

EARLY INDIAN BHAKTI WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO KABĪR,  
A HISTORICAL ANALYSIS AND RE-INTERPRETATION.

by

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis rejects the current definition of bhakti and seeks a reorientation of the present academic opinion about bhakti and the Bhakti Movement. It questions the basic assumptions responsible for the existing views, and points out the error of treating bhakti as a cult and a doctrine, and of its identification with Vaishṇavism.

The present study suggests that bhakti cannot be confined to Vaishṇavism and that a personal concept of God, a dualistic view of Reality, and an antagonism to jñāna are not its necessary concomitants. It brings forth evidence to show that the concept of an impersonal God, a non-dualistic view of Reality, and an emphasis on jñāna can also be the legitimate constituents of a bhakti tradition. Taking this position it prepares the ground for a re-evaluation of the Bhakti Movement and suggests a new approach to the study of Kabīr and his nirguṇa school.

Chapter I examines the existing opinion on the subject. Tracing its origin, growth, and perpetuation it shows the western bias which shaped it. Pointing out the inapplicability of the western standards of judgement in the Hindu context, the nature of Hindu Theism and Monotheism has been reassessed and a new approach to bhakti is suggested.

Chapter II is a study of the classical texts which are invariably cited to substantiate the current theories. It shows that the bhakti of the Bhagavad-Gītā, the Bhāgavata-Purāṇa and the Bhakti-Sūtras of Nārada and Śaṇḍilya is in fact incompatible with the present definition of bhakti.

Chapter III shows that the difference between Śaṅkara and the Vaishṇava āchāryas does not rest on bhakti, but is caused by Śaṅkara's challenge to Vaishṇavism and the Vaishṇava loyalties of the Vaishṇava āchāryas.

Chapter IV re-evaluates Kabīr and attempts to trace his antecedents.

The conclusion sums up the main arguments advanced in this thesis.



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## PREFACE

The present work on bhakti was originally undertaken as an introduction to the study of the social, political and religious implications of the Bhakti Movement. In this connection we wanted to concern ourselves chiefly with the mutual interaction of Islam and Hinduism and the changing opinions and attitudes of the two in relation to each other. We were particularly interested in Kabīr's nirguṇa school and its contribution to medieval thought and religion.

Because of the universally accepted views on bhakti and the Bhakti Movement, our initial approach was determined by certain basic assumptions about the subject. We had naturally to start therefore with the initial premises that the doctrine of bhakti was opposed to the idea of an impersonal God, and that it was based on a loving faith towards a personal Deity. We had to regard bhakti as a special religious tradition antagonistic to the Advaita Vedānta and the path of jñāna. Also, in accordance with existing opinion, we had to view the Bhakti Movement as an assertion of the bhakti religion against the path of jñāna and the ideology of the Advaita Vedānta. We had to accept the Vaiṣṇava āchāryas, Rāmānuja, Nimbārka, Madhva, and Vallabha as the prophets of bhakti, and Śaṅkarāchārya as

their opposite pole. In the light of such a representation of bhakti and the Bhakti Movement, a common ideology of bhakti had to be attributed to all the medieval bhaktas. Their connection with the Vaishṇava-āchāryas had to be recognised and their difference from Śaṅkara and the Advaita Vedānta had to be taken for granted.

But in the course of our research we soon became aware of the inherent errors of these assumptions. They obviously placed serious limitations on the study of the medieval religious movements. It was clear that the approach of the medieval bhaktas was not always the same, that there were serious ideological differences between the saguṇa and the nirguṇa bhaktas, and that the teachings of the nirguṇa bhaktas like Kabīr had more in common with the Advaita Vedānta of Śaṅkarāchārya than with the theology of the Vaishṇava āchāryas. Going through the works of Kabīr we could not avoid the conclusion that his devotionalism did not at all conform to the present technical and academic definition of bhakti. Obviously there was something inherently wrong with the current views about bhakti and the Bhakti Movement.

In order to resolve these inconsistencies a clearer understanding of the concept and doctrine of bhakti was necessary. But the study of the religious texts which are

generally cited to support the existing definition only increased our doubts. Neither the Bhagavad-Gītā nor the Bhāgavata Purāṇa, nor the Bhakti-Sūtras of Nārada and Śaṇḍilya corroborated the current definition of bhakti. An approach from the doctrinal standpoint of Śaṅkara and the Vaishṇava āchāryas did not help either, but only gave rise to further questions. We did not find Śaṅkara's position antagonistic to bhakti nor did we find in the bhakti of the Vaishṇava āchāryas a uniform conceptual system or doctrine opposed to the path of jñāna. On the contrary, bhakti was present in Śaṅkara, and the bhakti of the Vaishṇava āchāryas did not exclude jñāna.

There were reasons to believe therefore that the current views on bhakti were artificial and erroneous. But since they are universally accepted in academic circles today and have the sanction of the scholarship of more than a century, it was not easy to uproot them. Nevertheless, the study of the growth of the current opinion showed us the way and gave us the confidence to contradict it. A closer examination of the works of the 19th century on Hinduism established clearly that the current definition of bhakti was of gradual growth and was based on certain western standards of judgement.

Once the artificial nature of current opinions was revealed, it was possible to formulate a more consistent approach for a re-examination of bhakti. If the original connotation of the word bhakti could be <sup>re</sup>covered, fresh grounds could be established for a more correct evaluation of the medieval religious currents which are collectively known as the Bhakti Movement. We have carefully examined certain fundamental texts with this in view, and our study has confirmed our hypothesis.

We have therefore confined this thesis to the refutation of the existing views about bhakti and the Bhakti Movement by suggesting an alternate approach. Perhaps the position taken in this work can provide the right framework for further studies in the Bhakti Movement and Kabīr.

## CHAPTER I

### A NEW APPROACH TO BHAKTI

#### i. The Existing Opinion on Bhakti : Its Nature and Limitations

Bhakti is a generic term, but it has acquired a technical meaning which is both artificial and erroneous. The current theories about bhakti describe it as a religion<sup>1</sup> and a cult.<sup>2</sup> They define and analyse it as a doctrine and a theology.<sup>3</sup> In the light of these theories, bhakti is viewed as a special religious tradition of India, and is completely identified with Vaishṇavism.<sup>4</sup> It is studied and explained strictly from a Vaishṇava standpoint, and its history is traced on the basis of the earliest known antecedents of Viṣṇu worship.

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1. R.C. Majumdar, The History and Culture of the Indian People, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Bombay 1960, Vol.IV, p.47. Tara Chand, Influence of Islam on Indian Culture, Allahabad, 1936, pp.25-26.
  2. Yusuf Hussain, "Islam and the Cult of Bhakti", in: Glimpses of Medieval Indian Culture, Asia Publishing House, Bombay, 1957.
  3. Munshi Ram Sharma, Bhakti Ka Vikāś, Chaukhamba Vidya Bhavan, Varanasi, 1958.
  4. H.C. Raychaudhuri, Materials for the Study of the Early History of the Vaishṇava Sect, University of Calcutta, Calcutta 1920, p.6.



But disengaged from its present standardized definition, the term bhakti means nothing more than a loving devotion to God. By itself it indicates only an attitude of mind and heart, and not a set of specific ideas and beliefs. Considering the wider implications of its meaning, bhakti in the sense of religious devotion therefore can neither be defined as a doctrine nor can it be restricted to any one particular sect of the Hindus. It has found different modes of expression in their different religious traditions and has been emphasised by thinkers and poets belonging to different schools of thought.

The existing academic conceptions about bhakti are of very recent formation and can be traced back to the last quarter of the nineteenth century. They are the direct result of certain artificial theorisations by western scholars who wrote about Hinduism during that period and saw the real signs of a true monotheism in Kṛishṇa-worship and Vaishṇavism, and called it the Bhakti Religion. Their writings, which were to serve as the basis of all future researches on the subject, have restricted the general meaning of bhakti and have lent in its present technical and

academic definition.<sup>1</sup>

As a result of the theories offered by them, and the subsequent researches undertaken to substantiate them, a personal conception of God and a belief in the truth of the ever-existent duality between the Deity and the devotee are understood today as the essentials of the bhakti religion. Loving praise and adoration of a personal God as the Lord and father and an absolute dependence of Him as the Saviour are described as the path of bhakti as different from that of knowledge (jñāna) and self-realisation. Moreover the worship of a personal God is recognized as an indication of a theistic religion and as a reaction against the impersonal explanations of God as the nirguṇa Brahman. Keeping in line with these postulations, bhakti is summed up as "a personalistic faith, a reaction against the impersonalistic monism of a dominant Vedānta tradition"<sup>2</sup>

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1. The present theories about bhakti were initiated by Albrecht Weber, and were later supported by many western scholars, although some of them differed from Weber on the question of the influence of Christianity on the Bhakti Religion of India. The most prominent of them are Auguste Barth, Sir Monier-Williams, Edward Washburn Hopkins, Richard Garbe, L.D. Barnett and George Abraham Grierson. The basic concepts related to the nature and meaning of bhakti have not been questioned by the Indian scholars. Sir R.G. Bhandarkar, the first to write on bhakti on the modern lines from the Indian side had concerned himself with the question of the antiquity of bhakti and its pre-Christian origins only.
  2. Herbert H. Farmer, Revelation And Religion, Nisbet & Co., London, 1954, p.158.

and as a religion of Love and Grace juxtaposed to the Brahmanical intellectualism and an antithesis of classical Vedānta.

The character and definition assigned to the religion of bhakti were further explained and elaborated by western scholars through their special observations on Vaishṇava beliefs and practices. Applying the concept of a personal God as an essential test of true theism they fixed the Hindu monotheism in Vaishṇavism and in its elevation of Viṣṇu to the position of the supreme deity. In Viṣṇu they found God as a personality, in his exclusive selection from amongst the numerous Vedic deities, a true monotheism, and in the Vaishṇava modes of worship a religion of simple love and devotion. It must be mentioned here that whenever Vaishṇavism was so described as a monotheism, every other evidence of monotheism in the religio-philosophical thought of the Hindus was set aside either as pantheism or as philosophical monism. A single strand, that of Vaishṇavism, was pulled out of the intertwining threads of Hindu theism and was named the Bhakti Religion.

This representation of bhakti and its equation with Vaishṇavism was sustained and given a rationale through certain other generalisations about Hinduism. Ignoring the underlying unity of the vast complex of Hinduism, a division

was made between Brahmanism and Hinduism, and between the Vedic Religion and the Hindu sectarian traditions.<sup>1</sup> Their formal differences were regarded as more fundamental than their common ground in religious thought and their identification in the theistic unity of Hinduism. Without giving full recognition to the free intermixture of philosophy and religion in Hinduism, the true elements of religion were thus sought by the western scholars in areas outside philosophy. As a result of this, theism was associated only with sectarian Hinduism, and the classical thought of the Hindus was set apart as pure philosophy.<sup>2</sup>

The above postulations about the nature of bhakti, its identification with Vaishnavism, and the relevant generalisations about Hinduism which support them are universally accepted in every discussion on the subject of

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1. Auguste Barth, The Religions of India, Kegan Paul, London, 1906.  
Monier-Williams, Brahmanism and Hinduism or Religious Thought and Life in India, as based on the Veda and other sacred books of the Hindus, John Murray, London 1891.
  2. This approach to Hinduism was so well established that Macnicol had to introduce his study of Indian Theism with the following remark: "India has always been recognized as so determinedly pantheistic in its religious thought that Indian Theism will seem to many an unnatural collocation of words." Nicol Macnicol, Indian Theism from the Vedic to the Mohammadan Period, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1915, p.1.

bhakti. To the extent that the medieval religious renaissance is called the Bhakti Movement, they are held valid for the purposes of the study of the thought and religion of that period. But as explained earlier, bhakti or religious devotion is not something which can be restricted to any one denomination of the Hindus. Since the medieval period was a time of great religious upsurge, and since Hinduism consists of a multiplicity and variety of sectarian and philosophical traditions, the devotional expressions of Hinduism in that age were also varied and manifold. But ignoring both the wider meaning of bhakti, and the multiple and variable aspect of devotional manifestation possible within Hinduism, the different religious currents of the medieval period are studied collectively as the Bhakti Movement and are interpreted in the light of an artificially fixed definition of bhakti.

Due to the basic errors in the hypotheses which have shaped the present definition of bhakti as a religion and a doctrine, its application in the study of medieval religious movements has also led to many misconceptions and misjudgements. In spite of the evidence of personalities like Kabīr and Nānak and of their movements in favour of nirguṇa bhakti aimed at popularising the impersonal and the nirguṇa conception of God, the medieval Bhakti Movement is described

as a religious effort which strengthened the forces of monotheism by laying emphasis on the personal nature of God against the impersonal representation of Him.<sup>1</sup> In the total context of Hinduism it is represented mainly as a reaction against the Advaita Vedānta of Śaṅkarāchārya. To substantiate this, the entire expression of Hindu devotionalism of the medieval period is collectively viewed as an assertion of an emotional religion of love and grace in which reasoning and knowledge (jñāna) had no share.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, since bhakti is completely identified with Vaishṇavism, the whole of the Bhakti Movement is approached from a purely Vaishṇava angle in spite of the variations existing in it. Consequently the Vaishṇava āchārayas, Rāmānuja, Nimbārka, Madhva and Vallabha are regarded as the apostles of bhakti and their systems of Vedānta as its doctrinal foundations. The difference of their Vedānta from that of Śaṅkara is interpreted as the difference between the path of bhakti (devotion) and jñāna (knowledge). In the light of an artificial and restricted definition of bhakti, a uniform view is taken of the medieval saints and poets in spite of the fundamental differences noticeable amongst them. As a result of this,

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1. Tara Chand, ibid., pp.113ff.  
Yusuf Hussain, ibid., pp.5ff., 27.

2. R.C. Majumdar, ibid., Vol.VI, p.548.

the bhakti of Tulsīdās and Chaitanya who were the devotees of personal deities, Rāma and Kṛishṇa, is wrongly coupled with that of Kabīr and Nānak who were clearly the worshippers of the Nirguṇa Brahman.<sup>1</sup>

On account of the obvious limitations placed by the present definition of bhakti a similar ideology is attributed to both these groups of saguṇa and the nirguṇa bhaktas and the difference of their approach is not fully weighed and acknowledged. But a monolithic view can be taken of the medieval Bhakti Movement only if bhakti is understood in its wider meaning. If on the other hand it is accepted in its present restricted and technical sense, the ideological differences existing within the medieval religious movements must be fully recognized.

In short, the term bhakti is accepted today as a designation of "a type of religion" which is alleged to have had "a long history in India alongside the prevailing monism of philosophical Hinduism."<sup>2</sup> The present views on bhakti and the Bhakti Movement carry with them the sanctity of

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1. Kshitimohan Sen, Medieval Mysticism of India, Luzac & Co., London, 1930. *Passim*  
H.C. Raychaudhuri, ibid., p.1.  
R.C. Majumdar, ibid., Vol.IV, p.60.
  2. Nicol Macnicol, Foreword in W.G. Orr, A Sixteenth Century Indian Mystic, Lutterworth Press, London 1947. P.5.

about one century of scholarship related to this subject. But although they are very firmly rooted in our academic thinking today, there are some valid reasons for questioning them. A sound assessment of the medieval religious movements of India is not possible without a correct understanding of bhakti. It is necessary therefore to re-examine the existing academic theories about bhakti which are fallacious and are artificially conceived.

But the initial acceptance of bhakti as a special religion is in itself a mistake. To explain it as a doctrine is equally misleading. The current concepts about bhakti, which are chiefly the creation of western scholarship, are the result of the initiation and development of an opinion with regard to Hinduism which assigned the whole of Hindu devotionalism or bhakti to the Vaishṇava sect and ascribed the Hindu understanding of the oneness of God to the selection of Viṣṇu from amongst the numerous Hindu deities for the supreme position of the single Divine Personality.

No such exclusive definition of bhakti can be found in the Hindu religious texts which can completely corroborate the present conception of it in its full implications. Nor is the subject of bhakti found restricted to any one body of sectarian literature. On the contrary, texts such as the



Bhagavad Gītā, the Bhāgavata Purāṇa, and the Bhakti-Sūtras of Nārada and Sāṇḍilya, which are invariably quoted to uphold the present academic stand, have obvious possibilities of different and wider interpretations of bhakti.<sup>1</sup>

The origins of the present associations of ideas related to bhakti can be traced back to the later half of the nineteenth century. They received a more definite and technical formulation during the last quarter of it. By the end of the first decade of the present century, the theories about bhakti had assumed a fixed character and were generally current. But they had evolved gradually and the early stages of their formulation show them in a more nebulous and less positive form.

It was H.H. Wilson who first mentioned bhakti as a religion. He had done it in a very casual and general manner without implying any of the ideas which are associated with bhakti today. Writing on the religious sects of the Hindus in 1846, Wilson had made a stray observation about bhakti in connection with the Vaishnavas of Bengal.<sup>2</sup> But he did not define it in the manner in which it is defined

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1. Bhakti in the Bhagavad Gītā, the Bhāgavat Purāṇa, and the Bhakti-Sūtras of Nārada and Sāṇḍilya are discussed in Chapter II.

2. H.H. Wilson, Sketch of the Religious Sects of the Hindus, Bishop College Press, Calcutta 1846, pp.100-102.

today. Nor did he identify it with Vaishṇavism as a whole, which became an accepted rule in the later stages. This is an evident fact since Wilson mentions bhakti only in connection with the Vaishṇavas of Bengal and does not mention it again in his treatment of the other Vaishṇava sects of the Hindus.<sup>1</sup> But later, and not too long after Wilson, certain academic theories about bhakti started taking shape in the hands of scholars like Albrecht Weber and Sir Monier Williams. By 1909 however, Bhakti was incorporated in the Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics as a religion and a doctrine, fully equipped with all its present technical implications.<sup>2</sup>

Although the modern theories of bhakti are equally well established in Indian scholarship today, they were initially formulated by western scholars. They were shaped by them in the light of their own concepts of God and religion, and were not based on any axiomatic evidence provided by Hinduism. The basic material for the construction of the bhakti theories has been provided by western conceptual categories of theism, monotheism and pantheism, and a purely

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1. Wilson gave a list of 20 sects of the Vaishṇavas, ibid., see p.21. But he had mentioned bhakti in connection with only the Gosvamis of Bengal.

2. George A. Grierson, "Bhakti-Mārga", Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics, (ERE) edited by James Hastings, 1909, Vol.II, pp.539-551.

personal concept of God and a clear line of division between religion and philosophy have guided the entire course of their formation. The strict adherence by the western scholars to certain preconceived notions and fixed attitudes, rooted in their Christian thinking, made it difficult for them to understand and judge Hinduism on its own terms.

The application of conceptual categories which derive their character not from the Hindu but an alien background, the treatment of Hindu religion and philosophy in isolation from each other, and the rejection of all impersonal explanations of God as non-theistic, are largely responsible for the artificial nature of the present theories about bhakti. The fundamental error of treating Vaishṇavism as a specially theistic and devotional religion, and naming it as bhakti can also be traced back to the initial mistake of regarding faith in a personal deity as the only true indication of religious feeling and theism. It must also be mentioned here that whenever Hindu theism is evaluated on these lines, certain essentials of Hindu thought, such as Vedānta, are always set aside as merely the philosophical and intellectual activities of the Brahmins, and their actual religious significance is very often minimized and misinterpreted.

However, the concepts and standards of judgement which mark the attitudes and writings of scholars who

initiated the present theories on bhakti were formalized in the west. As will be shown at a later stage, they were the result of the Christian reaction against the growing tendency in modern European philosophy to disregard the Christian view of God and to explain Him as the Ultimate Reality in abstract and impersonal terms.<sup>1</sup> Since they were shaped strictly in the light of Christian beliefs and the Christian concept of the Deity, they could have no validity in the context of Hinduism, in which philosophy and religion have not had separate developments and an impersonal view of God has characterized religious thinking from the very start. But in spite of their obvious limitations, it is these concepts and attitudes which have shaped the entire development of the bhakti theories, and can account for their artificiality.

Our understanding of bhakti is bound to get more confused when bhakti is described as a monotheism and a special "theistic expression" in the midst of the intellectual pantheism of the Hindus. But the conceptual theories and categories of Theism, Pantheism and Monotheism, which are the real cause of all such assessments, are of recent and purely western origin.<sup>2</sup> They carry with them a strong bias of isolation of

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1. Vide Infra, p.66-2'

2. A.E. Taylor, "Theism", ERE, ed. 1921, Vol.XII, p.261. Taylor also says that a "certain vagueness about the meaning of the word in current English" exists, ibid.

religion and philosophy and of a personal conception of the Deity. Theism, as different from mere philosophical explanations of the Ultimate Reality, and monotheism as different from philosophical monism and pantheism became sharply defined as conceptual categories in the west to distinguish between the religious and the philosophical thought. The association of ideas which accompany these terms are easily understandable against the background of Christianity and the evolution of the clear distinction between religion and philosophy in the west.

The above theories however, can be of no assistance in ascertaining the nature of Hindu theism and monotheism because the evolution of Hindu thought and religion constitutes a pattern of its own, very different in character from that of Christianity. Their application therefore can further confuse, but cannot clarify the complex pattern of Hinduism. But since bhakti is described as a monotheism and a theistic religion different from the intellectualism of the Brahmins and their philosophical pantheism, a further explanation of the concepts of Monotheism and Pantheism might help us in gaining a clearer idea of a part of the current fallacy related to bhakti.

Theism, as a name for a "philosophical theory as distinct from a practical religious faith" is a thing of

"purely modern formation" distinguishing a technically correct definition of belief in God from the indefinite generality of faith in God.<sup>1</sup> The theoretical representation of theism today generally presupposes an acceptance of the idea of a personal God and a rejection of all impersonal and philosophical representations of Him. Making faith in a personal God its basic content, theism is distinctly marked out as different from belief in the oneness of God, and as a theory, it is carefully distinguished from all philosophical ideas of the unity of God. The latter are included in the category of pantheism which is kept distinct from monotheism, a term, the technical use of which is always kept confined to the belief in the oneness of a personal God. Monotheism is described as "sharply opposed to a very wide range of beliefs and teachings", and a demand for an abandonment ~~as~~ "often with contempt or aversion," of "many older beliefs, fears and customs...".<sup>2</sup> The Deity as a person is regarded as the central point of true monotheism, and it is argued that if "we mean by deity nothing more than the ultimate independent substance, whatever may be its nature, then every monistic theory of the universe

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1. A.E.Taylor, ibid.

2. Josiah Royce, "Monotheism", ERE, ed. 1915, Vol.VIII, p.817.

"becomes pantheistic and indistinguishable from materialistic monism and other philosophical theories of singularism."

Pantheistic thought, which goes hand in hand with monism, is further understood as mere "intellectual craving for unity" and a "vague apprehension of God as theism conceives Him."<sup>1</sup>

As suggested earlier, the above conceptual theories have received their present formulation essentially from a Christian standpoint. The use of these categories in discussions on Christianity and other religions of a common Semitic background may be completely valid but their application in the study of Hinduism is not only unwarranted, but has led to errors of judgement. The study of Hinduism through the medium of these theories has been largely responsible for interpreting Vaishṇavism as Hindu monotheism, and Viṣṇu-worship as Hindu devotionalism or bhakti. However, the nature and evolution of Hindu theism and monotheism must be understood in their own terms. Similarly, the nature of the different manifestations of Hindu devotionalism can be correctly ascertained only in relation with the characteristic pattern of Hindu theism and monotheism. The failure to do so, and the free application of the conceptual categories of theism and pantheism, which are irrelevant in the Hindu context, can account for the artificial nature of the present theories about bhakti. A

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1. Frank Thilly, "Pantheism", ERE, ed. 1917, Vol. IX, pp. 613ff.

closer examination of the growth of the bhakti theories, and of the western bias which has conditioned them, will explain this more clearly.

ii. The Artificial Formulation of the Bhakti Theories

The artificial nature of our present understanding of bhakti becomes more glaring when the whole process of their gradual formation and establishment in academic works is fully taken into account. Western observers in the earlier stages of Indology showed a very different approach to Hindu monotheism and Vaishṇavism, the two themes which later constituted the very basis of the bhakti <sup>theories</sup> themes. The same subjects however, were understood and judged very differently by the later scholars. Those who were writing at the end of the eighteenth and the first half of the nineteenth century showed a greater tendency to accept Hindu montheism on its own terms. They did not take any special notice of Vaishṇavism as a monotheistic or bhakti cult, as was done by scholars who wrote during the later half of the nineteenth century.

Neither the present definition of bhakti nor the supporting theories which go with it find any mention in the earlier studies on Hinduism. While referring to the totality of Hinduism the earlier writers on Indian history and culture did not draw a sharp line of division between Indian religion



and philosophy. The later writers however, clearly separated one from the other in a fundamental manner. At the same time, unlike the latter, the earlier authors do not make use of any standardised and technical theory of theism as a measure of their judgement of Hinduism and Hindu monotheism. Although some of them show a keen awareness of the absence of a parallel of the Christian deity in Hinduism and of the uniqueness of the Christian approach to God as compared to the Hindu, on the whole they clearly accept and acknowledge the state of intermixture of religion and philosophy in Hinduism and the individual nature of the monotheism known to the Hindus.

The later scholars on the other hand, not only treated the Hindu religion and philosophy as two different compartments of Hinduism but also went to great lengths to prove the existence of the true element of religion in Hindu sectarianism and in the worship of personal deities, such as Viṣṇu and his avatāras, Rāma and Kṛiṣṇa. They not only made a free use of the technical definitions of theism and monotheism as conceived in the west to an alien and unidentical situation, but they went further and constructed their own theories about Hindu monotheism, which lie at the root of the existing theories about bhakti. They suggested, and then laboured to prove, that Viṣṇu worship was the most outstanding theistic expression of Hinduism, and that Vaiṣṇavism alone possessed

"the essential elements of a genuine religion", and that Hindu monotheism could be traced in the worship of the single personal deity, Vishnu.

A survey of the sequence of opinions expressed by western scholars on the relevant aspects of Hinduism will show more clearly the artificial nature of the accepted views on bhakti, particularly from the standpoint of the fundamental change caused in the approach to the totality of Hinduism in course of time, and of the gradual and laboured process of the formulation of the present theories about bhakti. Both the change of attitude and the growth of new opinion can be traced and can explain the present certainties, which have remained unquestioned till now in spite of their artificiality.

At first the Hindu pattern of monotheism was duly recognized on its own terms. It was duly acknowledged by earlier writers like J.Z. Holwell and Luke Scrafton that "the Hindus were aware of one supreme God", Holwell had gone to the extent of describing Hinduism as one of the three religions which ~~and~~ believed in "one supreme being",<sup>1</sup> which "manifestly" carried the "Divine stamp of God". Dow, writing the History

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1. J.Z. Holwell, A Review of the Original Principles, Religious and Moral of the Ancient Bramins: comprehending an Account of the Mythology, Cosmology, Fasts and Festivals of the Gentoos, D. Steel, London 1779, p.31.  
 Luke Scrafton, Reflections on the Government of Indostan, London, 1763, p.5.

of Hindustan in 1768, said that the "Brahmins, contrary to the ideas formed of them in the west, invariably believe in the unity, eternity, omniscience and omnipotence of God" and that the polytheism of which they had been accused was "no more than a symbolical worship of the divine attributes" of God.<sup>1</sup> A similar view was expressed by Charles Wilkins in his introduction to the translation of the Bhagavad-Gītā. He also described the Brahmins as unitarians who believed "... but in one God, an universal spirit."<sup>2</sup> Summing up the theism of the Hindus, H.T. Colebrooke suggested that "if the doctrines of the Veda and even these of the Purāṇas "were taken into account, "the Hindu theology will be found consistent with monotheism though it contains the seeds of polytheism and idolatry."<sup>3</sup> Writing the history of India in 1841, Elphinstone made a clear and categorical statement that the "primary doctrine of the Vedas is the unity of God" and that the Hindu texts repeatedly state that there is "but one Deity, the Supreme Spirit, the

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1. Alexander Dow, The History of Hindostan, London 1803, Vol.I, p.LXII.
  2. Charles Wilkins, The Bhāgavat Gēetā; or, dialogues of Kṛeeshna and Arjoon, in eighteen lectures with notes. Translated from the original in Sankreet, London, 1785, p.24.
  3. H.T. Colebrooke, Miscellaneous Essays, 3 Vols., Trübner & Co., London 1873, Vol.II, pp.209-210.

Lord of the universe, ...."<sup>1</sup> According to Elphinstone the doctrine of monotheism prevailed throughout the Hindu Institutes.<sup>2</sup> Even a man like William Ward, who untiringly continued to point out the idolatrous practices of the Hindus, and who had very little respect for the views of those "apologists for Hindooism" who pleaded that Hinduism should not be judged by "present appearances", <sup>3</sup> had also acknowledged that "It is true indeed", he said, "that the Hindoos believe in the unity of God" and that "one Brūmhū, without a second is a phrase very commonly used by them when conversing on subjects which relate to the nature of God...."<sup>4</sup>

None of these early writers, saw the elements of true monotheism in the Vaishṇava sect - a thing which was commonly done by the later scholars. The attitudes which so predominantly characterised the later approaches to Vaishṇavism are completely absent in them. On the contrary, Vaishṇavism was viewed very often by them as a source of

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1. Mountstuart Elphinstone, The History of India, John Murray, London 1841, Vol.I, p.72.

2. Ibid., p.73.

3. William Ward, A View of the History, Literature and Mythology of the Hindoos: including a minute description of their manners and customs, and translations from their principal works, London 1822, 3 Vols., Vol.I, p.CLXV.

4. William Ward, ibid., Vol.III, p.1.

idolatry and polytheism. They neither found an essential theism nor a fully developed image of a personal God in it. No special religion of bhakti is mentioned in connection with the Vaishṇavas by the earlier writers, nor are Viṣṇu and the incarnations, Rāma and Kṛishṇa, given any pre-eminence as the more adequate representations of God as a person in the total context of Hinduism. On the contrary they saw nothing more than the worship of inferior divinities in sectarian religions like Vaishṇavism, and regarded the Vaishṇava deities Rāma and Kṛishṇa as deified heroes only. The higher theism of the Hindus and their belief in one God, they freely attributed to their "philosophical heritage upheld by the learned Brahmins."

Dow noticed that the "learned Brahmins with one voice deny the existence of inferior divinities" and that "all their religious books of any antiquity confirm this assertion."<sup>1</sup> Sir William Jones did not see a special or separate doctrine in Kṛishṇa-worship, isolated from the total Hindu view of religion and God. Speaking of the "figurative notions" of the Hindus, he explained that they consider God "in three characters of Creator, Regenerator and Preserver" and suppose that "the power of Preservation and Benevolence

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1. Alexander Dow, ibid., Vol.I, p.LXIII.

to have become incarnate in the person of Crishna."<sup>1</sup> Colebrooke saw nothing more in the Vaishṇava religion than the worship of "deified heroes".<sup>2</sup> William Ward took a similar view of the Vaishṇavas and described them as those "who choose Vishnoo for their guardian deity",<sup>3</sup> but he did not mention them as the votaries of a special religion of bhakti. Referring to Rāma and Kṛishṇa, Ward described them merely as "deified heroes"<sup>4</sup> and saw neither in them nor in Viṣṇu any indication of the fulfilment of the religious truth of a Personal God.<sup>5</sup> In spite of his strong Christian bias for a personal conception of the Deity, Ward did not attribute any higher ideas of a personal God to the Vaishṇavas but stated instead that "speaking of God in His abstract state, some of the Hindoo sages could express sublime conceptions though mixed with error."<sup>6</sup> Elphinstone

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1. William Jones, The Works of Sir William Jones with the Life of the Author, edited by Lord Teignmouth in thirteen volumes, John Stockdale, London 1807, Vol.IV, p.221.
  2. H.T. Colebrooke, ibid., Vol.II, p.211.
  3. William Ward, ibid., Vol.III, p.8.
  4. Ibid., Vol.I, p.LXXIV.
  5. In spite of taking note of the wide popularity of Viṣṇu worship, Ward could not see anything more in Viṣṇu than an "image of a black man with four arms ..., a creature half bird, half man."  
William Ward, ibid., Vol.I, pp.LXXVII ff.
  6. Ibid., Vol.I, p.XLIV.

described the sectarian Vaishṇava deities, Rāma and Kṛishṇa as "deified mortals" and saw in their worship only a negation of the Hindu principles of monotheism.<sup>1</sup> Although he described the Vaishṇavas as the most popular religious group, he did not see in the worship of these personal deities anything more than a corruption of the "more sublime" parts of Hinduism which were already "corrupted by the introduction of deified heroes ...".<sup>2</sup>

Some of the later Indologists, those who evolved the bhakti-theories, took a very different view of the situation. They made a new approach to the study of Hinduism which became a standing model for the subsequent scholarship in that field. Starting with the initial premises of an essential and inevitable difference between religion and philosophy, they used the two measurements separately and classed the major bulk of the religio-philosophical thought of the Hindus as Brahmanism, and their sectarian religious manifestations as Hinduism.<sup>3</sup>

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1. Mountstuart Elphinstone, ibid., Vol.I, p.161.

2. Ibid., Vol.I, p.164.

3. Monier-Williams described the religion of "the higher, cultured, and thoughtful classes as Brahmanism", and "of the lower, uncultured, and unthinking masses as Hinduism". Brahmanism And Hinduism, ibid., p.XI. He also acknowledges that "these names are not accepted by the Hindus, ibid., p.XVIII.

See also Auguste Barth, Bulletin on the Religions of India, Reprint, Indian Studies Past and Present, Calcutta 1960, p.1.

Regarding the religion of the Vedas as a mere expression of "reverential awe of the forces of Nature and a desire to propitiate them",<sup>1</sup> and Brahminism as "simply an Indian variety of pantheism",<sup>2</sup> Monier-Williams forwarded the theory that "Vaishṇavism alone" possessed "the essential elements of a genuine religion."<sup>3</sup> According to him it was the only Hindu system worthy of being called a religion "notwithstanding the gross polytheistic superstitions and hideous idolatry to which it gives rise."<sup>4</sup> The main argument behind Monier-Williams' thesis was that "there can be no true religion without personal devotion to a personal God...".<sup>5</sup> "Who can doubt that a God of such a character was needed" he explained, "a God who could satisfy the yearnings of the heart for a religion of faith, love, and prayer rather than of knowledge and works? Such a God was believed to be represented by Viṣṇu."<sup>6</sup>

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1. Monier-Williams, ibid., pp.96-7.

2. Ibid., p.97.

3. Monier-Williams, "The Vaishṇava Religion, with special reference to Sikshan Patri of the modern sect called Svami Narayana", in: The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland, (JRAS) Trübner & Co., London 1882, pp.295-6.

4. Monier-Williams, Brahmanism and Hinduism, ibid., p.96.

5. Monier-Williams, "The Vaishṇava Religion", ibid., p.296.

6. Monier-Williams, Brahmanism and Hinduism, ibid., p.97.



In his judgements, Monier-Williams was obviously guided by the orthodox and formalised Christian concepts of God and religion. No description of God and His unity other than their representation through a Divine Personality could satisfy him, since philosophical explanations of God and His unity could not be truly regarded as religion from a Christian standpoint.<sup>1</sup> Therefore in spite of acknowledging in his earlier writings that even "the most profound forms of Indian pantheism rest on the fundamental doctrine of God's unity" and that "even the ordinary Hindu, who practises the most corrupt form of polytheism is never found to deny the doctrine of God's unity",<sup>2</sup> in his later works, Monier-Williams saw the true ingredients of a mon<sup>o</sup>theistic religion in Vaishṇavism only. In that alone he saw an "abolition of the triune equality of Brahmā Siva and Viṣṇu in favour of Viṣṇu, especially as manifested in his two human incarnations Kṛiṣṇa and Rāma"

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1. The Christian bias of Monier-Williams stands out quite clearly in his studies of Hinduism. He had recommended that the knowledge of Sanskrit must also be used for the "elucidation of Indian religious systems with a view to their refutation". Monier-Williams, Brahmanism and Hinduism, ibid., p.VII.
  2. Monier-Williams, "Indian Theistic Reformers", The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society, (JRAS) Trübner & Co., London, 1881, p.1.

and described it as "the only real religion of the Hindus".<sup>1</sup> He found in Vaishṇavism an "approximation towards the Christian idea of God's Unity and Personality",<sup>2</sup> for "it must be admitted" he said, "that it has more common ground with Christianity than any other form of non-Christian faith."<sup>3</sup> These opinions were expressed by Monier-Williams during the period 1875 to 1894.

The earlier background of these theories about bhakti and Vaishṇavism can be found in the works of H.H. Wilson and A. Weber. As pointed out earlier, Wilson was the first western scholar to mention bhakti as a religion and a doctrine in his "Religious Sects of the Hindus", published in 1846. He had mentioned it in connection with the Kṛishṇa-cult of the Vaishṇavas of Bengal, the followers of Chaitanya. He pointed out that "in opposition to the Vedānta belief of the negative properties of God" the followers of Chaitanya believed in His "real attributes".<sup>4</sup> According to Wilson their "whole religious and moral code" was "comprised in

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1. Monier-Williams, "The Vaishṇava Religion", JRAS, ibid., 1882, p.295.

2. Monier-Williams, "Indian Theistic Reformers", JRAS, 1881, p.2.

3. Monier-Williams, Brahmanism and Hinduism, p.96.

4. H.H. Wilson, ibid., p.100.

the one word, Bhakti, a term that signifies the union of the implicit faith with incessant devotion...". Wilson saw in their doctrine of the efficacy of bhakti", an "important innovation upon the primitive system of the Hindu religion."<sup>1</sup> The Vedas, the very source of Hinduism had no attraction for Wilson. He described their object as the same "that was defused throughout the old pagan world", and stated that "the fervent adoration of any one deity superseded all this necessity, and broke down practice and speculation, moral duties, and political distinctions."<sup>2</sup> Wilson made a special mention of the Bhāgavat Purāṇa also, pointing out its teachings that worship is more efficacious than abstractions and knowledge of the Divine Nature. Religious Sects of the Hindus, Wilson's first standard work of its own kind on Hinduism, was bound to have a far-reaching effect on western opinion on this subject. Although Wilson did not connect bhakti with the whole of Vaishṇavism,<sup>3</sup> the way in which he connected it with the Kṛishṇa-cult of Bengal was in itself significant. Bhakti, a general term,

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1. Ibid., p.100.

2. Ibid., p.101.

3. Wilson had given a list of 20 sects as Vaishṇavas but had mentioned "bhakti" only in relation to the Vaishṇavas of Bengal. H.H.Wilson, ibid., p.21.

was now equated with Kṛishṇa-worship and was thus to assume a very restricted meaning.

This equation between Kṛishṇa-worship and bhakti was further strengthened and perpetuated by the German Indologist, Albrecht Weber.<sup>1</sup> His main aim, however, was to trace the influences of Christianity on Kṛishṇa-bhakti. He pointed out many parallels between the two. He saw in the exclusive emphasis on Kṛishṇa's personality and in the fervent and emotional worship of Kṛishṇa, a pattern similar to Christianity. He even pointed out the similarities between certain incidents of the life of Christ and the facts of the Kṛishṇa legend. Weber did this in order to prove that the elements of monotheism and of fervent faith, noticeable amongst the worshippers of Kṛishṇa, were in reality borrowed from Christianity. He also suggested that the later developments in the direction of monotheism among those Indian sects which worshipped a personal God were due to the same influence.

