

A New Sāmānya Lakṣaṇa of Bhakti

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Abstract

This paper attempts to discuss a new definition of the word *Bhakti*, proposed by Śrī Nirañjanasvarūpa Brahmācārī, in his Bengali book, *Advaitamatatimirabhāskara*. This definition is interesting in the sense that it uses the Navya-Nyāya terminology and style of formulating *lakṣaṇa*-s or definitions and also for the fact that it seeks to bring the various (apparently) different and conflicting definitions of *bhakti* into one fold. Besides, the author offers a new analysis of the term *īśvaraṇidhāna*, found in the *Yogasūtras* of Patañjali, in tune with this new definition and shows how the traditional interpretation cannot stand the test of reason.

Keywords: *Advaitamatatimirabhāskara*, *Bhakti*, *Premalakṣaṇā Bhakti*, *Navadhā Bhakti*, *Śrīmadbhāgavata*, *Madhusūdana Sarasvatī*, *Rāmānuja*, *īśvaraṇidhāna*, etc.

The book '*Advaitamatatimirabhāskara*' (in Bengali) by Śrī Nirañjanasvarūpa Brahmācārī, *Navatīrtha*, *Nyāyavedāntācārya*, former Professor (*Mahācārya* department), Government Sanskrit College, Calcutta, published by *Sādhana-Patha Prakāśana*, Calcutta (date of publication not mentioned) discusses, among other things, the logical untenability of *Ekajīvavāda* (admitted by the *Vivaraṇa* school of Advaita Vedānta and upheld by Śrīman Madhusūdana Sarasvatī and his followers), and the question whether knowledge of non-duality (*advaitajñāna*) proceeds from *bhakti* or not. While dealing with the second question, he examines various definitions (*lakṣaṇa*-s) of *bhakti*, given by philosophers through the ages and suggests a original general definition (*sāmānya lakṣaṇa*) that, according to him, takes into account all those varieties. In doing so, he utilises the Navya-Nyāya terminology and style of formulating *lakṣaṇa*-s or definitions. His arguments are here summarised as follows.

To begin with, on one hand, we have the nine-fold (*navadhā*) *bhakti*, mentioned in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, which forms the cardinal textual authority for almost all the schools of *Bhakti*, in the following verse:

śravaṇaṃ kīrtanaṃ viṣṇoḥ smaraṇaṃ pādasevanam/

arcanaṃ vandanaṃ dāsyam sakhyamātmanivedanam// (Tarkapañcānana, 2015, 282)

Aside from this, the sense of oneness (*tanmayatā*) in the *īśvara* that is generated as a result of repeated practice of the nine-fold *bhakti* spoken of above, and which happened in case of the

milkmaids of Vṛndāvana, described in the 10th chapter of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, is a *bhakti* of a very high grade, and is called the *premalakṣaṇā bhakti*. This *premalakṣaṇā bhakti* is, in the opinion of the author, is the same as the one spoken of in the various *sūtra* texts on *Bhakti*, as in *Śāṅḍilyabhaktisūtra (sā parānuraktirīśvare)* (Upādhyāya, 1998, 4), *Nāradabhaktisūtra (sā kasmai paramapremarūpa)* (Upādhyāya, 1998, 75), etc.

Next he cites Rāmānuja's definition of *bhakti*, which is as follows: 'tailadhārāvadvacchinnacittapravāho bhaktiḥ' (Gosvāmi, 17)

Lest this 'flow of the mind' (*cittapravāha*) be misunderstood as direct knowledge (*aparokṣa / pratyakṣa jñāna*) or indirect knowledge (*parokṣa jñāna*) as in the case of inference (*anumāna*), Rāmānuja has described this as a stream of memory (*smṛtisantāna*). In fact, in the absence of an object, though it is impossible to have a perceptive (*anubhavātmaka*) knowledge of it, yet in the presence of a suitable stimulus, a memory of it can arise, since such a memory is consequent upon the impression (*saṃskāra*) of a previous perception. But even in presence of *saṃskāra*-s, a stream (*dhārāpravāha*) of memory (*smṛti*) does not *always* occur; it happens only in special cases. This is especially true in case of the memory of children in relation to their parents and vice-versa, husband and wife, etc. This cannot happen in the absence of a special cause (*viśeṣa kāraṇa*). In the generation of a memory-stream (*smṛtidhārā*), deep affection (*tivrānurāga*) or profound love (*gabhīra prema*) is the special cause. Thus, in case of a memory-stream with regard to *Īśvara (bhagavadviśayasmṛtisantāna)* also, supreme love (*paramaprema*) is the reason. It is now clear as to why such a *bhakti* is called *premalakṣaṇā* or one having deep love as its characteristic feature. Śrīman Madhusūdana Sarasvatī also defines *bhakti* in a similar way in his *Bhagavadbhaktirasayana*:

'drutasya bhagavaddharmād dhārāvāhikatām gatā /

sarveśe manaso vṛttirbhaktirityabhidhīyate/' (Sāṅkhyavedāntatīrtha, 1997, 18)

"If the inner organ (*citta*), which has acquired a liquid nature due to the cultivation of nine-fold *bhakti*, assumes a continuous stream-like state having *Bhagavān* as its object, then that continuous stream-like modification of the inner-organ in the form of *Bhagavān* is called *bhakti*." (Our translation). He compares this *bhakti* with something which gets stuck in a molten lac. As something which when put into molten lac does not come out of it, and remains in it when the latter crystallises as also when the lac is melted, likewise, the form of God that enters into the inner-organ (*citta*) when the latter becomes liquefied as it were, never comes out, and the person is never oblivious of it, and he develops a permanent affection for it, which leads to *bhakti* that never withers away. When the mind becomes liquefied as it were as a result of the repeated practice of the nine-fold *bhakti*, the mind begets a permanent stream of affection or love for the Lord. Thus, in the opinion of Madhusūdana Sarasvatī too, *bhakti* is a stream of memory related to the Lord (*bhagavadviśayasmṛtisantāna*). It is also learnt from such a definition of his that the *premalakṣaṇā bhakti* is the primary (*mukhyā*) *bhakti* and it is caused by the nine-fold *bhakti* or the features of the Lord (*bhagavaddharma*).

Considering the various definitions of *bhakti* discussed above, it is clear that all these definitions have the *premalakṣaṇā bhakti* as the goal. Madhusūdana Sarasvatī, by describing the nine-fold (*navadhā*) *bhakti* as the cause of the *premalakṣaṇā bhakti*, clearly blocks the possibility of the former becoming the target (*lakṣya*) of his definition of *bhakti*. This surely leads to a contradiction with the position of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, which speaks of the nine-fold *bhakti*-s. Thus it becomes imperative to formulate a general definition of *bhakti*, which would apply to the mutually different nine-fold *bhakti*-s as well as the *premalakṣaṇā bhakti*.

In view of the above, the learned author proposes the following general definition (*sāmānya lakṣaṇa*) of *bhakti*: ***sākṣādbhagavadbhajanameva bhaktiḥ***. He glosses the term *bhajanam* as remembrance (*smaraṇa*) or actions conducive to it (*tadanukūlavayāpāra*). Lest such a definition made in terms of alternatives (*anyataratvaghāṭita-lakṣaṇa*), arising from the admission of a group of mutual absence (*bhedakūṭa*) be objected to, the author proposes the following revision: ***sākṣādbhagavatsmaraṇānukūlo vyāpāro bhaktiḥ***. It may now be objected that such a definition is also not flawless since it does not hold good in cases of remembrance (*smaraṇa*), included in the nine-fold *bhakti*, and *premalakṣaṇā bhakti*, both of which are of the nature of remembrance (*smaraṇātmaka*), while *bhakti* is here defined in terms of *actions conducive to the direct remembrance of the Lord*. In reply, it may be observed that since the two cases of *smaraṇa* and *premalakṣaṇā bhakti* may be treated as actions conducive to remembrance, they become the cause (*kāraṇa*) of consequent remembrance of the Lord (*paravartī-bhagavatsmaraṇa*) through the impressions ensuing from them (*svajanyasaṃkāradvārā*), and thus the definition does not suffer from any fallacy. That impressions (*saṃskāra-s*) are generated by repeated remembrance (*punaḥ punaḥ smaraṇa*) is admitted by Navya-Naiyāyikas like Raghunātha Śīromaṇi, who says the following in the *Anumiti Dīdhīti: kathamanyathā punaḥ punaḥ smaraṇād dṛḍha-dṛḍhatara-dṛḍhatamaḥ saṃskāraḥ* (Tarkadarshanatirtha, 1910, 71) (“How else do firm, firmer and firmest impressions are generated by repeated remembrance?”). The causality of remembrance for remembrance in case of *premalakṣaṇā bhakti*, which is of the nature of memory-stream (*smṛtisantānarūpa*), is quite clear. For in the case of memory stream, the first remembrance is the cause of the second remembrance, the second remembrance is the cause of the third remembrance, the third remembrance is the cause of the fourth remembrance, and so on and so forth. If such a causality is not admitted, then the memory-stream cannot continue for long. Thus it is clear that the general definition of *bhakti* does not suffer from under-extension or impossibility.

