The Tenets of Bhakti in Madhavadeva’s Works

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ATributeToSankaradeva.org presents a piece on the tenets of Bhakti in the Works of Madhavadeva, the foremost disciple and apostolic successor of Sankaradeva. The current piece, redacted from the Journal of the Srimanta Sankaradeva Research Institute, Vol I, Nagaon (1990), is authored by Dr. Karabi Deka Hazarika, Reader in Assamese, Dibrugarh University, who, in the course of her academic career, has done extensive research on the Life and Works of Madhavadeva, her doctoral thesis being on the same subject and entitled ‘Madhavadeva: His Life, Art and Thought’ which has also been brought out in book-form by Bani Mandir, Guwahati. Dr. Karabi Deka Hazarika is also the first woman-editor of the Kirttana of Sankaradeva.

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The Bhagavata-purana has given due importance to bhakti in the direction of realizing the Supreme. The neo-Vaisnava movement of Assam was based on the bhakti-sutra of the Bhagavata-purana and it brought the message of prema-bhakti to the people. Sankaradeva, Madhavadeva and their followers glorified the bhakti cult of the Bhagavata throughout their literary works and indicated to the individual that his voice could be heard by God if only it rose from a pure and sincere heart. Both Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva composed a good number of literary works including plays, songs and narratives giving importance on bhakti. Among the works of Madhavadeva, in the Namaghosa, a work of philosophical nature, the saint has announced the glory of bhakti and bhakta in an open voice. His Bhakti-ratnavali, a translation of Visnupuri’s original work, brings together the choice verses of the Bhagavata-purana dealing with bhakti. Importance has been given on intense love towards God and complete self-surrender to Him in the plays and lyrics of Madhavadeva. In all of his works he puts bhakti in a higher position than mukti. Dasya-bhakti is the main significance of Madhavadeva’s works which is a special attraction of his Namaghosa.

The Nature of Bhakti

Of all the works by Madhavadeva it is in the Namaghosa and the Bhakti-ratnavali

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1 Sankaradeva and His Times, p. 122
that we find the most elaborate discourses on the cult of bhakti. In his Namaghosa he has spoken of bhakti as rasamayi\(^2\) (exhilarating), thereby expressing the intensity of his devotion. The lyrics he has composed are also expressive of his sincere devotion as well as his consideration that life without devotion is insignificant\(^3\). For him bhakti is not merely a feeling, he also considers it as a duty enjoined upon all. His devotion to Visnu as expressed in the Namaghosa is equivalent to an attitude of absolute surrender before the Supreme One. According to Narada’s Bhaktisutra, bhakti signifies a state of profound and eternal love towards God\(^4\). Sandilya’s Bhaktisutra\(^5\) defines bhakti as intense love for the Lord. According to Bhakti-ratnavali\(^6\), bhakti is love towards God as expressed through the devotee’s body, words and mind. Compared with the beatific joy with which bhakti fills the mind of the devotee, even the joy of salvation is insignificant\(^7\). Nothing is unattainable by means of single-hearted devotion, because Visnu being the Supreme Giver presents the devotee with whatever he desires. But the true devotee is always selfless; he does not crave for anything except the attainment of bhakti. Still, such is the efficacy of bhakti that even without desiring it the devotee attains to salvation\(^8\). If a person sets on the path of devotion to Hari with some desire at heart, by and by he finds such a joy in his devotion that he forgets his earlier desire. His devotion is carried on for the joy it brings to him. Under such circumstances, his earlier desire is fulfilled by the Lord even when he does no longer seek it\(^9\). There is no need of one’s becoming a learned man or one’s acquiring the virtues of pilgrimage or other religious rituals for cultivating devotion to Hari\(^10\). Such a devotee does not go by castes; he can win the Lord’s grace by serving Him with an unshaken faith\(^11\). Even the most

\(^{\text{2}}\) v. 1

\(^{\text{3}}\) Bargit, Nos. 23, 27, 37, 78, 80, 81

\(^{\text{4}}\) Bhagavata Bhakti Cult, p. 24

\(^{\text{5}}\) op. cit., p. 50

\(^{\text{6}}\) v. 287

\(^{\text{7}}\) ibid., v. 115

\(^{\text{8}}\) Bhakti-ratnavali, vv. 54-55

\(^{\text{9}}\) ibid., vv. 66-67

\(^{\text{10}}\) Bhakti-ratnavali, v, 146

\(^{\text{11}}\) Namaghosa, vv. 479-485; Bhagavad-gita, 9-30, 31
wretched man can get liberation, if he seeks the devotion of the Lord sincerely.\footnote{12}{Bhagavata-purana, 6.2.18; Namaghosa, v. 484}

