CHAPTER I

THE IDEA OF BHAKTI

It is commonly held that the bhakti movement was a medieval phenomenon. It is true that the scholastic theory of bhakti received an elaborate expression at the hands of some medieval philosophers and that a large number of saints preached the doctrine of bhakti, practically in all parts of the country. Nevertheless, the doctrine as well as the practice can be traced back to remote antiquity, and, in fact, medieval thinkers themselves constantly appealed to these ancient sources. We have thus a phenomenon of true historical development in the realm of bhakti which manifested itself as early as the Vedic hymns, but gradually developed through the ages till, in medieval times, it reached its climax.

It would be admitted that the process of development can be properly understood only if we keep in mind the telos or end towards which that process tends. It is true that historical development is never wholly rational or organic, so that we can hardly think of any perfect ends in the context
of such a process. Nevertheless, there is an undeniable logic of development within the ideal processes of cultural history. If we move to the sphere of political or military history, for example, we find the element of chance and irrationality playing a prominent part, but if we turn to the history of higher culture, especially to religious and philosophical ideas, a strong undercurrent for rational and logical development can be plainly detected. Even if it is true that all history does not follow a rational process of development, it must at least be admitted that in the realm of the history of ideas such a process is more important than elsewhere. In a broad sense the history of ideas does exhibit a process of development which at least seeks to be rational.

From this point of view it would be helpful if we begin by glancing at the nature of bhakti as understood in classical medieval works which came at the end of a long development which they illumine.

Bhakti is both a means as well as an end in spiritual life. As a means bhakti is called gājhana bhakti or gaupi bhakti or aparā bhakti. The root bhañ, in the sense of serving (sevana), gives the clue to the meaning of this bhakti. It is serving or worshipping the divine, generally with the help of names and forms. It may be either ritualistic (vañā) or emotional (rāgoñā). It implies a certain code of conduct (ācāra) and worship (upāsanā, pūjā). As a result
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 bhakti implies the doctrine of an essential kinship between man and God.

Again, since the nature of bhakti is love, the development of bhakti also implies the growth of the conception of love and of the discovery and formalization of the modes of symbolic and actual behaviour appropriate to the cultivation and expression of love.\textsuperscript{6}

The structure of bhakti is, thus, at once theoretical, emotional and practical. It is a unity of knowing, feeling and willing in a growing integral being which culminates in direct communion with the divine. On the theoretical side it implies a conception of the personal nature and kinship of God and man. On the emotional side it implies the awareness of diverse personal relationships, moods, and sentiments, appropriate to the kinship between man and God. On the practical side it implies forms of worship and of moral and social conduct which would express the ideal of the devotee and correspond to the stages of his progress.

It is true that the best known medieval schools of bhakti tend to be monotheistic, but not monistic. They seem to think that there is one supreme divine person whom the human soul, as a finite spiritual being, eternally seeks. So long the human soul does not realize its true spiritual nature, it wanders unhappy from birth to birth. The Grace
of God awakens the soul to its spiritual nature, and with that inevitably comes the longing for the infinite spirit, which is the same as bhakti. From this point of view polytheism and absolutistic monism appear to be as much contrary to bhakti as any variety of naturalism. Polytheism robs the Divine of His supreme and unique position, and, in its lower forms, even of His character as supernatural person (purusottama). Monism or absolutism does away with the finitude of human soul and abolishes the distinction between man and God. In any variety of naturalism man ceases to have an eternal and spiritual nature, so that love itself becomes a temporary relationship based on needs and adorned by fancy. Those philosophers, even those dualistic philosophies like Sāṅkhya, Nyāya and Jainism which concede plurality as well as the spirituality of human nature, but which deny, to the human spirit, the self-consciousness of its limitations and dependence and with it the possibility of longing and feeling, are thus contrary to bhakti, because they abolish the possibility of love as central to human nature. The doctrine of bhakti has had to contend with these two extremes of naturalism and polytheism, tending towards the quenching of Love in worldly pursuits on one hand and of monistic and pluralistic intellectualism on the other. The former tendencies seek to gratify natural impulses and desires (kāma bhoga). They take human nature to be identical with the sense-bound ego. The latter alternatives tend to extol a mere negation and identify man’s destiny with ultimate dispassion (para vairāgya).
Even so it has to be admitted that serious and
valiant attempts have been made to reconcile *advaita* with
*bhakti*. Of these the attempt of Madhusudana Sarasvati must
be deemed to have finally ended the controversy, though
the writings of the Kashmir *śaivas*, especially Abhinavagupta
as well as of the *advaitic *saktas* undoubtedly contain the
reconciliation of *advaita* and *bhakti*. From the *advaitic*
point of view the search of the individual for the Divine
is part of the same *śiva* which has created the sense of
an individual separate from God. To deny feeling and
action in the absolute does not imply any deficiency in
the absolute. It is only part of an attempt to express
the infinite nature of the absolute where all attributes
get denied. Such denials do not limit the absolute, because
the absolute is not a *negative* entity. The absolute is the
most positive, the fullest, where all known attributes are
perfected and surpassed. The tendency to affirm merely
being or being and conscious or being,consciousness and
bliss of the absolute has meaning only in terms of either
the negation of some complimentary negation, or of a suggestive
analogy. When *brahman* is called *sat*, *asat* is negated and the
perfection of being is attributed to Him. It is the same
with all other attributes. Since the most intimate character
of the absolute is discovered in the *ātman*, it is difficult
to see in which sense the *advaitic *brahman* is impersonal.
Certainly the *brahman* is not a man, nor does it have the
attributes of human mind in *śiva* limitations and imperfections.
It must, however, contain the essential being and value of human nature which is self-awareness. As the \textit{Upanisad} says, the notion of the self is the source of all values and seekings.\footnote{Love itself has the self for its object which is seen in another as through a veil. As \textit{Vidyaranya} says, in all seekings, man merely seeks the self.\footnote{In all experiences of values man experiences the self. At the empirical level, the true object of seeking an experience is veiled by finite natural forms. \textit{Spiritual} life begins when one cleaves to the infinite essence underlying all finite manifestations. \textit{Advaitic} knowledge, thus, far from impoverishing the love and longing for an infinite self consciousness or person, is the essential condition for such a quest to be truly and fruitfully pursued. If God is really other than man, their kinship can only be accidental and will ever remain in jeopardy. If, on the other hand, man essentially needs God and can be with Him eternally, can he be really different from Him?}}

