

BHAKTI IN THE LIGHT OF SRI AUROBINDO

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Devotion is not utterly fulfilled till it becomes action and knowledge. If thou pursuest after God and canst overtake Him, let Him not go till thou hast His reality. If thou hast hold of His reality, insist on having also His totality. The first will give thee divine knowledge, the second will give thee divine works and a free and perfect joy in the universe. (Sri Aurobindo 12: 481)

What is devotion? What kind of devotion does Sri Aurobindo refer to in the above quote? How is it fulfilled in action and knowledge? A simple definition of devotion is, love and adoration for God. Devotion in India is called 'bhakti' and the one who pursues bhakti is called the 'bhakta'. The Bhakta has a specific purpose when he takes to bhakti, when he turns Godward. The purpose may be to seek protection, fulfill desires, salvation, identification or union with God or simply to love God. From times immemorial it has been observed that human beings are afraid of the powers unknown to them. In ancient times, storm, fire and such natural forces terrified them and they started worshipping some unknown higher power to stop destruction. The motive was to satisfy those powers so that they may spare the human beings. The nature of fear has changed over time but still human beings fear all that is unknown, and therefore they turn towards God and ask for protection. Desire for material wealth and prosperity has also led people to turn to God. Essentially, humanity turned towards God out of "fear and interest".

Before we proceed to salvation and other motives of bhakti, it is required to evince various modes and motives of bhakti prevalent in India. The evidences of *worshipping* God are available in the most ancient texts, particularly the Vedas. For the masses¹, the Vedas were a book of works, which instructed them how to perform sacrifices, yajna to propitiate God to gain wealth or protection. *Yajna* were also performed to establish peace, to purify and chide the evil. Upanishads documented the metaphysical experiences of the Rishis. The practice of Veda and Upanishad required great amount of concentration and long hours of meditation to attain God. At this time, there was no emotional involvement with God. The highest purpose of an individual following Vedas or Upanishads was *samādhi* through which they attained salvation or *mukti*.

It is in the relation of Sri Krishna with that of his disciples that we see a relation of 'love' between man and God. God who was only an object of reverence became the object of love too. The love and adoration of man for God is called bhakti. Sri Krishna emphasized the concept of the temple. The body was the temple and God was to be installed in it through love. The temple built of stones and concrete are only symbols of this concept. There are some rituals to install God in the temple. Each element used in the process is symbolic and has a spiritual significance. Various Indian cults define number of steps,

however, a minimum of 16 are certainly followed by majority. A few may be recalled here, *Aawahana* - Inviting God, *Aasanam* – The offering of a seat to God, *Chandan* - offering sandalpaste, *Kum Mala* or *Pushpam* - offering of garlands of flowers or just flowers, *Durva* or *Doob* - The offering of dew grass, *Pushpanjali* - offering flowers, *Deepam* – lighting a lamp. These are only a few steps not necessarily in a chronological order. Over the millennia, the spiritual import of these objects and ceremonies has been forgotten and what remains is only external, mechanical ritual. For example, the lighting of *deepam* signified the tending of aspiration and light of God's love within one's heart. However, performing these rituals was not the only way to approach God for the bhakta.

“The Ancient Indian tradition speaks of nine forms of devotion. They are at once movements for the expression of devotion and feeders for the flame of Divine Love.” (Pandit: 4) They are – *shravana*² (listening to the glories of God), *kirtana* (praising of the Lord from the depth of one's heart), *smarana* (whatever one is doing, whatever the movement, to remember and to offer), *padasevana* (physical service, consecration of the physical to God), *archana* (worship), *vandana* (bowing down as a result of inner attitude of surrender), *dasya* (taking up of the attitude of a servant), *sakhya* (a readiness to assume any attitude called for by God), and *atmanivedan* (complete self-surrender in all the parts, on all the planes of the being, at all times, in all places).