Of the three paths prescribed for the attainment of the Lord, namely, jnana (knowledge), karma (renunciation) and bhakti (devotion), the highest importance has been attached to \textit{bhakti} in the \textit{Bhagavata-purana}, though all the three paths are mutually interlinked.\footnote{13}{Bhagavata-mahatmya (Padma-purana), vv. 11-71} Only \textit{bhakti} can free people from worldly attachments by ridding them of all doubts.\footnote{14}{Bhakti-ratnavali, v. 282; Bhagavata-purana, 1. 5.12} Without being assisted by \textit{bhakti}, \textit{jnana} and \textit{karma} cannot lead one to the attainment of salvation. \textit{Bhakti}, however, can alone fulfill one’s desires without the assistance of either \textit{jnana} or \textit{karma}.\footnote{15}{Namaghosa, v. 200} After repeatedly asserting that \textit{bhakti} is superior to mukti (salvation), Madhavadeva further states that, after attaining to the state of salvation, the finally released one does not forsake the path of devotion to Hari even after being free from the cycle of rebirth.\footnote{16}{Ibid., vv. 251, 282, 283, 288.}

The close association with \textit{bhaktas} has been regarded as a necessary precondition for arousing the attitude of \textit{bhakti}. By associating with saintly persons one can purify one’s mind by driving out all evil desires and the path of \textit{bhakti} is thereby cleared.\footnote{17}{Namaghosa, v. 214} Just as, the presence of fire can help one in getting rid of the fear of cold and darkness, so also the association of a saint can save people from all attachments to \textit{karma}, worldly fears and the darkness of ignorance.\footnote{18}{ibid., vv. 437-438}
Classification of bhakti

The Bhagavata-purana has mentioned various forms of bhakti on various occasions. The classification of bhakti in this book extends from three forms\textsuperscript{19} to as many as thirty-six forms\textsuperscript{20}. Of these, nine forms of bhakti have found frequent reference in the neo-Vaisnavite doctrine of Assam\textsuperscript{21}. These nine forms are:-

1. *sravana* (listening to the recital of the Name and Glories of Hari)
2. *kirtana* (recital of the Glories and Name of Hari)
3. *smarana* (recalling of or meditation upon the Lord’s Form)
4. *arcana* (worship of the Lord’s image with flowers, etc.)
5. *vandana* (obeisance)
6. *padasevana* (personal services)
7. *dasya* (a servant’s devotion to the Lord)
8. *sakhyā* (a friend’s love to the Lord) and
9. *atmanivedana* (self-surrender at the Lord’s Feet)

A few other forms of bhakti have been noted in the Bhakti-ratnavali, namely, *bhagavati-bhakti*, *prema-bhakti* and *kevala-bhakti*. Bhagavati-bhakti is that state of the highest form of devotion by which the devotee attains to full wisdom by means of Bhakti and offers all activities and near and dear ones at the Feet of the Lord\textsuperscript{22}. Fortified by a profound devotion, such a devotee is blessed with all the benefits of a religious life even though he does not perform his daily round of worship and services\textsuperscript{23}. As regards prema-bhakti, the Bhakti-ratnavali notes that, endowed with this purely emotional or loving

\textsuperscript{19} 2.1.5; 6.2.3
\textsuperscript{20} 11. 3. 23-31
\textsuperscript{21} Kirtanaghosa, Prahlad-carita, based on Bhagavata-purana, Book VII.
\textsuperscript{22} Bhakti-ratnavali, v. 184
\textsuperscript{23} op. cit. v. 183
devotion, the devotee, out of sheer love of the Lord, alternates between laughter and weeping. Shedding fear of social disapproval and false sense of shame, he loses all attachments. Even while uttering the **Name of God**, his voice is surcharged with the emotion of love\(^\text{24}\). This feeling of devotion which, to such a devotee, brings joys even higher than the joy of salvation, is regarded as **prema-bhakti**. Regarding **kevala-bhakti** or **antaranga-bhakti** (intimate or all-loving devotion), the *Bhagavata* has mentioned\(^\text{25}\) that the Lord Himself had advised Uddhava about this form of **bhakti**. Even the worldly-minded people can rid themselves of all sins by means of **kevala-bhakti**. Everyone including the Candala or the lowest in the social hierarchy can become pure through devotion\(^\text{26}\).