In his discussions on the similarities between Kṛishṇa-worship and Christianity, Weber had also made a special reference to bhakti in relation to Kṛishṇa-worship,

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1. Albrecht Weber, Über die Krishnajanmâshtamî (Krishṇa's Geburtsfest), Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1867; see in particular pp.321ff.

and had translated it as Kraft des Glaubens or the power of faith and belief in God. He had explained the term further in the sense of "begging for His grace" to bring it nearer to the Christian parallel. Although Weber's theory of Christian influence in Kṛishṇa-worship was refuted by many scholars, both European and Indian, the links created in his writings between Kṛishṇa-worship and bhakti and monotheism, were to assume a lasting significance. Kṛishṇa being the incarnation of Viṣṇu, a wider view of Kṛishṇa-worship as the worship of Viṣṇu, and of Kṛishṇa-cult as a form of Vaiṣṇava religion, strengthened the connection in the minds of the western scholars between bhakti, monotheism, and Vaiṣṇavism. Thus the writings of Weber were mainly responsible for the formulation of the bhakti theories. His observations on bhakti marked out the lines for the subsequent growth of the academic opinion on that subject.<sup>1</sup>

Bhakti, now described as a distinct devotional religion of grace identified with and restricted to Kṛishṇa worship, was later associated with the Bhagavad-Gītā. Since Kṛishṇa whose worship and personality provided scope for

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1. Auguste Barth, a contemporary of Weber, can be quoted here as a clear testimony to this. Barth stated that the bhakti theory "in its scientific form belongs entirely to Professor Weber and which that scholar has developed from time to time...." Auguste Barth, ibid., p.220.

initial theorisation about bhakti occupied a central position in the Gītā narrative, the western scholars found it easy to connect it with their speculations on bhakti. If Gītā could be connected with Kṛishṇa-worship, it could be connected with the Bhakti Religion, too. At the same time, certain points of similarity between the teachings of the Bhagavad-Gītā and those of Christianity were also attracting the attention of some scholars. The theories propounded by Weber coupled with this new approach to the Gītā, added a greater significance to the connection between the bhakti theories and the Bhagavad-Gītā. The latter was soon to be recognized and referred to as an authoritative text of the Bhakti religion.

Soon after Weber's paper on Kṛishṇa's Geburtsfest or Kṛsnajānmastami, delivered to the Akademie der Wissenschaften in 1867, Dr. Lorinser in an appendix to his translation of the Bhagavad-Gītā showed traces of the "Christian writings and ideas" in that text.<sup>1</sup> This created a still more new and special connection between the Bhagavad-Gītā and the bhakti theories which were taking shape in the west at that time. Whereas Weber had referred to only the legend of the white island or Sveta-dvīpa in the Mahābhārata, the Nārada-Pancharātra and

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1. The German translation of the Bhagavad Gītā by Dr. Lorinser was published in Breslau in 1869. The English translation of the above mentioned Appendix appeared in the October issue of the Indian Antiquary, 1873.

Svapneśvara's commentary on Sāṅdilya-Bhakti-Sūtra<sup>1</sup> in connection with his explanations of the bhakti doctrine, Lorinser's indications with regard to the Bhagavad-Gītā now made it the focal point of the bhakti theories. The Gītā which in fact is acknowledged as an authority by both the so-called "philosophical Brahminism" as well as the "sectarian Hinduism" was now represented as a special Vaishṇava text and as the most outstanding exposition of the bhakti doctrine.

It must be noted here however, that a representation of the Bhagavad-Gītā mainly as a Vaishṇava text was also the result of the growth of an artificial opinion about the nature of that work. The Hindus have never regarded the Gītā as a sectarian work. On the contrary, as a religious text the Gītā is always placed in line with the Upanishads and the Vedānta sūtras. The three together constitute the final source of all Hindu theological opinions. Apart from this Hindu position, amongst the western scholars themselves, the earlier opinions expressed about Gītā stand out as very different from the later ones. Sir William Jones has described the Bhagavad-Gītā as "a work containing all the grand mysteries of the Brahminical Faith..."<sup>2</sup> Charles Wilkins, the first English translator of

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1. Albrecht Weber, ibid., pp.319-21.

2. William Jones, ibid., Vol.II, p.23.

the Bhagavad-Gītā had clearly observed, that the Brahmins esteemed that work as the source of their religion, and that the "principal design" of the Gītā was "to unite all the prevailing modes of worship" and to show the unity of God as Universal spirit.<sup>1</sup> The earlier western opinion was thus inclined more to accept Gītā as the first scientific and allegorical "systematisation of the scattered tenets" of Hinduism.<sup>2</sup>

However, the habit to represent Gītā as a purely Vaishṇava text is clearly the result of the change in western opinion. The changing opinions, here again, had followed a gradual and artificial course. This is clearly noticeable in the works of Sir Monier-Williams. In 1875, he described the Bhagavad-Gītā as an eclectic work which "abounded in sentiments borrowed from the Upanishads".<sup>3</sup> In 1882 he described it as the Bible of the Vaishṇavas.<sup>4</sup> This gave more weight to his theory that Vaishṇavism was a

1. Charles Wilkins, ibid., p.23.

2. Charles Wilkins, ibid., pp.5-6.

3. Monier-Williams, Indian Wisdom or Examples of the Religious, Philosophical and Ethical Doctrines of the Hindus: with a brief History of the Past and Present Condition of India, Moral and Intellectual, 2nd ed., H.Allen & Co., London, 1875, p.135.

4. Monier-Williams, "The Vaishṇava Religion", ibid., pp.296-97.



religion in itself, that it was a religion of bhakti, and that its theology was clearly enshrined in the Bhagavad-Gītā. The Bhāgavata Purāṇa was also treated as an authoritative text of the bhakti religion for the same reasons.

The academic theories describing bhakti as a religion were thus worked out in a gradual fashion. Gradually, but surely bhakti was equated with Vaishṇavism and Kṛishṇa-worship, and the Bhagavad-Gītā was fixed as the earliest authoritative source of the bhakti religion. These theories were finally bound together in a neat system by George Grierson who now spoke of a "Bhakti Church of India", and described bhakti as a "school of religion", a cult, and a doctrine.<sup>1</sup> Grierson defined the bhakti religion as the "descendant of the noble thoughts found in the Bhagavad-Gītā",<sup>2</sup> strongly opposed both to the "Advaita Vedāntist doctrine of salvation by knowledge and to the Mīmāṃsā doctrine of salvation by works." He explained<sup>it</sup> in more definite terms as a religion of "devoted faith directed to a personal God", a thing "essentially typical of monotheistic religion".<sup>3</sup> Grierson now described bhakti more clearly as

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1. G.A. Grierson, The Modern Hindu Doctrine of Works, JRAS, 1908, p.337.

2. Ibid.

3. George A. Grierson, Nārāyaṇa and the Bhāgavatas, Reprinted from Indian Antiquary, British India Press, Bombay 1909, p.1.

"the monotheistic religion of ancient India"<sup>1</sup> "in contradistinction to the pantheistic Brahmanism".<sup>2</sup> He attributed the conception of God, a monotheos, to the Bhāgavatas and designated that as the true Hindu religion and monotheism.<sup>3</sup> According to Grierson the worshipper of Viṣṇu was "essentially a monotheist"<sup>4</sup> and Vedānta was nothing more than a "belief in a passionless, impersonal, supreme Deity, unmoved by prayer and adoration...".<sup>5</sup>

Equipped with more crystallized theories about the bhakti religion, Grierson went a step further than the earlier scholars and constructed a history of it, seeking evidence of the spirit of bhakti in the classical literatures and putting forward his own theories about the processes through which the Bhāgavata or the Vaiṣṇava religion had

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1. George A. Grierson, The Monotheistic Religion of Ancient India and its Descendant, the Modern Doctrine of Faith, read at the Third International Congress for the History of Religions, held at Oxford in September 1908, (A. Bradford, Printer, Yorktown, Surrey).
  2. George A. Grierson, Nārāyaṇa and the Bhagavatas, *ibid.*, p.4.
  3. *Ibid.*, p.6.
  4. George A. Grierson, The Monotheistic Religion of Ancient India, *ibid.*, p.4.
  5. George A. Grierson, "Modern Hinduism and its Debt to the Nestorians", JRAS., 1907, Pt.I, p.313.

formalised its distinct theology as different from the pantheistic Brahmanical philosophies.<sup>1</sup>

To the list of the textual authorities quoted so far to explain the nature of the bhakti doctrine, Grierson now added his careful study of the Nārāyaṇia section of the Mahābhārata, hoping "it will not be difficult to separate the kernel of bhakti" from "the Brahmaist shell in which it has been enclosed."<sup>2</sup>

Grierson gave yet another dimension to the theories of bhakti by concentrating on its medieval manifestations in the Vaishṇava āchāryas of the south as well as the devotional poets of the north. He could speak with authority on the latter on account of his special knowledge of the medieval Hindi literature in general. To a great extent it was the medieval bhakti which served as the starting point for him, whence he took off to build and elaborate his more definite and advanced theories which have survived to this day. The retrospective and artificial nature of his approach can be clearly seen sometimes in his writings. For instance, describing the medieval bhakti movement he says: "suddenly, like a flash of lightening, there came upon all this darkness a new idea. No Hindu knows where it came from nor one can date its appearance,

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1. George A. Grierson, "Bhakti-Mārga", ERE. Vol.II, pp.539-551.

2. George A. Grierson, The Nārāyaṇia and the Bhāgavatas, ibid., p.1.

but all the official writings which describe it and which can be dated with certainty were written long before the Christian era. This new idea was that of bhakti. Religion was now no longer a matter of knowledge. It became a matter of emotion. It now satisfied the human craving for a supreme personality to whom prayer and adoration could be addressed in as much as bhakti, which may be translated by faith or devotion, requires a personal not an impersonal God."<sup>1</sup>

The general theories initiated by the western writers in connection with bhakti have got well established in Indian scholarship, too. Although in the beginning some differences of opinion were registered by men like R.G. Bhandarkar on certain aspects of these theories, but the basic definition of bhakti, as formulated by the western orientalist, and its total identification with Vaishnavism was never questioned by the Indian scholars. In their initial speculations on the subject on modern academic lines provided by the west, the Indian scholars had devoted their attention to only one thing in particular - the question of the Christian origins of the Bhakti religion. The theories advanced by Weber and others to prove the Christian influence in bhakti had to be refuted, and the indigenous character of bhakti had to be established on a sure footing.

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1. George A. Grierson, "Modern Hinduism and its Debt to the Nestorians", ibid., pp.313ff.

Bhandarkar's approach was obviously dominated by these considerations. Therefore without examining the full implications of bhakti against the background of Hinduism, and without paying attention to the extremely restricted and improper usage of the term by the western scholars, Bhandarkar proceeded on to establish the indigenous nature and antiquity of bhakti with the support of epigraphic and literary evidence.<sup>1</sup> But in so far as he did not question the artificial nature of the modern academic definition of bhakti, and to the extent that he used it as his premises to prove the antiquity of bhakti, Bhandarkar was also responsible for perpetuating its current usage in Indian scholarship.

To prove that bhakti was older than Christianity Bhandarkar sought every possible evidence of the worship of Kṛishṇa-Vāsudeva in the period before the birth of Christ. In this connection he drew attention to the inscriptions of Ghosundi and Nānāghat belonging to the 2nd and the 1st centuries B.C. Similarly he pointed out the significance of the Garuḍadhvaja, the emblem of Viṣṇu in the column of Heliadora at Besnagar belonging to the second century B.C.

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1. R.G. Bhandarkar, Vaishnavism, Saivism and Minor Religious Systems, J. Trübner, Strassburg, 1913, pp.3, 4, 14, 29, 38.

Bhandarkar referred to the occurrence of the name of Vāsudeva in Pāṇini's too, and argued that the worship of Vāsudeva must be regarded as old as Pāṇini.<sup>1</sup> He identified Heracles mentioned by Magasthenes as the God worshipped by the Śhaursenī dynasty of Mathurā, with Vāsudeva Kṛishṇa and quoted this as a proof of Vāsudeva worship in the fourth century B.C.<sup>2</sup> Thus in his own words Bhandarkar had brought forth "irrefragable evidence of the existence, three or four centuries B.C., of a religion with Vāsudeva as its central figure and a school of his followers, known by the name of Bhāgavatas."<sup>3</sup>

The main purpose of Bhandarkar was to establish the indigenous nature of what was being called the Bhakti religion. But in his attempt to do so, he had succeeded in proving the antiquity of Kṛishṇa-worship only. Since Bhandarkar did not question the equation of Kṛishṇa-worship and bhakti as fixed by the western scholars, his arguments were taken as a proof of the antiquity of bhakti in general and provided a stronger base for the future writings on the

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1. R.G. Bhandarkar, ibid., pp.3-4.

2. Ibid., p.9.

3. Ibid., p.4.

subject.<sup>1</sup>

Not only did Bhandarkar accept the word bhakti in the restricted sense of Kṛishṇa-worship and Vaishṇavism, but he also accepted it as a designation for Hindu monotheism as assigned by the western scholars. Accepting the concept of a personal God as an essential characteristic of monotheism, he traced the equivalent of it in the Ekāntika-dharma mentioned in the Nārāyaṇia section of the Mahābhārata.<sup>2</sup> He described it as the religion of the Sātvatas<sup>3</sup> and connected it with the Panchrātras and the Bhāgavatas.<sup>4</sup> This description and analysis of the Ekāntika-Dharma was quite compatible with Vaishṇavism, a sectarian religion which had become identified with bhakti in current scholarship. Bhandarkar ~~was~~ traced the history of the Ekāntika-Dharma, as manifest in the Panchrātras and Bhāgavatas, from its earliest representation in the Nārāyaṇia section to its more mature manifestations in the Bhagavad-Gītā. He now described the Bhagavad-Gītā as the "earliest exposition of the Bhakti-system or the Ekāntika-Dharma".<sup>5</sup> Bhagavad-Gītā,

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1. According to Grierson the paper read by Bhandarkar in 1886 at the Vienna Oriental Congress, had opened the way for all subsequent researches in the subject. G.A.Grierson, JRAS., For the First Half Year of 1910, p.172.

2. R.G. Bhandarkar, ibid., pp.4-8.

3. Ibid., pp.8-13.

4. Ibid., pp.38-41.

5. Ibid., p.14.

which is an amalgam of many philosophical influences and is recognized as an authoritative religious text by all denominations of the Hindus, and which throws enough weight in favour of an impersonal view of God, was thus represented by Bhandarkar as a Vaishṇava text, and as a work chiefly devoted to a person-alisation of the impersonal Brahman.

Through this particular approach to the Gītā, Bhandarkar was trying to show that a monotheistic religion, having a personal deity as its nucleus, was promulgated in the Bhagavad-Gītā. Here the impact of western opinion on Bhandarkar is quite clear. In attributing a special religion of that nature to the Bhagavad-Gītā, Bhandarkar was only trying to build up his case to refute the western opinions directed towards showing the Christian influence on the teachings contained in that text. He was able to show the Hindu antecedents of that religion in the earlier evidence of Kṛishṇa-worship, and in the Ekāntika-Dharma of the Nārāyaṇa section of the Mahābhārata. But in so doing, Bhandarkar had stuck to the western definition of monotheism. Without going into the question of the fundamental nature and indigenous pattern of Hindu monotheism, he had confined himself to the areas initially explored by the western writers in their search for the monotheistic element in Hinduism. In spite of expressing his doubts about the western understanding of the nature of



Hindu theism he continued to follow the established patterns and spoke of Hindu monotheism in terms of Vaishṇavism and Kṛishṇa-worship. Thus Bhandarkar's observations on bhakti were based entirely on the premises of an artificial definition of bhakti as provided by western scholarship. He had accepted Vaishṇavism as bhakti, and bhakti as Hindu monotheism. He had also accepted the western postulation that bhakti and monotheism were possible only in relation to a personal God.

Since the days of Bhandarkar a lot more has been written on Vaishṇavism and bhakti by Indian scholars, but without any effort for a fresh start. Every subsequent study of bhakti, therefore, has turned out to be a study of Vaishṇavism and vice versa. The history of Viṣṇu-worship and the evolution of Vaishṇavism has been treated as a historical development of bhakti, and bhakti is examined invariably from a Vaishṇava viewpoint.<sup>1</sup> However, sometimes, along with this general concentration on Vaishṇavism, the

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1. See for example:

H.C. Raychaudhuri, ibid.

Munshi Rama Sharma, ibid.

Baladeva Prasad Upādhyāya, Bhāgavata Dharma, Nāgarī Prachārāṇīśabhā, Benaras, 1953.

Mrinal Dasgupta, "Śraddhā and Bhakti in Vedic Literature", Indian Historical Quarterly, 1930, pp.315-333 and 487-513.

Mrinal Dasgupta, "Early Viṣṇuism and Nārāyaṇa Worship", Indian Historical Quarterly, 1931, pp.93-116, 343-358, 655-735, ibid., 1932, pp.64-84.

spirit and doctrine of bhakti itself is made the focal point in its study. The spirit of bhakti is then traced back to the Vedas, particularly to such hymns as addressed to the deity Varuṇa in the Rig-Veda.<sup>1</sup> But in all such contexts bhakti is invariably understood as a religious feeling, possible only in relation to a personal God. Therefore, although certain passages of the Upanishads are also sometimes pointed out as eloquent expressions of theistic devotion, great hesitation is shown at the same time to acknowledge them as expressions of bhakti in view of the absence of a supreme image of a personal Deity in the Upanishads.<sup>2</sup> It is argued that there was no scope for a bhakti system in the purely abstract and intellectual language of the Upanishads. "The anticipation of later bhakti doctrines", for this reason, are sought in the sectarian doctrines which conceive Brahman in more human and emotional terms. It is explained that the earlier "indefinite" and "incorporeal" spirit of bhakti was later defined and systematised in the Bhagavad-Gītā and the Bhakti-

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1. "If bhakti means faith in a personal God, love for Him, dedication of everything to His service and the attainment of Mokṣa or freedom by personal devotion, surely we have all these elements in Varuṇa worship." S. Radhakrishnan, Indian Philosophy, George Allen & Unwin Ltd., London 1923, p.108.

2. Vide infra, p.109

Sūtras of Nārada and Sāṅḍilya.<sup>1</sup> Thus the original hypothesis enunciated by the western scholars, that bhakti is possible only in relation to a personal God, and the initial equation made by them of bhakti with Kṛishṇa-worship and Vaishṇavism, have persisted in Indian scholarship.

In spite of this fixed and definite approach to bhakti, certain vagueness and ambiguity of opinion is sometimes detectable in scholars with regard to its exact nature and origins. But such instances however do not indicate any deviation from the established viewpoint on bhakti. Nevertheless they are a proof and an indication of the initial errors involved in treating bhakti as a special religious doctrine that had assumed a definite shape through a continuous process of development. This can be well illustrated by the following observation made by Radhakrishnan. "Bhakti is a vague term he states, extending from the lowest form of worship to the highest life of realisation." At the same time he adds that it "has had a continuous history in India from the time of the Rig-Veda to the present day."<sup>2</sup>

Similarly, <sup>S</sup>~~P~~.K. De who otherwise accepts the current academic theories about the meaning, origin, and history of

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1. Mrinal Dasgupta, "Śraddhā and Bhakti in Vedic Literature", ibid., p.332.

2. S. Radhakrishnan, ibid., Vol.II, p.704.

bhakti remarks that the origins of bhakti "are lost in far off antiquity" and that "its spread over centuries of obscure religious, cultural, and literary influences has made the stages of its growth erratic and undefined."<sup>1</sup> But on the whole, both Radhakrishnan and De assiduously adhere to the established technical definition of bhakti and accept it as a definite and continuous religious tradition standing distinct and separate in the general mass of Hinduism.

However, the current technical definition of bhakti is universally accepted by both the Indian and the western scholars, although it is completely untenable from the standpoint of the wider meaning and implications of the term bhakti in the total context of Hinduism. We have already discussed the errors and limitations of the present approach to bhakti. We have also shown in the preceding pages that the existing ideas about bhakti were artificially conceived by certain western scholars in the nineteenth century, and that they were formalised in the light of an alien bias. To a great extent the approach of the western scholars was determined by certain preconceived notions and value judgements derived from their own western background. A better grasp of their basic measures of judgement and their

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1. Sushil Kumar De, Early History of the Vaishnava Faith and Movement in Bengal, Calcutta 1942, p.2.

inapplicability to Hinduism, can help us in seeing more clearly the artificial aspects of the theories propounded by them.

### iii. The Main Bias Behind the Bhakti Theories and Its Western Background

As shown above, the existing theories about bhakti rest mainly on two principles and are the result of a total reliance on them as the basic measures of judgement for evaluating the nature of Hindu theism. One is the recognition of an essential division between religion and philosophy. The other is the acceptance of a personal conception of God as the only adequate proof of theism. The distinctions of the conceptual categories of Theism, pantheism, and monotheism which lend a more definite character to the present ideas on bhakti also rest on an unequivocal acceptance of these two principles.

But neither these basic principles nor the fixed and current technical distinctions of theism, pantheism and monotheism are applicable in the Hindu context. Philosophy and religion have never stood apart as two separate entities and have not followed separate courses of development in the evolution of Hinduism. Judging from the Hindu standpoint, an impersonal view of God can hardly be regarded as an indication

of an atheistic or non-theistic approach. The standardized distinction of pantheism and monotheism also cannot hold its ground in the Hindu situation, since in Hinduism the idea of the oneness of God and that of the oneness of Reality do not exclude each other, but are always found as intertwined and inseparable.

Thus the concepts and standards of judgement which have shaped the bhakti theories have in fact no relevance to Hinduism. Their application by western scholars in their analysis of Hinduism was not caused by any direct deductions made by them on the basis of their acquired knowledge of the Hindu religion, but was a direct result of a bias derived from their own western background to the study of an entirely different situation. The academic principles of making a strict division between religion and philosophy, and of explaining both religion and theism in terms of a belief in a personal God had taken shape in the west as a result of the Christian reaction against the growing trends in modern European philosophy to disregard the Christian view of God, and to explain Him instead, in purely abstract and impersonal terms. They were inspired by Christian thinking, and were formulated in the light of Christian beliefs and the Christian conception of the Deity.

In the nineteenth century the two forces of religion

and philosophy had reached their final parting of ways in Europe and the definition of religion was given now a more formalised character in isolation from philosophy. Technical and academic explanations about the true nature of theism strictly from a Christian standpoint of a personal concept of God was a significant outcome of these developments. The nineteenth century Indologists whose names we have connected with the initiation of the bhakti theories were clearly under the influence of the contemporary Christian opinion on the subject of theism and religion, particularly in relation to philosophy. Therefore, seeking in the Hindu religion, a pattern which would fit their own concepts of God and Religion, and of Theism and Monotheism, they perhaps saw their most fitting example in Vaishṇavism and Vaishṇava forms of devotion, and named it the bhakti religion.<sup>1</sup>

The origins therefore, of the main principles on which the current ideas about bhakti are based lie in the history of the development of modern philosophy in Europe and the Christian reaction to it. Although they can be clearly understood in relation to Christianity, they can have no intrinsic validity in the context of a religion which is totally dissimilar and has had a different mode of development. Principles which are a direct outcome of a European situation,

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1. Vide <sup>Supra</sup> infra, p. 35-37

caused by the struggle of religion and philosophy in the west, need not be accepted in the Hindu context. But they are freely applied in the study of Hinduism, and it is the unquestioned adherence to them which has resulted in the perpetuation of an artificial definition of bhakti.

A detailed study of the conflict which arose in Europe between religion and philosophy is undertaken in the following pages to explain the origins of the bias inherent in the principles which have shaped the current technical definition of bhakti. A closer examination of certain developments in western philosophy and their challenge to Christianity shows more clearly the reasons for the growing bias in the west in favour of a strict division between religion and philosophy. Similarly, a careful observation of some of the salient features of Christian thinking in defence of religion against philosophy shows how and why the concept of a personal God got finally established in academic deliberations as the sole criterion for determining the presence or absence of theism in any system of thought or set of beliefs.

The main purpose of the following discussion is to substantiate our stand that the principles and measures of judgement responsible for the formulation of the existing ideas about bhakti are of purely western origin and background. It is to show that since they are a direct outcome of a very



different situation and are conditioned by dissimilar factors, they are not relevant in the context of Hinduism. Such an analysis is necessary to prove our thesis that the current definition of bhakti has been artificially conceived in the light of certain alien standards of judgement. A clearer understanding of the western bias against the total background of the European conflict between religion and philosophy should provide us with the necessary freedom to break away from the present academic position and make a fresh approach to bhakti and to Hindu theism and monotheism.

In the seventeenth century, the beginning of modern philosophy in Europe, marked a clear break from medieval Christian scholasticism and ushered in a long period of conflict between religion and philosophy and between faith and reason. Whereas earlier it had been possible for men like St. Augustine and Thomas Aquinas to demonstrate the harmony and compatibility of the two,<sup>1</sup> it was now becoming increasingly difficult for the Christian thought to maintain a similar position in the face of the modern intellectual developments. The development of the modern schools of

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1. As a thinker Augustine had become the norm in every department of philosophical enquiry for the succeeding centuries. Warfield, "Augustine", ERE, Vol.II, 1909,p.222. Thomism had become a substitute of Aristotalism.

philosophy in Europe in the eighteenth century and its dominantly rational and empirical trends later created a gulf between philosophy and religion in western thought which continually grew wider throughout the nineteenth century.

This resulted in a period of long trial for Christianity, the like of which had not been witnessed before.<sup>1</sup> Christianity which had guided and controlled European thought for so long, and was accepted as a revealed truth, was now in danger. So far the Christian truths had been regarded as perfect in their revelation, but now a new bias of truth was being discovered in philosophy, which to a new class of philosophers was of deeper significance than the revealed truths of Christianity. Reason was now installed by them as the new criterion of truth. Reason, which dwelt in man and was self sufficient. It did not require the authority of revelation, for no revelation could be totally complete from the standpoint of reason. Truth could be discovered through human effort and investigation for man was endowed with the faculty of reason, and could formulate his discoveries without the aid of divine revelation. Christianity which rested on the

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1. Paul Hazard, European Thought in the Eighteenth Century, Translation by J. Lewis May, Hollis and Carter, London, 1954, see in particular "Christianity on Trial", pp.3-93.

truth of a divine revelation and was upheld by faith was bound to be the first casualty in this new age of reason. Nothing could remain exempt from the final tests of reason and nothing could be accepted as a final mystery, not even the Divine Revelation embodied in the Christian religion. The mystery of God also could perhaps be solved by an intellectual enquiry and a correct application of reason unaided by the authority of the Gospels and of revelation. But to question the Biblical revelation was the same as questioning the truth of the Biblical God, the God of Moses, the God of David. Thus not only the institutional Christianity, but the Christian God himself was now on trial.<sup>1</sup>

The incompatibility of Faith and Reason became grow-  
ingly apparent with the growth of modern European philosophy in view of the incompatibility of philosophical explanations of God and the Biblical representations of Him. The concept of a personal God, fundamental to Christian beliefs, was being constantly assailed by the philosophers, and Revelation and Divine Mediation were now exposed to the glaring light of Reason. Not the dependence on God and obedience to His will and laws, but the development of subjective life with the aid of Reason and Morality inherent in man, were held forth as a

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1. Paul Hazard, ibid., see "The God of the Christians Impeached", pp.44-59.

new value. Not the God who had made His covenant with Adam and had re-affirmed it in Jesus Christ, but Consciousness, the Soul, and Spirit were being described as the Ultimate Reality. The new prophets of Reason had not been slow in their efforts to understand and explain God. They were describing Him in terms of abstractions such as "infinity" and "perfection", as the "Absolute" and the "Ultimate", as a "cause" and a "substance". The God of the philosophers had no personality. He was not the author of the Divine Revelation embodied in the Bible. How could this impersonalised God, and intellectual abstraction, be the true object of Christian worship.<sup>1</sup>

From the standpoint of orthodox Christianity, all these developments had resulted from the indifference and disregard for the authority of the Bible. Christian thinking therefore had been suspicious of modern philosophy from the very early days of their mutual confrontations. It had become

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1. The nature of this dilemma which now confronted the Christian thinkers stands out very clearly in Pascal (1623-62). The following words are a part of the "memorial" found stitched up in his doublet after his death:

God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob,  
Not of philosophers and savants

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He is only found by the ways taught in the Gospel  
... that they may know thee  
The only true God and him thou has sent  
Jesus Christ

W.J.Cobb, "Pascal", ERE IX, 1917, p.654.

increasingly imperative for Christianity to reassert its old certainties with a fresh vigour. Biblical truths were fixed truths. The advance of philosophy could not be allowed to tamper with the personal notion of God whose true nature, the truth of whose perfect revelation, and whose mediation in human affairs were so clearly conveyed in the Bible. The philosophical explanations of God and the intellectual reasoning which supported them could be combated only with the force of the Christian faith in the Biblical God, who was not an Idea or Spirit, but was Personal in character. He was the God who had revealed Himself in history, who had sent His Son Jesus Christ for the redemption of the sins of man, and who had made His will known to mankind.

Thus in the light of Christianity, religion could mean only faith and trust in a personal God. Attempts to understand Him on other grounds were only deviations. Explanations of God in abstract and impersonal terms could be regarded only as philosophical speculations, but not as religious truths. If faith and reason, and religion and knowledge failed to attain a workable compatibility, the division between religion and philosophy must be clearly marked out.

Reasoning and knowledge might serve a faith fixed in a Personal God, but could not supersede it, for religion and

God were matters of the heart and not of the intellect. Not knowledge of God but love for Him as a Person was the very essence of religious devotion. The Christian truth of a personal God therefore was not to be compromised with the philosophical advances. Religion was a different realm from philosophy and the God of the philosophers could not be the God of religion, the personal God that the Christians had known and revered. Nineteenth century Evangelism and theology were able to establish all this on a doctrinal basis through Christian reasoning. It was finally proved that religion was a realm separate from that of philosophy and was self-sufficient and true in itself.

The following analysis of the challenge of philosophy to Christianity, from Descartes to Hegel, brings out certain salient points of attack on Christianity. At the same time it broadly outlines some characteristic features of Christian defence showing its main strongholds and essential objectives the fundamentals for which Christianity fought its battles and the grounds on which it gained its lasting victories. It is also shown how by the nineteenth century the Christian thinking was able to isolate religion from philosophy, faith from reason, and the personal representation of God from the impersonal speculations about Him.

Descartes, who represents the central position of the

new rationalism did concern himself with questions related to the existence and nature of God, but did not formulate his answers in accordance with the Christian faith. Although he continued to be a Catholic, he did not recognise God in his thought system in the light of Christian beliefs. He laboured to prove instead, the existence of God on grounds of his own categories of "innate ideas" and through an analogy of mathematical truth. According to him, the innate awareness of the finite man of his imperfection was in itself a proof of something infinite and perfect.<sup>1</sup> Though he did not attack the Christian God, Descartes subjected God to mathematical logic, and in so doing impersonalized Him. "You can substitute the mathematical order of nature for God, whenever I use the latter term", said Descartes.<sup>2</sup> Descartes' recognition of an "innate idea", God, however, was a departure from his logical position <sup>according to which</sup> ~~that~~ all truths ~~are~~ <sup>were</sup> self-evident, and which otherwise did not allow for any assumptions in reasoned thinking. At the same time Descartes did not conform to the Christian acceptance of God on the basis of faith and revelation. Thus

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1. René Descartes, "Meditations on First Philosophy", Meditation III in: The Discourse on Method and Metaphysical Meditations, Trans. by Gertrude Burford Rawlings, Walter Scott, London, 1901.

2. Descartes, quoted, Crane Brinton, Ideas and Men, Jonathan Cape, London 1951, p.350.

neither did he keep God outside his logical system (which would have at least maintained a division between religion and philosophy from the start), nor did he work out a concept of God completely consistent with the totality of his thought and logic. He left behind a philosophical situation which was uncertain either way.

The Cartesian explanation of God however was later questioned by Locke, whose rigid empiricism did not allow for any "innate ideas".<sup>1</sup> Locke was against all a priori methods, and was not concerned with the question of spiritual substance, whether of the individual self or of God. According to him, certainty could be brought to knowledge only by studying the source and origin of an idea. As ideas could be derived only on grounds of sensation and reflection, no idea could ever exist outside human experience.<sup>2</sup> If there was a substratum, "a something" which was the cause of ideas, Locke did not wish to probe into it. Philosophy, suggested Locke, should not concern itself with enquiry into realms which cannot be explored by scientific methods of observation.

Since Locke treated philosophy as completely independent of religion it could now push forward without

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1. John Locke, An Essay Concerning Human Understanding, Book I, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1924.

2. Ibid., Book II.



necessarily concerning itself with the questions related to the nature and existence of God. At the same time Locke could separate Christianity from his philosophy and could discuss it on its own terms on grounds of its own scriptural evidence without its interfering with his otherwise empirical stand. He saw no need to work out their compatibility, for according to Locke, the one necessary article of faith for a Christian was to regard Jesus Christ as the Messiah and Saviour, and to follow the path shown by Him and His apostles.<sup>1</sup> A similar stand of viewing religion in separation from one's general intellectual attitude had been taken earlier by Hobbes. "The scripture", according to Hobbes, "was written to show unto men the kingdom of God and to prepare their minds to become His obedient subjects, leaving the world and the philosophy thereof to the disputations of men for the exercising of their natural reason."<sup>2</sup>

The ideas of Descartes on God were picked up in a different spirit by Spinoza. Taking a stand very different from Locke, Spinoza tried to establish the idea of God in philosophy through a consistent and logical process. Working

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1. John Locke, The Reasonableness of Christianity, as delivered in the Scriptures, Awnshawn John Churchill, London 1695.

2. Hobbes, quoted by F.J.E. Woodbridge in: "Hobbes", ERE, VI, 1913.

with the concepts of mathematics like Descartes, but avoiding his dualism of mind and matter, Spinoza managed to arrive at a new metaphysics. According to Spinoza, God and nature were two different names for the same substance, and there was no need of proving either of them. For him God was "eternal existence" and could be known through the science of intuition (scientia intuitiva) which was for him a higher category than perception and reason.<sup>1</sup> All things flowed from eternal existence, and the things known as well as the knowing mind shared in it.

Spinoza clearly rejected the anthropomorphism of Christian theology and the Christian belief in Revelation. His God could not be explained as a personality because by God he meant, "... a being absolutely infinite ..., a substance consisting in infinite attributes, of which each expressed eternal and infinite essentiality."<sup>2</sup> According to Spinoza, things were not created by God at a certain point in history but they flowed from His nature from eternity to eternity. The ultimate end of man in relation to God lay not in the attitude of obedience and surrender to His will

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1. E.E.Kellet, "Spinoza", ERE, XI, 1920, pp.776-77.  
See also Spinoza's Ethics, Part II, prop.XL note ii, Everyman's Library, London 1910.

2. Ibid., Part I, def. VI.

and His defined laws, but in the efforts to gain knowledge of Him. Man could gain knowledge of God only through Knowledge of his own eternity. This knowledge and consciousness of God constituted for Spinoza a loving attitude towards God. He described this love as amor intellectualis Dei, or the intellectual love of God.<sup>1</sup> The concept of a personal God was not <sup>a</sup>necessary ~~ity~~ in Spinoza's doctrine. According to him, "God in so far as he loves himself, loves man, and consequently the love of God towards men and the intellectual love of the mind towards God are identical."<sup>2</sup>

The position taken by Locke and Spinoza, so different from each other on the question of God and religion were bound to have an impact on the subsequent philosophical speculations on the themes. Spinoza was essentially a metaphysician and God occupied a central position in his thought system. Locke on the other hand was a staunch empiricist who did not occupy himself with philosophical questions related to the subject of God. Spinoza made no compromises with theological ideas of a personal God, and had no respect for the traditional faith in the Revelation. Locke whose philosophy did not entertain speculation on that

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1. Ibid., Part V, proposition XXXII (corollary), proposition XXXIII and XXXIV.

2. Ibid., Part V, proposition XXXVI, corollary.

subject could view religion in isolation from his intellectual conviction and could thus endorse the "Reasonableness of Christianity".

Both these attitudes - to explain God in terms of an Absolute in philosophy, and to keep Him out of philosophical speculation - can be seen in the later philosophers. Whereas new queries were posed, and new answers were elicited in metaphysics on grounds of the former attitude, the latter type of approach opened up the possibilities of a complete segregation of religion and philosophy, as well as of scepticism regarding the validity of God and religion as they could not fully withstand the tests of empiricism. If on one hand, Leibniz and Berkeley struggled with the metaphysical questions, David Hume, on the other, raised a new and meaningful voice of scepticism on the subject of God and religion, which influenced the whole of the eighteenth century thought.

Both Leibniz and Berkeley, through pure rationalism and empirical reasoning respectively, tried to repudiate the position of Spinoza by placing God outside the universe. Leibniz, in his scheme of harmonious, self-sufficient, and active monads, thought of a sufficient reason, existing outside the universe, which alone could explain its creation and harmonious functioning. This reason was the God of Leibniz—

a God<sup>who</sup> was the author of the "pre-established harmony" of the monads, and the creator of the universe. But though existing outside the universe, and its primary cause, philosophically the God of Leibniz was not very much more than an "original simple substance".<sup>1</sup> The God of Berkeley, on the other hand with His position fixed as separate from the universe, was more active than the God of Leibniz. Berkeley conceived God as the "Eternal Invisible Mind"<sup>2</sup> who produces and sustains all things, and who can affect man "every moment with all the sensible impressions" he perceives. Ideas are not self-sufficient. They require an entity in which they can abide. Although Leibniz too had emphasised the nature of God as the creator and His entity as separate from the Universe, it was the philosopher-priest Berkeley, who succeeded in explaining God in terms more acceptable to Christians, for he was able to formulate an idea of God in the field of metaphysics which was compatible with the Christian beliefs. He described God as the Divine Creator and Guide who alone could sustain and lend meaning to the human phenomenon.

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1. G.W. Leibniz, The Monadology and other Philosophical Writings, transl. by R.Latta, Clarendon Press, London 1898, Section 47.
  2. George Berkeley, "Principles of Human Knowledge", section 94, in: Essays, Principles, Dialogues with Selections from Other Writings, edited by M. Whiton Calkins, Charles Scribners & son, London 1929.

But even the "spiritual Realism" of Berkeley could not stop the rising tides of doubt and unbelief on subjects pertaining to God and religion. Hume, a contemporary of Berkeley suggested that metaphysics of God and soul did not constitute rational knowledge. Although Hume's stand was that of a sceptic, and not of an atheist he had no sentiment or respect for the Christian religion. The scepticism of Hume, armed with his theories of human nature, causality, and belief; brought the greatest damage to Christianity. Through his analytic method Hume tried to reach the very source and nature of religion and analysed it as an aspect of human nature. "An opinion or belief", according to Hume was only "a lively idea related to, or associated with, a present impression".<sup>1</sup> Sure belief could be formed only through an apprehension of the content of an impression or our immediate experience. Beliefs based on indirect evidence and hearsay were only vague and uncertain ideas, the mystery of which could be solved by tracing the original impressions which caused them. Hume therefore wanted to subject religious beliefs to drastic, abstract, and experimental reasoning. Speaking of Christianity, he said, "Our most holy religion is founded on faith, not on reason, and it is a sure method of exposing it, to put it to

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1. David Hume, A Treatise of Human Nature, Book I, Part III, Section VII, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1888.

such a trial as it is by no means fitted to endure."<sup>1</sup>

Hume's "grand academic design", The Natural History of Religion, was a psychological and historical analysis of the phenomenon of religion, which had no relevance to Christianity, and was the opposite pole of all ideas about God Derived from a basic faith in Divine Revelation. Hume was not concerned with an enquiry into the nature of philosophical religion, but was to probe into "the religious beliefs and behaviour of the masses of mankind, viewing them clinically as a widespread reality of conduct and not as an approach to truth."<sup>2</sup> He had clarified his aim at the very outset. His Natural History of Religion was an enquiry into the foundations of religion in reason, and its origin in human nature.<sup>3</sup> This was a position far-removed from the simple but unfailing trust in Divine Revelation and the conception of a personal God, the two factors of great significance for Christian belief.

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1. Hume, quoted, Basil Willey, The 18th Century Background, London, 1957, p.129.

2. Frank E. Manuel, The Eighteenth Century Confronts the Gods, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1959, p.170.

3. David Hume stated "As every enquiry which regards religion is of the utmost importance, there are two questions in particular which challenge our attention, to wit, that concerning its foundation in reason, and that concerning its origin in human nature." David Hume, Four Dessertations By David Hume, A.Miller, London 1757, p.1.

The questions concerning the nature and existence of God were finally brought to a blind alley by Hume's scepticism. His approach not only made a mockery of Christian faith and theology, but also raised doubts about the efficacy and validity of all speculative attempts at a cognition of God. In view of Hume's approach to religion and metaphysics not only the Christian God but also the God of the philosophers stood in need of further justification on fresh grounds. It was Emmanuel Kant, who finally found the way out of Hume's scepticism and placed European philosophical thought on a new and more definite track. But Kant was not concerned with the question of the ultimacy of God as an entity existing outside of man. Although in his earlier works, Kant had spoken of "an unconditionally necessary being" and of a "necessary extra-mundane substance", and had sought rational proofs for the "Being of God", in the more vital years of his philosophical career he declared that all questions connected with the existence of God fall "outside the legitimate limits of speculative investigation".<sup>1</sup> He examined the rationally possible proofs of the existence of God and dismissed them as mere fallacies.

