather than effort,<sup>37</sup> particularly since, unlike other Hindu *bhakti* schools, it does not want to mix knowledge or action with *bhakti*. Yet, it does not eliminate effort totally. Although Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism does not consider *Yoga* in itself as an important means of salvation, since it leads to a lower liberation, yet, like so many other Hindu sects, it integrates yogic techniques into its meditational practices. Meditation is of course very important in Christianity. However, we do not make sufficient use of the body to help the mind to concentrate. If it is true that we can express our inner feelings through our body language, in our postures and gestures, it is also true that the postures and gestures in turn can put us into the right mood. A reverential posture, for instance, inspires reverence. It is indeed paradoxical that Hinduism, in which the soul has only a mistaken, apparent contact with the body, has evolved so many meditative techniques that involve the body through postures, breathing, etc. On the other hand, in Christianity, in which soul and body are intrinsically united to form one being, our prayer, especially in the Roman

34 For a detailed comparison between Hindu *avatāra* (descent) and Christian incarnation, see my forthcoming article in *Philosophy East and West*, January 2002.

35 Sheth (1989), 235–236. Note that there are numerous and serious printing mistakes in this article: see the Apology of the editor in *Jeevadhara: A Journal of Christian Interpretation*, Vol. 19, No. 112, 306.

36 See, for instance, *The Way of a Pilgrim and The Pilgrim Continues His Way* (French 1963).

37 On grace and effort, see Sheth (1999), 80.



Church, tends to be so cerebral: the body is involved so little. The Latin liturgy too is so dry and inexpressive: standing up and sitting down are practically the only postures we assume.

In Hinduism in general, and also to a large extent in Bengal Vaiṣṇavism, much importance is given to the spiritual guide or *guru*. It should be pointed out that in Hinduism a *guru* is recognised by popular acclaim: people witness his holiness and spontaneously go to him for guidance. In Christianity, on the other hand, superiors and spiritual guides are often appointed. However, the appointed guide may not necessarily be a person who has experienced God deeply and may not be sufficiently equipped with counselling skills to guide people effectively.

Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism evidently puts great emphasis on the lover-beloved relationship with God. It is in fact the best type of devotion. In Christianity too we find what has been called bridal mysticism. St Paul looked on the Church as the spouse of Christ (Eph 5. 31-32). In some women's religious orders and congregations, when the sisters make their Final Profession of Vows, they are given a ring, indicating that they are brides of Christ. *The Song of Songs* has been interpreted not only as a bridal song of Christ on the one hand, and the Church or the Blessed Virgin Mary on the other, but also of Christ and the individual soul. St. Teresa of Avila brings this out in her *Meditations on the Song of Songs*. She also wrote devotional love poems, e. g., *Loving Colloquy* and *On Those Words "My Beloved Is for Me"*. A glance at the Index of her collected works will reveal very many references to her love mysticism.<sup>38</sup> Similarly, we have ample evidence of erotic mysticism in the writings of St. John of the Cross, especially in his famous lyrical poems, *The Dark Night*, *The Spiritual Canticle* and *The Living Flame of Love*.<sup>39</sup> However, this form of passionate devotion is not so widespread and universal in Christianity as it is in certain Hindu sects, particularly in Bengal Vaiṣṇavism. In this context, some scholars have criticized this passionate devotion of Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism as vulgar (Hopkins), or immoral (McKenzie) or have accused it of glorifying the sex impulse (De). The traditional theologians of the Caitanya School are quick to point out that this heavenly love is different from earthly, erotic love. In the latter one seeks one's own lustful pleasure. But in the former, the herdswomen are solely concerned in bringing pleasure to Krishna, their Beloved. In fact, the traditional theologians have also said that if, due to our minds not being pure, we derive vicarious erotic pleasure from meditating on or imitating the intimate behaviour of Krishna and the herdswomen, then we should desist from such mediation and imitation. Indeed, from the Bengal

38 See, e. g., Kavanaugh and Rodriguez (1982-1986).

39 See, e. g., Kavanaugh and Rodriguez (1996).

Vaiṣṇavism point of view, the worldly sensual love is a reflection, and a distorted one at that, of the heavenly passionate love, and not the other way around.<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, it could be said that, since in heaven the attendants and souls do not have imperfect physical bodies and senses, but instead have perfect bodies and senses, made from 'pure matter', the charge of sexuality cannot be levelled against it.