Thus, the stream of \textit{bhakti} has developed from within the matrix of early \textit{Vedic} religion, gradually perfecting its notions of God and man and of ritual and conduct appropriate to their relationships. It has contended with diverse contrary tendencies, among which may be counted early Buddhism and Jainism, \textit{Sāṅkhya} and \textit{Yoga}, \textit{Nyāya} and \textit{Vaiśeṣika}, Mīmāṃsā and \textit{Gārvāka}. Its relationship with \textit{Vedānta} and \textit{Tantra} has been close and complex. The early \textit{Vedic} hymns reveal a lofty
conception of divine reality, and, not unoften, establish a personal relationship between man and deity. From the point of view of bhakti, the tendency towards excessive formalization of ritual, which grew up in the middle Vedic period, was a hinderance. It seemed to convert worship into magic and commerce. The Upanisads, with their clear insight into the unity of all the Gods and their doctrine of the universal spirit (ātman) or Person (purusa), furnished the basic track along which bhakti was to grow. In fact, the Kātha and the Svetāsvatara contain clear enunciation of the doctrine of bhakti which is implied in many other Upanisads such as Isa, Chāndogya, etc. Here are already adumbrated the doctrines of grace and love, the doctrine of grace, love and beatitude following a life of discipline, discernment and contemplation. The Upanisads clearly visualize the mystical way—purgative, illuminative and unitive. Behind this conception of the spiritual quest lies the conception of the absoluteness and supremacy of the spiritual principle in man which is identified with the cosmic divine reality.

While the Upanisads view the essence of man as divine, they tend to take a transcendental view of the spiritual essence which equally underlies man as well as nature. The gap between man and gods is still continued in the sense that man is required to transcend his merely human or psycho-physical personality to realize his essential
element. It is in the Bhagavat-gītā that the next step is taken with the doctrine of incarnation according to which God Himself is born in man. Humanity now becomes the supreme manifestation of divine nature. Arjuna indeed prefers the human form of Kṛṣṇa to his cosmic form. Kṛṣṇa himself declares the unmanifest absolute as inaccessible to man. The Upaniṣadic ascent towards God is now matched by the descent of God among men. With this humanization of God, bhakti came into its own as love within a personal relationship between man and God serving as the very archetype of love among men.

This new development took place among the Kṣatriya clan to which Kṛṣṇa belonged. In this clan at the same time the idea of the worship of some of its famous heroes (yṛṣṇi vīra) was also current. An attempt was made to link the doctrine of incarnation with this doctrine of royal hero worship through the concept of emanation (vṛūḥa). The other worshipful heroes were joint to Kṛṣṇa as so many emanations of the Divine reality. This doctrine of the vṛūhas along with a new interpretation of ritual constituted the heart of the Pāñcarātra movement which, in course of time, used its own elaborate samhitās.