Bhagawad Gita classifies four types of bhakti which leads to the corresponding *mukti*. They are *sālokya*, *sārūpya*, *sāyujya*, *sāmīpya*. These terms are complex to define. They are not rituals or simple methods to attain God, but demand complete surrender and consecration to God. Sri Aurobindo describes these modes in his *Essays on the Gita*.³ Prior to analyzing the levels of Bhakti given by Sri Aurobindo, the relation between God and the individual may be analyzed. The major difference between the worship at the Vedic-Upanishadic times and with the advent of Sri Krishna is the change of relation between God and bhakta. Earlier, there was awe, reverence, fear of God. God was at a distance to which the seeker had to reach by some means. “To fear God really is to remove oneself to a distance from Him” (Sri Aurobindo 12: 481). But love removes all these distances and where there is love there is no fear. Love then manifests in the form of different relations; this relation is assigned by bhakta to God. All the possible relations between God and bhakta are summarized by Sri Aurobindo thus,

Discipleship to God the Teacher, sonship to God the Father, tenderness of God the Mother, clasp of the hand of the divine Friend, laughter and sport with our Comrade and boy Playfellow, blissful servitude to God the Master, rapturous love of our divine Paramour, these are the seven beatitudes of life in the human body. (12:489)

With the coming of the devotional aspect, human beings did not distant themselves with God but got into an intimate relationship with God like one

who is a Father, a Mother, a Brother, a Friend, a Husband, a Child and so on, as was suitable to one's own emotions. Thus God came into a close proximity and an intimate relationship. An example of seeing God as the Mother is Sri Ramakrishna Paramhansa. He saw Goddess as his Mother and adored Her. The relations between Sri Krishna and Arjuna and Sri Krishna and Sudāma are that of a "divine Friend". Arjuna and Sudama share thier anxieties with Sri Krishna as a Friend while being aware of His divinity. Rādhā relates to Sri Krishna as her Lover and Mirabai sees Him as her Husband. Similarly, Prahlād is known to be the "bhakta", the disciple who completely surrenders himself to Narayan. These examples prove how individuals relate to God and extend their love to Him.

It is with love that bhakti can increase and thus love for God, intimacy with Him and union can come. In bhakti, the ultimate aim is to reach God through love. This reaching of God is actually the 'yoga' (the joining of the two). However, there are a few steps before the bhakta can unite with God. Sri Aurobindo observes five stages which the bhakta has to go through in order to reach the stage of perfect union; which is also the stage when love, knowledge and action come together. Sri Aurobindo writes, "worship is only the first step on the path of devotion. Where external worship changes into the inner adoration, real Bhakti begins; that deepens into the intensity of divine love; that love leads to the joy of closeness in our relations with the Divine; the joy of closeness passes into the bliss of union"(24:549). The five steps thus classified by him are worship, adoration, divine love, intimacy with the divine and delight of union.

The first step of worship has two dimensions, the outer and the inner. The outer modes of worship are the ones that involve rituals and rites, like invoking the God, offering flowers and sandal-paste and the like. Sri Aurobindo observes that this stage is important as it is through the external objects one can turn inward if he wishes so. He describes the importance of *puja* (the ceremonial worship) in one of his letters,

The kind of worship (*puja*) spoken of in the letter belongs to the religious life. It can, if rightly done in the deepest religious spirit, prepare the mind and heart to some extent but no more. But if as a part of meditation or with a true aspiration to the spiritual reality and the spiritual consciousness and with the yearning for contact and union with the Divine, then it can be spiritually effective. (*Letters on Yoga*: 138)

It may be marked here that the rituals alone are not able to connect the individual with God. As discussed earlier Sri Aurobindo counts the "inner adoration" as the beginning of bhakti, for it is only with adoration, the distance between man and God fades away. The bhakta realizes that God is not someone far and unreachable but someone who can be reached and loved and possessed. At the stage of adoration, the bhakta is astonished, is pleasantly surprised at

the magnanimity, the power and beauty of God and His creation. In adoration he sings songs for God and intends to share his joy. The bhakta at this stage realizes that he exists only because of God. Harindranath Chattopadhyaya, one of the poets who has written many devotional poems, expresses his joy of realizing that God controls and governs the entire creation. In "Immortal Destroyer" he says,

The Lord of Life is Lord of Death,
 Controller of all form and name.
 Lo, He can with a single breath
 Extinguish time's poor candle-flame. (7)

Many a poet like Mirabai, Surdas, Tulsidas have sung verses in the adoration of God. But, the bhakta, the adorer is also conscious of his distance and difference from God. He adores God from a particular mental distance. However, love for God takes over the bhakta and he remains intoxicated by that love. He craves for the divine love and prays that God should possess him and he should possess God. Swami Ramdas' poem would substantiate this delight and longing for the Lord,