The forces of reason now, in the newly fashioned garb of Kantian philosophy, reasserted their former challenge to

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1. A.E. Taylor, "Theism : Kant", ERE XII, 1921, pp.275-276.



traditional Christianity. In his Critique of Pure Reason, Kant marked out a new way of reasoning, which by its very nature was to prove detrimental to every form of faith derived from authority, every concept of the ultimacy of God as the power residing outside the human, and all beliefs in divine intervention. For Kant, not God, but the human mind, was the centre of all things. According to him all causal relations could be found in human reason, which was capable of operating alone, without resorting to anything other than itself. For Kant the unconditioned, the real, and the positive could reside only within man, in his reason and in his moral sense.

God as an acting agent separate from man, His will and mediation, had no significance in Kantian philosophy. Kant believed in an "intelligible realm of spirit", which, carrying the force of a moral law within it, vindicated itself as a moral agent. The only possible religion, according to him, was that of "Duty" and "morality". Not the divine will, but principles capable of universal application, and the moral sense innate to man, were regarded by Kant as the foundations of such a religion. Kant explained this as the "Religion within the Limits of Mere Reason". This was a very different position from that of Christianity.

The new vistas thrown open by Kant's transcendent<sup>e</sup>

reason for metaphysical speculations found a rich expression in the German Idealists during the first half of the nineteenth century. Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel were all concerned with the ultimate nature of existence and made "mind" the pivotal point of their thought. They evolved a philosophy of the 'spirit' and 'self', the Absolute, which Hegel tried to make compatible with the God of religion.

Fichte formulated a metaphysical viewpoint on the basis of Kant's epistemology and logic. Accepting the Kantian principle of the unity of self-consciousness, Fichte developed his idea of the "ego", a unity which could include everything in existence and knowledge. Fichte described the principle of self-consciousness as self-luminous which required no proofs, but could be known through intellectual intuition. Schelling developed the idea of the ego still further by removing the difference between the 'ego' and the 'non-ego' of Fichte. Rejecting the dualism of nature and spirit, he explained the universe as an organism dominated by a common soul. Schelling's philosophy was a philosophy of identity, in which reason or intelligence was the self-identical absolute, and self-consciousness, the highest form of intelligence. The philosophical position of both Fichte and Schelling was far removed from the Christian ideology.<sup>1</sup>

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1. History of Philosophy, Eastern and Western, edited by S. Radhakrishnan, 2 Vols. George Allen & Unwin, 1953, Vol. II, pp. 263-268.

It was Hegel who finally made out a rational and confident case for an agreement between religion and philosophy over the fundamental question of the Ultimate or the Absolute. Religion according to him was not a sphere of reality, but was an attitude towards it as "the object of the religious attitude is the Absolute in its unity, in its completeness, in its truth". Philosophy, he pointed out, was concerned with the understanding of the same reality. Both deal with the same content, though the way they grasp it assumes different forms. The Absolute of philosophy was not different from the God of religion, Hegel stated, since there could not be two truths about the Absolute, which is the Supreme Truth and is One.<sup>1</sup>

Although Hegel showed some eagerness in pointing out the common ground between religion and philosophy, as is understandable in the light of his early theological training and his Christian sentiments, he never compromised the ultimacy of philosophy and its innate superiority over religion. Only the former, as a system of pure reason, could serve as the final repository of truth. Religious forms were only symbolical representations, and were therefore inadequate in explaining the essential nature of God as Absolute Spirit. Hegel

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1. J.B. Baillie, "Hegel", ERE VI, 1913, pp.584-87.

explained that a symbolical representation of truth was compelled by its own dialectic to pass on to the supreme form of the "notion", which alone could embody the finality of truth. According to Hegel the realm of 'notions' was philosophy, and not religion.

On grounds of a similar logic, Hegel forged ahead to establish the finality of the Absolute of philosophy in relation to the God of religion. Hegel viewed Reality as a development of the Absolute mind going through the unceasing process of dialectic. The Absolute of Hegel, in other words, was a self-evolving spirit - the Absolute Idea of his Logic - which was infinite and self-determinant in character. Only a spiritual and an idealistic relationship could be sustained between this Absolute and the universe. The Absolute was grasped in religion only through "symbolical representations" and "pictorial thinking", but its true essence lay in the Idea. The description of God in religion as the Creator, the King, and the Father, were only pictorial representations of the Absolute and were therefore limited explanations of reality.<sup>1</sup>

According to Hegel, though the modes of realisation were essential to both religion and philosophy, it was in philosophy and not in religion that the highest expression

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1. Ibid., p.586.

of the self-conscious spirit could be found. Speculation was the final stage and crown of the life of spirit. Feeling, essential to religion, and the Idea, essential to speculation, led to the same end according to Hegel, because the self-manifestation in religion as well as the self-articulation in speculative science proceed from the same spirit. When spirit realises itself by recovering itself from its self-alienated otherness, it becomes the Absolute. Thus the "revelation of God to man in religion and God's revelation of Himself to Himself in infinite spirit"<sup>1</sup> were one and the same thing. Although Hegel accepted the notion of religion as real in its essence, and as an expression of the Absolute Spirit, he also pointed out that in religion "the real is cast in the mould of history and is bound up with the course of time", making the evolution of the notion of religion also an evolution of a historical reality.

Hegel's philosophy came as a fresh challenge to Christian thought. The earlier philosophers had either rejected the traditional ideas on God and religion, or had cautiously questioned their validity. Some of them had not concerned themselves with these questions, whereas some others had formulated their own ideas on them. Hegel on the other hand clearly recognized the validity of religion and the truth

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1. Ibid., p.585.

of God represented in it. But he created a crisis by asserting the superiority of philosophy over religion, and of the Absolute of philosophy over the God of religion. This was perhaps a greater danger for Christianity than those which it has confronted before.

Faith in the Biblical God was fundamental to Christianity. From the Christian standpoint therefore, philosophy could not be allowed to tamper with the personal notion of God whose true nature, the truth of whose perfect revelation, and whose mediation in human affairs were so clearly conveyed in the Bible. The Biblical truths were fixed truths and must be held as sacrosanct in spite of the advances made in human knowledge and reasoning. This was the attitude which determined the line of Christian defence against the dangers caused by the new trends in philosophy. Both the Christian image of a personal God and the authority of the Bible were now freshly emphasised.

But the attempts made by Christian thought in that direction could ignore neither the new intellectual climate nor the two great watchwords of the age, "Reason" and "Nature". For a long time scriptural exegesis and religious publications aimed at arguing out the case for Christian beliefs, through the accepted norms of reasoning, to prove their compatibility with the new found laws of Reason and Nature. The old Christian

certainty of faith were cast in the new mould of reason with the free application of both the rationalism of Descartes and the empiricism of Locke, as a result of which, soon a new kind of Christian scholarship took shape which relied more on methods of intellectual explanation and rational persuasion than on appeals to faith and innate religious feelings of the heart.<sup>1</sup>

Although an intense intellectual activity of this kind was a predominant feature of the Christian response, the greater and more effective support for the Christian certainties however came not from them, but from another source, the main inspiration of which was rooted essentially in faith and religious feelings. Movements such as that of John Wesley contributed much more towards religious revivalism than the rational efforts of the theologians and Christian intellectuals. For Wesley the true Christian faith was not an intellectual acceptance of the orthodox opinion but was a vital act of faith and a habit of soul trusting in Christ and abiding in Him. This habit of Christian devotion could be cultivated only through a constant awareness of the Personal and Biblical God, and the eternal hope of salvation in Christ, His Son. Belief in God as a person and in His revelation through the person of Christ was therefore a fundamental

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1. Paul Hazard, ibid., pp.78-86.

characteristic of the more powerful movements of religious revivalism.

Another important feature of religious revivalism of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was a greater and a more strict adherence to the Gospel. A complete acceptance of the Scriptural authority, as an act of faith, was declared essential for Christian devotion. Intellectual explanations and understanding of the Scriptural truths had not proved sufficient and could never serve as proper substitute for the blessedness of a fervent faith. On the contrary, theological activities in that direction had confused the true nature of faith, which by its very nature could be self-sufficient and needed no support from the intellect. The Gospel must be approached in the spirit of faith and not in that of intellectual enquiry. The latter path had shown many pitfalls and had led some theologians to exercise so much freedom in interpreting the Biblical text that finally they had lapsed into expounding views which were far removed from the basic position of the Christian faith.

The Evangelical movement of the nineteenth century which contributed so much towards religious revivalism was a vigorous affirmation of the completeness of the Biblical truths and the value of a fixed religious faith. It clearly pointed out the "divine inspiration, authority, and the self-



sufficiency of the Holy Scriptures" and was primarily dedicated to the promotion of the interests of "Scriptural Christianity."<sup>3</sup> The declaration of belief in the "utter depravity of human nature", the incarnation of the Son of God and His atonement for the sins of mankind, and the Trinity of the Persons in the unity of Godhead, were some of the points which served as the doctrinal basis of the Evangelical Alliance of 1846.<sup>1</sup>

Both the eighteenth century Methodism enunciated by John Wesley and the subsequent expression of Evangelism in the nineteenth century show the same spirit. There is an evidence in both of the Christian keenness to uphold the personal image of God and to emphasise the value of simple faith and religious feeling as against the intellectual approach to religion and doctrinal theology. The emphatic assertions of Methodism and Evangelism in these directions ~~there~~<sup>w</sup>ere a culmination of similar assertions made by Christianity at the very outset of its trial against philosophy. In the seventeenth century, the same attitudes were reflected in the development of the "Covenant Theology"<sup>2</sup> and the contemporary movement which is generally referred to as "Pietism".<sup>3</sup> The

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1. David S. Schaff, "Evangelical Alliance", ERE V, 1912, p.601.

2. W. Adams Brown, "Covenant Theology", ERE IV, 1911, pp.216-224.

3. E.S. Waterhouse, "Pietism", ERE X, 1918, pp.6-9.

emphasis on the idea of the Covenant in theology was at the same time an equally strong assertion of the idea of a personal God. Similarly, seventeenth century Pietism was an expression of the Christian awareness of the incompatibility of "Faith" and "Reason". Spener, the leading figure of the Pietist movement had explained that neither "correct knowledge" nor the "illumination of understanding" was so important to religion as the feelings of the heart and the "stimulation of the will".

Another important development of the nineteenth century deserves our attention in the present context. A new basis for modern Protestant theology was now offered in an academically reasoned manner by the German philosopher-priest, Schleiermacher.<sup>1</sup> Schleiermacher explained feeling as the most fundamental part of religion. Although he stated that the different religions of the world represented different forms of "Fundamental religious consciousness", he closely connected his theory of religion, as feeling, with Christianity. Christianity, according to him was not a body of doctrine, but was a "condition of heart" - a mode of consciousness making itself known in a devout feeling of dependence on God. In this reliance on feeling, we find in Schleiermacher a continuation of the Pietist Stand of Spener and others who had earlier

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1. W.B. Selbie, "Schleiermacher". ERE XI, 1920, pp.236-239.

explained the nature of religion on those lines. He further fortified that Stand and gave it the status of a doctrine and a philosophical theory.

Although Schleiermacher was inclined towards philosophy, he was essentially a Christian theologian and never denied the necessity of a personal God as the object of devout religious feelings. He saw in Christianity a religion of redemption and reconciliation - the "action of God in response to" the strivings of man, and in Jesus Christ "the one Mediator to men".<sup>1</sup> Schleiermacher sought a philosophical basis for religion, opening up possibilities of reasoning in theology, he always accepted the Christian premises of a personal God, Revelation, and Divine mediation. His theological efforts were in fact directed towards reforming and re-stating Protestant theology by "making religious experience or the sense of dependence on God mediated through Jesus Christ, the norm of dogmatic theology rather than the Creeds, the fathers or the unaided human reason".<sup>2</sup> Modern Protestant theology, subsequent to Schleiermacher, reflects his basic attitude of reasoning and philosophical theorisation about religion, accompanied by strong affirmation of the Christian certainties.

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1. Ibid., p.238.

2. Ibid., p.237.

Thus not by pure reasoning but by upholding the authority of the Gospel, Christianity was able to win its final victories through an assertion of its old certainties on grounds of faith and religious feeling. Only a personal concept of God could truly vindicate the truth of the Biblical God, who was not to be confused with the God of the philosophers. Religion and philosophy had to be recognized as two clearly separate ~~reasons~~ <sup>realms</sup>. Only a fixed faith in a personal God and the doctrinal feelings caused by such a faith could be accepted as the true ingredients of Religion and Theism. Intellectual enquiry and reasoning about God and the descriptions of Him in impersonal and abstract terms, could be viewed only as philosophical speculations.

As discussed earlier, the academic attitudes based on these considerations have played a great part in the shaping of the bhakti theories, identifying it with Vaishnavism, and explaining Vaishnavism as Hindu theism and monotheism. But whereas the division between Religion and Philosophy can be easily understood and accounted for in the Christian context against the background of the long struggle between the two in the west, generalisations on its basis to regard Religion and Philosophy as exclusive of each other in a completely dissimilar situation can hardly be justified. The treatment of Philosophy and Religion as two different and

separate areas of thought may be perfectly valid in the former case, but the extension of the same principle and its application to the Indian situation, where the two are always found interlinked, has led only to misconceptions. It is necessary therefore to make a fresh reappraisal of bhakti and of Hindu theism and monotheism in isolation from these considerations.

iv. A Re-assessment of Hindu Theism and Monotheism

The formulation of the present ideas of bhakti as a Hindu archetype of monotheism, its complete identification with Vaishṇavism, and its further elaboration in terms of a theistic religion of loving devotion to a personal God as opposed to the intellectual approach and exclusive character of Brahminism, could be possible only through an evasion of the real nature and indigenous pattern of Hindu monotheism. We have argued that such ideas could take shape only with the assistance of certain technical theories about the essentials of theism, and with the guidance of a line of division between philosophy and religion. Only in the light of these considerations could monotheism be placed in the Vaishṇava sect and the true characteristics of religion, as different from philosophy, attributed to it, to make it stand apart from the Brahminic thought.

It was the search for a Hindu pattern which would fit the western definition of monotheism, which resulted in interpreting the exaltation of the personality of Vishṇu to the highest position by the Vaiṣṇavas, as an expression of true monotheism.<sup>1</sup> But if Vaiṣṇavism is regarded as a monotheistic expression of Hindu religion on these grounds, all similar Hindu sectarian phenomena for identical reasons, must also be regarded as the same. Paradoxically enough, on the basis of the same argument, Hinduism can appear as an amalgam of many monotheisms - a position, which can hardly be regarded as tenable. Hindu monotheism however must be examined in its proper perspective without preoccupation with non-Hindu definitions of monotheism.

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1. Grierson's exposition of Vaiṣṇavism as the monotheistic religion of India was clearly inspired by this consideration. He introduced his study "The Monotheistic Religion of Ancient India and its Descendant the Modern Indian Doctrine of Faith" as a refutation of the following view expressed by an eminent English divine: "One of the greatest obstacles to the spread of Christianity amongst educated men in India is the fact that a false philosophy has gone far to undermine and destroy the presuppositions of natural religion which render the evidence for the truth of Christianity credible. When the idea of a personal God, Who has created and rules the world and Who cares for and loves the creatures whom He has made, has been obscured and lost, it is difficult to bring home to men the probability of a revelation or the reasonableness of the Incarnation." - Grierson explained that the above view pertained to the "pantheism of the Vedānta school of Indian philosophy" which was "professed only by a certain number of learned Brahmans" and that "monotheism could be traced in Vaiṣṇavism, which as a religion was as monotheistic as Christianity." George A. Grierson, The Monotheistic Religion of Ancient India, ibid., pp.3-4, see also pp.11-12.

It is important to recognize that Hindu monotheism has not taken shape through the denial of gods for God, but has been the result of the identification of all gods in God. It is equally important to bear in mind that Hindu philosophical monism, which is described as Hindu pantheism by the western scholars, can in no way be regarded as an antithesis of monotheism in the Hindu context.

It is not possible to define Hindu theism in terms of a single dogma or doctrine. Nor can its nature be clearly outlined on grounds of any one scriptural text, as is possible in the case of the Christian and Islamic theisms which are directly rooted in the Bible and the Quran. Hindu theism can be properly ascertained only in the light of some central idea or belief, common and essential to every practising sect and every articulate expression of Hindu religious thinking. In spite of the wide scope of Hinduism and its multiple doctrinal aspects, it should not be difficult therefore to define its basic theism without resorting to the fixed western theories about religion, and the line of division between religion and philosophy. But this new ground cannot be discovered without abandoning the present academic habit of applying ready-made theories of western origin to the Indian situation and without directing our attention to the indigenous classification and distinction of the āstika and nāstika religions, which the Hindus have always known and recognized.

The true nature of Hindu theism must be sought in those bonds of common belief which were responsible for holding together numerous thought systems and sects in the larger unity of the āstikas and by asserting which, the āstikas were always able to maintain their theistic unity against the atheistic or the nāstika trends of thought. The strongest link uniting all the āstikas was the common belief in the ultimate Reality of the Ātman or the soul and in its eternity and immutability. On account of this, every āstika explanation of God, irrespective of its particular source of origin, could make Him consonant with the principle of the Ātman. This holds true of both the diversity of the religious-philosophical speculations of the āstika systems and of the worship of the numerous deities by the various āstika sects. Thus, amongst the Hindus, the final acceptance of one God has taken shape around the understanding of God through an impersonal abstraction of Him in an idea, and through the recognition of all philosophical speculations concerning God not as mere intellectual abstractions but as an integral part of religious thinking.

The use of the western criteria therefore, of the concept of God of an essentially personal nature and of a definition of religion which must isolate it from philosophical thinking was bound to cause some serious errors in the



understanding of the Hindu theism. ~~and~~ A strict adherence to them has been responsible for the present explanations of the total Hindu theism in terms of the worship of personal deities such as Vishnu and in terms of some aspects <sup>of</sup> the Hindu sectarian zeal to maintain the supremacy of the personal character of the sectarian deities. The significance, however, of the impersonalised idea of God, and the constant identification of religion and philosophy in Hinduism must not be underestimated in a proper assessment of the Hindu theism, for it has a distinct character of its own. Neither the presence or absence of a concept of a personal God nor the dividing line between religion and philosophy can have any validity in judging the nature of Hindu theism.

The Hindu theism does not emanate from any belief in a Divine Revelation fixable in historical time, nor is it based on a belief in God's declaration of the finality of His will and law through any one personality. The beginnings of Hindu theism cannot be traced back to a revelation of God as an outward cosmic force seeking out man and working for his redemption, but can be detected rather in man's awareness of Him as the One and only cosmic truth in the human yearning to know and understand Him. A contemplative and philosophical approach to God clearly marks the entire evolution of Hindu theism, and the authoritative scriptures of the Hindus, for

that reason, are regarded as the works of seers and are not viewed as an embodiment of the "revealed will of God". An equally important feature of Hindu theism is the abstract and impersonal representation of God, accepted by all Hindus in spite of their sectarian differences and the different deities worshipped by them. Thus in Hinduism, as acknowledged by Renou, religion and philosophical speculation "have gone hand in hand from the very outset"<sup>1</sup>. Consequently, an impersonal and immanent view of the Godhead has always formed an integral part of Hindu theism. It must be fully recognized that the Hindu philosophy, in spite of its hair-splitting polemics has always been concerned with the religious; and that the Hindus, in spite of the multiplicity of the vulgar manifestations of their religion, have always accepted the speculative approach as religious. Thus metaphysics and philosophy cannot be separated from Hindu theism. The latter therefore, must be determined in the light of the total religio-philosophical thought of the Hindus.

As in the case of Hindu theism, a correct understanding of Hindu monotheism also requires a different perspective from the one offered by western theorisation in general about the true nature of monotheism. As pointed out earlier, the present conceptual category of monotheism with its full implications can be held valid only in relation to religions

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1. Louis Renou, Hinduism, London 1961, p.8.

of Semitic origin, and cannot be correctly applied to the Hindu situation. The shaping of Hindu monotheism constitutes a very different pattern from that of the Christian and Islamic monotheisms which had assumed their present shape on grounds of revelation, and the subsequent negation of all the gods worshipped before in favour of the One true God who was conceived as a personality. In the total context of Hinduism, however, the final acceptance of the Deity as an Impersonal Absolute and the identification of all the gods with it, have served as the keystone of monotheism. These factors, and not the final emergence of the personality of any one deity as the one true God, are the base on which Hindu monotheism rests. This must be fully recognized if its nature is to be properly understood.

Although a number of gods are mentioned in the Vedas, they are finally reduced to an Absolute in the Upanishads through a process of intuition and analysis.<sup>1</sup> The notion of the Ātman disposed of many gods, as well as the one God conceived as something different from the human soul.<sup>2</sup> The speculation and reasoning which is freely used in the

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1. Karlo Formishi, "The Dynamic Element in Indian Religious Development", Viśva-Bhāratī Quarterly, 1926-27, April 1926, pp.16-28, July 1926, pp.113-24, October 1926, pp.213-235, 333-350.

2. Ibid., p.344.

Upanishads to explain the Absolute cannot be regarded as non-religious nor can this Absolute of Hindu metaphysics be regarded as different from the Hindu concept of God. Here God, the Absolute, who supersedes all the other deities, and in whom they are all subsumed, does not appear as an outward personal force, but is felt and known and takes shape in the human mind itself. In the Hindu context, whenever speculation and discursive knowledge fail, the understanding of God takes shape in human intuition. For example, according to the Kāṭha Upanishad, "He is framed by the heart, by the thought, by the mind."<sup>1</sup> Similarly Śvetāśvatara Upanishad states that "God the maker of all, the Great Spirit is fashioned by the heart, the understanding and the will."<sup>2</sup> God understood as this has been recognized as one, from the very early stages of Hindu speculation, in spite of the multitude of gods mentioned in their scriptures. The truth of the oneness of God, the Ultimate Reality, remains the same, though it is variously explained.<sup>3</sup> God as the Absolute and Ultimate Reality is not thought of as a mere philosophical abstraction or a lifeless intellectual doctrine, but is mentioned with all the fervour and adoration that religion can claim for Him. It is not a

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1. Kāthopanishad, VI.9.

2. Śvetāśvatara Upanishad IV.17.

3. Rig Veda I.164.46; X.114.5.

dead and "chilling" "intellectual abstraction" but is fervently regarded as the goal which all the Vedas rehearse and all the austerities proclaim.<sup>1</sup> It is described as the Reality which captures affection in changing forms because it is eternal and everlasting.<sup>2</sup>

The Hindu monotheism has thus taken shape around the "idea" of the oneness of God, and not through the acceptance of any one unique divine personality as God superseding the lesser gods. The belief in the oneness of God here does not remain only a matter of faith and acceptance of the supremacy of the personality of an accepted Higher God, but is linked with the knowledge and understanding of Him as an impersonal truth. The Hindu worship of personal deities such as Vishnu, Śiva and the host of others would have meant nothing more than a gross polytheism without the super-imposition of this idea of the oneness of God. In the total context of Hinduism, it is the identification of these personal deities with that idea which lends validity to their worship as God.

The Hindu personalistic polytheism thus converges into a monotheism through the acceptance of the truth of the philosophical idea of the oneness of God. Manifestations of

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1. Kathopanishad II.15.

2. Atharva Veda X.8.23.

polytheism could continue only on the grounds of the universal acceptance of the oneness of God in that sense. The sects for which the worship of a particular personal deity is of fundamental importance, at least in their theology always identified their<sup>ly</sup> sectarian deities with this idealised view of God. It is only by doing so that they were able to exalt a particular deity to the supreme position of exclusive significance in relation to the others. Since this is done not by one, but many sects to uphold the worship of their sectarian deities, such an exaltation of a personal deity to the highest single status by one particular sect can hardly be accepted as the culminating point of Hindu monotheism.

#### v. Bhakti Reinterpreted

The word bhakti is derived from the root bhaj by adding the suffix ktin (ti). The suffix ktin is usually added to a verb to form an action or agent noun.<sup>1</sup> According to the rules of Pāṇini, bhakti indicates a bhāva or condition<sup>2</sup> (√Bhaj+ti). The root bhaj however can convey any of the following meanings: - to partake of, to engage in, and to turn and resort to, to pursue, practise or cultivate; to declare for, prefer, or choose; to serve and honour, and to love and

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1. Pāṇini, Aṣṭādhyāyī, III.3.94.

2. Ibid., III.3.18.

adore. Thus, bhakti can mean participation as well as resorting to. It can mean experience as well as practice and cultivation. It can also mean reverence, love and adoration.<sup>1</sup>

Bhakti, therefore is a general and a relative term, which can be used in any of the above meanings in a wide range of contexts, the object of bhakti remaining a variable factor.<sup>2</sup> Its nature, therefore, can assume a characteristic and particular form, only when it is viewed in relation with the object towards which it is directed.

Nevertheless, the word bhakti is generally used in

1. A closer look at the usage of the term bhakti in the classical Sanskrit literature can testify this. The semantic studies of bhakti by E.Washburn Hopkins, Mrinal Dasgupta and J. Gonda deserve a mention here. Hopkins provides us with a study of its usage in the Mahābhārata, and M. Dasgupta of that in the Vedic literature. Gonda however has chosen a much wider scale and includes the writings of the medieval Vaishṇava āchāryas in his study. All these studies show that the word bhakti is not used in the classical texts in its present technical meaning. All the three authors agree on that and make definite statements to that effect. Nevertheless, none of these scholars has rejected the modern academic definition of bhakti in spite of these findings.  
 E.W.Hopkins, "The Epic Use of Bhagavat and Bhakti", JRAS, 1911, for second half year, pp.727-738.  
 Mrinal Dasgupta, "Śraddhā and Bhakti in Vedic Literature", ibid.,  
 J.Gonda, "Het Begrip Bhakti", Tijdschrift voor Philosophie, Utrecht, Feb. 1948.

2. Pāṇini, ibid., IV.3.95-100.

the context of religion and in the sense of devotion to God. But even in its particularised religious meaning, as long as bhakti is directed to God as the one Ultimate Reality, it can mean devotion only in a general way irrespective of the variations and distinctions caused in its form and manner by the conceptual difference of beliefs and doctrines regarding the nature of God. To the extent that the different traditions of the Hindus have conceived and worshipped God in different ways, bhakti has found different formal expressions in them. At the same time in the sense of devotion, it remains common to all the theistic religio-philosophical systems of thought. Consequently, instances of ready agreement between different schools of philosophy on grounds of devotion are also not rare. Our understanding of bhakti therefore, must take into account its general character as devotion and must recognize the possibilities of its different expressions. Similarly, our assessment of the nature of bhakti in a particular religious tradition must bear relation with the nature of the cognition of God found therein.

It is wrong, therefore, to confine bhakti to certain sects alone. It is equally wrong to explain that it is compatible with only those religious patterns which provide the image of a personal God. Bhakti in its general sense as shown above has intrinsic possibilities in relation to both,



the saguṇa and the nirguṇa view of God since both find recognition in the totality of Hindu beliefs and Hindu modes of worship. To the extent that the devotee accepts and worships God in His nirguṇa aspect his bhakti is towards the nirguṇa Brahman, and he too is a bhakta. Similarly, bhakti cannot be confined to the Viṣṇu bhaktas alone. Vaiṣṇava devotion whether towards Viṣṇu or towards his incarnations, Rāma and Kṛiṣṇa can be interpreted only as Viṣṇu-bhakti and not as bhakti pure and simple. The different ways of explaining the nature of God however, are related rather to the realm of Siddhānta than to that of Sādhana.

Thus bhakti by itself does not imply any special /concept or doctrine pertaining to the nature of God. To describe bhakti as a kind of religion or a religious doctrine is also a fallacy. In the Hindu context the word dharma can be regarded as the nearest equivalent to religion. Religious doctrines are described as Siddhānta and also as Mata. It must be mentioned here that bhakti is never referred to as a dharma, nor is it ever called a Siddhānta or Mata. For example in the two well known medieval compendia of the prevalent Siddhāntas and Matas, the Sarva-Siddhānta-Saṅgraha of Śaṅkṛāchārya and the Sarva-Darśana-Saṅgraha of Mādhavācharya, bhakti is nowhere explained as a religion or doctrine. Even in their treatment of Vaiṣṇavism and of Vaiṣṇava Vedānta,

bhakti is not discussed as their particular religion.<sup>1</sup>

But bhakti is usually understood as a mārga. Whereas siddhānta and mata refer to the doctrinal aspect of religion, and dharma to the general principles which ultimately assimilate the doctrinal and the practical aspects in one whole, mārga indicates the way of the mata and siddhānta.<sup>2</sup> In other words, it is a particular doctrine which paves a particular way. If the siddhānta or mata is concerned with explaining the nature of God as the Ultimate Reality, the mārga is the path shown for knowing and worshipping Him. Bhakti however, is recommended under various matas and siddhāntas, and is upheld by groups of varying denominations and convictions. Therefore bhakti, even as a mārga, cannot be given a fixed and limited meaning in the sense of a special religious conviction.

In modern scholarship, whenever bhakti is described as a mārga, it is usually done so in contra-distinction to the karma-mārga (the path of action) and the jñāna-mārga (the path of knowledge). They are explained as alternatives, exclusive of each other, and bhakti in particular is always

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1. Śaṅkarāchārya, Sarva-Siddhānta-Saṅgraha, Chapter IX (Vedavyāsapaksha prakaraṇa).  
Madhavacharya, Sarva-Darśana-Saṅgraha, Chapter IV, XX (Rāmānujadarśanam).

2. N.A. Thoothi, The Vaishnavas of Gujarat, Longmans Green & Co., Calcutta, 1935, p.65.

explained as juxtaposed to the path of jñāna or knowledge. The view that they are two different and separate paths must be of a very recent origin, since we do not find any early standard and authentic exposition of bhakti setting the two as distinctly apart and exclusive of each other.<sup>1</sup> At the same time the Hindu scriptures, which are usually quoted to support the aforesaid statements, do not show evidence of such a view. Neither in the Bhagvad-Gītā nor in the Bhāgavata Purāṇa, the two texts regarded as the most authoritative in relation to bhakti, is such a line of division drawn between knowledge and bhakti. On the contrary, they appear in them as completely compatible and inclusive of each other. The same is true of the Bhakti-Sūtras of Nārada and Śāṇḍilya, which are also so

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1. In this context, the following fact strikes us as very significant. In his Sanskrit English Dictionary, Monier-Williams has offered a number of meanings for the term bhakti, such as trust, homage, worship, piety, faith, love and devotion etc. These renderings of bhakti are supported by illustrations from the classical Sanskrit texts. But over and above this, Monier-Williams, translates bhakti also as a "religious principle or means of salvation together with Karman, 'works' and jñāna, 'spiritual knowledge'." This particular rendering of bhakti however is not illustrated by the usage of the term in that sense from any Hindu text, but is supported by Monier-Williams' own definition of it. Therefore, to illustrate the meaning of bhakti as a "religious principle", different from that of jñāna, Monier-Williams refers to his own works Indian Wisdom and Religious Thought and Life in India (also called Brahmanism and Hinduism.) This should also lend some weight to our contention that the present theories about bhakti which define it as a special religious doctrine, different from that of jñāna, are of an artificial nature. Monier-Williams, Sanskrit English Dictionary.

often quoted to substantiate the current theories about bhakti.<sup>1</sup>

The treatment of bhakti and jñāna as counter agents, has caused some serious misjudgements. For example, bhakti is interpreted as an antithesis of the principles of classical Vedānta, a thought system held in high esteem by the Hindus, and a philosophy which can hardly be pushed aside as non-religious and non-devotional.<sup>2</sup> However, the above position is maintained on the ground that the latter is only a philosophical system which lays down the path of jñāna, different from that of the truly theistic religion, bhakti. Furthermore, the seeming consistency of this assumed position is maintained by interpreting jñāna or knowledge as an intellectual and scholastic understanding only, in spite of the clear evidence that the Vedāntins do not use the term jñāna in that sense. In the final analysis however, the Vedāntins always describe jñāna as knowing in terms of spiritual experience. The difference between the knowledge derived from personal spiritual experience and the knowledge derived from textual scholarship is often made clear and the superiority of the former is always acknowledged by them.<sup>3</sup>

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1. Bhakti in the Bhagavad-Gītā, Bhāgavata Purāṇa, and Nārada and Sāṅdilya Bhakti-Sūtras, are discussed in Chapter II.

2. Vide infra, pp. 127 ff, 144 ff, 155 ff

3. Vide infra, pp. 181-86.

A misconception thus lies at the base of the related theories which explain bhakti as an antithesis of the classical Vedānta and the so-called "intellectualism" of the Brahmins.

A similar inexactitude is perpetuated by the assertion that bhakti is incompatible with non-dualistic explanations of the Ultimate Reality, and with the nirguṇa and impersonal view of God. It is always argued that bhakti or loving devotion requires an essential dualism, for there must be one who loves, and another who is loved. Also, that it is not the unfeeling impersonal Brahman, but God as a person, who can arouse the feeling of love and devotion in the human heart. Bhakti is thus explained as a kind of devotion which has no validity in relation to the philosophical stand of the Advaita Vedānta, and the belief in the nirguṇa character of God.

To interpret bhakti or devotion in the above sense, in the context of Hinduism, amounts to a negation of a fundamental devotional aspect of the Hindu pattern of religious and spiritual pursuit. The path of self-realisation through self-knowledge is an essential part of the Hindu view of religious life and devotion. It would not be incorrect to state that it has found due recognition in all the Hindu sects, irrespective of the varying degree of its actual practice in them. The Advaita/Vedāntin of course, is committed

to it the most fully, and upholds it in a more non-compromising manner than the others. But the form and manner of spiritual pursuit advocated by the Advaita Vedāntin is often explained as the exaltation and glorification of the self, and since it is explained that bhakti as love needs the "other" to love and requires an essential dualism, bhakti is set off against this position of the Advaita Vedānta with its emphasis on the self.

However, it must be remembered that when the Vedāntin speaks of self-realisation and self-knowledge, he means not the empirical self but the self most high, the Ātman, the Brahman. It is that and not the empirical self which must be known and realized. The Vedāntin also must need God and attachment to Ātman to know and realize it. In that respect he also requires bhakti in his spiritual quest. For the Vedāntin, the ever-existent duality exists within himself, in the polarity of his higher and his lower self. That in itself opens up the possibilities of love and devotion. The devotee does not love himself, but loves the Self most high. Only the love and yearning for It can result in knowing and realizing It. To live in It, is to continue to love it. Here too, bhakti is an act of love and surrender, although the object of bhakti is not a personal deity. The beginning of it is an act of faith, and the culmination of

it, a participation in the Divine. It is the loving devotion to God, the ONE Ultimate Reality, as Brahman, which makes both the quest and the end possible. This bhakti does not require a personal God. The relationship of "I" and "THOU" between the devotee and God, as axiologically separate and different from each other, is no longer necessary. Both "I" and "THOU" exist and function within the devotee in the act of devotion. This pattern of Hindu devotionism can be defined as nirguṇa bhakti, and is fully compatible with the ideology of the Advaita Vedānta.

In Hinduism, the genesis of nirguṇa bhakti can be traced as far back as the conception of the nirguṇa character of God. To the degree that the latter is accepted by the varying groups included in the theistic unity of Hinduism, nirguṇa bhakti is possible within their sectarian limits as well. Its spirit is evident in the upāsana of the Upanishads. The Ātman, though seen as impersonal, is described as the "Dear One" in the Bṛihadāraṇyaka-Upanishad,<sup>1</sup> and is glorified in lyrical rapture in some other Upanishads also. This Ātman cannot be known through learning, nor through the knowledge of Vedas, but it reveals itself to "whomever it chooses".<sup>2</sup>

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1. Bṛihadāraṇyaka Upanishad, IV.4.22.

2. Kāthopanishad 1.2.23, also Muṇḍakopanishad III.2.3.

Bhakti in relation to God, when conceived of as an Impersonal principle, must be understood in its etymological meaning of "participation". The nirguṇa bhakti, in other words, can be accepted as a fervent devotion for the soul's participation in the Divine. This bhakti is of a different order from the simple worship of the person of Viṣṇu, or his avatāras Rāma and Kṛishṇa, for it has no need of a personal image of God. However, it may be entertained and practised by a Vaiṣṇava, a Rāma or <sup>u</sup> Kṛishṇa bhakta in so far as he conceives Viṣṇu, Rāma and Kṛishṇa as not different from the Nirguṇa Brahman or Ātman. It must be mentioned here that the identification of Viṣṇu, Rāma and Kṛishṇa with the Nirguṇa Brahman is a common characteristic of the Vaiṣṇava scriptural texts.<sup>1</sup> Such a process of identification in itself opens up the possibilities of the transformation of the worship of the personal deity into the bhakti for the Nirguṇa.

Thus saguṇa bhakti, such as Viṣṇu worship, has always recognized and made place for nirguṇa bhakti. For example, Vallabhāchārya, who out of all the medieval Vaiṣṇava āchāryas did the most to establish on a scholastic level, the superiority of Kṛishṇa-bhakti of a personalistic form, recognized

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1. Mahābhārata, Bhāgavata Purāṇa, and the Viṣṇu-Purāṇa testify this.



the distinctive and fundamental nature of nirguṇa bhakti when he called his path of personalistic devotion to Kṛishṇa as Puṣṭi-Bhakti and the one for the Brahman as Maryādā-Bhakti and accepted the validity of both.<sup>1</sup> But nirguṇa bhakti on the other hand does not accept the intrinsic validity of the saguṇa bhakti in a similar manner. Nirguṇa bhakti as parā-bhakti or the highest form of devotion may tolerate and absorb within itself every other form of devotion but it need not necessarily uphold and recognize the worship of personal deities such as Rāma and Kṛishṇa. On the contrary, it may even deny the latter in the course of asserting itself. This aspect of nirguṇa bhakti stands out very prominently in the medieval nirguṇa bhaktas like Kabīr who caused a mass-movement in favour of <sup>n</sup>nirguṇa bhakti and who represent its most popular and widespread manifestation. They neither recognize nor tolerate the worship of personal deities and demand an uncompromising adherence to bhakti for the Nirguṇa.<sup>2</sup>

As shown above, nirguṇa bhakti has a character of its own and it has certain aspects which openly clash with our standardized ideas about bhakti. But as it does not completely conform to the current accepted definitions of bhakti, the recognition of nirguṇa bhakti on its own terms has been

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1. Vide infra, pp 207 ff

2. Vide infra, pp 224 ff, 241 ff.

largely evaded. For this reason eminent scholars like Bhandarkar and Radhakrishnan are unable to identify it with bhakti in spite of their recognition of the theistic and devotional aspects of the Upanishads. Bhandarkar, though he points out the "germs of bhakti" in the upāsanā of the Upanishads, is reticent about calling it bhakti. Tracing the indigenous character of bhakti he quotes from the Bṛihadāraṇyaka Upanishad but describes the relevant passage only as the nearest approach to bhakti with the substitution of Impersonal Ātman for a Personal God.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, Radhakrishnan, taking note of the devotional fervour of the same Upanishad, feels the need for explaining it as "spiritualised bhakti"<sup>2</sup> and is unable to give it the status of bhakti. These evaluations by Bhandarkar and Radhakrishnan are obviously the result of the application of the modern standardized definition of bhakti, which as suggested earlier is artificial and not free from errors. Bhakti for that reason can not assume a consistent form for Bhandarkar without a Personal God, and Radhakrishnan cannot help noticing a marked difference between bhakti and bhakti spiritualised .

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1. R.G. Bhandarkar, ibid., p.28.

2. S. Radhakrishnan, Indian Philosophy, Vol.I, p.233.

vi. Bhakti Theories and the Bhakti Movement

Both the current academic definition of bhakti and the consequent inhibition to recognize nirguṇa bhakti on its own terms, place a serious limitation on the understanding of the medieval religious currents which are collectively known as the Bhakti Movement. The fixed monolithic view of medieval bhakti, current in the academic circles today, is obviously the result of regrading bhakti as a special religion, its initial identification with Vaiṣṇavism, and of the unqualified acceptance of a personal conception of God as its necessary condition.