We present below a brief introduction to the nine forms of **bhakti** as discussed by Madhavadeva: -

- **Sravana**: Madhavadeva considers **sravana** as an excellent path to **bhakti**. Just as the appearance of autumn serves to purify water, similarly by listening to the recital of Hari’s Glory or Name, a person’s mind gets purified\(^\text{27}\). Those who are indifferent to the chanting of Hari’s Name and engage in worshiping other deities by sacrificing animals and birds are sure to be thrown into hell\(^\text{28}\). They are like animals, concerned only with the need for food and sleep\(^\text{29}\). On the other hand, people who find joy in the Name of the Lord, which is as sweet as nectar, experience a feeling of devotion that increases day by day, attain to a state of pure happiness with their hearts purified, acquire real knowledge, and are received into Vaikuntha (the

\(^{24}\text{Bhakti-ratnavali, vv. 229-230}\)

\(^{25}\text{Bhavartha-dipika, XI. 28}\)

\(^{26}\text{Namaghosa, v. 481, Bhakti-ratnavali, vv. 213-233}\)

\(^{27}\text{Namaghosa, v. 15}\)

\(^{28}\text{Bhakti-ratnavali, vv. 561-563}\)

\(^{29}\text{ibid., v. 576}\)
Highest Abode)\textsuperscript{30}. The real devotees are aware that \textit{sravana-bhakti} is higher than even \textit{mukti}. Hence what they desire is only the joy of listening to the Glories of Hari from the lips of the saints\textsuperscript{31}.

- **Kirtana:** - On several occasions both Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva have noted that the best way out of this dreadful world is \textit{sravana} and \textit{kirtana}. Even a sinner like Ajamila could earn salvation by simply uttering the Name of the Lord\textsuperscript{32}. Only the fools seek Him by such methods as chanting obscure and difficult \textit{mantras} and taking to other painful ways. His soft-sounding and short names such as \textbf{Rama} and \textbf{Krsna} are enough to bestow upon one the rewards of \textit{dharma, artha, kama} and \textit{moksa}\textsuperscript{33}. The tongue can very well serve as a bridge between men’s soul and the goal of final release. By crossing this bridge through the recital of \textbf{Krsna’s Name}, the devotee can easily win his heart’s desire. The recital of the playful actions of God in His various incarnations on different occasions is the best path to \textit{bhakti} during the \textit{Kali-yuga}\textsuperscript{34}.

- **Smarana:** - One of the ways of attaining to the mood of \textit{bhakti} is calling to mind the forms and actions of the Lord. Those who recall His form during the final hours of their lives are blessed with what is known as \textit{sarupya-mukti} or liberation with the same form as of the Lord\textsuperscript{35}. Even those who

\textsuperscript{30} ibid., vv. 388-389

\textsuperscript{31} Namaghosa, v. 664

\textsuperscript{32} Kirtana, Ajamila-upakhyan, based on Bhagavata-purana, Book VI, Namaghosa, v. 89

\textsuperscript{33} Namaghosa, v. 766

\textsuperscript{34} ibid. vv. 398-401

\textsuperscript{35} Bhakti-ratnavali, v. 891
recall Him as an enemy are not deprived of such a bliss. By remembering Him in a mood of fear or anger also, one can easily attain to this form of liberation. The Gopis or the milk-maids won His favor by virtue of their constant meditation on Him in a mood of passionate desire. Hence, the devotee can have all his desires fulfilled if he meditates on Him with firm conviction.

- **Padasevana:** - When a person surrenders himself at the Feet of the Lord, those Feet serve as a boat enabling the person to cross the rough sea of the world. Thus a bhakta can cross the shore-less ocean of the world without building any bridge. Unlimited is the significance of surrendering oneself at His Feet. Even a low-caste Candala serving at Visnu’s Feet is superior to a brahmana who does not serve at His Feet. Such is the joy a devotee derives from serving at the Lord’s Feet that he does not seek sayujya-mukti or liberation by merging into the Lord because such a liberation deprives him of serving at the Divine Feet. Indifferent to all forms of worldly enjoyments, such a devotee only aspires after the fortune of touching with his head the dust of Krsna’s Feet.