O Lord, I longed to be with Thee,
 Thou as eternal Mother and I thy little immortal child.
 The sweet joys of Thy nearness I sought
 Gracious Mother, Thy blessing came.
 I slacked my thirst for a time at the fountain of Thy love
 In close communion with Thee
 I felt the untold thrills of ecstasy.
 Love overflowed my being – I was lost in it – yet not lost. (17)

The poet delights in the fact that the Mother has accepted and embraced him with Her Love. He is so much in possession of Her love that he has nearly lost his separate existence. But he longs for the separation so that he may continue to enjoy being in love rather than be lost in the union. Such is the play of divine love. The lover and the beloved are separate but they want to behold each other for ever and cannot bear the separation. In this stage the devotee has complete faith that God loves him in return without any reservations. This realization is a stage between adoration and "divine love". "Divine love" is the manifestation of the Love that God has for the bhakta. It is with this surety that Sri Aurobindo writes, "Others boast of their love for God. My boast is that I did not love God; it was He who loved me and sought me out and forced me to belong to Him" (CWSA 12:481).

When God's love manifests, the bhakta is able to see various forms and aspects of God. He may have certain spiritual realizations. He may see God

everywhere and can also see His working everywhere. Adoration is the bhakta's aspiration and divine love, God's answer to this aspiration. When the bhakta bathes in the joy of divine love he comes to the stage of intimate relation with God. All the stages mentioned above were comparatively simple to understand as there are various accounts of bhaktas who have gone through worship, adoration and have experienced divine love. Intimacy and union are much higher stages and it is difficult to decipher between the two without experience. In its very logical sequence, when one loves the other, when one is intimate with the other, one knows the other. That is how the bhakta comes to know the real nature of God. Sri Aurobindo describes how love leads to knowledge,

Love fulfilled does not exclude knowledge, but itself brings knowledge; and the completer the knowledge, the richer the possibility of love. "By Bhakti" says the Lord in the Gita "shall a man know Me in all my extent and greatness and as I am in the principles of my being, and when he has known Me in the principles of my being, then he enters into Me". (24: 547)

By the same sequence it is also true that the more we know and love someone, the more we tend to work for him. When we love God and know Him then automatically we want to work for Him, (this is where the love, knowledge and action converge and become an integral part of yoga). In *The Synthesis of Yoga*, Sri Aurobindo devoted eight chapters to describe how love is connected to knowledge and action, for any one of these in isolation cannot lead to complete union. The convergence of all the three – bhakti, knowledge and action form the basis of Sri Aurobindo's Integral Yoga.

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End Notes

1. Vedas held a deeper significance for the spiritually enlightened individuals called the Rishis. As the paper discusses the meaning and dimensions of bhakti in a very general sense, Rishis are eschewed.
2. All these explanations have been taken from The Yoga of Love by M.P. Pandit.
3. The liberation of the Gita is not a self-oblivious abolition of the soul's personal being in the absorption of the One, sāyujya mukti; it is all kinds of union at once. There is an entire unification with the supreme Godhead in essence of being and intimacy of consciousness and identity of bliss, sāyujya,—for one object of this Yoga is to become Brahman, brahmabhūta. There is an eternal ecstatic dwelling in the highest existence of the Supreme, sālokya,—for it is said, “Thou shalt dwell in me,” nivasisyasi mayyeva. There is an eternal love and adoration in a uniting nearness, there is an embrace of the liberated spirit by its divine Lover and the enveloping Self of its infinitudes, sāmīpya. There is an identity of the soul's liberated nature with the divine nature, sādśyamukti,—for the perfection of the free spirit is to become even as the Divine, madbhāvamāgatah. , and to be one with him in the law of its being and the law of its works and nature, sādharmaṃyāmāgatah. The orthodox Yoga of knowledge aims at a fathomless immergence in the one infinite existence, sāyujya; it looks upon that alone as the entire liberation. The Yoga of adoration envisages an eternal habitation or nearness as the greater release, sālokya, sāmīpya. The Yoga of works leads to oneness in power of being and nature, sādśya. But the Gita envelops them all in its catholic integrality and fuses them all into one greatest and richest divine freedom and perfection.

The aim of Yoga being union, its beginning must always be a seeking after the Divine, a longing after some kind of touch, closeness or possession. When this comes on us, the adoration becomes always primarily an inner worship; we begin to make ourselves a temple of the Divine, our thoughts and feelings a constant prayer of aspiration and seeking, our whole life an external service and worship.

Sri Aurobindo, SABCL, Vol.21, p.547