But the medieval Bhakti Movement however, has two distinct facets to it, one laying emphasis on the worship of personal deities Rāma and Kṛishṇa, and the other which regards Nirguṇa Brahman alone as the sole object of devotion. Whereas one represents the medieval neo-Vaiṣṇava movement which can be connected with Viṣṇu bhakti, the other is an expression of an equally powerful movement to popularise the teachings of classical Vedānta, the belief in an impersonal God, and the path of nirguṇa-bhakti. Bhakti of Tulsīdās, Sūrdās and Mīrā is a constituent of the former, that of Kabīr, Nānak and Dādū of the latter. The two groups stand for different ideologies and convictions, although spiritualism and devotion is common to both. As the leading figures of the Bhakti Movement they

can be treated as a single group in spite of their differences only if the word bhakti is understood in its general meaning of religious devotion. But if bhakti is regarded as a doctrine in its present academic meaning then they must be recognized as two separate groups and their ideological difference must be marked out more clearly.

The teachings of nirguṇa bhaktas like Kabīr and Nānak cannot be connected with the Vaishṇava traditions and Viṣṇu-bhakti. They believed not in a personal but an impersonal God. Not a dualistic but a non-dualistic view of Reality characterises their religious thinking. Their bhakti is not opposed to, but is in complete harmony with the spirit of Advaita/Vedānta. All this stands out in clear contrast with the present academic definition of bhakti. The devotionism of Kabīr and other medieval saints of the nirguṇa school can be understood only if nirguṇa bhakti is understood within its own framework and not in accordance with the current technical definition of bhakti.

The popular manifestation of nirguṇa bhakti in Kabīr is not only incompatible with the accepted definition of bhakti but it also disproves some of the current ideas about the position of the Advaita/Vedānta in Hinduism. The authors of the bhakti theories had set aside monistic Vedānta as a mere philosophy and a system of ideas confined only to Brahmins

and incapable of satisfying the religious needs of the common man.<sup>1</sup> But a movement for the popularisation of the essential principles of the Advaita Vedānta amongst the common people constitute a vital part of the Bhakti Movement. Kabīr, and unlettered and low caste man, advocated a religion, the spirit of which cannot be understood in isolation from that of the Vedānta. Kabīr's religious faith is deeply rooted in the monistic philosophical tradition of Hinduism. His impersonal concept of the Deity, his non-dualistic view of Reality and his emphasis on reasoning and self-knowledge confirm this.

Although conceptually we do not find anything new in Kabīr's monism his own treatment of it and his contribution towards making it a living part of people's religion on a wide scale cannot be minimized. What had been systematised and elaborated through erudition and argumentation by the Brahman Śaṅkarāchārya was now being said in a simple and direct manner by Kabīr in the language of faith and personal conviction. If Śaṅkara's main objective was to establish the doctrinal infallibility of the Advaita

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1. It may be pointed out here that the Indologists like Max Müller, who recognized Vedānta as a system "chiefly concerned with the soul and its relation to God" and who accepted it both as a philosophy and a religion, did not concern themselves at all with the bhakti theories. On the other hand, A. Weber, Monier Williams and G.A. Grierson whose writings can account for the current theories about bhakti could never view Vedānta as a religion. On the contrary, they always represented it as a philosophy which could not meet the real demands of religion. For Max Müller's opinion on Vedānta see, Three Lectures on the Vedānta Philosophy delivered at the Royal Institution, London 1894, pp. 2, 8, 11-13, 29.

Vedānta, Kabīr's mission was to make its essentials a matter of common belief. His plain logic and commonsense and his direct and sincere appeal to human reason must have done more to make them popular amongst the masses than the learned commentaries on the Advaita-Vedānta.

Judged as a bhakta, certain fundamental aspects of Kabīr's thought and personality are very often evaded and under-estimated on account of the general acceptance of bhakti as an antithesis of Advaita-Vedānta. However, whereas the historians continue to treat the Bhakti Movement as a unity irrespective of the variations existing within it, a tradition has taken roots in the historical studies of Hindu literature to take into account the distinctive features of the Nirguṇa and Saguṇa schools of bhakti.<sup>1</sup> Hindi

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1. The first history of Hindi literature was attempted by George A. Grierson in 1889. He classified the bhakti-poets in two groups, the Rāma-bhaktas and the Kṛishṇa-bhaktas. This classification provided the framework for the subsequent works on the subject till 1929, when a more detailed study was made by Rāmachandra Sukla. The latter pointed out the existence of two different currents of bhakti - saguṇa, consisting of Rāma and Kṛishṇa bhakti, and the Nirguṇa, running in two different channels, one dependent on jñāna as in Kabīr, and the other dependent on prema as in Jāyāsī and other Sūfī-poets of Hindi. This division is now universally observed in Hindi scholarship, but the same definition of bhakti is invariably applied to both the nirguṇa and the saguṇa bhaktas.

G.A. Grierson, Hindī Sāhitya Kā Prathama Itihāsa, the Modern Vernacular Literature of Hindustan, translated into Hindi by Kishorilal Gupta, Hindi Prachāraka Pustakālaya Benaras, 1957.

Rāmachandra Sukla, Hindī Sāhitya kā Itihāsa, Kāśī Nāgarī Prachārāṇī Śabhā, 10th ed., 1955.

scholars naturally are more inclined to take cognisance of the exact nature of Kabīr's thought because of their closer understanding of his verses, which are composed in Hindi. Nevertheless, they too have not been able to free themselves of the pre-conceived notions about bhakti, and much uncertainty still exists in Hindi scholarship over certain fundamental questions connected with Kabīr's ideology. Even when the ideological difference between Kabīr and Tulsīdās is clearly seen, when it comes to the question of bhakti, its nature and antecedents the established definition of bhakti is always adhered to and attempts are made to correlate the two personalities in the light of it.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, though the evidence of the concept of Advaita Vedānta in Kabīr is sometimes duly recognized by Hindi scholars, in order to make his devotion consonant with the technical definition of bhakti, they try to harmonize their understanding of bhakti and their discovery of the nirguṇa quality in Kabīr. Such attempts have led to serious inconsistencies and misjudgements.

As suggested earlier, the medieval religious currents which are collectively known as the Bhakti Movement cannot be assessed properly without settling the present anomalies in

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1. For example, see Munshi Ram Sharma, ibid., p.410.

our understanding of bhakti. A correct assessment of the thought and personality of Kabīr, and of the antecedents of his nirguṇa school is also not possible without this. An attempt is made in the subsequent pages to remove some of these anomalies and to prepare the ground for a more consistent and unbiased approach to the study of Kabīr and the other nirguṇa bhaktas of medieval India.



## CHAPTER II

### BHAKTI IN THE CLASSICAL TEXTS

Certain classical texts are always cited in support of the current definition of bhakti. They are the Bhagavad-Gītā, the Bhāgavata Purāṇa and the Bhakti-Sūtras of Nārada and Śāṇḍilya. But a closer examination of the expositions of bhakti in these texts does not bear out the existing ideas about bhakti and the theories connected with them. None of these works provides us with any exclusive, uniform or standardised definition of bhakti to confirm them.

Neither a fixed belief in a personal God, nor a rejection of a monistic view of Reality appear as the necessary pre-requisites of bhakti in these texts. They do not describe bhakti as opposed to jñāna, but recognize and point out the interconnection of the two. Bhakti is not represented in them as something incompatible with a monistic and nirguṇa ideology. On the contrary, bhakti for the Nirguṇa is sometimes clearly described as a higher form of devotion and is upheld with the help of the monistic principle of Vedānta. Both the saguṇa and the nirguṇa forms of bhakti can be found in the Bhagavad-Gītā, the Bhāgavata Purāṇa and the Bhakti-Sūtras. They make it clear that bhakti can manifest itself in different forms. Not a simple faith directed towards a personal God, but an active spiritual endeavour on the part of the individual is

very often described as a necessary constituent of bhakti.

The following textual study of the Bhagavad-Gītā the Bhāgavata Purāṇa and the Bhakti-Sūtras of Nārada and Sāṅḍilya, explain this at greater length.

#### i. The Bhagavad-Gītā

To establish the antiquity of bhakti in the light of its current definition, the Bhagavad-Gītā is always cited as its earliest literary exposition. Therefore, whenever the Gītā is mentioned in connection with bhakti, it is invariably treated as a purely Vaishṇava text, and a strictly personal theism is attributed to it.<sup>1</sup> It is regarded as "an expression of the earliest attempt made in India to rise to a theistic faith and theology"<sup>2</sup> and its monotheism is explained as a stage different from the pantheism of the Upanishads. It is also represented as a vindication of a popular religion independent of the Vedic tradition.<sup>3</sup>

In Gītā's exaltation of Kṛishṇa is seen the emergence of a personal image of God. It is considered unique for its

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1. R. Garbe, "Bhagavad-Gītā" ERE, Vol.II, ed. 1909, pp.535-538. See also S.N. Dasgupta, A History of Indian Philosophy, Vol.II, Cambridge 1932, p.532.
  2. J.N. Farquhar, An Outline of the Religious Literature of India, Humphrey Milford, 1920, p.86.
  3. G.A. Grierson, Bhakti Marga, ibid., pp.539-551.

notion of bhakti which is regarded as "almost a new note in Hindu religious speculation",<sup>1</sup> and it is suggested that the inspiration of Gītā's bhakti came not from the Upanishads but from certain popular forms of religion. It is also argued that the schemes of salvation suggested in the Upanishadic speculation were reinterpreted in the Gītā in terms of its personal theism, and that it recommended the path of bhakti as a counterpoise to the path of knowledge.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, the personal theism of the Gītā is taken as a result of the transformation of the Absolute of the Upanishads into a personal God through the identification of the God of the Vaishnavas with the Brahman of the Upanishads.

These interpretations of the Bhagavad-Gītā are the obvious result of the application of the artificial theories about bhakti, and the use of the western conceptual categories of theism and pantheism in the study of Hinduism.<sup>3</sup> But if we free ourselves of the current approach and judge the Bhagavad-Gītā from a strictly Hindu standpoint and evaluate its ideology in the light of its text alone, the assessment of its position in the Hindu thought and of its theism and

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1. F. Edgerton, The Bhagavad-Gītā, Translated and Interpreted Harvard Oriental Series, Cambridge, Mass. 1946, p.71.

2. J.N. Farquhar, ibid., pp.87-88.

3. The general errors inherent in this approach have already been pointed out in Chapter I. Vide supra, p. 22 ff.

bhakti are bound to be different.

The Gītā is recognized by the Hindus as one of the prasthāntrayī, the three authoritative textual sources of all religio-philosophical opinions. The other two placed in the same category are the Upanishads and the Brahma-Sūtras. But for the modern opinions, Gītā's philosophy was never placed at variance with that of the Upanishads by the Hindu theologians. On the contrary, they usually refer to the Gītā as the repository of the very essence of the Upanishads.<sup>1</sup> Similarly the theism of the Gītā is not viewed as different from that of the Upanishads and the Vedānta. That the Gītā conveys the knowledge of the Brahman, was always recognized by the general Hindu opinion, and no new concept of a personal God, separate, opposed, and different from the Brahman, was ever attributed to it.

But due to the fixity of the modern academic opinion about bhakti and its relation with the Bhagavad-Gītā, the total viewpoint and the composite nature of Gītā's philosophy is easily ignored. Whatever influence of the Upanishads that is found in it, is explained away as the result of the imposition of the Brahmanic thought on the Bhāgavata religion.<sup>2</sup> Gītā is consistently treated as a Vaishṇava

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1. See for example the colophon of the Bhagavad-Gītā.

2. F. Edgerton, ibid., p.32.

scriptural text which could draw freely from other philosophies because the latter had not assumed their systematic forms at the time of its composition.<sup>1</sup> This is done in spite of the recognition of the influence of the prevailing philosophic currents in Sāṅkhya, Yoga, and Vedānta on the Bhagavad-Gītā. The inability to break away from the fixed approach has sometimes led to apparent contradictions in scholarly opinions about the nature of Gītā's bhakti and theism.

For example, writing about the bhakti of the Gītā, Radhakrishnan suggests that devotion to the "Supreme is possible only with a personal God, a concrete individual full of bliss and beauty". "Personality implies a capacity for fellowship", and there is always the personal need for a personal helper, for "we can not love a shadow of our minds". In the course of the same discussion however, Radhakrishnan states at another place that the Gītā "recognises nirguṇa bhakti, or devotion to the qualityless, as superior to all else", and acknowledges that the absolute monism is the completion of the dualism with which the devotional consciousness starts.<sup>2</sup>

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1. Ibid., p.6.

2. S. Radhakrishnan, ibid., Vol.I, see pp.559 and 565.

A similar contradiction is noticeable in Carpenter's observations on the Gītā. He makes it clear that behind the "worshipper's adoring love, evoked by the sense of the divine beneficence of the cosmic scale as well as God's personal dealing with the individual soul", there lie only two fundamental conceptions in the Bhagavad-Gītā - the spirit in man and the spirit in the universe. The highest reality of the universe is the spirit and it is called by different names. The highest reality in man is also spirit and has kinship with the supreme spirit.<sup>1</sup> It must be mentioned here that Carpenter, in spite of making this assessment of the theism of the Bhagavad-Gītā, is unable to break away from the fixed theories about bhakti and accepts them with all their implications.<sup>2</sup>

However the following analysis shows that the bhakti of the Bhagavad-Gītā does not fit in with the current definitions of it and needs understanding in a different perspective. The word bhakti is not used in the Gītā as an equivalent of a simple loving faith. On the contrary, it is

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1. J.E. Carpenter, Theism in Medieval India, London 1921, p.253.

2. Ibid. See for Bhakti as a mārga p.244: Rāmānuja as a systematizer of bhakti p.245; bhakti and the Nārāyaṇa section of the Mahābhārata p.265; Nārada's and Sāṅdilya's bhakti p.419.

clearly distinguishable from it. No fixed and invariable concept of bhakti is offered by the Gītā. It is graded and the possibilities of its variations are also indicated. The Gītā does not install bhakti as a counterpoise to jñāna, but maintains perfect compatibility between the two. They are represented as interdependent on each other. Finally, bhakti in the Gītā does not suggest any essential and ever existent dualism between the devotee and God, nor does it necessitate the idea of a personal God.

(a) The Distinction between Bhakti and Śraddhā

In the Bhagavad-Gītā bhakti is clearly distinguished from mere faith or śraddhā. The latter manifests itself in numerous forms of religious worship, caused by the difference of guṇas inherent in men. The sāttvikas worship the devas, rājasikas the yakshas, and tāmasikas the pretas and the bhūtas.<sup>1</sup> The śraddhā of each is according to his natural disposition.<sup>2</sup> But whether Sāttvika, rājasika or tāmasika in nature, śraddhā is efficacious in every form in winning God's grace.<sup>3</sup> It is necessary for every act of worship. That which is practised without it is asat and is invalid. Thus the

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1. The Bhagavad Gītā, XVII.4.

2. Ibid., XVII.3; VII.20.

3. Ibid., VII.21,22.

element of faith or śraddhā is recognized in every form irrespective of the higher or lower categories of the objects of worship.

Bhakti-Yoga, however, is coupled only with <sup>parā-</sup>śraddhā or supreme faith. "Those who fixing their mind on me worship me eversteadfast, endowed with supreme śraddhā, they are the best versed in yoga" says Kṛiṣṇa in the discourse on bhakti-yoga.<sup>1</sup> This parā-śraddhā which is considered necessary for bhakti-yoga, is described as something beyond the three categories of guṇas.

Although the Bhagavad-Gītā carries a note of condescending recognition of all forms of worship if they are caused and accompanied by faith,<sup>2</sup> the true bhaktas seem to stand apart from the worshippers who are led by mere faith. The bhaktas are described as virtuous,<sup>3</sup> and noble,<sup>4</sup> and as those who cross over the divine illusion caused by the guṇas.<sup>5</sup> They are different from the others, who are deprived of discrimination and therefore follow different rites and devote themselves

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1. Ibid., XII.2.

2. Ibid., VII.21,22.

3. Ibid., VII.16.

4. Ibid., VII.18.

5. Ibid., VII.14.



to different gods, bound by their own nature.<sup>1</sup> According to the Gītā the latter are "men of little understanding".<sup>2</sup>

Thus although the Gītā recognizes the value of faith or śraddhā in all its manifestations, its bhakti-yoga is possible only through parā-śraddhā, which is free of the three guṇas and is therefore nirguṇa in character. It indicates a greater degree of spiritual involvement than the other three categories of śraddhā. Although every form of worship and every expression of faith and love for God is recognized in the Bhagavad-Gītā, bhakti is represented more in the nature of an active and passionate search of the self for the Divine. It means much more than just an attitude of faith, or acts of worship, or a code of conduct to be fulfilled, "as heard from the others".<sup>3</sup>

#### (b) Gradations of Bhakti

Different types of bhakti and its gradations are also indicated in the Bhagavad-Gītā. "Four kinds of virtuous men worship me" says Kṛishṇa and the four are described by him as the distressed (ārta) the one who seeks some gain (arthārthī), the one who seeks knowledge (jijñāsu), and the one who

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1. Ibid., VII.20.

2. Ibid., VII.23.

3. Ibid., XIII.25.

is wise (jñānī).<sup>1</sup> The jñānī bhakta is described by Kṛishṇa as the highest amongst the bhaktas and as the one dearest to him.<sup>2</sup>

This distinction of four types of bhaktas is not based on any difference of guṇas as is done in the case of śraddhā. Nor is it attributed to the difference in the nature of the object of bhakti, for it is clearly recognized that all four of them worship the same deity Kṛishṇa. It is not made on grounds of greater or lesser degree of moral character either, for all the four are regarded as virtuous and noble. The distinction seems to emerge therefore from the fact of their different attitudes. It lies in their motivation and the nature of their emotional involvement with God. The distressed seeks solace, the seeker of knowledge wants to know, and the man desirous of gain wants the fulfilment of his desires. The jñānī alone represents a state of attainment. The jñānī bhakta of the Gītā is the one who knows and has attained the state of self-realization.

The bhakti of the jñānī which is regarded as the highest form of devotion in the Bhagavad-Gītā is different from the bhakti of the other three types of bhaktas. It does not merely seek comfort from God, nor the fulfilment of any desires. Nor is it aimed at gaining formal and intellectual

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1. Ibid., VII.16.

2. Ibid., VII.17.

knowledge about Him. It is the bhakti by which, with the mind ever steadfast, the bhakta is established in Him alone and through which the distinction between the Deity and the devotee disappears. It is this element of his bhakti which makes the jñānī different from the other three types of bhaktas. Kṛishṇa says "noble indeed are they all, but the wise one I regard as my very self".<sup>1</sup>

Again in his discourse on the bhakti-yoga, Kṛishṇa points out the superiority of the contemplative bhakti which has its base in jñāna and yoga. The fixing of one's mind and intellect in God, and the effort to move towards Him are considered higher than the effortless act of surrender and complete dependence. The worshipful attitude devoid of jñāna and yoga is recommended only for those who are weak and do not aspire <sup>to</sup> for the highest goal.

Various options are offered for the cultivation of the bhakti-yoga in a qualitative gradation. "Fix thy mind in Me only, place thy intellect in Me"<sup>2</sup> says Kṛishṇa and adds "if thou art unable to fix thy mind steadily on Me, then try to reach me through abhyāsa-yoga,<sup>3</sup> if thou are unable to

1. Ibid., VII.18.

2. Ibid., XII.8.

3. Ibid., XII.9.

practice abhyāsa-yoga, perform actions for my sake,<sup>1</sup> if unable to do even this, then take refuge in Me."<sup>2</sup> Here the contemplative bhakti is regarded as the highest and the one obtained through abhyāsa yoga as the next in order of merit. Bhakti in the sense of surrender is clearly graded as the lowest.

(c) The Trilogy of Bhakti, Jñāna and Yoga

In the Bhagavad-Gītā, bhakti does not stand apart from jñāna and yoga. On the contrary, the three are fully interwoven into each other. In the discourse on the bhakti-yoga, bhakti is clearly connected with jñāna and yoga and both the bhakta and the jñāni are described in similar terms.<sup>3</sup> The virtues attributed to the bhakta are the same as those attributed to the yogī and the true yogī is also considered a bhakta.<sup>4</sup> Personal excellence, contemplation and detachment are demanded of the true bhakta.<sup>5</sup> Mere obedience to a personal deity and a simple loving faith in him are obviously not considered sufficient.

1. Ibid., XII.10.

2. Ibid., XII.11.

3. Ibid., XII.13ff. What is said here of the bhakta is also said of the sthitaprajña, See II.55-58.

4. Ibid., VI.47.

5. Ibid., XII.13-20.

The tendency to regard bhakti and jñāna as essentially different from each other has influenced the interpretations of the bhakti of the Bhagavad-Gītā in relation to jñāna. Edgerton tries to prove that the path recommended by the Gītā is that of bhakti as against the difficult path of knowledge. According to him the Gītā was trying to displace jñāna through bhakti.<sup>1</sup> Radhakrishnan and Dasgupta hold similar points of view as far as the bhakti aspect to the Bhagavad-Gītā is concerned.<sup>2</sup> But these interpretations do not seem satisfactory. The passages quoted by Edgerton in support of his view are taken not only in isolation from the total philosophy of the Gītā, but are sometimes cited without due regard to their immediate context. Radhakrishnan quotes the Sāṅdilya-Sūtra to bring out the distinction between knowledge and bhakti of the Gītā without making any direct reference to the Bhagavad-Gītā itself.<sup>3</sup>

The bhakti of the Gītā does not exclude jñāna. On the contrary, jñāna constitutes a necessary part of bhakti

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1. F. Edgerton, ibid., pp.71,72.

2. S. Radhakrishnan, ibid., Vol.I, pp.558-565.  
S.N. Dasgupta, A History of Indian Philosophy, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1932, Vol.II, p.532.

3. S. Radhakrishnan, ibid., Vol.I, p.558.

and the conscious intellect has a full share in it. The Gītā does not lay down a path of bhakti which would exclude the knowledge of the Upanishads and the Vedānta, but lends its full support to them. Knowledge is described as the purifier by the Bhagavad-Gītā.<sup>1</sup> When ignorance is destroyed by the knowledge of the self, the new knowledge, like the sun reveals the supreme.<sup>2</sup> In the discourse on the Kshetra and the Kshetrajñā Kṛishṇa describes the knowledge of the two as the highest knowledge.<sup>3</sup> It is this knowledge, he explains, which is sung by the Rishis in the various metres and the passages of the Brahma-Sūtra.<sup>4</sup> "By knowing the Kshetra, jñāna and the jñeyam" says Kṛishṇa "the devotee is fitted for my state."<sup>5</sup>

The Gītā views knowledge in a twofold way. A clear distinction is made between jñāna and vi-jñāna in the Bhagavad-Gītā. Jñāna is better than mere abhyāsa and there is also the jñāna coupled with dhyāna which is rated higher than the jñāna itself. Whereas the knowledge of a philosophical system like Sāṅkhya is also sometimes referred to as a means of

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1. Bh.G., V.17.

2. Ibid., V.16.

3. Ibid., XIII. 12, 17.

4. Ibid., XIII.4.

5. Ibid., XIII.18.

spiritual knowledge,<sup>1</sup> viññāna is always mentioned in the sense of self realisation.<sup>2</sup> Jñāna and viññāna in the particular sense of the knowledge attained through self realisation, constitute an essential part of bhakti in the Gītā.

(d) The Gītā and the Personal Concept of God

During the process of the formulation of the current theories about bhakti, the Bhagavad-Gītā was specially picked out by the western scholars to illustrate that bhakti is possible only for a personal God. They considered it as an exception in the Hindu context on account of the supremacy of the personality of Kṛishṇa in it. They saw in Gītā's identification of Kṛishṇa Vāsudeva with the Upanishad's Brahman the emergence of a personal God and the makings of the theistic cult of bhakti. In the light of these ideas the presence of the impersonal view of God found in the Gītā was interpreted as a mark of Brahminical imposition. Similarly, accepting only a dualistic view of Reality as the true basis of theism and bhakti, the presence of the monistic elements in the Gītā was explained away through the same theory of imposition.

These views about the nature of Gītā's theism and of its concept of God have been consistently upheld in the

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1. Ibid., XIII.24.

2. Ibid., VII.2.

academic circles since then, particularly in all discussions related with bhakti. Bhandarkar explained that the Gītā adheres to the philosophical elements of the Upanishads but they are personalised in it.<sup>1</sup> According to Dasgupta, God in the Upanishads had only majesty but not the personal form which He acquired in the Gītā.<sup>2</sup> Radhakrishnan also interprets the Purushottama of the Gītā in terms of a personal God and states that "for those who insist on devotion as the final nature of spiritual life, the end is not an immersion into the Eternal Impersonal but a union with the Puruṣottama".<sup>3</sup> Edgerton goes to the extent of stating that the impersonal Brahman is subordinated to the idea of a personal God in the Bhagavad-Gītā.<sup>4</sup>

But in spite of Kṛishṇa being the central figure in the Gītā its ultimate representation of God revolves round His impersonal and inmanifest nature. It is the unmanifest that must be worshipped, says Kṛishṇa. In the Bhagavad-Gītā, the description of the state finally attained through bhakti leaves very little room for the idea of a personal God and the dualistic relationship between the Deity and the devotee.

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1. R.G. Bhandarkar, ibid., p.27.

2. S.N. Dasgupta, ibid., p.534.

3. S. Radhakrishnan, ibid., Vol.I, p.565.

4. E. Edgerton, ibid., p.49.



According to the Bhagavad-Gītā the bhakta who takes refuge in God "attains Him",<sup>1</sup> "enters into Him",<sup>2</sup> "abides in Him",<sup>3</sup> and "lives in Him".<sup>4</sup> Kṛishṇa says in the Gītā, "The bhaktas are in Me and I am in them",<sup>5</sup> "they enter into Me",<sup>6</sup> "those who worship me are fitted for becoming Brahman",<sup>7</sup> and "the highest yogī sees all in me and me in all."<sup>8</sup>

These aspects of the Bhagavad-Gītā are completely ignored whenever it is assessed to elaborate the bhakti theories. The Gītā is then interpreted mainly from the standpoint of a personal conception of God and a dualistic view of Reality. For reasons shown above, such assessments are not free from serious contradictions.

To take the examples of Radhakrishnan and Edgerton, Radhakrishnan admits that absolute monism is "the completion of the dualism with which the devotional consciousness starts".<sup>9</sup> Similarly, Edgerton also has to point out that

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1. Bh.G., IV.10.

2. Ibid., XI.55.

3. Ibid., VII.23.

4. Ibid., XII.8.

5. Ibid., IX.29.

6. Ibid., XVIII.55.

7. Ibid., XIV.26.

8. Ibid., VI.29.

9. S. Radhakrishnan, ibid., Vol.I, p.565.

"through its God, Gītā seems after all to arrive at an ultimate monism".<sup>1</sup>

The narrative form of the Bhagavad-Gītā and the position of Kṛishṇa in it are the real cause of all the theories which explain it as the authoritative exposition of a religion characterised by a personal conception of God. In the Bhagavad-Gītā Kṛishṇa speaks not only as God but he directly addresses Arjuna who, in doubt and despair, seeks guidance and solace from him. The human situation represented in Arjuna, and the appearance of Kṛishṇa as God provides a very personal image of the deity which is further strengthened when Kṛishṇa speaks as the God who appears on earth for the protection of the good and the destruction of the wicked.<sup>2</sup> The personal image of the Deity becomes more vivid when Kṛishṇa enjoins upon Arjuna to remember him and to follow him and ensures salvation and his protection to those who worship him.<sup>3</sup> As a result of a concentration on those aspects of the narrative, with Kṛishṇa addressing Arjuna in the first person, the final definition of God offered by the Bhagavad-Gītā is ignored and overshadowed.

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1. F. Edgerton, ibid., pp.44-45.

2. Bh.G., IV.6,8.

3. Ibid., IX, 26ff.

The colophon of the Gītā however, describes the text as "the essence of the Upanishads, the knowledge of the Brahman, the Scripture of yoga," and also as "the dialogue between Śrī Kṛishṇa and Arjuna". Both these aspects of the text deserve equal attention. The inclusion of the personality of Kṛishṇa in the Bhagavad-Gītā and the dialogue form of the narrative, should not be allowed to overshadow its view of God.✓

Although the utterances of Kṛishṇa carry a strong personal note, Kṛishṇa himself states at one place "the foolish regards Me, the unmanifest as come into manifestation - not knowing my supreme state."<sup>1</sup> "This deluded world knows Me not, the unborn, the immutable".<sup>2</sup> Kṛishṇa describes the worshippers who try to reach him through wrong methods as those who do not know his real nature. As shown below, in the final analysis, it is not Kṛishṇa, the manifest, but it is unmanifest, which is regarded as the Ultimate Reality. This constitutes the final view of God in the Bhagavad-Gītā, when the personality of Kṛishṇa is totally merged in the unmanifest form.

It is the unmanifest and universal form which is made manifest to Arjuna by Kṛishṇa through his divine yoga,<sup>3</sup> over-

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1. Ibid., VII.24. See also IX.11.

2. Ibid., VII.25.

3. Ibid., XI.47.

awed by which Arjuna asks him to come back to his manifest form. The manifest form which Arjuna asks Kṛishṇa to resume fits in with the image of Viṣṇu also. "Diademed, bearing a mace and a discus, Thee I desire to see as before" says Arjuna "assume that same four armed form, O Thou, the universal form."<sup>1</sup> Thus both Kṛishṇa and Viṣṇu are represented as manifest here, different from the unmanifest, the Īśvara-Rūpa, the Viśva-Rūpa, the ancient Puruṣa. According to Kṛishṇa, it is this unmanifest form which can neither be known through the Vedas nor by austerity, and which is unattainable through sacrifices and gifts,<sup>2</sup> for it can be known by bhakti alone, and by knowing it the bhakta enters into Him.<sup>3</sup>

Thus it is not the Absolute or the Brahman which is being personalised in the Bhagavad-Gītā, but it is the deified personality of Kṛishṇa which is being raised to the status of the Brahman. Kṛishṇa, the manifest clearly describes his highest state as the unmanifest (Avyakta). Therefore the monotheism of the Bhagavad-Gītā does not arise out of the final installation of the personality of Kṛishṇa as the supreme deity or fully evolved idea of a personal God but is the result of the identification of the deified hero of

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1. Ibid., XI.45,46.

2. Ibid., XI.48,53.

3. Ibid., XI.54.

Kṛishṇa with the Absolute and the impersonal Ātman of the Upanishads. It must be remembered that the Mahābhārata in its present form contains enough evidence to show that Kṛishṇa was either absent or was regarded only as a human hero in the original version of that work and that he was deified at a much later stage.<sup>1</sup> In some parts Kṛishṇa is represented as an ordinary mortal and to a certain extent the evolution of the Kṛishṇa cult itself can be traced through the various stages of the development of the Epic. It is therefore maintained by many scholars that Kṛishṇa-worship had either not originated at the time of the composition of the Mahābhārata, or was still in its infancy. In view of this, to interpret the God of the Gītā not in the light of its total thought content but only from the point of the personality of Kṛishṇa is hardly justifiable.

## II. The Bhāgavata Purāṇa

If the Bhagavad-Gītā is regarded as the earliest expression of bhakti, the Bhāgavat Purāṇa is recognized as its more articulate and exuberant expression. Because of its definite Vaishṇava bias, its extreme emotionalism and its decided concentration on the life and personality of Kṛishṇa, the Bhāgavata Purāṇa could fit in more easily with the modern

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1. J.N. Farquhar, ibid., pp.49,78,83,87,89,100.

definitions of bhakti which have identified bhakti so completely with Vaishṇaism and Kṛishṇa-worship.

The preoccupation of the Bhāgavata Purāṇa with the personality of Kṛishṇa is more than clear. The purpose of Vyāsa in undertaking to write this Purāṇa is explained at the very beginning. It is stated that when Vyāsa, after having written the Mahābhārata was still not satisfied, Nārada gave him the suggestion to write something exclusively about the glories of Vāsudeva.<sup>1</sup> The Bhāgavata Purāṇa dwells a great deal on the life and personality of Kṛishṇa and the whole of the tenth book of this Purāṇa is devoted to the Kṛishṇa theme. This aspect of the Bhāgavata Purāṇa provides an ample scope for a personal conception of the Deity.

Similarly, acts of worship which can fit in only with a personal image of God, are recommended and described at length in Bhāgavata Purāṇa. Most of the nine acts of worship which are named as the navadhā bhakti can be conceived only in relation to a personal deity and the Vaishṇava traditions of idol worship.<sup>2</sup> At the same time the loving devotion for Kṛishṇa is described in highly emotional terms in the Bhāgavata Purāṇa. In such contexts of personal devotion, bhakti is described as a surging emotion "which chokes the speech, makes the tears flow and the hair thrill with pleasure-

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1. Bhāgavata Purāṇa, I.5.1-14.

2. Ibid., VII.5.23.

able excitement".<sup>1</sup> This state, it is explained, is produced by gazing at the image of Kṛishṇa, singing his praises, keeping company with his devotees and hearing about his mighty deeds.

These features of the Bhāgavata Purāṇa make it a suitable text for illustrating the current theories about bhakti. It is therefore universally proclaimed as the most important text on bhakti and is often described as the "supreme scripture of devotion". Accepting it as a bhakti text Dr. Tara Chand states that the Bhāgavata Purāṇa marked the transition from the ancient religion of works to the medieval religion of bhakti.<sup>2</sup> Although Dr. Radhakrishnan acknowledges the fact that the paths of karma and jñāna find due recognition in the Bhāgavata Purāṇa he emphasizes the fact that its main stress is on bhakti.<sup>3</sup> These opinions are of course stated from the standpoint of the modern definition of bhakti. Thus a restricted and single doctrinal meaning is attributed to the bhakti of the Bhāgavata Purāṇa in spite of

1. Ibid., XI.14.23-26.

2. Tara Chand, Influence of Islam on Indian Culture, ibid., p.134.

3. S. Radhakrishnan, Foreword to Siddheśvar Bhaṭṭāchārya, The Philosophy of Śrīmad Bhāgavata, Viśva-Bhārati; Santia Niketan, 1960, pp.vii-viii.

the awareness of its many-sidedness.<sup>1</sup>

But in spite of its Vaishṇava bias and its emphasis on the personality of Kṛishṇa<sup>2</sup> both the saguṇa and the nirguṇa ideologies are expounded in the Bhāgavata Purāṇa through the personality of Kṛishṇa. The Ultimate Reality is very often explained in impersonal and abstract terms on the lines of Sāṅkhya and Vedānta.<sup>3</sup> Kṛishṇa is identified with the Purusha, Paramātmān, and Brahman.<sup>4</sup> He is described as haṁsa, suparṇa and avyakta,<sup>5</sup> and also as one who can be attained through jñāna and yoga.<sup>6</sup> Thus both the saguṇa and nirguṇa elements co-exist in the Bhāgavata Purāṇa, and throughout this popular religious text the saguṇa is interpreted as the nirguṇa, and the nirguṇa as the saguṇa.

Naturally therefore, bhakti is also described in both its saguṇa and nirguṇa forms in the Bhāgavata Purāṇa and no single, definite, and exclusive meaning or definition can be attributed to it. If it is steeped in deep emotional

1. J.N. Farquhar makes a note of the "many-sided devotion of the great Purāṇa", ibid., p.232.

2. Bhaṭṭācārya, ibid., see pp.54-128.

3. Bhāgavata Purāṇa III.32.33.ff.

4. Ibid., III.32.26.

5. Ibid., XI.5.23.

6. Ibid., III.32.30ff.



attachment to Kṛishṇa, it also includes jñāna and vairāgya in its contemplative form. If it is in keeping with the Vaishṇava traditions of the temple ceremonies and idol-worship, it is also adjusted to the philosophies of Vedānta, Sāṅkhya and yoga. If the bhakti of the Bhāgavata Purāṇa is meant for Kṛishṇa, it is also directed towards Brahman and the Atman.

The bhakti of the Bhāgavata Purāṇa thus stands in direct connection with the Purāṇa as well as the Vedānta traditions of the past. It has the support of the sectarian beliefs and practices of the Vaishṇava as well as of the metaphysical beliefs of the Upanishads. Judging from the point of the current theories of bhakti, it is a significant fact that the two traditions could be represented simultaneously in a Vaishṇava text such as the Bhāgavata Purāṇa, and that both the saguṇa and the nirguṇa forms of bhakti could find equal recognition in it. Bhakti is not only not confined to its saguṇa form as devotion to a personal deity in the Bhāgavata Purāṇa but is also not marked out as a path separate from that of jñāna. The most important fact is that the two traditions exist together in the Bhāgavata Purāṇa, and that both the nirguṇa and the saguṇa forms of bhakti are mentioned in it and no separate path of bhakti is chalked out as exclusive of jñāna and vairāgya.

(a) The Different Categories of Bhakti

Bhakti does not appear in any fixed form in the Bhāgavata Purāṇa, and its possible variations are sometimes made quite clear.

In answer to Devahūti's question about the distinctive features of the bhakti-yoga, Kapila explains that bhakti manifests itself in a number of ways and can be of different kinds. The difference in its expression is caused by the inherent difference in the natural tendencies and attributes of people. Kapila then goes on to enumerate three kinds of bhakti caused by the three guṇas. The bhakti caused by pride or ill will is called tāmasika, that caused by some desire or end in view as rājasika which manifests itself in the worship of idols, and that by which a man performs the prescribed rituals and dedicates the fruits thereof to the Lord as sāttvika. To these three, Kapila adds yet another category that of nirguṇa bhakti, which is described separately as distinct from the other three.<sup>1</sup>

Again, explaining the Sāṅkhya and the yoga philosophies as the supporting factors of the devotional tendencies of the mind, Kapila mentions two types of bhaktas. In one group he places those who, impelled by the natural tendencies of the

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1. Bhāgavata Purāṇa, III.29. 7-12.

mind, bear bhakti for Hari as an eman<sup>a</sup>ation of sattva. In the other are placed those who are engaged in serving the lord's feet, whose acts are directed and consecrated unto Him and who delightfully discuss His glorious powers and deeds.<sup>1</sup>

When the Bhāgavata Purāṇa dwells on nirguṇa-bhakti, it also upholds and elaborates the necessary precepts which alone can maintain it. Therefore whenever bhakti is mentioned in relation with self-realisation, the relevant underlying principles of Sāṅkhya, Vedānta, and Yoga are used to explain its nature.<sup>2</sup> The principle of the non-duality of soul is stressed, and the recognition of a separate and independent existence to the soul is regarded as an error and a delusion of the mind. The enquiry after the Self and the tattva is described as the real aim of life and the importance of religious rites and of the outer forms of worship is minimized. This is in clear contrast with the pattern of saguṇa-bhakti of the Bhāgavata Purāṇa which is directed to the personal deity Kṛishṇa and expresses itself in externalised acts of worship, listed under the requirements of nāvadhā-bhakti.<sup>3</sup>

Although the promise of salvation is held out for both groups, nevertheless, they do stand apart as different

1. Ibid., III.25. 32-37.

2. Ibid., III.32. 23-35.

in character. The common factor which entitles them both to salvation (mukti) is disinterested or selfless devotion. (ahaitukī bhakti), which can be a counterpart of nirguṇa as well as saguṇa bhakti irrespective of their mutual difference.

However, the distinction drawn between the two groups of bhaktas makes the difference between the nirguṇa and saguṇa bhakti very clear. The expression of the two is entirely different. One expresses itself in idol-worship, whereas the other represents a contemplative approach to God. For the saguṇa bhaktas, he is "dear as a son" and "a friend in confidence"; for the nirguṇa bhaktas, He is of the nature of sattva. Thus the yogī and the jñanī on the one hand and the man who worships Him in the idol, sings His praises and listens to His glorious deeds, on the other, are both recognized as bhaktas.<sup>1</sup>

#### (b) Nirguṇa-Bhakti in the Bhāgavata Purāṇa

The presence of saguṇa bhakti in the Bhāgavata Purāṇa is duly recognized. But the nirguṇa bhakti, standing in close relationship with the philosophies of Vedānta, Sāṅkhya and Yoga, is seldom suspected in the Bhāgavata Purāṇa, although bhakti for the nirguṇa is clearly represented in it as a distinct and separate category.

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1. Bhāgavata Purāṇa, III.25.30-44.

In the Bhāgavat Purāṇa, Sanat Kumāra talks of the bhakti unto one's soul and recommends unflinching devotion to the soul which is identical with the nirguṇa Brahman. He declares that when through devotion the soul unifies with the nirguṇa Brahman then the devotee by virtue of his knowledge of truth and through his dissociation from the worldly objects of attachment destroys the egoism of his mind and feels free from the desires that make the knowledge of the real difficult. Through devotion, the devotees disentangle themselves from the world. The knowledge of the self or tattva-jñāna then dawns upon them, and with the advent of this knowledge of the self, they are able to meet their real Self. The sense of otherness between God and His devotee disappears in such a meeting.<sup>1</sup>

(c) Bhakti in Relation to Jñāna, Karma and Vairāgya.