- **Arcana:** - To worship Visnu, Who is the Cause of the Universe, is to worship all gods and goddesses. Just as the water poured into the roots of the tree reaches its branches and leaves as well, so also the worshiping of Visnu pleases the other deities. Though God Himself, being full of His own glory,

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36 Rajasuya, vv. 647-651
37 Bhagavata-purana, 10, 44. 55
38 Namaghosa, vv. 640, 723
39 Bhakti-ratnavali, v. 1007
40 Bhakti-ratnavali, v. 1028
41 Bhagavata-purana, IV. 39. 24. ; Bhakti-ratnavali, v. 1028
is not keen on being worshiped, any worship offered with sincerity pleases Him. He only accepts such worship as is offered selflessly, with a firm conviction. Bhakti needs a selfless service of God. Since He exists in everybody’s heart, by worshiping Him the devotee worships his own self.

- **Vandana**: - By making obeisance (vandana) to Visnu, the Lord of the Universe, man can achieve final release. Whenever a person is afflicted with some injury or some illness, he recalls the Name of Hari almost spontaneously. And yet, even by such involuntary invoking of the Glorious Name, he is easily placed with the Grace of Visnu.

- **Dasya**: - So long a devotee does not surrender himself at the Feet of Visnu, he lives as a prisoner within the four walls of his domestic life. When he sacrifices all his worldly possessions, his house and his kith and kin, at the Feet of the Lord and also considers himself as the servant of the Lord, he becomes free from all responsibilities and worries, and attains to salvation by his single-minded devotion to the Lord. A devotee’s ultimate goal of life is to become a servant of the Lord. He considers the Master-servant relation with the Lord as the most desirable and seeks nothing other than the pleasure of worshiping His Feet as a servant.

- **Sakhyā**: - This form of devotion is of utmost joy to a devotee. Any friendship with a human being involves many anxieties such as those of possible separations, etc.; but there is no such fear of separation from

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42 Bhagavata-purana, 1. 2. 6

43 ibid., 11. 12. 15

44 Namaghosa, v. 7

45 Namaghosa, vv. 800, 801, 802, 803, 804
God who is omnipresent. The milkmen and the milkmaids of Vrndavana and even the birds and animals of that place enjoyed the fruits of friendship with the **Lord Krsna**. The deep feeling of joy arising out of a friend’s love of God has found expression in Madhavadeva’s *Namaghosa* as well. The friendly form of devotion is regarded as an easy path to attain to salvation.

- **Atma-nivedana**: - By coming closer to God through the path of self-surrender or *atma-nivedana*, the devotee gets rid of all worldly worries. God, too, is pleased with a devotee whose only concern is *bhakti* and He blesses him with the final release that is of the (nature of being on the) same level as Godhead. God demands a **complete, willing self-surrender** on the part of a devotee.

**Classification of bhaktas**

About the characteristics of a *bhakta*, Madhavadeva mentions that a *bhakta* in the real sense is desirous of good to all, full of forgiveness, quiet and saintly. By sacrificing everything including wealth, family and friends in favor of God, he devotes himself single-mindedly to the *sravana, kirtana* and *smarana* of Hari’s Name and Glory, and directs his heart only to Hari. He is free from anger and never desires anything more than what is necessary for keeping his body and soul together. A man of devotion is solely attached to God and mentally detached from worldly pleasures and aspirations. He is free from any trace of selfishness.

Sankaradeva, in his *Bhakti-ratnakara*, has divided the *bhaktas* into three categories,

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46 Bhakti-ratnavali, v. 1123
47 v. 128
48 Bhagavata-purana, 11. 12. 15; Bhakti-ratnavali, vv. 1134-1137
49 Bhakti-ratnavali, vv. 323-324
50 Bhagavata-purana, 8.1.10
(i) uttama\textsuperscript{51} (the best), (ii) madhyama\textsuperscript{52} (the mediocre) and prakrta\textsuperscript{53} (the lowest). The Bhakti-ratnavali of Madhavadeva narrates the greatness of all these three categories of bhaktas, and by giving the accounts of various anecdotes pertaining to nirguna bhaktas (devotees without any desire), has glorified nirguna-bhakti. A devotee without desire finds God in his own heart. Those who are sa guna bhaktas (devotees with some desire) also gain through their devotion.

Of all the different tenors of bhakti, Madhavadeva concentrated upon dasya-bhakti. It is the frequent eulogisation of this variant of bhakti which gives the Namaghosa and other works of him a distinctive stamp of tremendous impact and a distinctive quality among the prevalent Hindu tradition of the time.

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\textsuperscript{51} ch. 16
\textsuperscript{52} ch. 17
\textsuperscript{53} ch. 18