It should be noted that, in Hinduism, the devotee is generally female in reference to God, who is the only Male. This conception is of course due to the fact that most of the Supreme Beings of the Hindu *bhakti* religions are male: the only exception is the Mother-Goddess or the Śakti of Śaktism. Understandably, it would be more difficult for men to look on themselves as women, at least for devotional purposes, than it would be for women. Some psychologists may consider it as abnormal that a man tries to generate the feminine emotions within himself. In this context, some may also consider the vicarious enjoyment in the *Rāgānugā Bhakti* too as aberrant.

While it emphasizes the vertical dimension of *bhakti*, Bengal Vaiṣṇavism does not neglect the social or horizontal aspect of *bhakti*. E. g., it asserts that worshipping an image is useless, if one does not care for the welfare of one's fellow devotees. Taking up charitable works for the community is a form of devotion. Still, I would say that Christianity stresses the social dimension of devotion much more than the School of Caitanya.

All devotional schools, including Christianity and Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism, believe in salvation after death. While the Caitanya School concedes that one may attain liberation while alive through the path of knowledge, it positively rejects it as a way open to Vaiṣṇavites. As far as the state of salvation is concerned, Bengal Vaiṣṇavism paints highly imaginative and concrete pictures of the various grades of salvation. Compared to this, the Christian idea of salvation is rather abstract. Even though Jesus says "There are many rooms in my Father's house" (Jn 14. 2), the house and its rooms are not described. The Bengal Vaiṣṇavite picture of the states of salvation may appear too anthropomorphic to a Christian. Yet, since the divine sphere transcends human understanding, concepts and words, a picturesque depiction of the heavenly paradise is certainly more attractive than a dry, insipid, and even boring heaven. I should add, however, that Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavites take these descriptions of the heavenly abodes and grades of salvation as real, and not merely as figurative or symbolic images.

40 Kapoor (1977), 218-220.

The Vaiṣṇavite perfect bodies of 'pure matter' (*śuddha-sattva*) may be compared with the glorified, resurrected bodies in Christianity. The resurrected body of Christ was not subject to the limitations of the earthly body: e. g., he was able to enter the cenacle in spite of the doors being closed. Even the resurrected bodies of ordinary human beings are free from hunger, thirst, etc. Of course there are also differences between the two understandings. E. g., the Vaiṣṇavite perfect bodies are constituted of a different kind of 'matter' compared to the imperfect earthly, even if resurrected, bodies, which, in Hindu terms, are made up of the imperfect *prakṛti*.

Bengal Vaiṣṇavism has to its credit the fact that it is the first to have made a thorough analysis of devotion as an aesthetic religious experience. While it is against sterile intellectualism, it has attempted to give a theological basis for its doctrine of devotion. It believes in the sublimation of emotions rather than in their suppression, in the spirituality of love rather than asceticism. Using as model the broad spectrum of human emotions in general, and erotic love in particular, it has spelled out, on the transcendental level, the deeply emotional relationships between devotees and God. Although the charge of sensuality made against it may not hold water, the danger of slipping into an all too human eroticism does remain. In fact, the Sahjīyā sect, an offshoot of Bengal Vaiṣṇavism, includes tāntric practices such as actual ritual sexual intercourse. Nevertheless, it may be said that the main line School of Caitanya has succeeded in presenting loving, passionate devotion, as an aesthetic and religious experience, which has a human appeal and a transcendental value.

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