In the 20th adhyāya of the 11th skandha of the Bhāgavata Purāṇa, Karma is recommended for the anirvinṇa<sup>n</sup> or the attached, jñāna for the nirvinṇa or the detached, and bhakti for those who are neither excessively attached nor too detached from the fruits of action.<sup>2</sup> Here bhakti serves as a

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1. Ibid., IV.22.18-30.

2. Ibid., XI.20. 7ff.

balance between Karma and Jñāna. But later,<sup>1</sup> in the same text, bhakti and jñāna are mentioned together as means of salvation. Bhakti is described as the means through which one acquires Jñāna and Vairāgya, which become the objects to be attained through bhakti. It is pointed out however, that bhakti can exist without knowledge too. Bhakti generates vairāgya and one who has vairāgya cherishes bhakti towards Kṛishṇa. Thus bhakti is described as an end as well as a means. In one sense it indicates the mental attitude of the aspirant, in the other, it stands for an accomplished state of mind.

Bhakti here is not established as a separate category in relation to jñāna and Karma. As far as Karma is concerned, it is mentioned only in the beginning. It seems to fade away completely later on and the triology under discussion is then formed by bhakti jñāna and vairāgya, the three remaining inter-linked with each other. It is made clear that all three are important for beholding the Paramātmān. Aided by the knowledge of the self, dispassion and devotion, the jīva is able to perceive the supreme soul. Thus irrespective of whether it is described as a means or an end, bhakti in the Bhāgavata Purāṇa, does not stand exclusive of the other two, jñāna and Karma. Either it leads to them or is their result.

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1. Ibid., XI.20.29-37.

In the 32nd adhyāya of the 3rd skandha, describing the characteristics of bhakti to Devahūtī, Kapila explains that through jñāna, Yoga and vairāgya, the jīva attains the highest state. At the end of his exposition, he tells her "I have expounded unto you both the doctrine of Yoga and that of bhakti. By practising one or the other of these, a person attains divinity." The Yogīn, says Kapila, must fix his thought with unflinching devotion on Brahman.<sup>1</sup> Passages are also not rare in the Bhāgavata Purāṇa where bhakti is stated to lead to a complete identification of the jīva with the Brahman, and through which the bhakta attains the state of divinity.<sup>2</sup>

In the Bhāgavata Purāṇa, therefore, bhakti is not represented as a separate spiritual discipline exclusive of jñāna and vairāgya. Nor is it viewed as a kind of devotion possible only in relation to a personal conception of God. On the contrary, bhakti is supported by jñāna and vairāgya and has inherent possibilities in relation to the Nirguṇa Brahman as well. Knowledge of philosophy and the practice of yoga are considered a legitimate counterpart of bhakti in the Bhāgavata Purāṇa. Even when Devahūtī pleads she is a woman

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1. Ibid., III.32.31-35.

2. Ibid., IV. 22.26ff.

and of meagre powers of understanding, and asks Kapila to give an exposition of that kind of devotion which would lead more easily to salvation; Kapila explains that the "sequence of the categories of thought of Sāṅkhya philosophy as well as the process of yoga extends the devotional aspect of one's mind".<sup>1</sup>

Thus jñāna and bhakti go hand in hand in the Bhāgavata Purāṇa and its recommendation for bhakti is very often accompanied with a nirguṇa ideology also. It is urged that one should contemplate on the Ātman with bhakti and jñāna,<sup>2</sup> and bhakti is described at one place as a characteristic feature of the knowledge of the nirguṇa (nirguṇa-jñāna).<sup>3</sup>

### III. The Bhakti-Sūtras of Nārada and Śāṇḍilya

The Bhakti-Sūtras of Nārada and Śāṇḍilya are referred to as the two most authoritative texts dealing with the Bhakti doctrine. This is obviously due to the fact that these two works are primarily concerned with explaining the nature of bhakti and are thus distinctly different from all other works in which the origins of the bhakti ideology are usually sought. Here bhakti is not just one part of some wider philosophical

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1. Ibid., III.25.28-30.

2. Ibid., III.26.72.

3. Ibid., III.32.32.



or religious systematisation, but is the very object of the enquiry and analysis. This is made quite clear by both Nārada and Sāṅḍilya in their opening sutras.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, they do not treat bhakti as a special religion (dharma) or doctrine (siddhānta) in these sutras. They analyse the form, the nature, and significance of bhakti, only in its general meaning of devotion. Not only is bhakti not treated here as a fixed religious doctrine, but even as devotion, it is not approached by the two sūtrakāras in exactly the same manner and spirit.

Although the Nārada and Sāṅḍilya sūtras are very often grouped together on account of their common theme of bhakti, there exists an obvious dissimilarity of spirit between the two. This shows that at the time of their composition different opinions were being expressed on the subject of bhakti, and that it could be approached from different points of view. In the context of Sanskrit literature however, the sūtra-form in itself largely pre-supposes the existence and currency of certain trends of thought on the subject. Moreover Sāṅḍilya mentions earlier interpreters of bhakti also such as Kaśyapa and Bādarāyaṇa.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, Nārada, a later sūtrakāra than Sāṅḍilya mentions the views of Parāśara, Garga, and

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1. athāto bhaktim vyākhyāsyāmaḥ, Nārada Bhakti-Sūtra, I  
athāto bhakti'jñāsā; Sāṅḍilya Bhakti-Sūtra I.

2. Sāṅḍilya, Bhakti-Sūtra, 29, 30.

Sāṅḍilya, before stating his own.<sup>1</sup> These names however, are found repeatedly in many religious texts spreading over a wide range of time, and can be connected with a number of different traditions. Their occurrence here therefore, does not necessarily indicate the existence of different systems of bhakti expounded by these men. Nevertheless, it does suggest that long before, and also at the time of the composition of these Sūtras, attempts were being made to define and expound bhakti in the light of different views held by the different schools of thought.<sup>2</sup>

A comparative analysis of the Bhakti-sūtras of Nārada and Sāṅḍilya however, indicates the existence and acceptance of at least two different points of view on the subject of bhakti. Whereas Sāṅḍilya's approach is more in line with the classical systems of Sāṅkhya and Vedānta, Nārada shows a greater leaning towards the Purāṇic tradition and the sectarian modes of the Bhāgavatas. It has been argued earlier that bhakti can in no way be restricted to the Vaiṣṇavas alone and that there is no antagonism between bhakti and the Vedānta. The difference of approach between Nārada and

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1. Nārada, Bhakti-Sūtra, 16,17,18.

2. Ibid., 83.

Sāṅḍilya and the nature of Sāṅḍilya's exposition of bhakti, lend further support to these two points.

If the bhakti Sūtras of Nārada and Sāṅḍilya are to be regarded as textual authorities on bhakti, there is evidence here that bhakti need not necessarily have a Vaishṇava bias, and that its inspiration can come from the Upanishads as well. If on the one hand Nārada draws his inspiration from the Bhāgavata Purāṇa<sup>1</sup>, Sāṅḍilya looks up to the Upanishads and describes the Brahma-Kāṇḍa as the Bhakti-Kāṇḍa,<sup>2</sup> whereas Nārada attaches great importance to the ritualistic modes of Vaishṇava bhakti, generally known as the daśadhā bhakti,<sup>3</sup> Sāṅḍilya does not show the same regard for those observances, but allows them only an inferior position. Acts of worship like śravaṇa and kīrtana which constitute an integral part of the daśadhā bhakti and which have an important place in the Vaishṇava tradition, do not enjoy the same importance in Sāṅḍilya's exposition of bhakti. He describes them as secondary forms of bhakti, which can have value only in so far as they lead to the primary and essential form of bhakti.<sup>4</sup> Singing of

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1. Nārada Bhakti-Sūtra, 68.

2. Sāṅḍilya Bhakti-Sūtra, 26.

3. Nārada, 82.

4. Sāṅḍilya, 56, 57.

hymns and worship through narration of God's attributes etc. could lead to only a secondary form of devotion. Sāṇḍilya defines the primary form of devotion in accordance with the spirit of the Bhagavad-Gītā,<sup>1</sup> and describes it as exclusive self-devotedness. A personal deity is obviously not the object of his bhakti. Sāṇḍilya makes it very clear that his bhakti should not be confused with Deva-bhakti.<sup>2</sup> At the same time he also draws a very careful distinction between Sraddhā (faith) and bhakti.<sup>3</sup>

The bhakti of Sāṇḍilya is much more contemplative in nature as compared to that of Nārada, which is definitely more emotional.<sup>4</sup> Sāṇḍilya defines bhakti as a form of extreme attachment to God,<sup>5</sup> and as a state of mind, by attaining which, a man lives, moves, and has his being in Him. According to Sāṇḍilya, bhakti can be cultivated with the help of other means such as jñāna and yoga as well.<sup>6</sup> But it is essentially a state of mind and an experience. It includes the means and is beyond and other than them. According to Sāṇḍilya, bhakti

1. Ibid., 83.

2. Ibid., 18.

3. Ibid., 24.

4. Nārada, 68.

5. Sāṇḍilya, 19.

6. Ibid., 19.

is an act of recognition and therefore is itself a form of knowledge. Just as an act of recognition pre-supposes former knowledge and in itself is an expression really of renewed knowledge.

Nārada also describes bhakti as intense attachment to God,<sup>1</sup> but on a more emotional level.<sup>2</sup> On obtaining bhakti or union with God man does not desire anything else and thus rises above the feeling of pleasure and pain.<sup>3</sup> He is overjoyed, and satisfied.<sup>4</sup> For Nārada, bhakti has the nature of āsakti or attachment. He speaks with great fervour about acts of worship directed towards the personal form of the deity. To adore His greatness and beauty, to worship Him, to serve Him, and to love Him is described as bhakti by Nārada.<sup>5</sup>

That bhakti is possible only in relation to a personal God is an opinion which cannot hold ground when judged from the standpoint of Nārada and Śaṅḍilya Bhakti-Sūtras. Although their main theme is bhakti and they are not really concerned with the question of the nature of God as such, there are

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1. Nārada, 2.

2. Ibid., 68.

3. Ibid., 5.

4. Ibid., 6.

5. Ibid., 82.

sufficient indications in these Sūtras to provide us with the ideas of the two sūtrakāras on this subject. However, none of them points out that a personal view of God is a necessary condition of bhakti, although Nārada's bhakti, due to his Vaishṇava bias, clearly suggests a personal and saguṇa concept of the Deity.<sup>1</sup> He is clearly very much inspired by the tradition of Kṛishṇa-bhakti and the daśadhā bhakti as mentioned by him can have meaning only in relation to a personal deity.<sup>2</sup> But if there is such an indication in Nārada, it is equally evident in Sāṅḍilya, that the latter's view of God is more impersonal and is not so close to the Vaishṇava image of a personal Deity. It is evident however, that they both uphold and emphasise the value of bhakti in spite of their difference of approach.

Sāṅḍilya-Sūtra is constantly cited in support of the general theory that bhakti is not possible without the faith in a personal God. It must be pointed out however, that Sāṅḍilya's God is not of a personal nature. Although he refers to Īśvara both as the transcendant Lord as well as an immanent principle, his cosmology on the whole, stands very close to the dualistic principle of Sāṅkhya. Reality according

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1. Nārada, 79, 9ff.

2. Ibid., 82.

to him is composed of only 'chit' and 'achit'. There is nothing which exists out of it. Sāṅḍilya's God is therefore of the nature of chit and does not seem very different from the Purusha of Sāṅkhya.<sup>1</sup> The difference noticeable between the two is that whereas the Purusha of Sāṅkhya is ultimately removed from, and is independent of Prakṛiti, Sāṅḍilya's chit works through achit and the two remain united.<sup>2</sup> He does not establish God as a third principle.<sup>3</sup> Therefore without looking for a separate and distinct entity as God, if Sāṅḍilya's bhakti is placed within his own dualism of chit and achit, it can be easily interpreted as a unifying principle.

Describing God (Īśvara) as both a transcendant Lord and an immanent principle, does not create any problem for Sāṅḍilya in defining his ideas on bhakti.<sup>4</sup> For him both Īśvara and the Ātman can be the objects of bhakti.<sup>5</sup> The difference of the philosophical points of view about their nature do not matter with him, for according to him, their

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1. Sāṅḍilya, 37-40.

2. Ibid., 41.

3. Ibid., 40.

4. Ibid., 38.

5. Ibid., 29, 30, 31.

unity lies in the recognition of one as the other. Recognition of Īśvara and the Ātman as one, in no way diminishes the greatness of Īśvara. Īśvara can never lose His superiority states Sāṅḍilya, because of His very nature for He continues to work through prakṛiti as the superior principle.<sup>1</sup> Thus the immanent nature of God and the impersonal principle of the Ātman are fully recognized in Sāṅḍilya's bhakti. The idea of God's immanence is not absent in Nārada either. It can be seen in his description of the divinity of great souls or mahātmās. According to Nārada, bhakti can be attained through divine compassion as well as through the grace of the divine men.<sup>2</sup> He not only describes them as men of God, but also suggests that there is no distinction between God and His men.<sup>3</sup> Here the mahātmās or the great souls seem to share His divinity.

Neither Sāṅḍilya nor Nārada represent bhakti as a path separate and opposed to that of jñāna or knowledge. Bhakti is described by both as a state and an attitude of mind and heart.<sup>4</sup> Expounding bhakti in these terms they attach the

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1. Ibid., 37.

2. Nārada, 38.

3. Ibid., 41.

4. Sāṅḍilya, 3.



highest value to it and describe it as the final spiritual end to be attained.

In the relative context of jñāna, karma, yoga, and bhakti, Sāṅḍilya is preoccupied mainly with explanations of the correct relationship between jñāna and bhakti. Bondage according to Sāṅḍilya is due to the want of devotion and not to the want of knowledge.<sup>1</sup> Whereas knowledge is necessary for bhakti, the final liberation comes only through the attainment of the latter. When bhakti appears it destroys the existing knowledge and leads to new knowledge.<sup>2</sup> Sāṅḍilya's bhakti thus consists of the experience of this renewed knowledge,<sup>3</sup> which is different from knowledge through the intellect alone. It is a knowledge caused by the final disappearance of buddhi.

Nārada regards bhakti as higher than karma, jñāna, and yoga<sup>4</sup> but he does not create any antagonism or barrier between jñāna and bhakti. When Nārada speaks of the superiority of bhakti, he offers two explanations for it. First, it is superior because it is its own reward, and does not require any other support.<sup>5</sup> Second, because God has an aversion for

1. Ibid., 98.

2. Ibid., 96.

3. Ibid., 15.

4. Nārada, 25.

5. Ibid., 26.

the egoist, and love for humility. Karma jñāna and yoga are thus set aside as inferior not because they are antithetical to bhakti, but because they can never be self-sufficient. Besides, if devoid of bhakti, they can even generate egoism and pride. Thus Nārada does not lay down an exclusive and superior path of bhakti as against that of Karma, yoga and jñāna but emphasises the self-sufficiency of bhakti and points out the insufficiency of the others without bhakti. According to him, bhakti is superior to knowledge, because it is the fruit of its own self.<sup>1</sup> It is spontaneous and it takes shape of its own accord.

Although certain points of distinction and difference can be found between the Bhakti-Sutrās of Nārada and Sāṅḍilya, in the final analysis, bhakti remains for both, a "state of mind" which is essentially a matter of individual experience. According to Sāṅḍilya, it comes as an act of recognition based on previous knowledge. According to Nārada, through the spontaneous attachment which finally results in an act of complete absorption.

Even Nārada, who shows a greater leaning towards Vaishṇava and ritualistic modes of worship, while describing the ten formal acts of worship (daśadhā bhakti), makes it

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1. Ibid., 30.

clear that they are only different manifestations of the essential bhakti which is just one.<sup>1</sup> Bhakti in general is described by Nārada, not as an act of worship, but as a state of mind to be attained, and as an experience to be experienced. It is in the nature of a subtle experience,<sup>2</sup> and is beyond description, as is the taste of a thing tasted by the dumb.<sup>3</sup>

Thus neither the Bhagavad-Gītā nor the Bhāgavata Purāṇa, nor the Bhakti-Sūtras of Nārada and Śaṅḍilya provide us with a definition of bhakti which would corroborate its technical meaning as it is current in the academic circles today. The above analysis of bhakti in these texts, their concept of God in relation to the different gradations of bhakti provided by them and the recognition of an interrelation between bhakti and jñāna substantiates this. Bhakti for the impersonal God is very often described in these texts as a higher form of devotion, and a monistic ideology accompanies all such descriptions of nirguṇa bhakti. A strictly personalistic devotion is attributed to these texts only on account of the accepted artificial definition of bhakti. It must be

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1. Ibid., 82.

2. Ibid., 54.

3. Ibid., 52, see also 51.

mentioned here again that there is no indication in these texts to suggest that bhakti is possible only in relation to a personal God and within the doctrinal framework of a dualistic view of Reality. They do not represent bhakti as an antithesis to the religio-philosophical position of the Vedānta and the Upanishads. On the contrary, Sāṅḍilya for example has clearly described the Brahma-Kāṇḍa as the Bhakti-Kāṇḍa.<sup>1</sup>

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1. Sāṅḍilya, 26.

### CHAPTER III

#### BHAKTI IN THE MEDIEVAL CONTEXT

##### i. The Existing View of the Bhakti Movement

When the great religious resurgence of the medieval period is summed up as the Bhakti Movement, the epithet bhakti is not understood in its general meaning of religious devotion, but is used as a name for a specific pattern of religious devotionism, possible only within the ideological framework of the concept of a personal God, a non-monistic view of Reality, and man's reliance on emotion rather than reason in religious life.

Furthermore, bhakti so defined, is viewed in the medieval context chiefly as an antithesis of Śaṅkara's monistic Vedānta, his impersonal view of God, and his insistence on knowledge. The doctrine and religion of bhakti is then attributed to points of view opposed to that of Śaṅkara, and the medieval development of Vaiṣṇava Vedānta is described as its chief theological expression. The Vaiṣṇava āchāryas, Rāmānuja, Nimbārka, Madhva, and Vallabha are thus represented as the apostles of bhakti, and their systems of Vedānta, as its doctrinal base. It is also argued that this was an assertion of an emotional religion of "loving devotion", and that it was very much needed at this time because of the vacuum created by the "cold intellectualism" of Śaṅkarāchārya.

Since this is how the Bhakti Movement is generally approached, the Vaishṇava āchāryas are always accepted as the inspirational source of the religious thought and beliefs of all the medieval bhaktas, of both the nirguṇa and the saguṇa schools. Because of the same approach, the total expression of religious devotion of that age, irrespective of the variations so clearly seen in it, is interpreted as a reaction against the religious values upheld by Śaṅkarācharya. Consequently, the Bhakti Movement as a whole is studied as an expression of Vaishṇavism as opposed to the influence of Śaṅkara's Advaita Vedānta.

But this position can hardly be accepted as correct. What is known as the Bhakti Movement shows evidence of both a flowering of neo-Vaishṇavism, and a remarkable popularity of the nirguṇa ideology of the Advaita Vedānta. The Vaishṇava movement, in the light of which the Bhakti Movement is always assessed, constitutes only one part of the religious resurgence of medieval India. But during the medieval period, <sup>y</sup> Vaishṇavism found its poets in Tulsīdās, Sūrdās, and other Rāma and Kṛishṇa-bhaktas, the bhakta-poets like Kabīr and Nānak advocated nirguṇa-bhakti with equal fervour. If theologians like Rāmānuja were adding new philosophical dimensions to the simple and popular faith of the Vaishṇavas by evolving Vaishṇava systems of Vedānta, the

more obstruse philosophical principles of the classical Vedānta were now reaching the common man through poets like Kabīr, in a simple, spontaneous, and non-scholastic language.

Both these currents had flowed into the bhakti-stream of the medieval period, although they were different in origin and inspiration. Viṣṇu-worship and a personal conception of God was essential in one. An impersonal view of God and the concept of the Nirguṇa Brahman was of primary importance in the other. Whereas the Vaiṣṇava movement of Rāma and Kṛiṣṇa bhakti can be easily connected with the Vaiṣṇava āchāryas, the nirguṇa school of bhakti is not related to them in any significant way. There is nothing in common between the Vaiṣṇava āchāryas and the Nirguṇa bhaktas like Kabīr, Nānak and Dādū. In fact their respective positions strike us as basically different. Whereas the former established a personal image of God in their theology and emphasized on saguṇa-bhakti, the latter, like Śāṅkarāchārya, took a strictly impersonal view of God and advocated bhakti for the Nirguṇa Brahman.

But in spite of the evidence of complete harmony between Śaṅkara and the nirguṇa bhaktas who constitute a vital part of the Bhakti Movement, the latter is invariably described as a reaction against Śaṅkara's Advaitavāda. It is always represented as an assertion of bhakti against

jñāna. In all such contexts, bhakti is attributed to the Vaishṇava āchāryas, and jñāna to Śaṅkara. The present position however, implies and rests on the following factors. Firstly, it is implied that bhakti was absent in Śaṅkara. Secondly, an intellectualism incompatible with and devoid of religious devotion, is attributed to Śaṅkara, and the emphasis he laid on Jñāna is misinterpreted as his emphasis on abstract and scholastic knowledge. Thirdly, the difference between Śaṅkara and the Vaishṇava āchāryas is described as the difference between the path of Jñāna and the path of bhakti. Lastly, it is assumed that the Vaishṇava āchāryas had evolved a definite and uniform doctrine of bhakti which was opposed to the principle of jñāna and a monistic view of Reality. It is also suggested that their ideology made room for the dualism and distance between the devotee and the deity, necessary for bhakti.

But these arguments which sustain the existing views about the Bhakti Movement in relation to Śaṅkara and the Vaishṇava āchāryas need a more careful examination. A reassessment of the position of Śaṅkara and that of the Vaishṇava āchāryas is undertaken here to clear some of the misconceptions mentioned above. The following study shows that bhakti is not absent in Śaṅkarāchārya. It explains, though briefly, what Śaṅkara meant by jñāna and proves there is no



antagonism between Saṅkara's jñāna and bhakti. The points of difference between Saṅkara and the Vaishṇava āchāryas are also reviewed here to show that their difference did not arise from the difference between jñāna and bhakti but were caused by the challenge of Advaita Vedānta to the Vaishṇava tradition of the worship of personal deities. We have also analysed the various definitions of bhakti provided by the Vaishṇava āchāryas to point out the absence of that fixed and uniform concept of bhakti which is so often attributed to them. Neither their collective approach to bhakti nor their individual views on it fit in with its current technical definition.

## ii. Bhakti and Jñāna in Saṅkarāchārya

Saṅkara's position can in no way be regarded as the opposite pole of bhakti. In fact, he eulogizes bhakti, and attaches great importance to it as a means of salvation. Nevertheless, it must be remembered that Saṅkara's Vedānta is usually viewed as an absolutism, and in contradistinction to it, the Vaishṇava Systems of Vedānta are regarded as theistic. Bhakti is considered incompatible with the absolutism of Saṅkara, and is attributed to the theism of the Vaishṇava āchāryas.

This method of explaining bhakti in relation to Śaṅkara is the result of the misleading application of an alien concept of theism in the study of Hinduism, the limitations of which have been discussed in Chapter I. From the Hindu point of view however, Śaṅkara's position is neither non-theistic, nor non-devotional. On the contrary, Śaṅkarāchārya is revered for the part he played in strengthening the forces of theism against those of atheism. A man whose entire life was devoted to religious pursuits, whose religious fervour was responsible for the rise of many monastic orders, and whose inspiration had led to the establishment of the four religious centres/<sup>now</sup>sacred to the Hindus in the far corners of the Indian sub-continent, can hardly be regarded as a man opposed to theism and religious devotion.

But Śaṅkara's theism rests on an impersonal view of God and his bhakti remains constantly in line with his nirguṇa ideology and exists within the framework of his monistic beliefs. Śaṅkara is not only not opposed to bhakti, but has provided us with his own definition of it.

Bhakti according to Śaṅkara is an enquiry and a search after the real form of one's own self (Sva-svarūpa).<sup>1</sup>

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1. Svasvārūpānusandhānam bhaktirityevābhidhīyate  
Viveka-Chūḍāmaṇi Of Śaṅkarāchārya, ed. by Swami Mādhavān-  
 anda, Advaita Ashrama, Calcutta, 6th ed., 1957, v.39.

To support this, Śaṅkara mentions the opinion of those who maintain that bhakti is a quest for the substance and reality of one's own self (Svātma-tattva).<sup>1</sup> The difference between the terms sva-svarūpa and svātma-tattva is only that of phraseology. Śaṅkara therefore regards them as one and does not distinguish one from the other, for they stand for the same Reality, the Ātman, which is sought by bhakti.

Śaṅkara places bhakti in line with Śraddhā and yoga<sup>2</sup> and describes the three as the necessary means of salvation.<sup>3</sup> But out of them, Śaṅkara rates bhakti as the highest in a very positive and emphatic manner.<sup>3</sup> It sustains the aspirant in his search after the self, and culminates in that state of self-realisation, or Ātman-jñāna, which is described by Śaṅkara as the only way to salvation or moksha. Here we can take Śraddhā as the faith with which the quest begins, Yoga as the active will, and bhakti as the emotional involvement which arouses the passion and the longing for the quest. Śaṅkara's bhakti constitutes the emotive part of the act of self-contemplation.

Śaṅkara regards bhakti not only as a means but also as an end in itself. The highest form of bhakti according

1. svātmataṭṭvānusandhānam bhāktirityapare jaguḥ, ibid., v. 32.

2. śraddhābhaktidhyānayogānmumukshoḥ, ibid., v. 46.

3. mokshakāraṇasāmagryām bhaktireva garīyasī, ibid., v. 31.

to him, is jñāna-niṣṭhā<sup>h</sup> or the state of abiding in the knowledge of the self.<sup>1</sup> Thus bhakti which acts as a means in the initial spiritual endeavours, finally becomes an end in itself when it culminates in the experience of the self, for it exists both in the search for the Self as well as in the state of abiding in It.

These views of Śaṅkara on bhakti are in complete harmony with his impersonal conception of God. Therefore, the suggestion that Śaṅkara made room for bhakti by putting forth a dual definition of Brahman as parā and aparā, one as the object of knowledge and the other as that of devotion, is unwarranted. Although Śaṅkara provides us with two concepts of parā and aparā Brahman, the nature of his bhakti does not need the support of their distinction and difference. We do not find any incompatibility between his Parā-Brahman and his bhakti. Śaṅkara has his own concept of bhakti in relation to Nirguṇa Brahman and therefore does not require the help of an extra conceptual category for its sake. On the contrary Śaṅkara mentions bhakti-bhāva in relation to his aparā or Nirguṇa Brahman<sup>2</sup> and enjoins that his verses

1. jñānanishṭhā parā bhaktirityu<sup>klā,</sup>chyate,  
Śaṅkarāchārya, Gītā Bhāshya, XVIII. 55,

2. Brahma-Sūtra-Śāṅkara-Bhāshya, ed. by Anant Kṛishṇa Sāstrī,  
Nirṇaya Sāgar Press, Bombay, 1938, I.1.31.

on self contemplation should be sung with bhakti-bhāva.<sup>1</sup> Again, according to Śaṅkara, the devotee should worship Om with Śraddhā and bhakti,<sup>2</sup> as it is not possible to grasp the Nirguṇa Brahman without it.

What Śaṅkara means by bhakti becomes still more clear through the distinction he makes between bhakti and upāsanā. Śaṅkara's definition of bhakti is entirely in keeping with his idea of the Nirguṇa Brahman, but his description of upāsanā is related with the concept of the Saguṇa Brahman. Śaṅkara explains that the guṇas are attributed to the Nirguṇa Brahman for the purpose of upāsanā.<sup>3</sup> Whereas Upāsanā is regarded by Śaṅkara in its dual aspect, both as meditation and as outward acts of worship, bhakti is always described by him as an internalised attitude of mind and heart. According to Śaṅkara, upāsanā can lead only to nearness (samīpatā and sālokatā) with the ultimate

1. sva-svarūpānusandhāna-rūpaṃ stutiṃ yaḥ  
paṭhed-ādarāt-bhaktibhāvo mānushyāḥ, see "Vijñāna Naukā",  
v. 9, in: Minor Works of Śaṅkarāchārya, ed. by Hari  
Raghunath Bhagavat, Ashtekar & Co., Poona, 1925, p. 365.  
For the devotional attitude advocated by Śaṅkarāchārya  
towards Nirguṇa Brahman, see also his Parā Pūja and  
Nirguṇa-Mānasā-Pūjā, ibid., p.363 and 360-1.
2. śraddhā-bhaktibhyāṃ bhāvaviśeṣeṇa cha omkāre āveśayati,  
Śaṅkarāchārya, Bṛihadāranyaka Upāniṣad Bhāṣya, V.I.I.
3. The Brahma-Sūtra Bhāṣya, III.2.12-15.

Reality, but bhakti results in that feeling of oneness and identification (sāyujyatā and svarūpatā) which alone can lead to Ātman-jñāna and moksha.

The Nirguṇa Brahman of Śaṅkara is not juxtaposed to the saguṇa, but includes it within itself.<sup>1</sup> The Reality is only one and rests within one's own self. The formal difference of the categories of thought and names which are used to explain it are immaterial since they are all indications of the same thing. Adhering to this position, Śaṅkara does not find it difficult to accept different names for God in spite of his strictly qualitiess view of it. It is in this spirit that he deals with the Bhāgvas, their bhakti, and their deities. He interprets their concepts in his own language, and in the process, he sometimes attributes his own ideas of bhakti to them. For example, he explains the devotion for the Saguṇa Īśvara as bhakti for the Īśvara who dwells within one's own self.<sup>2</sup>

When Śaṅkara is described as an exponent of the path of jñāna as opposed to that of bhakti, not only is his

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1. V.H. Date, Vedānta Explained, 2 Vols., Booksellers Publishing Co., Bombay, 1954, Vol. II, p.515.

2. sva-karmanā antaryāminam Īśvaram pūjayitvā kevaljñāna-nishthānushthāna-yogyatā-lakṣhaṇa-siddhiḥ bhavati, quoted, Swami Atmanand, Srī Śaṅkara's Teachings in His own Words, Bhāratīya Vidyā Bhavan, Bombay, 1960, p.111.

own concept of bhakti not taken into account, but his idea of jñāna is also misinterpreted and he is viewed as a champion of intellectual and abstract knowledge. But there is no contradiction between bhakti and jñāna in Śaṅkarāchārya, for he does not recommend the path of jñāna as opposed to bhakti, nor does he uphold jñāna in the sense of learning and intellectual excellence. Whenever Śaṅkara uses the term jñāna in an absolute sense, he means by it, the spiritual knowledge of the self through experience, and not knowledge through intellect. This stands out very clearly in Śaṅkara for he does not attach any final value to scholastic knowledge and to intellectual attainments.<sup>1</sup>

According to Śaṅkara, the highest knowledge lies in the experience of the Brahman (Brahmānubhava), which transcends all empirical knowledge.<sup>2</sup> This knowledge has no reference to human intellect, but is rooted in the self.<sup>3</sup> It can be attained only through personal experience, and not through the help of learned man.<sup>4</sup> Śaṅkara views all other forms of knowledge as merely instrumental in nature.

1. The Brahma-Sūtra-Bhāshya, II.1.6.

2. V.H. Date, ibid., Vol.II, pp.452ff.

3. Brahma-Sūtra-Bhāshya, I.1.2.

4. Viveka-Chūḍāmaṇi, v. 54.

They have value only in so far as they purify the soul which is stained by ignorance.<sup>1</sup>

The scriptures also lose their pre-eminence when Śaṅkara speaks of jñāna as personal spiritual experience.<sup>2</sup> The Sāstras or Scriptures can guide and render knowledge of the practical aspects of religion (dharma-jñāna), but not of the Brahman (Brahma-jñāna).<sup>3</sup> Whereas in the case of the dharma-jñāna, the knowledge derived from the Sruti can be useful, in the case of Brahma-Jñāna, the fact of experience alone can be taken as authoritative. The study of Scriptures without the knowledge of the highest tattva is of no use, and with the attainment of the knowledge of that tattva, it no longer remains necessary.<sup>4</sup> The network of words can lead to useless wanderings says Śaṅkara.<sup>5</sup>

Thus the path of knowledge upheld by Śaṅkara is the path of Self-realisation and of Self-knowledge. It does not stand for the pursuit of intellectual attainments and

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1. Ātmabodha, v 5, in Minor Works..., ibid., p.13.

2. Swami Ātmānanda, ibid., pp.58ff.

3. Brahma-Sūtra-Bhāṣya, 1.1.4.

4. avi jñāte pare tatve śāstrādhītistu nishphalā, vijñāte pare tatve śāstrādhītistu nishphalā, Vivekakhūḍāmaṇi, v 59.

5. Śabda-jālam-mahāraṇyaṃ-chittabhramaṇakāraṇam, ibid., v 60.



scholastic knowledge. Śaṅkara makes a distinction between a man of experience and a man of learning. He calls the former a mahātmā, and the latter a vidvān,<sup>1</sup> and regards the mahātmā as greater than the vidvān. To describe Śaṅkara as an exponent of the path of jñāna, without giving sufficient importance to these factors, amounts to stating a half-truth.

### iii. Śaṅkara and the Vaiṣṇava Āchāryas

The bhakti of the Vaiṣṇava āchāryas and the jñāna of Śaṅkara are not counterpoised to each other. In fact, bhakti in the sense of devotion, and jñāna in the sense of self-knowledge, are common to both Śaṅkara and the Vaiṣṇava āchāryas. This does not imply however, that there are no serious differences between them. The Vaiṣṇava systems of Vedānta, the Viśiṣṭhādvaita of Rāmanuja, the Dvaitādvaita of Nimbārka, the Dvaita of Madhva, and the Suddhādvaita of Vallabhāchārya were definite deviations from the Advaitavāda of Śaṅkara, and the Vaiṣṇava āchāryas had put forward very different views from his on questions of the nature of God, the relationship between God and man, and the

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1. Ibid., v 160.

relationship between God and the phenomenal world. But the real cause of disagreement between Śaṅkara and the Vaiṣṇava āchāryas does not arise out of any existing controversy between jñāna and bhakti.

The disagreement of the Vaiṣṇava āchāryas with Śaṅkara's Vedānta can be easily explained on grounds of their primary loyalty to Vaiṣṇavism. The growing popularity and general acceptance of Śaṅkara's Advaita Vedānta had created special problems for the Vaiṣṇavas. In his efforts to combat the nāstika influences, Śaṅkara had worked for the unity of the different āstika traditions. He was able to achieve it by concentrating on those aspects of their beliefs which alone could serve as their meeting ground. But Śaṅkara had explained the fundamentals of the āstika beliefs in terms of Vedānta, and had interpreted Vedānta in strictly monistic terms. The Advaita Vedānta of Śaṅkara, which takes an impersonal view of God was bound to create problems for the Vaiṣṇavas who belonged to the āstika group, but whose characteristic religious modes could lose their pre-eminence if they were to be constantly exposed to the influence of Śaṅkara's Advaita and its emphasis on the impersonal nature of God. Vaiṣṇavas viewed God primarily as a person, and the worship of the personal deity Viṣṇu and his avatāras Rāma and Kṛiṣṇa was of fundamental

importance to the Vaishṇava religion. An impersonal concept of God and the idea of the Nirguṇa Brahman on the other hand was the very essence of the Advaita Vedānta of Śaṅkarāchārya. Vaishṇavas, as an āstika group, were now faced with the task of upholding their traditional faith and practices, and also of reiterating their āstika beliefs. In the post-Śaṅkara period however, the latter could be achieved only through the language of <sup>the</sup> Vedānta.

As Śaṅkara's influence became more broad based, the need for evolving a Vaishṇava thought-system in terms of Vedānta must have become more and more apparent. If this popular religion, Vaishṇavism, was to retain its traditional beliefs and modes of worship, it was necessary for it now, more than ever, to have a status of its own in philosophy and metaphysics and to have its own theological sanctions intellectually explained. The best way to achieve this was to interpret Vedānta from the Vaishṇava viewpoint. The four great theologians of the medieval period, Rāmānuja, Nimbārka, Madhva, and Vallabhācharya were to fulfill this need of Vaishṇavism, each in his own manner. The four systems of Vaishṇava Vedānta, as evolved by them, were in the nature of a reasoned and a scholastic response of Vaishṇavism to the challenge of Śaṅkara. They were an expression of the Vaishṇava efforts towards the preservation

and re-orientation of their thought and beliefs.

The main difference between Śaṅkara and the Vaiṣṇava āchāryas lies in the Vaiṣṇava sympathies of the latter who laid great stress on the personality of Viṣṇu and his avatāra Kṛiṣṇa in their systems of Vedānta. As Vaiṣṇavaś, it was very important for the Vaiṣṇava āchāryas to establish this aspect of their faith in the Vedānta. Therefore, even when most of them were able to make certain adjustments with Śaṅkara's Vedānta,<sup>1</sup> on the question of the unity of the Brahman, none of them showed any compromise with his Nirguṇa or impersonal Brahman. Although we find different shades of opinion amongst the Vaiṣṇava āchāryas on the question of the Advaita and the Dvaita, there is perfect unanimity amongst them regarding the Saguṇa or the personal nature of God. Thus the emphasis laid by the Vaiṣṇava āchāryas on a personal God was caused by their Vaiṣṇava faith, and need not therefore, be interpreted as a counterpart of any special religion or doctrine of bhakti propounded by them.

Some major misconceptions about the Bhakti Movement can be removed if the differences between Śaṅkara and the Vaiṣṇava āchāryas are studied on the lines suggested above. In the following pages therefore, the position of Śaṅkarāchārya is examined against the total background of Hinduism

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1. Vide Infra, pp. 191-95.

and that of the Āstika unity. His achievement of the Āstika unity is explained here in the light of his formulation of the Advaita Vedānta. The repercussions of this on Vaishṇavism are duly weighed, and the position of the Vaishṇava āchāryas in relation to Śaṅkara is reviewed mainly from the standpoint of the Vaishṇava cause.

(a) The Place of Śaṅkara and His Vedānta in Hinduism, and the Problem of the Āstika Unity

Śaṅkara occupies a very unique place in the history of Hinduism. This is not entirely on account of his brilliant academic exposition of the Advaita-Vedānta, but is also due to the significant role he played in the revival of Hinduism in its struggle against the Buddhist forces. Śaṅkara was not only a philosopher and a man of exceptional intellectual attainments, but was also a man of action inspired by the great sense of religious mission.

A great deal of diversity existed within Hinduism in spite of the common agreement regarding fundamentals and the acceptance of certain doctrines by all the groups and philosophical systems. Certain amount of ideological agreement, and a serious effort towards a possible synthesis was necessary if they were to stand together as one. To defend Hinduism against other forces demanded at once a

sense of solidarity, a conscious unity, and some unifying principles. That alone could enable Hinduism to hold its own against Buddhism, Jainism and other prevalent creeds which lay outside its orthodox fold. Śaṅkara must have been aware of this when he started his work for the revival and reorganization of Hinduism.

The Indian religio-philosophical traditions can be viewed in two broad divisions, those that are āstika, and the others that are nāstika. Whereas the former accept the principle of Ātman, the latter rest on the principle of nairātmyā. The āstika tradition consists of many religious groups and ideologies and the āstika thought is represented by the six orthodox systems of philosophy. The Buddhist tradition has proved the most significant and dynamic in the nāstika group.

The philosophical systems which draw inspiration from the Upanishads conceive Reality as the Soul or the Ātman, and regard it as eternal and immutable. All religious groups which accept this viewpoint fall into the āstika group. The nāstikas take a very different stand. They disregard the authority of the Upanishads and deny the existence of an inner and immutable unifying principle of Reality. According to the Buddhists, everything is

discontinuous, separate and momentary, and to regard Reality as otherwise is only an illusion born out of wrong belief or avidyā. Whereas according to the Upanishadic tradition, bondage arises out of the ignorance of the self and a wrong identification of the Self with the non-self, according to the Buddhist, avidyā or ignorance is born out of wrong belief in the Ātman.