The Śvetāsvatara already contains the basic outlook of the Śaiva cult for which Śiva is the Lord and the human soul utterly dependent on Him. Corresponding to the Bhāgavata concept of purusottama, we have here the concept of Paśupati. The Paśupata cult, so called, found a historical landmark
when it was claimed that the Lord had descended (avatāra) to assume a human body as Lakulīsa. For the Bhāgavata God is born as man. For the śaivas or Pāṇḍupataś śiva appears in the human birth as a perfect being (ātma).

During the Śaka-Kuśāna age the Bhāgavata and Pāṇḍupata attempts to bring humanity and divinity together were matched by Mahāyāna Buddhism, where the Bodhisattva, especially Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara, is hard to distinguish from a gracious god, easily accessible to man. The Sādhanamā Purāṇa goes on to place the highest emphasis on repeating the name of Avalokiteśvara and calling on him for help and guidance. The notion of the Buddha as a supernatural person manifesting himself in human form was elaborated into the doctrine of the three Bodies (trikāya) and also helps the rise of the Buddha image for worship. That, along with the new practice of the deva-kulās and the popular emphasis of Paurāṇika Hinduism helped the rise of temple worship as a major feature among all the religious cults of India in the Gupta and the post-Gupta times.

The Purāṇas, which were originally bardic compilations, were recast in the Kuśāna and Gupta periods as veritable popular expositions seeking to present a syncretic and theistic religion. The doctrine of Trimūrti was one of their greatest triumphs and the idea of incarnation was taken up and further developed. New forms and symbols were provided for older Vedic ideals.
It was in the south under the Pallavas where Buddhism, Jainism and Hinduism contended as rivals that the Ṛivārśa lent a new dimension to bhakti by making it an intensely personal and popular appeal, which disregarded hierarchical and formal tradition. This work forms the basis of discussion and systematization by a series of learned philosophers (śarvas).

All these diverse tendencies were summed up in the Bhāgavata which became the central point of reference for the later bhakti movement. It may be regarded as the gateway to medieval bhakti. While Ramanuja thinks of bhakti as 'constant remembrance' of the Lord and as parāparāti, the Bhāgavata defines bhakti as the 'uninterrupted flow' of the mind towards the Lord or as love for Him, as importunate and obstinate as natural love. The views of the Gīta and the Bhāgavata and of the Rasā-sāstra were taken up into a perfected system of the philosophy of bhakti by men like Madhusudana Sarasvatī and the Cowell.

REFERENCES

1 Cf. Ross, Aristotle, p. 45.


3 Mārācā-kṛṣṇa-sūtra, sūtra 56:

"Cauṇḍī śriṅga-bheda ārtibheda vā".

This obviously derives from the Gīta:

"Caturvīdhā bhaivante rām" etc. 7.16.

Cowell, Aphorisms of Śāndilya with the Commentary of Śrīnāvāra, pp. 75-76, Madhusudana, Bhāgavatībhaktiśārvana, pp. 21 ff.

The dates of the Bhakti-sūtras of Mārāca and Śāndilya are
quite uncertain; of the two, Śaṅkīla is presumably earlier stylistically. Cowell calls Śaṅkīla comparatively modern (op. cit., p.xix). The crucial question is whether Nārada and Śaṅkīla are earlier than the Pāñcatattva or later. They are not best regarded as attempts at producing aphoristic compendia of the Pāñcatattva, cf. Nānatsay, *Love of God*, p.96. Were they other than the Pāñcatattvā they would surely have been referred to by classical writers and would have been quoted as authorities by the medieval theorists of bhakti.4


5 Cf. *Pānavaśīthakīrāsāvāna*, 1.10; 3rd *Uralā* on the nature of rasa.

6 Nārada-bhakti-sūtra, 4th chapter, sūtras 51-56. The nature of love is here described as ineffable (anirvacanīya) like a dumb person’s taste of delight (ātmottaravat). Love is described as a subtle experience, continuous, craving, selfless and motiveless (Cupa-rāhitā kāmā-rāhitā pratikṣā-vardhamānām avicchinnam sūkṣmataram anubhayavāt); Cowell, op.cit., pp.7-9.

Rūpāgavāmī defines love as intense feeling of personal relationship overwhelming the mind and leading to its spontaneous outflow of tenderness:

"sarvanā manātā-svānto maaṣatvātāsāvanā kitāh

bhavah sa eva sāndrātām bhūthāt pravā nigadātāt". (op.cit., p.115).


8 *Pañcādari*, chap.15.

9 *Śvetāśvatara* mentions the word bhakti - ‘Yasya deve para bhaktih...’. Cf. *Śvetāśvatara* Upan., VI, 23.

10 "saranaśatigadāya", Cf. Commentary ad *Sūtra*, 18, tr. K. Bhayavam.