Although all systems of philosophy and all the religious groups which accepted the principle of Ātman and the authority of the Vedas could be grouped together as āstikas, unity of their thought and belief could be regarded as more of an implicit than an apparent fact. Each thought system had evolved its own metaphysics and had followed a separate course of development. Starting from a common source, the different schools of philosophy had thus drifted apart. Many religious groups existing within the āstika fold had their own sectarian loyalties and distinct traditions too, which were not always directly derived from the Vedic background and which they had retained in spite of their acceptance of the Vedic authority and the Upanishadic principle of the Ātman. Each religious group was bound to be zealous of its separate identity, and each thought system of its own particular standpoint.

But in spite of their mutual differences and their

separate identities, they were in complete agreement on two points. The common bonds of the āstika systems lay in their common acceptance of certain underlying philosophic axioms on the one hand, and their firm acceptance of the Śruti on the other. In so far as they believed in an eternal and immutable entity, the Ātman, and they accepted the authority of the Vedas, there was no scope for difference of opinion amongst them. On the question of the ultimacy of the Ātman and the Śruti, they formed a composite group against the nāstikas, who took a totally different position on these issues.

Śaṅkara was faced with the task of upholding the āstika position against that of the nāstikas. This could be achieved by highlighting the points of mutual agreement amongst the āstikas and by making them aware of their main difference with the nāstika group. Śaṅkara therefore, strongly emphasised the two factors which could keep the āstikas linked together, their common adherence to the Śruti and their underlying philosophical unity on the question of the Ultimate.

Śaṅkara drew a clear line of division between the āstikas and nāstikas, and made a case for the unity of the āstika systems on grounds of their common adherence to the Vedas. Describing the Bauddhas, the Lokāyatās and the Jainas



as those "who hold it as an established conclusion that the Vedas are not authoritative", he called upon all those who accepted the authority of the Vedas to refute their systems by means of logical reasoning.<sup>1</sup> Similarly he pointed out the philosophical unity of the Āstikas by explaining that they all agreed in their final understanding of the Ultimate Reality.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, in the light of this Saṅkara strongly emphasised the oneness of the Being who, he explained, "is variously understood by various philosophical controversialists in their several systems of philosophy", but who is indeed "the one and the only Brahman".<sup>3</sup>

Although in such explanations of the essential unity of that Being, Saṅkara was only repeating an old and familiar idea of the Vedas,<sup>4</sup> this idea must have carried a new meaning in an atmosphere of fully evolved philosophical diversities and multiplicity of cults and practices. Such an approach could help in viewing the mutual philosophical differences in the right perspective, and might set the forces of synthesis to work. It might also direct the

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1. Sarva-Siddhānta-Sangraha of Saṅkarāchārya, ed. by M. Rangāchārya, Madras, 1909, I.25.

2. Ibid., passim.

3. Ibid., I.1.

4. Rig-Veda, I.164.46; X.114.5.

people's attention to certain points of fundamental similarity.

Whereas the ultimacy of the Vedas was always maintained by the Āstika schools, and the idea of the essential oneness of the Reality was easily acceptable to them, much greater effort was required on the part of Śaṅkarāchārya to formulate a thought system which would cement all the Āstika schools into a more positive and definite philosophical unity. Out of all the orthodox systems of philosophy perhaps he saw a greater potential in the Vedānta as a cementing force for achieving such a synthesis.

Because of the very nature of its development, Vedānta had remained closest to the Upanishads, and was more suitable as a meeting ground for all the philosophical systems which were directly rooted in them. It had taken shape as <sup>a</sup>result of a continuous effort to give a systematic form to the philosophy contained in the Upanishads. As the Upanishads did not exist in the form of systematised treatises, different interpretations were always possible, and the system of Vedānta therefore, though directly rooted in them, always enjoyed a certain amount of flexibility. Various points of view were always possible within its framework, and yet its close connection with the Upanishads

could always be retained.

The work of systematically explaining the philosophical contents of the Upanishads was first undertaken by Bādarāyaṇa. But this first exposition of the Vedānta was offered in the form of Sūtras, which on account of their cryptic nature, could be differently interpreted. Thus, in the course of its development, Vedānta was explained in different ways and had remained flexible enough to accommodate a wide range of differences without losing its substantial unity, which was formally based on the Vedānta-Sūtras of Bādarāyaṇa. On account of this flexibility, Vedānta had also developed a great capacity for assimilation of other influences. For example, it had not been shy even of the influence of the opposite forces of the nāstika group, and long before Śaṅkara, Vedānta had absorbed some of the Buddhist concepts as well.

An earlier Vedāntin, Gauḍapāda, shows a considerable influence of Buddhist thought.<sup>1</sup> A similar phenomenon is

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1. According to Chandradhara Sharma, Gauḍapāda represents the best that is in Nāgārjuna and Vāśubandhu. Radhakrishnan describes the Kārikā of Gauḍapāda as an "attempt to combine in one whole the negative logic of the Mādhyāmikās with the positive idealism of the Upanishads" and states that Gauḍapāda's "liberal views enabled him to accept doctrines associated with Buddhism and adjust them to the Advaita-Vedānta".  
Chandradhar Sharma, A Critical Survey of Indian Philosophy, Rider & Co., London 1960, p. 239.  
S. Radhakrishnan, ibid., Vol.II, p.465.

seen in Śaṅkara, who clearly included in his system of Vedānta certain Buddhist elements such as the doctrine of Māyā and the value of monasticism. This ability of Vedānta to incorporate the strong influence of Buddhist philosophy was perhaps its additional strength. It could help in extending its influence and popularity in view of the predominant impact of Buddhism on Indian life and thought.

Śaṅkara used <sup>the</sup> Vedānta as a platform for unifying the Āstika systems. He used it as a medium to transmit a unified philosophy, complete in itself, fundamentals of which would be acceptable to all the Āstika groups. He established it now on a stronger footing in relation with the other systems of philosophy. He crystallised it and gave it a new shape through his clear cut philosophy of Advaitavāda or non-dualism. At the same time he argued and proved that out of all the systems of philosophy it was Vedānta which stood closest to the meaning and the wisdom of the Vedas.

In his introduction to Sarva-Siddhānta-Saṅgraha, Śaṅkara discusses the auxiliary limbs (angas), the secondary limbs (upāṅgas) of the Vedas, and the supplementary Vedas (upavedas).<sup>1</sup> But out of the fourteen branches of knowledge

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1. Sarva-Siddhānta-Saṅgraha, I.2.

mentioned under them, he regards <sup>the</sup> Mīmāṃsā, which is devoted to the enquiry into the meaning and aim of all the Vedas, as the highest.<sup>1</sup> The Pūrva-Mīmāṃsā, he explains deals only with rituals or Karma, whereas the Uttara-Mīmāṃsā is divided into two parts - one dealing with the deities (Devatā-Kāṇḍa), the other with jñāna or wisdom (Jñāna-Kāṇḍa).<sup>2</sup> The explanatory commentary written on the Jñāna-Kāṇḍa is described by Śaṅkara as Vedānta.<sup>3</sup> Although Śaṅkara connects <sup>the</sup> Mīmāṃsā as a whole with the "meaning and aim of the Vedas", he regards only the Jñāna-Kāṇḍa of Uttara-Mīmāṃsā as Vedānta, the end and the aim of the Vedas. As far as other systems of philosophy go, Śaṅkara points out that they all culminate in <sup>the</sup> Vedānta. According to him, the conclusions of all the other systems tend towards the same as those of Vedānta.<sup>4</sup>

Śaṅkara's desire to create a philosophical synthesis of the āstika schools in terms of Vedānta can be clearly seen in the opening and the concluding remarks of his Sarva-Siddhānta-Saṅgraha. He mentions at the outset that "the Brahman, who is differently understood by different controversialists of philosophy, can be realised in the

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1. Sarva-Siddhānta-Saṅgraha, I.16,17.

2. Ibid., I.20.

3. Ibid., I.22.

4. Ibid., XII.1.

Vedānta."<sup>1</sup> He concludes his account of the different systems of philosophy and religion with the remark that "he who hears in the proper order these well abridged conclusions of all the systems culminating in the Vedānta becomes the knower of things and a learned person in the world."<sup>2</sup>

Śaṅkara not only established an infallible position for <sup>the</sup> Vedānta as the main purport of the Vedas and a meeting ground of the fundamentals of different philosophical trends, but was also able to give it a new dimension as a philosophical system in itself. The systematisation of Vedānta by Śaṅkara in terms of Advaita created a thought-system "which in consistence, thoroughness and profundity, holds the first place in Indian philosophy". According to Thibaut, "the doctrine advocated by Śaṅkara is, from a purely philosophical point of view, and apart from all theological considerations, the most important and interesting one which has arisen on Indian soil; neither those forms of the Vedānta, which diverge from the view represented by Śaṅkara nor any of the non-Vedantic systems, can be compared with the so-called orthodox Vedānta in boldness, depth and subtlety of speculation."<sup>3</sup> Śaṅkara's

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1. Ibid., I.1.

2. Ibid., XII, 99.

3. Thibaut, quoted, Radhakrishnan, Indian Philosophy, ibid., Vol.II, pp.445-46.

the treatment of/Vedānta was thus unique. In the words of Radhakrishnan his Advaita-Vedānta stands forth complete as a philosophy "needing neither a before nor an after".<sup>1</sup>

(b) Sāṅkara's Challenge to Vaiṣṇavism

The superiority of Vedānta, thus established by Sāṅkara not only affected the relative position of the other orthodox systems of philosophy but had serious repercussions on Vaiṣṇavism too. The Vaiṣṇavas were a religious group, āstika in nature but held together mainly on the basis of the worship of a common deity, Viṣṇu. They had no distinct and exclusive thought system of their own comparable to the six classical schools of philosophy. Viṣṇu-worship constituted the very essence of their religion, and their formal theology had evolved as a result of the influences of the prevailing systems of philosophy.<sup>2</sup> That the Vaiṣṇava thought on the whole had drawn freely from all the āstika philosophical schools is clear from the speculative parts of their scriptures which show that such an

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1. Ibid., p.446.

2. This can be seen in the important literary texts of the Vaiṣṇavas such as the Bhāgavat Purāṇa and the Viṣṇu Purāṇa. It may be added here however that the Vaiṣṇava Samhitās also, when they consist of four parts, one of which is called the Jñāna-pāda, show similar influences.

assimilative process was going on from an early stage. In the pre-Saṅkara period, however, the Vaishṇavas had relied more definitely on the Sāṅkhya philosophy for the development of their theology, and the deity Viṣṇu was upheld by them in the Sāṅkhya terminology as pure Sattva.<sup>1</sup>

The growing popularity of Saṅkara's philosophy and the new status acquired by Vedānta came as a challenge to the Vaishṇavas. Vaishṇavism had always had a great following and had served as one of the main āstika strongholds against the nāstika group till now.<sup>2</sup> When Saṅkara used Vedānta as the touchstone for testing the validity of all āstika systems of thought and was successful in establishing it as the meeting ground of all the theistic groups, it became increasingly important for the Vaishṇavas also to explain their religious beliefs in terms of <sup>the</sup> Vedānta if they were to

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1. Sarva-Siddhānta-Saṅgraha, Chapter XI.

2. Prabodha-Chandrodaya, an allegorical and popular Sanskrit play of the 11th century, gives a clear indication of this. Viṣṇu-bhakti is represented in this play as the repository of the true śraddhā and dharma at a time when the Upanishad was undergoing a period of crisis. It is Viṣṇu-bhakti which finally brings about a meeting of the Upanishad and viveka who had got separated from each other. The atheists find it difficult to combat Viṣṇu-bhakti and it is she who finally succeeds in gaining victory for viveka.

Krishṇa Mishra, Prabodha-Chandrodaya, Chowkambha Vidyā Bhavan, Banaras, 1955, Acts II, III, V, VI.



maintain and uphold their former position. An absence of an independent philosophical system exclusively their own, and their reliance on the principles of Sāṅkhya in their theology, are clearly indicated in Śaṅkara's observations on them in his Sarva-Siddhānta-Saṅgraha. It will not be wrong to mention here that no special religion or doctrine of Bhakti is attributed to the Vaishṇavas by Śaṅkara in this work.

In the Sarva-Siddhānta-Saṅgraha, Śaṅkara does not deal with the Vaishṇava Siddhānta separately but gives an account of their doctrines and beliefs in his discussion on the Veda-Vyasa-Paksha, where he mentions Viṣṇu-worship and the supremacy of the deity Viṣṇu as recognized by the Bhāgavatas.<sup>1</sup> The system of Veda-Vyasa is described by Śaṅkara as the essence of the Vedas as given out by Veda Vyasa in the Mahābhārata. He also explains that their views were derived from the Sāṅkhya system by the believers of the Vedas.<sup>2</sup> As is clear from this, Śaṅkara had fully recognized the āstika nature of the Vaishṇavas. Nevertheless, in view of Śaṅkara's challenge, the Vaishṇavas had now to explain their religious beliefs in terms of Vedānta if they were to maintain and uphold their former position.

Although Śaṅkara had not raised any objections to

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1. Sarva-Siddhānta-Saṅgraha, XI. 55, 58, 59, 66.

2. Ibid., XI. 1.

Vishṇu-worship and had given his general sanction to the religious modes of the Vaishṇavas, his impersonal and monistic view of Reality was obviously at variance with their essential beliefs.<sup>1</sup> First and foremost, the Vaishṇavas worshipped Vishṇu and his avatāras as personalities. No amount of theological manipulations to explain Vishṇu as the Brahman could change this basic position of the Vaishṇava religion. Similarly, certain religious modes closely linked with the temple-culture and idol-worship were an integral part of Vaishṇavism.<sup>2</sup> They were an easy accompaniment to the anthropomorphic view of the deity Vishṇu. Śaṅkara's position however, was basically opposed to this. His concept of the Nirguṇa Brahman was not at all compatible with the personal image of the deity. Nor could his non-dualistic explanation of Reality be conducive to idol-worship. But an essential dualism and a sense of otherness between the Deity and the devotee were a necessary counterpart of personality cults such as that of Vishṇu-worship. If God was to be worshipped as a person, He must be regarded as

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1. Brahma-Sutra-Bhashya, II. 2. 42-44.

2. The Pancharātra Saṁhitās, for example, lay great stress on temple-building (mandira-nirmāṇa) and image-making (pratishṭhā-vidhi). Detailed accounts of these can be found in the Kriyā-Pāda of the Saṁhita literature. F. Otto. Schrader, Introduction to the Pancarātra and the Ahirbudhnya Saṁhitā, Adyar Library, Madras, 1916, pp.22ff.

definitely other than the devotee. How could the non-dualism of Śaṅkara provide for this?

(c) The Vaishṇava Response.

In face of Śaṅkara's challenge therefore, the task before the Vaishṇava theologians was twofold. Not only was it necessary for them to explain their religious beliefs through the system of Vedānta, but it was equally important for them to assert the essential elements of the Vaishṇava tradition with a fresh vigour. The personality of Viṣṇu and of his avatāras had now to be reinstated in the language of the Vedānta, irrespective of Śaṅkara's impersonal representation of God. Similarly, provision had to be made within the framework of Vedānta for the deity as a clearly separate entity against Śaṅkara's non-dualistic view of Reality. Neither the worship of Viṣṇu nor that of his avatāras could have full significance without the sense of the otherness of the personal deity. The personality of Viṣṇu and that of his avatāra Kṛiṣṇa had to be synchronised somehow with the Vedāntic Brahman. At the same time this personal image of the Vaishṇava God had to be placed in logical relationship with the Vedāntic principles of God's immanence and of the unity of individual souls and God.

This emphasis on the Vaishṇava elements can be

clearly seen in the four systems of Vaishṇava Vedānta. Neither bhakti nor theism, but Viṣṇu-bhakti and Vaishṇavism are the real points of difference between Śaṅkara and the Vaishṇava āchāryas. The latter worked within the framework of Vedānta and did not so much aim at negating the Vedāntic concepts of the unity of the Brahman as safeguarding the fundamentals of the Vaishṇava religion. However, the Vaishṇava āchāryas show ready adjustments and compromise with the Advaita Vedānta in so far as their Vaishṇava beliefs are not superseded and to the extent that they find themselves in a position to retain their Vaishṇava bias in relation to it. Each Vaishṇava system of Vedānta, as well as the general nature of the progression of the Vaishṇava movement from Rāmānuja to Vallabhāchārya shows this.

Although Rāmānuja objects to Śaṅkara's non-dualism and qualifies it, he does not entirely oppose it. Like Śaṅkara he also conceives Reality as a unity. As the term itself indicates, the Viśiṣṭādvaita of Rāmānuja lays as much stress on the non-dualistic nature of Reality as it does on the difference which qualifies it. The inseparable unity of matter, souls, and God constitute the Brahman of Rāmānuja. The main disagreement between Śaṅkara and Rāmānuja, is that whereas Śaṅkara's Advaita is an undifferentiated monism, Rāmānuja's advaita is viśiṣṭa, or qualified.

Qualifying Śaṅkara's monism, Rāmānuja lays down three ultimate realities (tattva-traya): God (Īśvara), Soul (chit) and matter (achit). But he also establishes the principle of an internal relation of inseparability (aprāthaka-siddhi) amongst them, which serves as the pivot on which his whole philosophy runs.<sup>1</sup> Soul and matter are distinct from God, but are not separate from Him. They are attributes (prakāra) of God. They are the controlled (niyāmya) the supported (dhārya) the parts (aṅśas) and the accessory means (śeṣha). God is their substance (prakṛiti), controller (niyantā), support (ādhāra), whole (aṅśī), and the principal end (śeṣhī). He is free from all internal (sajātīya) as well as external (vi-jātīya) differences because there is nothing similar or dissimilar which is external to or other than Him.<sup>2</sup> Rāmānuja's Absolute is therefore an organic unity - a concrete whole (Viśiṣṭa) consisting of interrelated and interdependent subordinate elements which cannot exist by themselves in separation from the substantive element (Viśeṣhya). The distinction and the supremacy of God or Īśvara is thus established by Rāmānuja within the non-dualistic unity of

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1. M. Hiriyanna, Outlines of Indian Philosophy, George Allen & Unwin, London, 1932, p.399ff.

2. Chandradhar Sharma, ibid., p.347.

the Ultimate Reality.

Like Rāmānuja, Madhva also believes in the three distinct entities of matter, soul, and God. But he does not support Rāmānuja's principle of inseparability. On the contrary, Madhva dwells more on the principle of difference and separation amongst them. Madhva clearly rejects Śaṅkara's monistic Vedānta and offers his own which is clearly dualistic. He puts forward a clear and fundamental difference between soul and God. Against Śaṅkara's description of the jīva as the pratibimba of Brahman, Madhva's dualism or Dvaitavāda provides for the bimba-pratibimba relationship between the two. Although Madhva acknowledges Brahman as the independent source of Reality, he states that the consciousness and the activity of the jīva cannot be experienced without dependence upon the Brahman. The bimba-pratibimba relationship according to Madhva cannot be annulled and must remain eternal.<sup>1</sup>

But in spite of this dualism, Madhva also leaves some room for unity between the Brahman and jīva. He substitutes the idea of identity of Śaṅkara and that of inseparability of Rāmānuja with his own idea of aṅśatva.<sup>2</sup>

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1. B.N.K. Sharma, Philosophy of Sri Madhvācārya, Bhāratīya Vidyā Bhavan, Bombay, 1962, p. 218 ff.<sup>h</sup>

2. Ibid., p. 227.

Madhva regards jīva as similar to Brahman to the degree that the former possesses the latter's characteristics of reality, consciousness and bliss. Speaking in this strain, Madhva sometimes identifies the jīva with the Brahman and describes a free soul as akin to God. So much so, that on these <sup>also</sup> grounds sometimes the followers of Madhva/claim their position to be monistic.<sup>1</sup>

Like Rāmānuja and Madhva, Nimbārka also conceives Reality in three parts - God, Soul and matter. But his Dvaitādvaita Vedānta is really a dualistic monism. Nimbārka accepts the difference as well as the non-difference between the Brahman and the individual souls, and between Brahman and the phenomenal world. According to him soul and matter have no independent existence and are not different from God. Individual souls are not the rays of Brahman individualised, as suggested by the Vivartvādins, but are essentially of the nature of knowledge (jñāna - svarūpa). Matter and souls are not attributes of God, but they constitute parts and power of God.<sup>2</sup>

Vallabhāchārya takes a completely monistic stand. His Suddhādvaita or pure monism explains the whole universe

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1. K. Narain, An Outline of Madhva Philosophy, Udayana Publications, Allahabad, 1962, p. 123.

2. Chandradhar Sharma, ibid., p. 376 ff.

as Brahman. Neither the individual souls nor the inanimate world has any separate existence. God is the whole and the individual is a part thereof. According to Vallabha, the relation between the two is that of the spark and the fire. The universe is neither an illusion nor a manifestation of Brahman, but is its natural emanation. God is the one supreme inner ruler of the universe (antaryāmin). The material world is only a manifestation of His aspects of existence and knowledge. Brahman as bliss remains obscure in the material world, states Vallabha, but from His nature as Bliss, spring forth the antaryāmins who are the residing deities of the souls and are as numerous as the souls.<sup>1</sup>

Thus in spite of their differences with Śaṅkara, the Vaiṣṇava āchāryas show some agreement and compromise with his advaitavāda. On the whole they acknowledge the oneness of the jīva and the Brahman or of soul and God. As a group occupied with the task of developing a different view of Vedānta from that of Śaṅkara in spite of seriously modifying his views they seem to gravitate more towards the non-dualistic than a dualistic view of Reality. Each one of them had put forward his system of Vedānta in refutation of Śaṅkara, but out of the four Vaiṣṇava āchāryas, it was only Madhva who took a clearly dualistic stand. Rāmānuja

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1. S.N. Dasgupta, ibid., Vol. IV, p. 331ff.



and Nimbārka were content with modifications of non-dualism. Vallabhāchārya went to the extent of evolving his own non-dualism, though different from that of Śaṅkara. It is therefore wrong to regard these systems of Vedānta as assertions of the sense of dualism and otherness between man and God for the propagation of bhakti or devotion.

The more serious difference between Śaṅkara and the Vaishṇava āchāryas lies in the uniform insistence by the latter on a personal view of God. All of them uphold Īśvara or God as perfect personality (Purushottama) and describe Him in terms of good qualities (saguṇa). But although the categories of Īśvara and Purushottama are the same as that of Brahman in the Vaishṇava āchāryas, their views in this respect are absolutely different from that of Śaṅkara who always regards Brahman in its final form as nirguṇa and impersonal.

In their personal view of God however, the Vaishṇava āchāryas were asserting only their Vaishṇava bias. The worship of the personal deity Viṣṇu and of the deified personality of Kṛiṣṇa was an integral part of Vaishṇavism. It was necessary to keep the supreme position of these personalities intact if Vaishṇavism was to retain its own character while speaking the language of Vedānta. In the Vaishṇava-Vedānta, the concept of the Purushottama provided

ample scope for bringing in the anthropomorphic view of God, which was a vital part of the Vaishṇava religion. Rāmānuja and Madhva installed and exalted Viṣṇu in their Vedānta as the Purushottama and the Brahman. Similarly Nimbārka and Vallabha concentrated a great deal on the personality of Kṛishṇa in theirs. But this emphasis on God as a person, and on Viṣṇu and Kṛishṇa, was for the purpose of upholding the Vaishṇava religion. These personal conceptions of God were not evolved in <sup>the</sup> Vaishṇava-Vedānta for the propagation of any /bhakti religion or doctrine.

#### iv. Bhakti in the Vaishṇava Achāryas.

##### (a) Rāmānuja

Both the Upanishadic and the Vaishṇava elements are present in Rāmānuja's scheme of Sādhnā. Inspired by one, he lays stress on contemplation, individual efforts, and internalised forms of devotion. Guided by the other, he gives full recognition to overt and ritualistic modes of worship followed by the Vaishṇavas. On the one hand Rāmānuja emphasises the importance of dhyāna, jñāna, and yoga. On the other he talks of the path of complete surrender, devoid of all these as sufficient. But on the whole he recognizes the path of self effort, contemplation and jñāna as the

higher one and identifies it with bhakti.<sup>1</sup>

Rāmānuja lays down two categories of sādhana, that of bhakti and prapatti. They are defined differently and are recommended for different types of aspirants. Nevertheless one is definitely declared to be higher than the other. The path of bhakti is recommended for the three upper castes, and only the path of prapatti is left open for the sūdrās. Whereas meditation, knowledge, and spiritual experience are declared essential for bhakti, the mere act of surrender is considered as sufficient for those who follow the path of prapatti.<sup>2</sup> Considering this distinction made by Rāmānuja between bhakti and prapatti, it is wrong to interpret his bhakti as the path of simple surrender opposed to that of jñāna.

Rāmānuja does not describe bhakti as a form of faith or doctrine, but describes it in very clear terms as an act of constant memory. In this context memory is explained by Rāmānuja as meditation or dhyāna. According to him it is this memory or smṛiti which adopts the nature of, and culminates in an immediate intuitive perception or pratyakshatā. Those who are attached to this state, obtain

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1. Hiriyanṇa, ibid., pp. 410 ff.

2. Radhakrishnan, ibid., Vol. II, pp. 705-6.  
See also Chandradhara Sharma, ibid., pp. 352ff.

liberation on account of their intense love for the object of their memory.<sup>1</sup> In other words, Rāmānuja's bhakti is aimed at and results in a kind of intuitive knowledge. Therefore, if in the context of spiritual endeavour or sādhnā, jñāna is correctly understood in the sense of spiritual knowledge derived from personal experience, Rāmānuja's bhakti must be considered synonymous with it. Thus Rāmānuja defines bhakti as an experience which is the result of devout meditation, is accompanied with love, and is also a kind of knowledge.

Rāmānuja is generally described as the chief protagonist of the path of bhakti against that of jñāna. But this is a mistaken judgement. As shown above, bhakti is described by him as a particular kind of knowledge or jñāna-viśeṣa,<sup>2</sup> to which one is infinitely attached. According to him, it is this knowledge which leads to the extinction of all other interests and desires.

(b) Nimbārka.

Although Nimbārka views bhakti from a more emotional angle, and describes it as Mādhurya and rasa, it is the

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1. J. Gonda, "Het Begrip Bhakti", ibid., pp.651 ff.

2. S.N. Dasgupta, ibid., Vol.III, p.161.

intuitive perception of the Brahman, Brahmasākshātkāra, which remains the ultimate aim of his sādhnā. According to him the end of spiritual endeavour is to attain the feeling of oneness with God and to abide in Him as a part of His energy.<sup>1</sup> This can be achieved only through bhakti. Both thought and devotion are required in it, because the nature of the Brahman is revealed only through a process of spiritual realisation. According to Nimbārka, meditation on the nature of God and participation in Him as His constituent is the same as continuous devotion for Him.<sup>2</sup>

Nimbārka does not see any conflict between jñāna and bhakti. He does not only relate bhakti with knowledge, but regards the two as interdependent. According to him, liberation is caused by knowledge which is brought about by God's grace, which itself is due to devotion.<sup>3</sup> In a way Nimbārka regards knowledge as superior to bhakti, because his bhakti at once requires the knowledge of the Supreme Reality as well as that of the individual soul.

Nimbārka's bhakti does not exclude the element of

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1. S.N. Dasgupta, ibid., Vol.III, p.414.

2. Ibid., p.415.

3. Chandradhara Sharma, ibid., p.376.

individual endeavour either. On the contrary, the latter is considered necessary for the attainment of Brahma-Jñāna and Brahma-Sākshātkāra. Neither the idea of God's grace nor that of prapatti eliminate this from his thought. Nimbārka recognizes prapatti as a means of salvation and states that those who show it are favoured by God who engenders bhakti in them. Nevertheless, he maintains that it is only through the efforts of the devotee himself that God is moved to grant His grace. Prapatti or surrender to Him has value only in so far as it arouses bhakti and finally leads to the intuitive perception of the Brahman. But it is the latter which always remains the ultimate end of Nimbārka's bhakti.

(c) Madhva.

Madhva describes bhakti as a state of loving attachment born out of the knowledge and regard for the object of devotion. The knowledge and correct understanding of the greatness of God is necessary for bhakti because devotion, in order to be meaningful, must be founded on a firm and adequate knowledge of the object of devotion.<sup>1</sup> Since the purpose of bhakti is to manifest the true relation of jīva to Brahman, it is the knowledge of God alone which

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1. S.N. Dasgupta, ibid., Vol.IV, pp.317-18.  
See also B.N.K. Sharma, ibid., pp. 293 ff.

can produce the feeling of love and absolute dependence on Him.<sup>1</sup>

Thus there is no antagonism between devotion and knowledge in the philosophy of Madhva who regards jñāna as a direct constituent of bhakti, and bhakti a combination of knowledge and love. The principle of interdependence between the two is established by Madhva in very explicit terms. Not only this, but he goes even further and establishes the superiority of knowledge over bhakti. This is evident in the categories and <sup>the</sup> gradations made by him of bhakti, bhaktas, moksha and Īśvara-prasāda. According to him, different souls are capable of different kinds of devotion.<sup>2</sup> Madhva mentions three stages of bhakti, that which precedes Paroksha-jñāna, that which follows it, and that which comes after direct realisation and wins the absolute grace (atyārthaprasāda) of God.<sup>3</sup> The final and highest stage of bhakti is reached only when the true relationship between jīva and Brahman is realised, and the grace of God comes to the devotee only when he attains a stage of direct realisation. It is also clear from these gradations that in spite

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1. S. Radhakrishnan, ibid., Vol.II, p.747.

2. B.N.K. Sharma, ibid., p.292.

3. Ibid., p.296.

of his emphasis on the principle of Divine Grace, Madhva did not in any way minimize the importance of individual effort in spiritual endeavour.<sup>1</sup>

These aspects of Madhva's bhakti, existing within the framework of his dualistic Vedānta, support our contention that the term bhakti was at no stage used by the Vaishṇava āchāryas in its present meaning. If we accept the current definitions of bhakti, at least Madhva, as an exponent of the Dvaita-Vedānta, should have drawn a more clear line of demarcation between the path of devotion and that of knowledge. But even the dualistic philosophy of Madhva does not make it necessary for him to make such a division between bhakti and jñāna. The accepted definition of bhakti however vitiates our understanding of Madhva's exposition of it. Some studies of his philosophy, such as those of K. Narain and B.K.N. Sharma, suffer seriously from this defect. In order to conform to the existing view of bhakti, these scholars quote freely from the Bhāgavata-Purāṇa and other Vaishṇava works to define bhakti in general, and they then judge Madhva's bhakti in their light, instead of basing their understanding of it on Madhva's work alone.<sup>2</sup> That

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1. In the words of B.N. K. Sharma, "Madhva's peculiar doctrine of intrinsic gradation of fitness among various orders of souls enables him to correlate the different forms of devotion to different orders of selves.", ibid., p.292.

2. Ibid., See Chapter XLVIII.



Madhva should have given greater importance to knowledge in spite of giving locus-standi to bhakti is noted rather apologetically by both Narain and Sharma.<sup>1</sup> On the one hand therefore, an exaggerated view is taken of the place of bhakti in its present meaning in Madhva, on the other, great surprise is shown why he did not create a superior place for bhakti in relation to jñāna. This attitude is obviously due to the acceptance of the present fixed and artificial definition of bhakti and judging Madhva's bhakti in its light, instead of accepting it on its own face value.

(d) Vallabha.

Of the four Vaishṇava āchāryas, Vallabha deserves our special attention from the standpoint of the current ideas about bhakti, for it is his exposition of bhakti which

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1. In order to make the bhakti of Madhva compatible with the current concept of bhakti, Sharma feels the need for introducing his discussion on Madhva's bhakti by quoting Jayatīrtha instead of Madhva himself. He explains apologetically that the "point in Madhva's insistence on mahātmyajñāna as one of the constituents of Bhakti is that a blind and ignorant devotion is of no philosophical worth". Similarly, Narain observes that "it would unmistakably occur to us that bhakti in his system could not acquire that supreme status as was expected from a doyen of the bhakti movement". Narain tries to explain away the importance attached by Madhva and his followers by suggesting that this was due to "the fear that the futility of knowledge as a means to liberation would establish the futility of their labour in writing works on philosophy".

B.N.K. Sharma, ibid., pp.287 and 289; K.Narain, ibid., 174.

the conforms/most to them. A clear and definite emphasis on a personal God, complete reliance on emotions and on God's grace, and a separation from the path of knowledge are the chief characteristics of the path of Vallabhāchārya, which is known as the Pushti-Mārga.

In his Bhakti-Vardhanī, Vallabha describes prema (love) as the seed of bhakti.<sup>1</sup> He defines bhakti as an overwhelming affection for God, accompanied by a full sense of his greatness.<sup>2</sup> Amongst the followers of Vallabha, bhakti is generally interpreted as a combination of love and service. Bhakti as sevā can exist for the name (nāma-sevā), as well as for the form (rūpa-sevā). Sevā or service may be of the body (tanujā) of material wealth (vittayā), or of the mind (manasā). The bhakti of the Vallabha school has an intensely emotional angle. The seven stages of bhakti<sup>3</sup> mentioned by Vallabhacharya himself - of bhāva, prema, pranaya, sneha, rāga, anurāga and vyasana - indicate purely emotional states of love. According to him the devotee attains the highest state of bhakti only when his love for God assumes the nature of a passion (vyasana).

Jñāna or knowledge does not have much significance

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1. S.N. Dasgupta, ibid., Vol.IV, p.355.

2. Ibid., p.347.

3. Ibid., p.356.

in the emotionalism of Vallabha's bhakti. Similarly no importance is attached to individual effort in his Pushti-mārga. They are not necessary for bhakti nor for salvation. According to Vallabha, the devotee must depend entirely on God's grace or Pushti, for according to him bhakti is itself a product of pushti. Bhakti is aroused and the sins are destroyed through the grace of God, and the same ends which are otherwise achieved through jñāna, karma and upāsana, can be attained through the pushti-mārga.

A completely personal image of God, as seen in Kṛishṇa, completes the pattern of Vallabha's bhakti. Since Kṛishṇa is recognized as the Supreme Deity by Vallabha, Kṛishṇa-worship forms the nucleus of his religious inspiration. A great importance is attached to the life and personality of Kṛishṇa, particularly to the accounts of his childhood in the Vallabha School in/love, service and surrender are conceived and understood only in relation to the personal deity Kṛishṇa.

Although these aspects of Vallabha's devotionalism conform to the current ideas about bhakti, it must be remembered that even Vallabhāchārya does not offer any single and fixed definition of bhakti limiting it to his own views. When he elaborates on bhakti, he does so to emphasise his own pattern of it, that of Pushti-bhakti. The

general connotation of the term bhakti however, is not limited by him. On the contrary, the variability of its character according to the nature of the object towards which it is directed, is duly recognized by Vallabha. Although he himself is in favour of the Pushti-bhakti and recommends it in terms of Kṛishṇa-worship and an emotional approach to religion, he gives full recognition to the bhakti directed to the Nirguṇa Brahman.<sup>1</sup> This is clear from the division made by Vallabhāchārya between Pushti-bhakti and Maryādā-bhakti.

According to Vallabha, the souls are either Godly or demonic. Each acts according to his own nature. Whereas the latter remain excluded from Sādhnā, the former are always capable of bhakti. Vallabha divides the Godly souls into two categories - those who follow the path of Maryādā - bhakti and the others, who follow the path of Pushti-bhakti.<sup>2</sup> This distinction is explained by Vallabha as that of Pushti-mārga and the Maryādā-Mārga. We have already mentioned the salient features of the former. The latter however, is described by Vallabha as the Vedic path in which bhakti is attained by Karma, jñāna and upāsana, and in which liberation can be attained only through individual effort.

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1. Ibid., pp. 354-56.

2. Jadunath Sinha, A History of Indian Philosophy, Central Book Agency, Calcutta, 1952, Vol. II, p. 718.

Thus Vallabha gives us two alternate categories of bhakti, the Maryādā-bhakti and the pushti-bhakti. Whereas the former is described as a constituent of the Vedic path, compatible with jñāna and self-endeavour, the latter, it is said, can be cultivated entirely through a loving dependence on God's grace. The distinction of these two categories of bhakti becomes still more clear when Vallabha explains that those who follow the Maryādā-bhakti, attain the Akshara Brahman, but those who practice the pushti-bhakti, attain the Purushottama or the Supreme Person.

The above analysis shows that the Vaishṇava āchāryas were not evolving any conceptional system of bhakti to give it the status of a doctrine. It also shows that they had no uniform and restricted definition of bhakti to work with. Moreover, the bhakti of the Vaishṇava āchāryas does not conform to its current definition, for they do not regard it as incompatible with jñāna and divorced from the path of self-realisation.

Thus the Vaishṇava āchāryas were not expounding any special religion of bhakti against Śaṅkara's path of jñāna. Their differences with Śaṅkara were due to their sectarian loyalty to Vaishṇavism and their systems of Vedānta were in the nature of a Vaishṇava defence against the challenge of Śaṅkara's Advaitavāda. As shown above, bhakti is not

absent in Śaṅkara and he does not uphold the path of intellectual and abstract knowledge against that of bhakti. Certain corrections are therefore called for in the current view of the Bhakti Movement in relation to Śaṅkara and the Vaishṇava āchāryas.

CHAPTER IVKABĪR AND THE CURRENT CONCEPT OF BHAKTI : A REAPPRAISAL

The fixity and the general currency of the present theories about bhakti and the Bhakti Movement place a serious limitation on attempts at an adequate understanding of the exact nature of Kabīr's religious and intellectual position. The tendency to judge and analyse him in the light of an artificial definition of bhakti has led to many misconceptions about him. Kabīr's religious faith, which is rooted in his personal spiritual experience does not arise out of any formally fixed ideology or doctrine of bhakti. What is found in his verses, not only does not fit in with the current view of bhakti but clearly contradicts it.

Kabīr believes not in a personal but an impersonal God. His bhakti does not depend upon a dualistic view of Reality but rests on his keen awareness of the essential oneness of things. Furthermore, the emotional intensity of his devotionism does not rule out the path of self-knowledge or jñāna. Although Kabīr shows no respect for scholasticism, he attaches great importance to jñāna in the sense of self-knowledge which he regards as the highest spiritual end.

But all these aspects of Kabīr's thought are not

weighed properly in their own right and are not accepted at their face value. Instead of ascertaining his position directly from his verses, enquiries into his thought and religion are invariably undertaken in the light of a fixed definition of bhakti. His devotionalism is therefore, interpreted sometimes as love for a personal God, and his bhakti as an antithesis of the path of knowledge or jñāna. Again, for the same reasons, to the extent that bhakti is identified with Vaiṣṇavism, Kabīr as a bhakta is represented as a Vaiṣṇava without taking cognizance of the fundamental difference between his standpoint and that of Vaiṣṇavism.

As pointed out earlier, similar difficulties are caused in the assessments of Kabīr when the various vital currents which shaped the medieval religious renaissance in India are collectively viewed as a Bhakti Movement in the light of the present restricted meaning of bhakti. Without going into the general implications of the term, and rejecting its wider meaning, Kabīr, a nirguṇa bhakta is easily placed in line with the Vaiṣṇava bhaktas. The origins of his religious inspiration are then sought in Vaiṣṇavism and the source of his bhakti is traced back to the medieval Vaiṣṇava āchāryas, although he has very little in common with them. These attitudes create obvious difficulties in tracing the antecedents of Kabīr and his nirguṇa school.



However, Kabīr's Nirguṇa school constitutes a distinct bhakti tradition. Its strong emphasis on the idea of an impersonal God, the evidence of Advaita philosophy and Yoga in it, and its emphasis on Self-knowledge and reasoning do not detract from its essential character of bhakti. That such factors can accompany bhakti is a position not difficult to take, if the word bhakti is understood in its broader meaning, and not as a special religion or cult.

It must be pointed out here that no set and restricted definition of bhakti was current in the medieval period. This is quite clear from the Bhakta-Māla of Nābhādās which is the earliest known account of the medieval bhaktas to be found in a single work. Nābhādās takes a very general view of bhakti and does not regard it as any fixed doctrinal position. Nor does he restrict it to Viṣṇu-worship and the Vaiṣṇava religious modes alone. The Bhakta-Māla includes a variety of religious personalities of different philosophical viewpoints in its list of bhaktas. The Advaita Vedāntin Śaṅkara,<sup>1</sup> the Vaiṣṇava commentator of the Bhāgavata Purāṇa, Śrīdhara,<sup>2</sup> and the Vaiṣṇava āchāryas,

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1. Nābhādās, Bhakta-Māla, 2 Volumes, Banares 1904-9, Chhappaya 37. (Abbrev. Chappaya: Chh)

2. Ibid., Chh. 40.

Rāmānuja, Madhva, Nimbārka etc.<sup>1</sup> are all listed together as bhaktas. Similarly, the medieval nirguṇa bhaktas like Kabīr,<sup>2</sup> Pīpā<sup>3</sup> and Raidās<sup>4</sup> are mentioned along with the Vaishṇava devotees such as Tulsīdās<sup>5</sup> and Sūrdās.<sup>6</sup>

That Nābhādās should not represent bhakti in purely Vaishṇava terms is all the more significant when we know that he himself was a Vaishṇava and find his Vaishṇava sympathies otherwise so clear in his work. Furthermore, bhakti is not treated here as a religion based on a sense of the otherness of God. Nor is the sense of duality between the bhakta and Bhagavān accepted as a necessary pre-requisite of bhakti.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, knowledge and philosophical thought are nowhere represented as antagonistic to bhakti. On the contrary, Nābhādās pays tribute to the bhakta Jñāneśvara of Mahārāshṭra for his profound thinking,<sup>8</sup> and describes bhakta

1. Ibid., Chh. 24.

2. Ibid., Chh. 55.

3. Ibid., Chh. 61.

4. Ibid., Chh. 54.

5. Ibid., Chh. 124.

6. Ibid., Chh. 41.

7. On the contrary Nābhādās points out the oneness of bhakta, bhakti, and Bhagavat, ibid., dohā 1.

8. Ibid., Chh. 43.

Kīlhadēva of Gujerat as one who strengthened the viewpoint of Sāṅkhya-yoga.<sup>1</sup> Similarly yoga is also not regarded by Nābhādās as incompatible with bhakti, for he speaks also of the yogic excellence of bhaktās like Kṛishṇadās.<sup>2</sup>

There is no indication in the Bhaktā-Māla of any contradiction between bhakti and the non-dualistic philosophy of Sāṅkarāchārya either. That Nābhādās' list of bhaktas includes the name of Sāṅkarāchārya is a fact which has hitherto been completely ignored by scholars in their researches on bhakti and the Bhakti Movement. This fact however, deserves our special attention particularly when the medieval upsurge of bhakti is so often and so clearly explained as a reaction against the "cold intellectualism" of Sāṅkara and as a path separate from that of jñāna or knowledge. The inclusion of Sāṅkara in the Bhaktā-Māla is in itself the strongest possible proof that there exists no antagonism between jñāna and bhakti, and that bhakti is completely compatible with Sāṅkara's ideology.

To the extent that the general nature of bhakti, so clearly seen in Nābhādās, is recognized and accepted, there

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1. Ibid., Chh.35.

2. Ibid., Chh.33.

remains no cause to question the unity of the Bhakti-Movement and the medieval bhāktas. But if bhakti is equated with Vaishṇavism and is understood in terms of specific doctrines and sets of beliefs, a clear and definite division between the Vaishṇava bhāktas like Tulsīdās and the nirguṇa-bhāktas such as Kabīr becomes necessary. The two groups that they represent would then stand apart, for they advocate different ideas and attitudes. Whereas the worship of Viṣṇu and his avatāras is of fundamental importance to the Vaishṇava bhāktas, the nirguṇa bhāktas consider the Nirguṇa Brahman alone as the object of worship. To one, the sense of the otherness of God remains important for bhakti, to the other, the understanding and realisation of His non-otherness is the first step to it. For one, love, supplication, and surrender to the deity are the modes of reaching out to Him in worship, for the other, the love and passion for self realisation, and the constant effort of the self for it, are the only means of attaining Him. But since bhakti is common to both and continues to be understood in a restricted meaning, which it has artificially assumed, there is a constant effort in scholarship somehow to hold the two groups together, in spite of taking note of their differences. Whenever the distinction between the two groups is taken into account, the basic points of

disagreement which distinguish the nirguṇa from the Vaishṇava bhaktas are either completely ignored or are somehow explained away in order to maintain the perfect compatibility between the nirguṇa bhaktas and the present definition of bhakti.

Consequently, Kabīr, a nirguṇa bhakta, has not been studied with the freedom that a sound academic enquiry requires. He is invariably approached from the standpoint of certain pre-conceived notions about bhakti. However, the exact nature of his thought, the true source of his religious inspiration, his impact on the life and the thought of medieval India, and the immediate antecedents of his school cannot be properly ascertained without the necessary freedom from this fixed position. Therefore, a closer look at Kabīr as a bhakta in relation to the current theories about bhakti is necessary for a correct evaluation of his personality and thought.

The object of the following analysis of the nature of Kabīr's bhakti, his concept of God, his attitude to jñāna and the Advaita ideology, and his position in relation to Vaishṇavism is to seek a rectification of some of the current misconceptions about him. After disassociating him from Vaishṇavism, and from the ideology which is attributed to him on account of the existing views about bhakti, an

attempt is made to trace the antecedents of his nirguṇa school against the total background of the religio-intellectual climate of his age.

(i) Kabīr's Bhakti

It is wrong to relate Kabīr's devotionalism to the present standardized definition of bhakti and the ideology attached to it. Regarding him as a Vaishṇava, attributing to him a belief in a personal God, and representing him as an upholder of the path of bhakti as opposed to jñāna and the Advaita Vedānta have led to only a gross misinterpretation of his thought. Kabīr was always pointing out the meaninglessness of the differences of religious doctrines and practices. His position therefore can hardly conform to a sectarian tradition, Vaishṇavism, with which bhakti is so completely identified today. Similarly, his bhakti, which is clearly directed towards an impersonal and nirguṇa God, does not conflict with monistic Vedānta.

That Kabīr's bhakti is not opposed to jñāna and is directed not towards a personal but towards an impersonal God, and that it rests not on a sense of otherness, but on one of the final oneness of God and man, will become clearer in our subsequent discussions. At this stage however, we shall concern ourselves with the two remaining major aspects

of Kabīr's devotion, which are equally incompatible with the current definition of bhakti. Firstly, <sup>that</sup> Kabīr's bhakti does not appear as a doctrine or a religion; and secondly, that Kabīr does not describe bhakti as a simple and easy path of surrender.

Although Kabīr speaks fervently of bhakti and bhakti remains the main inspiration of his poetry, he never expounds it as special religion or doctrine and does not formally outline its nature. Nor does he describe it as a fixed form of belief. On the contrary, he repeatedly points out the impossibility of describing and explaining the exact nature of the spiritual experience which he regards as both the means and the end of bhakti.

Kabīr uses the word bhakti in its basic and intrinsic meaning, in the sense of a bhāva or feeling, and implies by it a mental attitude, and not a formal belief. He very often uses the phrase bhāva-bhakti in the sense of devotion. Bhāva-bhakti, explains Kabīr, can be known only through personal experience. It is not a matter of verbal exposition, nor can it be explained and known through argumentation and hearsay.<sup>1</sup> God must be worshipped through

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1. kathanīñ badnīñ sab janjāl, bhāva bhagati aur Rām nirāl,  
kathai badai sunaiñ sab koī, katheñ na hoī kiyeñ hoy.  
Kabīr Granthāvalī, ed. Shyām Sunder Dās, Nāgarī  
Pracharāñī Sabha, Kāśī, 7th ed., 1959, p.134  
(Abbrev. KG)

this bhāva-bhakti<sup>1</sup> because/<sup>the</sup>worshipful acts of devotion and other religious performances can have no meaning without it.<sup>2</sup>

For Kabīr bhakti is not a path of passive surrender, but is an arduous process requiring self knowledge and courage and a constant effort towards self-realisation. According to him only the brave and the valiant can tread the path of bhakti. Those who are devoid of courage, are unable to cope with it, for bhakti is like the sharp edge of a blade. One who wavers or trembles is bound to cut himself. Only the one who is able to stand firmly on it can attain liberation with safety. Mounted on the steed of love with the sword of knowledge in his hand the devotee can conquer death.<sup>3</sup>

1. bhāva bhagati sūñ Hari na arādhā, janam maran kī miṭī na sādha KG p. 209.

sāch sīl kā chaukā dījai, bhāva bhagati kī sevā kījai. KG., p. 210.

2. kyā jap kyā tap sanjamāñ, kyā tīrath brat asnāñ  
jo pain jugati na jāniye, bhāva bhagati Bhagavāñ. KG.p.110.

3. bhagati duhelī Rām kī, nahi kāyar kā kām,  
sīs utāre hāthi kari, so lesī hari nām.  
bhagati duhelī Rām kī, jaisi khāñde kī dhār.  
je dolai tau kaṭi padai, nahīñ tau utarai pār.  
bhagati duhelī Rām kī, jaisi agani kī jhāl.  
dāki paḍe te ūbare, dādhe kautigahār.  
Kabīr ghōḍā prem kā, chetani chadhī asavār.  
gyāñ shadāg gahi kāl siri, bhalī machāī mār. KG. p.62.



Thus bhakti is not just a simple act of faith for Kabīr, but is a reasoned and an individual act of spiritual striving. According to Kabīr bhakti is caused by and attained only through divine love which is not easy to find. The devotee must strive for it and remain constantly occupied with it. The divine love does not grow in the fields, nor is it sold in the public places. Whether a king or a commoner, only he who holds it dearer than his own life can obtain it.<sup>1</sup> The door that leads to bhakti is narrow and difficult, and the house of God's love is not within easy reach. Only he who is ready to surrender everything and lay down his life has the right to enter it.<sup>2</sup> The wine of divine love is not easy to receive. The one who serves it asks for your very life before pouring it out to you,<sup>3</sup> for there are so many who wait, but only he who can lay down his life for it will be able to drink of it.<sup>4</sup> The ways

1. prem na khetaun nānpajai, prem na hāṭi bikāya.  
rājā parajā jis ruchai, sir de so le jāya. KG. p.62.
2. Kabīr yahu ghar prem kā, khālā kā ghara nāñhi  
sīs utārai hāthi kari, so paise ghar māñhi. ibid.
3. Rām rasāyan prem ras, pīvat adhik rasāl.  
Kabīr pīvaṇ dūlabha hai, māṅgai sīs kalāl. KG. p.14.
4. Kabīr bhāṭhī kalāl kī, bahutak baithe āya.  
sir saupē soī pivai, nahīn to piyā na jāya. ibid.

of love are not easy, nor can the beloved be found with easy laughter. The search for him involves pain and suffering, and only he who knows the anguish of separation can hope to find him.<sup>1</sup>

Since bhakti is for Kabīr a matter of feeling and experience, and not a matter of any fixed or formal religious belief or doctrine, he clearly points out the possibilities of its different modes of expression.<sup>2</sup> God can be felt and realized in various ways<sup>3</sup> and the modes of his worship assume different forms.<sup>4</sup> But Kabīr's recognition of the different manifestations and modes of bhakti does not minimize the definiteness of his individual preference and views. Kabīr's own bhakti is rooted in mysticism and clearly arises, and takes shape from his personal spiritual experience. The beliefs with which he supports this pattern

1. hañsi hañsi kaṁta na pāiye, jini pāyā tini roya.  
jo hāñsenhī harī milai, tau nahīñ duhāgani koya.

hāñsī khelaun hari milai, tau kauna sahai sharasān.  
kāṁ krodha trishṇāñ tajai, tāhi milai Bhagavān.  
KG, p.8.

2. bahut bhagati bhausāgarā, nānāñ bidhi nāñnāñ bhāv.  
jihi hiradai śrīhari bheṭiyā, so bhed kahūñ kahūñ thāun.  
KG. p.86.

3. bhāv bhagati pūjā aru pātī, ātamarām mile bahubhāntī.  
KG. p.204.

4. anek jug bañdigī bibidh prakār kī,  
aṁti guññ kā guññ hīñ hamāñhīñ. KG., p.134.

of bhakti are in complete harmony with Śaṅkara's Advaita Vedānta and his nirguṇa ideology. Kabīr professes bhakti in the above sense, clearly and definitely, as the desired finality in spiritual endeavour. He has no patience with the other ways, which he regards as mistaken and meaningless. Very often he raises a loud voice against the external forms of devotion which are observed in the name of bhakti. He condemns and ridicules those who have no knowledge of the true nature of bhakti but are called bhāktas, and pride themselves in it.<sup>1</sup> Such people only distort the true nature of bhakti, says Kabīr.<sup>2</sup>

(ii) Kabīr's Concept of God.

Belief in a personal God is sometimes attributed to Kabīr to prove his position as a bhākta in the light of the existing definition of bhakti. But there is clear and definite testimony in the verses of Kabīr to his uncompromising belief in the impersonal nature of God.

Kabīr's God is nirguṇa, impersonal and immanent.

1. thorī bhagati bahut ahaṅkārā,  
aise bhagatā milaiṅ apārā. KG., p.115.

2. Kabiran bhakti bigāriyā, kaṅkar patthar dhoy.  
Kabir Saheb Ka Bijak, ed. by Hans Das Shastri and  
Mahabir Prasad, Kabir Grantha Prakashan Samiti,  
Harak, Zila Barabanki, (Uttar pradesh), 1950, p.114  
(Sākhī 251), (Abbrev. Bīj.)

He always describes Him as nirguṇa,<sup>1</sup> and very often uses abstract and impersonal terms in order to name Him.<sup>2</sup> This image of God is consistently upheld and supported by Kabīr through a monistic view of Reality which is fully in keeping with the ideology of the Advaita Vedānta.<sup>3</sup> In fact Kabīr very often uses the epithet Brahman to convey his idea of God. He also makes it obvious that his belief and devotion are directed towards the impersonal and the nirguṇa. He states very clearly in one place, that his verses, which are regarded by people as mere songs are in fact an expression of his own ideas about the Brahman.<sup>4</sup>

Kabīr of course had no scholastic interest in the controversies so strongly current in theology and metaphysics to determine the finality of the saguṇa or the nirguṇa character of God and of the dual or the non-dual nature of that Reality in relation to the phenomenal world. He regarded these undertakings as futile and meaningless. Nevertheless Kabīr constantly pointed out and stressed the

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1. terī nirguṇa kathā kāhi syoñ kahiye, aisā koī vivekī  
KG, p.233.

2. Kabīr freely uses the terms Brahman, Ātman (as ātam), and tatva (as tat, tatū and tatt) for God.

3. sakal māñd main rami rahyā, sahib kahiye soy. KG. p.52.  
See also KG. p.128 (pada 180); Bij p.30 (sabda7).

4. tuma jini janauñ gīt hai, yahu nij Brahma bichār  
keval kahi samajhāiyā ātam sādhan sār re. KG. p.80.

truth of the nirguṇa nature of God in his own direct and non-scholastic manner.

According to Kabīr God has no form and no shape.<sup>1</sup> He defies every description and it is difficult even to give Him an exact name.<sup>2</sup> How then can He be described and accepted as a person? How can He be identified with personalities such as Rāma and Kṛishṇa<sup>3</sup> and how can His nature be fully grasped through philosophical expositions?<sup>4</sup> It is impossible to define His exact nature through the written word,<sup>5</sup> and those who try to do so through the spoken word get worn out by speaking endlessly about it.<sup>6</sup> The blazing glory of the Brahman can be known only through a personal encounter.<sup>7</sup>

1. nāti sarūp baran nahiñ jākai, ghaṭi ghaṭi rahyau samāī.  
KG., p.128.

2. vāko nām kāh kahi lījai, vāke baran na rūpā. Bīj, p.46  
(Sabda 48).

3. Bījak, p.15, Ramainī 45; p.18, Ramainī nos. 54-5.

4. Bījak, p.11, Ramainī 30.

5. sāt samañd kī masi karaun, lekhanī sab banarāy.  
dharatī sab kāgaḍ karaun, tau Hari guṇ likhyā na jāy.  
KG, p.54.

6. bolanā kāsauñ boliye re bhāī, bolat hī sab tattū nasāī.  
bolat bolat bāḍh bikārā, so boliye jo parai bichārā.  
Bīj p.22 (Ramainī 70)

7. KG, See "parachā kau aṅg." pp.11-14.

But in spite of these unambiguous assertions by Kabīr of his belief in an impersonal God, scholars have very often manipulated his verses to show the presence of the concept of a personal God in them. However, the main arguments put forward in support of such a stand always rest on an initial acceptance of Kabīr as a Vaishṇava. The Vaishṇava bias for a personal deity is easily connected with him and he is then described as a worshipper of Rāma the avatāra of Viṣṇu. Kabīr's frequent usage of the name of Rāma in his verses is mentioned and analysed to strengthen these arguments. But a closer examination of Kabīr as a Vaishṇava, and of the occurrence of the name Rāma in his poetry, does not justify these views. On the contrary, it further substantiates Kabīr's impersonal image of God.

Kabīr uses the name Rāma for God only in a symbolic sense. He uses it always as an epithet for the Ultimate Reality, which is nameless and undefinable. Kabīr's Rāma therefore is the same as the Ātman and the Brahman.<sup>1</sup> Kabīr very often uses the terms, Ātman, Brahman, and Rāma in close conjunction with each other and the oneness of their meaning

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1. kahai Kabīr svād jab pāyā, bañk nāli ras khāyā.  
 aṁmrīt jharai brahma parakāśai, tab hī milai Rām rāyā.  
 KG, p.136.



is no ambiguity about this in Kabīr's verses. On the contrary he makes it quite clear that his Rāma is not the same as the avatāra of Viṣṇu.<sup>1</sup> He did not marry Sītā,<sup>2</sup> and he was not born in the house of Daśaratha, and he did not bring about the fall of Rāvaṇa.<sup>3</sup> The Rāma who did that was a mortal like anyone else. How could he be the immutable and eternal Reality which must remain free from birth and death?<sup>4</sup> Those who worship God as the unborn and the unmanifest cannot worship Him in the form of a person, for God is never born and can have no human parentage.<sup>5</sup> Nor does He act like a living mortal.

(iii) Kabīr and Jñāna

As a bhakta, Kabīr attaches the greatest importance

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1. Dasarath sut tihuñ lokahiñ jānā, Rām nām kā maram hai ānā.  
Bīj, p.66 (Sabda 110).
  2. Sirjanhār na byāhī Sītā, Bīj, p.31 (Sabda 8).
  3. nāñ Jasarath ghari autari āvā, nāñ Lañkā kā rāv sañtāvā.  
KG, p.208.
  4. das autār Īsarī māyā, karatā kai jin pūjā.  
kahahiñ Kabīr sunahu ho sañto, upajai khapai so dūjā.  
Bīj, p.31 (Sabda 8).  
kahahiñhi Kabīr muvā nahi sōī, jāke āvāgavan na hoī.  
Bīj, p.45 (Sabda 45).
  5. Kabīr ko svāmī aiso thākur jākai māī na bapo re.  
KG, p.276.



to jñāna.<sup>1</sup> According to him jñāna is the highest state,<sup>2</sup> to attain which the devotee sets out in his spiritual quest<sup>3</sup> and which alone can finally lead to spiritual excellence.<sup>4</sup> True enlightenment and awakening of the spirit is not possible without jñāna,<sup>5</sup> for God must be known and worshipped through it.<sup>6</sup>

Thus bhakti and jñāna go together in Kabīr's thought. In his scale of values, true bhakti cannot exist without jñāna, and jñāna can have no meaning without bhakti. The true guru or spiritual preceptor is the bestower of both jñāna and bhakti and he who discovers the spiritual truth

1. gyān ratan kī koṭharī, chuñbak dīnhau tāl.  
pārakhi āge kholiye, kuñjī bachan rasāl. Bīj, p.115,  
(sākhī 254).  
raj bināñ kaisau rajapūt  
gyān binā ~~p~~okaṭ avadhūt. KG, p.111.
2. kahai kabīr sunahu re sañtau,  
agam gyān pada māhīñ. KG, p.82.
3. KG, p.81, pada 8-10.
4. pañdit logah kau byavahār. gyānavanṭa kau tattva bīchār.  
jākai jīy jaisī budhi hoī. kahi Kabīr janaigā soī.  
KG, p.268.
5. gyān hīn chetai nahīñ sūtā. KG, p.198.
6. kari sanmukhi jab gyān bīchārī,  
sanmukhi pariyā agani mañjhārī. KG, p.203.  
gyān na sumiryo nirgun sārā,  
bīpathaīñ birachi na kiyā bīchārāñ. KG, p.209.

is both a jñāni and a bhakta.<sup>1</sup> The feeling of love or prema in Kabīr is also an accordant accompaniment of Brahma-jñāna, or the knowledge of the Brahman.<sup>2</sup>

It must be made clear here that when Kabīr speaks of the supreme finality of jñāna, like Śaṅkara,<sup>3</sup> he also implies by it the knowledge based on spiritual experience and not the knowledge derived from books. The world can be deluded by the written word and the real essence of religion can be lost in the increasing bulk of learned writings.<sup>4</sup> Ceaseless verbal expositions of religious themes can destroy the real meaning and substance of religion and such articulations can be a serious handicap to thought.<sup>5</sup> Kabīr therefore has very little respect for those who are well versed in <sup>the</sup> <sup>who</sup> scriptures but do not really know the truth of

1. kahañhi Kabīr sunahu ho sañto, jo yah pada arathāvai.  
soī pañḍit soī gyātā, soī bhagat kahāvai. Bīj., p.48  
(Sabaa 55)
2. prem palītā surati nāli kari, golā gyān chalāyā.  
brahma agni le diyā palītā, ekai choṭ dhahāyā. KG, p.178.  
anahad bājai nījhar jharai, upajai brahma giyān.  
ābagati aṅtari pragatāi, lāgai prem dhiyān. KG, p.13.
3. Vide supra, p.
4. kāgad likhi likhi jagat bhulānāñ, manahīñ man na samānāñ.  
KG, p.88.
5. bolanāñ kā kahiye re bhāī, bolat bolat tat nasāī.  
KG, p.96.

personal spiritual experience.<sup>1</sup> He ridicules the learned pandit who repeatedly recites the Vedas but is not aware of the inner Reality that resides within his own self.<sup>2</sup> According to Kabīr the man who knows the spiritual truth through his own experience is truly a man of knowledge even if he has no scholastic learning to his credit.<sup>3</sup> Sometimes extremely learned men struggle and aspire for this knowledge and are yet unable to grasp its reality.<sup>4</sup>

Although Kabīr shows very little regard for scholastic learning he attaches great importance to a rational approach to religion and religious practices. He strongly advocates the exercise of reason for ascertaining religious truth and insists on a thoughtful quest for the essential and the fundamental. Kabīr upholds the intellectual faculty of discrimination or viveka as the chief guide in the spiritual quest. He not only recommends its

1. sumriti beda purān paḍhai sabh, anabhau bhāv na darasai.  
Bīj, p.34 (Sabda 14).

2. paḍhi paḍhi paṇḍit beda bashāṇṇaiṅ, bhītar hūṭī basat na jāṇṇaiṅ.  
KG, p.90.

3. masi binu dvāt kalam binu kāgaj, binu acchar sudhi hoī.  
sudhi binu sahaj gyān binu gyātā, kaṇhahiṅ Kabīr jan soī.  
Bīj, p.35 (Sabda , 16)

4. baḍ baḍ gyānī munivar thāke, pakari sakai nahiṅ koī.  
Bīj, p.59 (Sabda , 86).

exercise<sup>1</sup> but also pleads for its recognition and enjoins that obeisance should be paid to it.<sup>2</sup> The unawakened, he says, are bound to get lost. Only those who have the power of discrimination in them can remain safe.<sup>3</sup>

Kabīr's reasoning takes him away from the religious fixity of doctrine and practice to the truth of personal spiritual experience, which he very often describes as jñāna. This does not clash with his bhakti, which always leaves full scope for individual reasoning. According to Kabīr the devout and the knowing man must always use the touchstone of thought and reason in his quest for self-realisation<sup>4</sup> because the knowledge of the Brahman requires serious contemplation. The real jñānī is he who can think for himself.<sup>5</sup> Kabīr addresses the human mind as the store-house of intellect, and pleads with it that it should think

1. re re man budhivañt bhañḍārā, āp āp hī karahu bichārā.  
KG, p. 199.

2. kar bañdagī bibek kī, bhes dhare sab koy. Bīj, p.118  
(Sākhi, 294).

3. sañsai sab jag khañdhiyā, sañsai khañdhai na koy.  
sañsai khañdhe so janā, sabda bivekī hoy. Bīj, p.100  
(Sākhi, 88).

4. bastu kahīñ khojai kahīñ, kyauñ kari āvai hāth.  
gyānī soy sarāhiye, pāra kh rākhai sāth. Bīj, p.114  
(Sākhi 246)

5. kathatā bakatā suratā soī, āp bichāre so gyānnī hoī.  
KG, p.90.

for itself and discriminate between truth and falsehood, and between the essential and the non-essential.<sup>1</sup> In the multitude of various hues and currents of thought and belief, one must learn to know and recognize truth through one's own intellect and reasoning.<sup>2</sup> What can the scriptures yield if one does not know how to draw their essence from them.<sup>3</sup> No path can be of any use if the traveller himself fails to tread upon it with thought and care.<sup>4</sup>

Kabīr's recommendation of reason and discrimination carries the force of personal conviction also, for he often cites from his own experience in such contexts. He explains that he did not go out anywhere to seek the truth, but found it all by himself through his own reasoning and contemplation. Truth then appeared on its own, he explains,

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1. re re man budhivañt bhañḍārā, āp āp hī karahu bichārā.  
KG, p.199.

2. nānā raṅg taraṅg hai, man makarañd asūjh.  
kahañhi Kabīr pukāri kai, akil kalā le būjh. Bīj, p.100  
(Sākhī 94).

3. bed kiteb dui pañḍ pasārā, tehi pañḍe paru āpu bichārā.  
Bīj, p.41  
(Sabda 32).

4. rāh bichārī kyā karai, pathik na chalai bichārī.  
āpan mārag chāñḍi kai, firai ujāri ujāri. Bīj, p.109  
(Sākhī 191).

and freed him from all his doubts.<sup>1</sup>

(iv) Kabīr's Monism.

According to Kabīr there is only one Reality which pervades the entire universe. Nothing is separate and other than that,<sup>2</sup> for it is that which is in all, and every existing thing subsists in it. "Wherever I see" says Kabīr, "I find only that Reality, for it is that which abides in everything."<sup>3</sup> This all pervading spirit and universal Reality is the God of Kabīr.

According to Kabīr God lives in man like the pupil in the eye.<sup>4</sup> Only those who do not realize this truth and do not accept the innate unity of things and the oneness of

1. karat bichār manahīñ man upajī, nāñ kahīñ gayā na āyā.  
kahai kabīr sañsā sab chūṭā, rāñt ratan dhan pāyā.

KG, p.85.  
bhaī budhi kachū gyāñ nihārā, āp āp hī kiyā bichārā.  
āpañ mainī je rahyau samāī, neḍai dūri kathyau nahīñ jāī.  
tāke chīñheñ parachau pāvā, bhaī samajhi tāsūñ man lāvā.

KG, p.200.

2. e sakal brahmañḍa taiñ pūriyā, aru dūjā mahi thāñ jī.  
mainī sab ghaṭ añtari peshiyā, jab dekhyā naiñ samāñ jī.

KG, p.86.

3. jahañ jahañ dekhoñ tahañ tahañ soī, sab ghaṭ rahā samāī.  
Blj, p.39 (Ramāinī 27).

4. jyūñ nainūñ mainī pūtalī, tyūñ khālik ghaṭ māñhiñ.

KG, p.73.

man and God look for Him outside themselves.<sup>1</sup> As the deer wanders in the forest and continues to smell the grass in search of the musk which rests within it, in the same mistaken way the ignorant man looks around and wanders in search of the God who resides within his own self.<sup>2</sup> But this is a futile search,<sup>3</sup> for there is no Reality other than the great Self. That which is bodiless abides in the body.<sup>4</sup> The feeling of otherness in relation to God is due to the lack of knowledge. This ignorance is caused by the evident differences of form and appearance. All men are made of the same clay, although they appear in different forms.<sup>5</sup> But they are essentially the same, for of whatever shape and design be the ornaments, it is known that they are wrought

1. herat herat he sakhī, rahyā Kabīr hirāy.  
būnd samānī samad main, so kat herī jāy.  
herat herat he sakhī, rahyā Kabīr hirāy.  
samañd samānā būnd main, so kat heryā jāy. KG, p.15.
2. kastūrī kuñḍali basai, mrig dhūñḍai ban māñhi.  
aisaiñ ghaṭī ghaṭī Rām hai, duniyā dekhai nāñhiñ.  
so sāññ tan main basai, bhrañmyau na jāññaiñ tās.  
kastūrī ke mrig jyūñ, ~~p~~hīri ~~p~~hīri sūnghai ghās. KG, p.72.  
KG, p.73.
3. brahma khojat janam gavāyau, soī Rām ghaṭ bhītari pāyau.  
KG, p.172.
4. base apañḍī pañḍ main, tā gati lashai na koy. KG, p.15.
5. māṭī ek bhash dhari nāññ, sab main brahma samāññ.  
KG, p.150.

out of the same gold.<sup>1</sup>

The true and steadfast aspirant therefore gets rid of all sense of duality.<sup>2</sup> He sees and recognizes the oneness of things. He gets coloured with the colour of the great Self and becomes aware of the Self within.<sup>3</sup> That in which the individual exists and has his being, exists and has its being in the individual. To know this is the highest knowledge, and this knowledge can bring salvation.<sup>4</sup> Performance of religious acts is of no value without this consciousness.<sup>5</sup> According to Kabīr, bhakti can have no significance unless the bhākta is able to recognize the God who resides in the Ātman. When the bhākta knows and recognizes this, there remains no distinction between God and his devotee, for the bhākta then merges in the Bhagavān.<sup>6</sup> The self then merges in the great Self in the same manner

1. gahanā ek kanak te gahanā, in mahñ bhāv na dūjā.  
Bīj, p.40(Sabda 30)
2. Kabīr soī sūrivāñ, man sūñ māñḍai jhūjh.  
pañch payādā pāḍi le, dūri karai sab dūj. KG, p.61.
3. apaneñ bichāri asabārī kījai sahaj kai pāiḍai pāv jab  
dījai. KG, p.86.
4. KG, pp.124-5, pada no. 169.
5. kyā jap kyā tap kyā brat pūjā. jākai ridai bhāb hai dūjā.  
KG, p.239.
6. KG, pp.114-5, see padas 136-8.



as water merges into water when it is added to it.<sup>1</sup>

Kabīr describes his own experience of Brahma-jñāna in the same manner. "I could myself then see the self and recognize It", he explains "for having got introduced to this Self, I could merge myself in my Self".<sup>2</sup> There remains no sense of duality in this act of meeting for what is outside is then known inside.<sup>3</sup> This, he adds, is not possible without contemplation of the Self. Nor is it possible without constant effort and total dedication of the empirical self towards this end in a spirit of devotion. The knowledge of God as the great Self which abides within man, comes neither easily nor frequently. This Self resides within everyone, but it makes itself known only to the fortunate few.<sup>4</sup>

The question of the incompatibility between Kabīr's monistic beliefs and his bhakti need not arise in view of

1. jāmaiñ ham soī ham hīñ maiñ, nīr mileñ jal ek hūvā.  
KG, p.125.

2. āpai maiñ tab āpā nirapyā, apan paiñ āpā sūjhyā.  
āpai kahat sunat puni apanāñ, apan paiñ āpā būjhyā.  
apanaiñ parachai lāgī tārī, apan pai āp samāññāñ.  
kahai Kabīr je āp bichārai, miṭi gayā āvan jāññāñ.  
KG, p.80.

3. jo bāhar so bhītar jānyā. bhayā bhed bhūpati pahichānyā.  
KG, p.267.

4. sab ghaṭi merā sāñiyāñ, sūñiñ sej na koy.  
bhāg tīñhauñ kā he sakhī, jihi ghaṭi paragat hoy. KG, p.45.

the nature and implications of nirguṇa-bhakti. As discussed earlier, the sense of an axiological otherness between man and God is irrelevant to nirguṇa bhakti.<sup>1</sup> The consciousness of duality necessary for a feeling of love and devotion can exist within the individual himself. In an act of devotion the devotee can be conscious of a higher as well as a lower self, both existing within him. In the act of nirguṇa bhakti, a bhakta is required to surrender his empirical self to his higher Self. The feelings of love, dedication and devotion of one for the other in itself provide the scope for bhakti.

This aspect of the nirguṇa-bhakti, that it requires a full awareness of the polarity of the higher Self and the empirical self existing within one's own self, is made very clear by Kabīr. There is a mirror in the heart, he says, but it is so difficult to look into it.<sup>2</sup> You are you, and are also the reflection that you see as your own. The man of knowledge knows the oneness of the two as well as their difference. But the one who is ignorant of this truth is like the dog who, seeing its reflection in the mirror, tires itself out barking at its own image thinking it to

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1. Vide Supra, pp 104 ff.

2. hiradayā bhītar ārasī, mukh dekhā nahiñ jāy.  
mukh to tabhīñ dekhi ho, dil kī duvidhā jāy. Bīj, p.94  
(Sākhī 29).

be a reality other than itself.<sup>1</sup>

God can be very far from you and He can be very near, says Kabīr.<sup>2</sup> Although He resides in all, He can remain far off in the absence of true feelings of devotion.<sup>3</sup> It is only by placing Him before your mind and contemplating Him with jñāna or knowledge that you can see Him.<sup>4</sup> The one whom you search for and regard as the other, in the end turns out to be you, and does not remain the other.<sup>5</sup> Kabīr tells us at one place that he himself has given this question very careful thought and feels sure that when the self recognises the Self, it becomes immersed in the Self.<sup>6</sup>

1. darapan kerī gufā meñ, sunahā paithā dhāy.  
dekhī pratimā āpanī, bhūñki bhūñki mari jāy. Bīj, p.97  
(sākhi 59)
2. niyar thain dūri dūri thain niyarā, Rām charit na  
jāniyaiñ jiyarā. KG, p.201.
3. kathyau na jāy niyarai aru dūrī, sakal atīt rahyā ghaṭ  
pūrī.  
jahāñ dekhaun tahāñ Rām samānāñ, tumha bin thaur aur  
nahīñ āñnāñ.  
jadapi rahyā sakal ghaṭ pūrī, bhāv binā abhi-antari dūrī.  
KG, p.202.
4. kari sanmuki jab gyāñ bichārī, sanamukhi pariyā agani  
mañjhārī. KG, p.203.
5. Kabīr jāko khojate pāyo soī thaur.  
soī bhiri kai tū bhayā jākau kahatā aur. KG, p.217.
6. Kabīr sochi bichāriyā, dūjā koī nāñhi.  
āpā par jab chīnhiyāñ, tab ulaṭi samānā māñhi. KG, p.48.

To use his own words: "Having called out to you as you for so long, I myself have now turned into you and have lost all sense of my selfhood. Now that the consciousness of "you" and "I" is no more in me, I find only you, no matter where I look".<sup>1</sup> As a nirguṇa bhakta Kabīr shows a clear awareness of the difference of the "Self" and the "not self", for he says, "When 'I' was, God was not, and now that God is, 'I' am not".<sup>2</sup> Thus his bhakti does not require a constant sense of dualism and otherness between the Deity and the devotee.

(v) Kabīr and Vaishnavism.

Because of the false identification of bhakti and Vaishnavism, Kabīr, on account of his bhakti, is generally accepted as a Vaishṇava. The antecedents of Kabīr's bhakti, for the same reason, are sought in the Vaishṇava tradition of Rāmānuja and an artificial relationship is thus established between his thought and the Vaishṇava theology.<sup>3</sup>

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1. tūñ tūñ karatā tūñ huā mujh main rahī na hūñ.  
jab āpā par kā miṭi gayā jit dekhañ tit tūñ. KG, p.218.

2. jab main thā tab hari nahīñ, ab Hari haiñ main nāñhi.  
KG, p.13.  
ekahi te anañt bhau, anañt ek hvai āy.  
parachai bhaī jab ek te, anañtau ek samāy. Bīj, p.103.  
(Sākhī 124).

3. For an extreme example of the effort to establish a compatibility between Kabīr and the Vaishṇava modes of bhakti, see Munshī Rāmā Sharma, ibid., pp.417-527.

Whenever Kabīr is described as a Vaishṇava, the traditional accounts of a teacher-disciple relationship between him and Rāmānanda, and between Rāmānanda and Rāmānuja are put forward as evidence of his affiliations with the Rāmānuja School. At the same time, the constant occurrence of the name Rāma in his verses is taken as a direct testimony of his Vaishṇava faith.

These arguments however, cannot be accepted as valid proofs of Kabīr's Vaishṇava affiliations. It must be stated here that Kabīr himself has nowhere mentioned Rāmānanda as his guru. But even if we accept the tradition about his being the preceptor of Kabīr, there are reasons to believe that Rāmānanda belonged to a Vaishṇava School which had drifted away from the tradition of the Śrī Sampradāya of Rāmānuja and was more under the influence of the northern movement of the Nāthāpantha. The nature of the Vaishṇava School of Rāmānanda and its impact on Kabīr, which are reviewed at a later stage, show that the influence of Rāmānanda on Kabīr lies not in his Vaishṇavism but can be fixed in certain other contemporary influences, common to both the Vaishṇava School of Rāmānanda and the nirguṇa bhakti of Kabīr.<sup>1</sup> Besides, it is definitely wrong to

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1. Vide Infra, pp 253 ff.

describe Kabīr as a Vaishṇava merely on account of his usage of the name Rāma for God. As discussed earlier, Kabīr uses the name Rāma only in a symbolic sense and not in the sense of a personal incarnation of Viṣṇu.

Kabīr believes neither in the worship of Viṣṇu nor in that of Rāma and Kṛishṇa. Nor does he show any respect for the other for the Vaishṇava rituals.<sup>1</sup> In fact his total disregard of these strikes at the very roots of the Vaishṇava beliefs. Moreover, Kabīr is not only opposed to the worship of Viṣṇu and his avatāras, but he condemns every form of idol-worship, which as is commonly known, is an integral part of the Vaishṇava tradition. Lastly, Kabīr's staunch belief in an impersonal God in itself leaves no scope for the exaltation of personal deities such as Viṣṇu, Rāma, and Kṛishṇa, whose worship forms the very basis of the Vaishṇava religion.

The ten avatāras or incarnations of Viṣṇu are described by Kabīr as nothing but māyā or illusion.<sup>2</sup> Belief in them, according to him, is the result of ignorance which is perpetuated on account of the lack of discrimination

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1. māthe tilak hāthi mālā bānāñ, logan Rām khilaunā jāhāñ.  
KG, p.271.

2. das autār īsarī māyā, karatā kai jin pūjā. Bīj, p.31  
(Sabda 8)

for the entities which are born and subject to destruction can never be regarded as God.<sup>1</sup> How can the personal incarnations of Viṣṇu, men who were born and who died, be identified with God? Kabīr therefore rejects the divinity of each avatāra in no uncertain terms, and explains that the nirguṇa God must not be confused with Viṣṇu and his incarnations. He cannot be the Rāma who was born of Daśratha, and who killed Rāvaṇa. Nor can he be the Kṛishṇa who killed Kaṁsa. He did not become incarnate to bring about the death of Hiranyakaśipu nor did he take the Vāmana form to test Bāli. God could never assume a mortal frame and is incapable of acting like a living man.<sup>2</sup>

In fact Kabīr's complete disregard for the popular deities Rāma and Kṛishṇa brings out with greater emphasis his uncompromising belief in a nirguṇa and impersonal God. He not only rejects their divinity, but does not even hesitate to treat them on a par with the evil-doers, to destroy whom, it is believed, Viṣṇu had become incarnate in them. Kabīr is able to speak of Rāma and Rāvaṇa, and

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1. Mathurā marigau Krisna guvārā, mari mari gaye daso autārā. Bīj, p.18 (Ramainī 54).

muye Krisna muye karatārā, ek na movā jo sirajan hārā.  
kahañhiñ Kabīr movā nahi soī, jāke āvāgavan na hoī.  
Bīj, p.45 (Sabda 45).

2. See Bījak p.31 (Sabda 8); ibid., p.24 (Ramainī 75).

of Kṛishṇa and Kaṁsa in one breath.<sup>1</sup> They were all mortals, he says, and pleads for the worship of the nirguṇa Rāma<sup>2</sup> instead of these deified personalities.

Although Kabīr does not support the Vaishṇava beliefs as such, in some of his verses he speaks well of the Vaishṇavas. These verses, which of course are very few in number, are always quoted as a proof of Kabīr's Vaishṇavism. But Kabīr's appreciation of the Vaishṇavas in all these instances is of a relative nature. He invariably praises them only in comparison with the corrupt Śāktas and their evil practices. He does not exalt or advocate the beliefs of the Vaishṇavas, but shows only a greater regard for them as compared with the Śāktas.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore even this appreciation of the Vaishṇavas cannot be regarded as an unqualified feature of Kabīr's views about them. He is often very severe in his criticism of the Vaishṇava rituals, and shows an open contempt for the practising Vaishṇavas

1. Hiranākus Rāvan gau Kaṁsā, Krisna gaye sur nar muni baṁsā. Bīj, p.15 (Ramaini 45).

2. nirguṇa Rām nirguṇa Rām japahu re bhāī  
abigatī kī gati lākhī na jāī. KG, p.92.  
ye tatu Rām japahu re prānī, Bīj, p.36 (Sabda 19)

3. baīsnoṁ kī chhaparī bhalī,  
nāṁ sāshat kā baḍ gāuṁ.  
sāshat bāṁbhan mati milai, baisanaṁ milai chaṁḍāl.  
KG, p.46.



who otherwise fall short of the higher ethical standards.<sup>1</sup>

In view of all this, it is surprising that scholars like R.G. Bhadarkar,<sup>2</sup> H.C. Raychaudhuri,<sup>3</sup> S. Radhakrishnan<sup>4</sup> and R.C. Majumdar<sup>5</sup> should place Kabīr in the Vaishṇava tradition without any reservations. Even the Hindi scholars, in spite of their direct knowledge and familiarity with the works of Kabīr, continue to describe him as a Vaishṇava and struggle to prove his Vaishṇava loyalties in order to keep his position as a bhakta compatible with the standard definition of bhakti.

(vi) The Antecedents of Kabīr's Nirguṇa School

Kabīr's Nirguṇa School represents a particular pattern of medieval devotionalism. It need not therefore be approached necessarily from a Vaishṇava angle to fit the current definition of bhakti. A closer look at the Bhakti-Movement shows that it was not confined to Vaishṇavism alone. The flowering of the Vaishṇava-Vedānta and the Vaishṇava

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1. *baisanauñ bhayā tau kā bhayā, būjhā nahīñ babek. chhapā tilak banāy kari, dagadhyā lok anek.* KG, p.40.

2. R.G. Bhandarkar, ibid., p.66††

3. H.C. Raychaudhuri, ibid., p.2.

4. S. Radhakrishnan, ibid., Vol.II, p.670.

5. R.C. Majumdar, History and Culture of the Indian People, ibid., Vol.VI, p.562, also in The Cultural Heritage of India, Swami Ramakrishna Centenary Memorial, Vol.III, n.d., p.35.

poetry forms only one part of the medieval devotionism. It cannot cover and explain the whole of the Bhakti-Movement. Certain other existing religio-philosophical traditions were also asserting themselves with a fresh vigour at this time. They too were stressing the importance of religious devotion in accordance with their own background of beliefs and practices. In so far as Kabīr is concerned, forces other than Vaishṇavism contributed more than Vaishṇavism itself in shaping his school of nirguṇa bhakti.

Kabīr was not a systematiser and was completely non-sectarian in his outlook. The antecedents of his thought and beliefs, therefore, cannot be traced back to any one system of philosophy or sectarian theology. Influences proceeding from different sources, āstika as well as nāstika, gave life and shape to Kabīr's religion. Nevertheless Kabīr cannot be regarded as merely an eclectic thinker, for certain special characteristics of thought and approach mark out his religious beliefs as a distinct tradition in its own right. He repeated all such philosophical views which lent strength to his own ideology, and openly condemned those which were not in keeping with it. He emphasised the religious spirit but had totally rejected every religious form. The sources of Kabīr's inspiration therefore can be determined only in the light of the

predominant and characteristic features of his own standpoint.

As shown above, an essential spiritual monism and a strictly impersonal view of God constitute the fundamentals of the philosophical position of Kabīr. A broad based Advaita ideology can be found throughout his works, and by whatever name he calls his God, he always conceives Him as nirguṇa. As far as the methods of actual spiritual endeavour or sādhnā are concerned Kabīr recognises the general principles of yoga and advocates self-effort for the attainment of spiritual ends. The highest values of religious life upheld by Kabīr lie clearly in the realm of mysticism, for according to him, personal spiritual experience alone must be regarded as the finality of the active religious modes.<sup>1</sup> In all these respects, Kabīr is in line with the āstika traditions of the Hindus and lays strong emphasis on certain essentials of the Hindu religion and philosophy.

At the same time, Kabīr's approach is also marked with a freedom of thought and reasoning which makes him unique as a religious thinker. Although both his philosophy and faith are deeply rooted in the āstika soil, his constant and open attacks on all formal religious beliefs, doctrines,

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1. karm dharm kachhuvo nahiñ uhavāñ, nā uhāñ mantra na pūjā.  
Bīj. p.44 (Sabda 43)

and rituals,<sup>1</sup> are reminiscent of those levied by the nāstikas against the orthodox religion. Excepting the essential truth and ultimacy of the Spirit, nothing escaped the questioning and criticism of Kabīr, and no religious form, whether of ritual or doctrine was regarded as infallible by him. The vitality and freedom of individual reasoning which we find in Kabīr, carry with them a clear echo of the nāstika traditions.

Kabīr's religion strikes us as an expression of a medieval āstika tradition, which shows evidence of an intermingling of the āstika and nāstika elements. A simplified monistic philosophy, a reformed order of yoga, a rationalistic and critical approach to religion, and an antipathy for established religious form and ritual constitute the main characteristics of this new āstika tradition. It is āstika in nature in so far as it upholds the ultimacy of the Ātman and derives its inspiration from the monistic Vedānta and yoga. At the same time the critical modes of reasoning and the irreverential attitude which mark this tradition show a clear impact of the nāstika tradition.

There are reasons to believe that as a result of their mutual interaction on each other, the differences

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1. Bijak pp.8-9 (Ramainī 22), p.29 (sabda 4); p.32 (sabda 10); p.37 (sabda 22); p.40 (sabda 30); p.57 (sabda 84).

between the āstika and nāstika tradition was becoming less fundamental during the medieval period. Certain philosophical precepts and modes of religious discipline were now finding equal acceptance amongst the āstikas as well as the nāstikas. A monistic view of Reality in the field of Siddhānta and the practice of yoga in that of sādhnā, were common to both.<sup>1</sup> Similarly a rejection of religious authority and ritual, a complete disregard for scholasticism, and a definite articulation of religious finalities in terms of mysticism and personal spiritual experience, mark the significant movements of both the āstika and the nāstika groups.<sup>2</sup> The expanding common grounds of thought and practice brought them nearer together and had resulted in an interpenetration of thought and approach. During this period of confluence, if certain āstika values were assimilated by the nāstikas, the critical and unorthodox

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1. For examples of monistic thought in the medieval Buddhist and Jaina literature, see Dohā-Kośā, edited by Rāhula Sāṅkṛitāyana, Bihar Rāshtra Bhāshā Parishād, Patna 1957, p.85, dohā 1 and 2; p.89, dohā 15 and 16; p.95, dohā 32 and 34; p.157, dohā 49. See also, Pāhuda-Dohā, of Muni Ramsimha, ed. by Hiralal Jain, Karanja Jain Publications Society, Karanja (Berar) 1933, dohās 39, 40, 41, 122, 139, 174.
  2. See Dohā-Kośā, *ibid.*, p.93; dohā 26; p.161, dohā 60; p.163, dohā 63 and 67; p.255, dohā 14 and 25; p.259, dohā 26; p.281, dohā 11; p.291, dohā 18. See also Pāhuda-Dohā, *ibid.*, dohās 8, 7, 19, 22, 24, 37, 59, 67, 69, 78, 97, 98, 109, 116, 126, 135, 161-63, 180, 217.

approach of the nāstikas also had a great impact on the āstikas.

The new āstika tradition which took shape as the result of this intermingling, has a lot in common with the later movement of nirguṇa bhakti. ~ It can explain the combination in Kabīr of the sincerity of his orthodox belief in the ultimacy of spirit, which is āstika in nature, and the severity of his unorthodox criticism of existing religious formalities which carries a nāstika flavour. ~ Philosophically, this new tradition was rooted in monistic thought, and in the field of spiritual endeavour, it advocated contemplation and yogic discipline. Resting on the principles of the basic and innate truth of mysticism, it emphasised the use of reason and freedom of thought in religion. A movement was thus afoot long before its spirit and message could take a more definite and popular form in the nirguṇa bhaktas like Kabīr.

There is literary as well as sectarian evidence of the existence of such an āstika tradition in the medieval period. Its sectarian manifestation can be seen in the Nātha-Pantha, one of the most popular and active ascetic groups. The preceptors of the Nātha-Pantha preached a monistic philosophy in a simple and popular form, laid stress on yoga, and at the same time opposed the formal and

ritualistic patterns of religion. The same characteristic features are indicated in the Yoga-Vasishtha, which is neither a sectarian work nor a systematic exposition of any particular philosophical doctrine, but is a religious text written in a popular style, advocating yoga and a nirguṇa ideology. Although the Nātha-Pantha was āstika in its beliefs, to the extent that the antecedents of the preceptors of the Nātha-Pantha are inter-connected with that of the Sahajayāni Siddhas, they had a nāstika background. Similarly, the Yoga-Vasishtha is fully in keeping with the āstika traditions in so far as it enjoins a belief in a monistic and nirguṇa view of reality and emphasises the importance of jñāna and yoga. But the Yoga-Vaśishta strongly condemns many established beliefs and practices, a thing with is associated more with the nāstika tradition.

But although the Nātha-Pantha reiterated the āstika beliefs related to Hinduism, its origins can be traced back to the movements of the Buddhist siddhās, the beginnings of which were first seen in the Vajrayāna and the Sahajayāna.<sup>1</sup> The names of Matseyendranāth and of his disciple Gorakhnāth,

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1. Hajarī Prasād Dvivedi, Nātha Sampradaya, Hindustani Academy, Allahabad, 1950, pp.60ff.  
 Prabodha Chandra Bagchi, Kaula Jñāna Nirṇaya, Calcutta, 1934, Introduction.  
 Dharma Vīra Bhārati, Siddha Sāhitya, Kitab Mahal, Allahabad, 1955, passim.

both of whom are regarded as the most important of the preceptors of the Nātha-Pantha, are connected with the tradition of the Sahajayānī siddhas also.<sup>1</sup> They represent a stage of change in the Siddha tradition which ultimately brought about the transformation of the Buddhist siddhas into the Nātha-Pantha. The predominance of the non-Buddhist elements in Matsyendra and Gorakhnāth shows that the Buddhist siddhas had greatly assimilated the Brahmanic influences.<sup>2</sup> Separate from its allied Buddhist traditions of the nāstika fold, and free from the corrupting tāntrik influences, the Nātha pantha served as a powerful ascetic movement from the eleventh to the fifteenth century. The intermingling of the āstika and the nāstika forces, and the emergence of an āstika tradition equipped with the vitality of the critical and unorthodox attitude of the nāstikas, stands out very clearly in the growth of the Nātha-pantha.

Although the medieval nirguṇa saints cannot be connected with the Nātha-pantha in any narrow sectarian sense, nevertheless this system seems to be the most

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1. Dvivedi, ibid., pp.41 and 48ff.

2. S.B. Dasgupta, Obscure Religious Cults, Revised Ed., Calcutta, 1962, pp.226-29.  
For Advaita influence in the Nātha Pantha, see Dvivedi, ibid., pp.69, 76.



preponderant of sectarian influences on the nirguṇa bhaktas like Kabīr. Kabīr's advocacy of yoga and his frequent recourse to yogic terminology reiterates the Nātha ideology. His revolt against the formal and ritualistic religion, and his incessant emphasis on the basic spirit and essentials of religions is the same as that of the Nātha teachers. Many parallels can be found between Kabīr and Gorakhnāth. Both Kabīr and Gorakhnāth take a monistic view of Reality.<sup>1</sup> Both rely on the truth of personal experience and point out the meaninglessness of scholastic knowledge in religion.<sup>2</sup> Both recommend the path of Self-knowledge and describe it as Jñāna.<sup>3</sup> Like Kabīr, Gorakhnāth also considers the formal differences of religion as unimportant.<sup>4</sup>

The Vaishṇava influence on Kabīr which is recognised because of his association with the Vaishṇava guru Rāmānanda,

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1. For comparison with Kabīr, see Gorakh-Bāni, edited by Pitāmbara Dutta Baḍathvāl, Hindi Sahitya Sammelan, Prayag, 1960, p.25, Bani 70; p.29, B83; p.64, B.191; p.71, B 218; p.188, B 22; p.192, B p.215, B32. The same in Machhinder's teachings to Gorakh, ibid., p.188, B 22; p.192 B 50.
  2. Ibid., p.3, B 6; p.5, B 13; p.21, B 59; P.42, B 119; p.57, B 167; p.72, B 223; p.77, B 248; p.81, B 264; p.82, B 270; P.170, B 4; p.172, B 11.
  3. Ibid., p.64, B 189; p.65, B 195; For the position of the Nātha-Pantha on Jñāna, see "Gyān-Tilak" and "Jñāna-Dvīpa-Bodha", ibid., pp.207 ff and 227 ff respectively.
  4. Ibid., p.25, B 68 and 69; p.33, B 96; p.175, B 9.

is also interconnected with that of the Nātha-Pantha. The Vaishṇava school of Benaras to which Rāmānanda belonged was very much influenced by the Nātha-pantha. The works of both Rāmānanda and his guru Rāghavānanda bear its stamp.<sup>1</sup> The connecting link between Kabīr and Rāmānanda therefore is not Vaishṇavism, but lies in the influence of the popular northern movement of the Nātha-pantha, an influence common to both Kabīr and the Vaishṇava school of Rāmānanda. The interconnection between Vaishṇavism and the Nātha pantha, and between Vaishṇavism and Kabīr's nirguṇa school also becomes clearer when we examine the antecedents of the Vaishṇava school to which Rāmānanda belonged.

Rāmānanda represents a distinct Vaishṇava tradition different from that of Rāmānuja with whose Śrī-sampradāya he is so often connected on account of the traditions which place him in the continuous line of teachers and disciples connected with that school. However, it needs to be recognized more fully that<sup>a</sup> Vaishṇava tradition was taking shape in the north, which while still retaining its Vaishṇava affiliation, had drifted away from the Rāmānuja

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1. See Rāmānand kī Hindī Rachnāyeṅ, edited by Pītāmbara Dutta Badāthvāl, Nāgari Prachārāṇi Sabhā, Kaśī, 1955.

school.<sup>1</sup> This new Vaishṇava tradition did not attach importance to caste distinctions in matters of religious pursuits and had readily thrown open the higher paths of spiritual endeavour to all, irrespective of their caste. Different in its approach from the more common expressions of Vaishṇavism, it does not seem to regard the simple worship of the personal deity Viṣṇu and the performance of the characteristic Vaishṇava rituals as self-sufficient in themselves. On the contrary it laid great stress on yogic discipline in the field of sādhana and on a strictly monistic view of Ultimate Reality in the field of siddhānta.<sup>2</sup> In

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1. It is generally recognized that the Rāmānuja's Śrī Vaishṇava Sampradāya was later divided into two schools, the northern school known as Vaḍagalai, and the southern school known as the Tiṅgalai. Important ideological differences can be found between these two schools, both of which are traditionally connected with the Śrī Sampradāya. Rāmānanda belonged to the northern school of Rāghavānanda. It seems that these two had not only drifted away from the southern tradition of the Ālvars, the immediate antecedent of the Śrī sampradāya, but were also greatly influenced by the popular but non-Vaishṇava movement of the north, that of the Nātha Pantha.

For the differences between the Vaḍagali and the Tiṅgalai branches of the Śrī Sampradāya, and for those between the school of Rāmānanda and Rāmānuja. see, Pītāmbara Dutta Baḍathavāl, ibid., pp.21-26.

2. These conclusions are based on the study of the Siddhānta Panchmātrā of Rāghavānanda, and that of Rāma-Rakṣhā, Yoga-Chintāmani and Gyāna-Tilak of Rāmānanda. Rāmānanda's pada in the Adi-Grantha has also been taken into account. For these texts, see Rāmānanda Ki Hindi Rachnayan, ibid., and the Adi-Grantha. the pada of Rāmānanda in the

some important respects therefore this Vaishṇava tradition had taken a very different position from that of Rāmānuja. Although a greater credit is given to Rāmānanda in this connection, the beginnings of it can to some extent be traced back to Rāmānanda's guru Rāghavānanda, the key figure in this development.

Our knowledge of the life and thought of Rāghavānanda is very meagre.<sup>1</sup> Nābhādās places him in the tradition of Rāmānuja, putting him as the fourth in line from him.<sup>2</sup> According to him, Rāghavānanda had gone to live at Kāśī where he tried to instil bhakti amongst all kinds of people irrespective of their caste and āśrama. Perhaps in the line of Rāmānuja's Srī Sampradāya, Rāghavānanda was the first to settle down at Kāśī separately in his own right, and the first to /assume a different attitude on important questions like the caste. In his chappaya on Rāghavānanda, Nābhādās makes only a brief and passing reference to the immediate successors of Rāmānuja, such as Devāchārya and Hariyānanda, and does not make any observations about them which might suggest any noticeable change in the traditions of the

1. Pitāmbara Dutta Bādathvāl, see "Swami Rāghavānanda aur Siddhānta Panchmātrā" in: Yoga-Pravāha, Kāśī-Vidyā-Pīṭha, Benares, 1946.

2. Bhakta-Māla, Nidā, Chappaya 30.

Śrī sampradāya. But he mentions Rāghavānanda as the one who decided to stay at Kāśī and who extended equality to all castes in spiritual matters.

It must be remembered here however that Rāmānuja had thrown open only the lower path of prapatti or surrender to the lower castes but had recommended the higher path of bhakti for the high castes only. This fundamental difference between Rāmānuja and Rāghavānanda can be explained only on grounds of the latter having moved to the north and having come under the direct influence of the religious movement of the north, that of the Nātha-pantha which was unorthodox in its approach in this respect but was a very active and influential religious group.<sup>1</sup> Rāmānanda, who is more well known than his guru, Rāghavānanda, belonged to this Vaishṇava school of Kāśī. It is not surprising therefore that he should have attracted such a large number of his celebrated

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1. The traces of the Nātha Pantha can be found in Bengal, Uttar Pradesh, Punjab, Sindh, Gujarat, Rajasthan and Maharashtra. But there are reasons to believe that this movement, in its origins, was essentially a northern movement. The medieval religious thinking and movements of north India show a greater influence of the Nathas when compared with the southern counterparts. According to Dr. Ghurye the south shows a much lesser impact of the Nātha Pantha.  
G.S. Ghurye, Indian Sadhus, The Popular Book Depot, Bombay 1953, p.155.

disciples from the lower castes.<sup>1</sup>

The Yoga-Vasishtha can be viewed as a significant literary expression of an important aspect of medieval religious life. As pointed out earlier, one vital current of the period is found clearly marked with monistic beliefs, reformed practice of yoga and a rational approach towards formal aspects of religion. The evidence of it, is shown above in the Natha-pantha. The same elements are found in the Yoga-Vasishtha. Here also is seen an āstika tradition equipped with the vitality of the unorthodox approach of the nāstikas.

The Yoga-Vasishtha is not a sectarian work, nor is it a systematic exposition of any particular philosophical doctrine. It does not technically outline any system of philosophy or metaphysics, nor is it meant for a limited circle of the very learned. Nevertheless it is philosophical in its approach and content, and is written more in the nature of a popular religious text, meant for a much larger audience. Certain essentials of the religio-philosophical thought of the Hindus are conveyed here not in a scholastic but a simple and straightforward manner, understandable even by men of lesser learning. This aspect of the Yoga-

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1. The most prominent of them are Kabīr, Raidas, Dhanā, and Senā. They are all mentioned by Nābhādās as the disciples of Rāmananda. See Bhakta-Māla, Chhappaya 31.

Vasishṭha can be taken as an indication of a popular movement in favour of its teachings.

The ideology of the Yoga-Vasishṭha is unorthodox in some respects and cannot be confined to any particular philosophical system or sect. At the same time it rests on certain fundamentals of Hindu religious thought, particularly those related to the classical Vedānta and Yoga. If the Yoga-Vasishṭha attacks the traditional formalities of religion and states the importance of individual reasoning against religious authority, it also stresses upon the beliefs in the ultimacy of the Ātman and the monistic nature of Reality.

A similar approach characterises Kabīr's religious position and many parallels can be found between the passages of the Yoga-Vasishṭha and the verses of Kabīr. Perhaps he was the product of the same forces which are in evidence in the Yoga-Vasishṭha. The following analysis of the philosophy of the Yoga-Vasishṭha brings out some points of similarity between the two.

In general, like Kabīr, the author of the Yoga-Vasishṭha upholds a monistic and nirguṇa ideology with the help of a supporting philosophy of mysticism. The finality of personal spiritual experience in religion is emphasised by both, and both advocate the rejection of irrational

authority and the use of individual reasoning in matters pertaining to religion.

A simplified and popularised form of monistic philosophy forms the basis of Kabīr's religious thought. The same is the case with Yoga Vasishṭha, according to which the being of the world is bound with the being of the spirit and has no separate existence from it.<sup>1</sup> There is nothing which is not present in the Great Self,<sup>2</sup> and the world exists in the Brahman in the same way as the tree in the seed,<sup>3</sup> and as the butter in the milk.<sup>4</sup> The Yoga-Vasishṭha describes the Brahman as the unmanifest and without names<sup>5</sup> in the same manner as Kabīr. Even those who know it fail to describe it. Therefore the use of different names to describe the Ultimate Reality is unnecessary and meaningless.<sup>6</sup> From this position of the Yoga-Vasishṭha Kabīr had to take only one step forward in order to say that the different

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1. The Yogavasishṭha of Vālmīki, with the commentary, Vasishṭhamahārāmāyanatātparyaprakāśa, edited by Wāsudev Laxman Sāstri Paṇṣikar, Nirṇaya Sāgar Press, Bombay 1937, III.14.75, also VI.b. 14.8.

2. Ibid., III.100.5.

3. Ibid., III.100.11.

4. Ibid., VIa.9.27; also ibid., VIa.2.52; III.14.73.

5. Ibid., VIb. 52.27.

6. Ibid., VIa. 78.32-34.



names used for God by the Hindus and Muslims also could not mean two different things.

The importance attached by Yoga-Vasishṭha to personal spiritual experience is also the same as that found in Kabīr. According to the Yoga-Vasishṭha the final proofs lie only in direct apprehension, and the direct cognition alone can serve as the ultimate source of knowledge.<sup>1</sup> The Self alone is the reality at the root of the universe,<sup>2</sup> and the nature of the Self cannot be realized without its direct experience.<sup>3</sup> It is further explained in the Yoga-Vasishṭha that the Self can be experienced only through intuition<sup>4</sup> and that there is nothing greater than the divine experience which is immanent in its nature and arises only when the ego and the mind get completely dissolved.<sup>5</sup> This reality cannot be described in words but can only be experienced from within.<sup>6</sup> God should not be sought outside, for He

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1. Ibid., II.19.16; III.42.15; VIb 52.29.

2. Ibid., VIa. 78.39.

3. Ibid., V.64.53.

4. Ibid., V.73.15.

5. Ibid., V.64.51.

6. Ibid., V.64.52.

resides within everyone and one's body itself is His temple. Those who leave this God residing within, and look for Him outside themselves are like fools who leave the gem and run after pieces of glass.<sup>1</sup> A clear echo of the same ideas can be found in Kabīr. His way of explaining them also is very often the same.

Similarly the role of the Self in religious and spiritual endeavour as laid down by the Yoga-Vasishṭha is upheld by Kabīr in the same spirit. The Self is the most important. It is through the medium of the Self that experience can make knowledge valid. But the self which sees itself in its calm mind<sup>2</sup> can be attained only through one's own efforts and cannot be realized through external agencies or methods. Scriptures cannot make one realize the Self, if the individual attempt to interpret one's own experience and intuition is missing.<sup>3</sup>

In a scheme of ideas such as found in the Yoga-Vasishṭha, a greater stress is naturally laid on individual reasoning and choice than on external authority and injunctions. God can be found only through knowledge, and

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1. Ibid., V.8.14.

2. Ibid., VIa. 118.4.

3. Ibid., VIb. 197.25, 28, 29.

not through performances of any kind. Living in a forest, performing penance,<sup>1</sup> going on pilgrimage, and bathing in the sacred rivers can be of no avail.<sup>2</sup> Neither the scholarly study of scriptures nor the worship of any particular god, however powerful he may be, can be of any help without one's own personal effort.<sup>3</sup> Even the god Vishṇu cannot bestow self knowledge on one who does not exercise his own thought.<sup>4</sup> According to the Yoga-Vasishṭha, reason must serve as the guiding light for the true aspirant. A rational man should value the works of even an ordinary person if they are conducive to the advancement of knowledge and are logical, and should be ready to throw away even those of the great sages if they fail in it. A reasonable statement, even that of a child, should be accepted while an unreasonable one should be discarded like straw, even if it came from the creator himself.<sup>5</sup> This freedom of thinking and expression which is so predominant in the Yoga-Vasishṭha bears an extremely close resemblance with Kabīr's general approach

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1. Ibid., VIb. 199.30.

2. Ibid., VIb. 197.18.

3. Ibid., V.44.1; V.43. 10, 13, 16, 17.

4. Ibid., V.43.10.

5. Ibid., II.18.2,3.

and reasoning. The performance of ritualistic religious acts is denounced by Kabīr in the same manner, and he lays a similar emphasis on the importance of individual reasoning for the understanding of religious truths, and of self-effort for the attainment of spiritual ends.

On the testimony of the Yoga-Vasishṭha, it can perhaps be stated that at the time of the composition of this popular religious text, the ideology of nirguṇa bhakti had found wide acceptance amongst certain sections of the Vaishṇavas. In the evolutionary process of the penetration of the philosophical influences in popular Vaishṇavism, the Yoga-Vasishṭha represents a stage higher than that of a mere identification of Viṣṇu with the nirguṇa brahman. In the Yoga-Vasishṭha, Rāma, the avatāra of Viṣṇu, asks for instructions in Yoga from Vasishṭha and listens to the glories of the Nirguṇa Brahman from him. The personality of Rāma is thus reduced to a secondary position, and is that of a recipient rather than of a giver of knowledge, a situation very different from the one in the Bhagavad-Gītā, where it is the personality of Kṛishṇa, again an avatāra of Viṣṇu, which occupies the central position in the narrative, and serves as the transmitter of spiritual knowledge.

The personality of Rāma in the Yoga-Vasishṭha is clearly superseded by the injunctions of jñāna and yoga

since the position of Rāma in this work remains only that of a listener. The constant use of the figure of Rāma throughout the narrative can only be explained in two ways. Either his name was being used to win Vaishṇava sympathies and to receive a Vaishṇava hearing, or the nirguṇa ideology had found such a complete acceptance amongst the Vaishṇavas that the personality of Rāma could easily recede into the background in such a text. In either case the nirguṇa ideology acquires a sanctity for the Vaishṇavas in the Yoga-Vasishṭha through the authority of the discourses between Rāma and Vasishṭha. If Rāma himself accepted the knowledge of Vasishṭha, why not the Vaishṇavas who were his devotees?

Nirguṇa bhakti must have been fairly widespread amongst certain Vaishṇava groups of the north. Not only can this conclusion be drawn on the basis of the narrative form of the Yoga-Vasishṭha, which is in the form of a discourse between Rāma and Vasishṭha, but there are also certain passages in it which indicate this more clearly and definitely. The bhakti of Prahlāda, as described in the Yoga-Vasishṭha, is a significant illustration of this.

Prahlāda who is revered as one of the great Viṣṇu bhaktas and who is represented as a devotee of Nārāyaṇa, and the account of whose Saguhya bhakti we find in the Bhāgavata-Purāṇa, is represented in the Yoga-Vasishṭha as a

nirguṇa bhākta who attains the real knowledge (tattva-jñāna) of the oneness of Nārāyaṇa and the Nirguṇa Brahman. As Prahlāda is worshipping the personal image of Viṣṇu in all its glory and beauty of form,<sup>1</sup> the realisation comes that Viṣṇu is the same as the Ātman<sup>2</sup> and that it is the reality existing within himself, which has assumed the external form of the deity for him as Viṣṇu.<sup>3</sup>

Again when Prahlāda performs pūjā for Viṣṇu, makes his offerings to him accompanied by rituals characteristic of the Vaiṣṇavas modes of worship<sup>4</sup> praising the Lord Viṣṇu in various ways, Viṣṇu himself appears before Prahlāda to explain the need for viveka and vichāra, and enjoins upon Prahlāda to continue with his spiritual endeavours until he can attain the state of Brahman.<sup>5</sup> Having received this injunction from the Bhagavan himself, Prahlāda uses his own thought power (vichāra) and discrimination (viveka) to understand Ultimate Reality.<sup>6</sup> Thereafter he dwells upon the supreme reality of the Self and its universal oneness.<sup>7</sup> He

1. Ibid., V.31.37; 32.1.

2. Ibid., V.31.39.

3. Ibid., V.32.2.

4. Ibid., V.32. 8-16.

5. Ibid., V.34.3.

6. Ibid., V.34.8ff.

7. Ibid., V.34.112-115.

realises that the ultimate Reality which is explained in different ways through the doctrines of Vedānta, the systems of logic, and the songs of the Purāṇas, is essentially the same.<sup>1</sup> At the end of this account of Prahlāda, Vasishṭha points out that whatever Prahlāda had attained was attained by him through his own efforts and not by any other course.<sup>2</sup> Viṣṇu is only that which is the Ātman of all, and that which is the Ātman of all is itself Viṣṇu.<sup>3</sup> Ātman alone had caused Viṣṇu bhakti in Prahlāda. Having realised that there was no difference between himself as Ātman and Viṣṇu, he obtained Ātman jñāna through his own power.<sup>4</sup>

If the above is accepted as an indication of the possibility and prevalence of nirguṇa bhakti amongst certain Vaishṇava sects, it can serve as a clue for understanding the viewpoint of the Vaishṇava guru Rāmānanda. Rāmānanda is always classed as a Vaishṇava. But if there exists a tradition proving him as a Vaishṇava, there also exists a clear evidence of a nirguṇa ideology in his verses. Some of which bear a close resemblance with the Nātha literature

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1. Ibid., V.35.2-10.

2. Ibid., V.43.4.

3. Ibid., V.43.6.

4. Ibid., V.43.7-8.

as well. The most prominent of the nirguṇa bhaktas of the medieval period, who did not believe in Viṣṇu-worship, are known to us as the disciples of Rāmānanda. There are only two explanations possible in this connection. Either there were two different Rāmānandas who are wrongly referred to as one, or the one traditional Rāmānanda was a strong protagonist of a nirguṇa ideology in spite of his formal affiliations with the Vaiṣṇava sect. The traditional accounts of the teacher-disciple relationship between the Vaiṣṇava guru Rāmānanda and Kabīr can be accepted only in the light of the second alternative.

In view of the lack of sufficient data, nothing definite can be said about Kabīr's personal associations and his immediate sources of inspiration. Nor can we know, with authenticity, the exact nature and extent of the influence of any one sect on him. The above attempt therefore to ascertain the antecedents of Kabīr's Nirguṇa School was not to connect him with a particular sect or thought system, but was only to show the avenues in which we can look for the sources of his inspiration. We were trying to establish that Kabīr's thought and religion cannot be explained in terms of Vaiṣṇavism but can be understood only against the background of a monistic and nirguṇa ideology.

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### CONCLUSION

Certain firmly established views about bhakti and the Bhakti Movement have been repudiated in the foregoing chapters. It has been shown that bhakti is neither a cult nor a doctrine and that a fixed belief in a personal God, an antagonism to the path of jñāna, and the rejection of a monistic view of Reality are not its necessary pre-requisites.

The validity of the identification of bhakti with Vaishṇavism has also been questioned. It has been pointed out that the whole of the Bhakti Movement cannot be viewed in Vaishṇava terms alone. We have suggested that the total manifestation of medieval bhakti cannot be traced back to the inspiration of the Vaishṇava āchāryas, and that it <sup>cannot</sup> be regarded as a reaction against Śaṅkara's Advaita Vedānta. There is clear evidence of bhakti in Śaṅkara and many of the medieval bhaktas of the nirguṇa school lend full support to the essentials of monistic Vedānta and strongly advocate a belief in an impersonal God. Taking this position about bhakti and the Bhakti Movement, we have re-examined Kabīr and his antecedents to show the absence in him of those beliefs which are generally attributed to him on account of the current definition of bhakti.

Bhakti is not a religion. It does not fall in any

of the categories by which different religions and religious doctrines are denominated and distinguished within the totality of Hinduism. It does not stand for any dharma, mata, or siddhānta but is a constituent of sādhana. It suggests only a bhāva or condition - in other words, only a devotional attitude of mind and heart. Since it does not pertain to any religious tenets but is indicative of only a religious attitude, variations and distinctions can be caused in its form and manner because of the difference of sectarian beliefs and the disagreements in the doctrinal approach to the question of the nature of God. In the total complex of Hinduism, bhakti, in the sense of devotion, forms a part of various religious traditions, and is not confined to any one sect. Thus not only is it wrong to call it a religion, but it is equally wrong to restrict it to the Vaishṇava faith.

There is no incompatibility between bhakti and the nirguṇa ideology of the Advaita Vedānta. In Hinduism, an impersonal concept of God and a non-dualistic view of Reality in no way exclude the possibilities of bhakti. On the contrary they provide the necessary philosophical framework for the recommended path of Self-realisation, which forms an essential part of the Hindu view of religious devotion.

Bhakti is not antagonistic to jñāna either. In the authoritative religious texts the two are always found as accordant accompaniments to each other. In fact their mutual interdependence is very often emphasised. The current misconception that bhakti is opposed to jñāna is obviously the result of a false interpretation of jñāna. Whenever bhakti and jñāna are described as antagonistic to each other, the latter is invariably understood as intellectual and abstract knowledge. But in the Hindu literature, whenever the term jñāna is used in relation to spiritual endeavour and is described as the highest value, it always carries the meaning of Self-knowledge, derived from personal spiritual experience.

The current theories which suggest that bhakti is a religious conviction, that it is not possible without a belief in a personal God, and that it is opposed to jñāna and the Advaita Vedānta, are of recent and artificial formation. So is the equation of bhakti with Vaiṣṇavism. The beginnings of these theories which outline the principles of the "bhakti religion", and which ultimately identify bhakti with Vaiṣṇavism can be traced back to certain western scholars of the nineteenth century. The Hindu Scriptures do not support these views. Even such texts as the Bhagavad-Gītā, the Bhāgavata-Purāṇa and the Bhakti-Sūtras of Nārada

and Sāṇḍilya do not bear them out, although these are always cited to substantiate them. In none of these texts do we find the suggestion that bhakti is possible only for a personal God. Nor do we find any divergence between bhakti and jñāna, and between bhakti and the Vedānta. The Bhagavad-Gītā describes the jñāni bhakta as the highest amongst the devotees. Sāṇḍilya refers to the Brahma-Kānda as the Bhakti-Kānda, and the Bhāgavata-Purāṇa, in spite of its strong Vaishṇava bias, gives full recognition to the bhakti for the Nirguṇa.

The nucleus of the modern theories about bhakti can be found in the writings of Albrecht Weber. The ideas initiated by him were further developed by scholars like Monier-Williams and George.A. Grierson. Weber had identified bhakti with Kṛishṇa-worship. He was interested mainly in the question of the influence of Christianity on this particular religious tradition of India. Although the researches of R.G. Bhandarkar finally resolved this question by proving the pre-Christian existence of the cult of Kṛishṇa-worship, its identification with bhakti had become a settled fact. Even Bhandarkar could not question it in spite of his awareness, though rather uncertain, that the spirit of the upāsanā of the Upanishads was akin to that of bhakti. However, because of its initial identification with Kṛishṇa

worship, bhakti, soon became in the academic circles an equivalent for Vaishṇavism. It was later discussed by western scholars not in terms of Christian influence, but as an expression of Hindu theism. They now saw in the worship of Viṣṇu and of his avatāras Rāma and Kṛishṇa, the signs of a "monotheistic religion", distinct and separate from the religion of the Upanishads. They also suggested that the theistic religion of bhakti was opposed to the ideology of the classical Vedānta and the path of jñāna.

But most of these ideas propounded by the western scholars in connection with bhakti seem to be the result of their search for a Hindu parallel which could fit the definition of a theistic religion according to their own standards of judgement. Their theories on bhakti rest on two fundamental principles, the principle of a clear division between religion and philosophy, and the principle that theism is possible only in the context of a belief in a personal God. These principles however are easily understandable against the western background. But they are not applicable to Hinduism.

The principle of division between religion and philosophy is clearly the result of the long period of conflict between the two in Europe and their final separation. Similarly, the ultimacy of a personal God in the academic

definition of theism is determined by the nature of a Christian concept of God. Because of the incompatibility of the Christian faith in the Biblical God and the impersonal explanations of God offered by modern philosophy, the personal nature of God was bound to receive great emphasis in the explanations about theism. But in the Hindu traditions, religion and philosophy have always remained interconnected and an impersonal view of God has never been regarded as a negation of theism.

The application of the above principles in the study of Hinduism has resulted in many misconceptions. Not only has it led to the formulation of certain fallacious theories about bhakti, but has also been the cause of some wrong postulations about the nature of Hindu theism and monotheism. However, the recognition of the presence of religious devotion and theism only in the worship of a personal deity, and the rejection of all philosophical influences as non-theistic and non-devotional, has caused serious misjudgements about the Bhakti Movement and the nirguṇa bhaktas like Kabīr. The artificial definition of bhakti based on these principles makes it more difficult to evaluate them correctly.

The current view that the Bhakti Movement was a reaction against the "intellectualism" of Saṅkara and that its doctrinal base was provided by the Vaishṇava āchāryas,

needs correction. It has led to a misrepresentation of certain vital religious movements of the medieval period. Some of them were obviously inspired by the same values which had inspired Śaṅkara, and do not share the Vaiṣṇava bias which was the most predominant characteristic of the theology expounded by the Vaiṣṇava āchāryas. Moreover, Śaṅkara himself lays great emphasis on bhakti. In fact there is no disagreement between Śaṅkara and the Vaiṣṇava āchāryas on the question of the nature and importance of bhakti. Their more serious disagreements arise from the inherent challenge of Śaṅkara's nirguṇa ideology to the Vaiṣṇava traditions of worship which rest mainly on <sup>a</sup>the faith in the personal deity Viṣṇu and his personal incarnations. Whereas the Vaiṣṇava āchāryas can be rightly regarded as the fountainhead of the neo-Vaiṣṇava movement of the medieval period, there are no valid grounds for connecting the whole of the Bhakti Movement with their religious and doctrinal position.

When the total medieval religious upsurge is described as the Bhakti Movement, certain common beliefs are attributed to all the medieval bhaktas, irrespective of their ideological differences. Their bhakti is commonly understood as a simple faith in a personal God, different from the beliefs upheld by the Vedāntins, and as a path opposed to that of jñāna. But an unbiased approach shows

clearly that some of the medieval bhaktas were staunch supporters of the idea of an impersonal God and of the essential teachings of the Vedānta. A monolithic view of the Bhakti Movement, therefore, can be taken only if bhakti is understood in its intrinsic and wider meaning. If however bhakti is viewed in terms of specific doctrinal beliefs, then the division between the nirguṇa and the saguṇa bhaktas and their ideological differences must be recognized more definitely, and they must be treated as entirely separate groups. No efforts should then remain necessary to establish the compatibility of the two. A correct understanding of the nirguṇa bhaktas like Kabīr is not possible without such an approach.

Kabīr's position strikes us as the antithesis of the current academic definition of bhakti. He rejects the idea of a personal God and takes a completely monistic view of Reality. He emphasises the importance of jñāna and advocates that religious faith must always be accompanied by individual reasoning. Furthermore, his ideology bears no particular resemblance with that of the Vaishṇava āchāryas, and his open attacks on the beliefs in the divinity of the avatāras strikes at the very roots of the Vaishṇava beliefs. But these aspects of his thought are not seen clearly because of the preconceived notions about bhakti. Freedom from this



fixed position is therefore necessary for a better understanding of his teachings and of the impact of his personality on the medieval religion and thought. Perhaps the more fundamental aspects of the religious and philosophical position of Kabīr can be explained only after that. His belief in the equality of man, his faith in the oneness of all religions, his emphasis on reason, and his complete disregard for ritual and tradition deserve a more serious examination.

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