The above definition of *bhakti* is also the intention of the author of the *Gītā*, where we find the following verse (VII/16) –

caturvidhā bhajante mām janāḥ sukṛtino’rjuna!

ārta jijñāsurarthārthī jñānī ca bhatarasabha// (Tarkabhūṣaṇa, 2013, 442)

“Four kinds of people worship me, O Arjuna! They are – one who is in distress (*ārta*), one who desires to know the nature of godhood (*jijñāsu*), one desiring some gain (*arthārthī*), and the knower (*jñānī*).” There is no doubt that all these four worship the Lord directly. Some worship him to get rid of dangers that have befallen the former, some in a desire-free (*niṣkāma*) manner, some for achieving some end, and some as one’s own self. In spite of differences as to the way of worship, it is certain that all of them worship directly. Therefore, the common feature of all the devotees (*bhakta*) is ‘*sākṣādbhagavadbhajanam*’. So there is no scope of doubt regarding this being the general definition of *bhakti*, intended by the Lord in the *Gītā*. Although *ārta* and *arthārthī bhakta-s* belong to a lower category, still the Lord calls them *bhakta* because by anyway they worship the Lord directly. The deeper intention is that, if someone worshipping for the alleviation of sorrow gets rid of the miseries, or if the desire of someone, worshipping the Lord for achieving some specific thing, is fulfilled, he gets further attracted towards the Lord, and will remember the Lord more and more, and in this way, they will unknowingly develop deep love for the Lord. Naturally, with the deepening of love, all desires will slowly wither away, just as it happened with the milk-maids (*gopī*) of Vṛndāvana, who, being attracted to the beauty and qualities of the Lord, started to worship the latter in a desirous (*sakāma*) manner. Later, not only did their objective desires wither away because of constant remembrance of the Lord, but it

brought them supreme oneness (*tanmayatā*) with the Lord, which is verily known as the ‘love of the milk-maids’ (*gopīprema*) in the scriptures and the tradition of the devotees. Having arrived at such a state, the *ārta* and the *arthārthī* devotees are promoted to the level of *jijñāsu* devotees. That is to say – when the *ārta* devotee sees that upon prayer, the Lord delivers him from all miseries, he keeps on remembering the Lord under all circumstances for fulfilling all his desires. Thus his transition from *ārta* to *arthārthī* devotee takes place. Now, when the *arthārthī* devotee sees that upon prayer the Lord fulfils all his desires, then questions related to the nature of the Lord crop up in his mind and he makes efforts to know the Lord. Thus the *arthārthī* devotee slowly becomes the *jijñāsu* devotee. In this way, if the devotee worships the Lord with a view to knowing His qualified nature (*saguṇa svarūpa*), the Lord makes him realise His qualified nature without the instruction of others, just as it happened with the milk-maids (*gopī*) of Vṛndāvana. That the knowledge of the object of contemplation (*dhyeya*) springs from *bhakti* is evident from the following words of the *gopī*-s found in the Rāsapañcādhyāyī section of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇā* (X/31/iv):

*na khalu gopikānandano bhavān
 akhiladehināmantarātmadrk/
 vikhanasārthito viśvaguptaye
 sakha udeyivān sāttvatvāṃ kule//
 (Parivrājakācārya, 2014, 444)*

“You are certainly not the son of a milk-maid, but the witness of the inner self of all embodied beings. You have appeared in the lineage of the Sāttvata-s, for protecting the world upon being prayed by the Creator (himself).” (Our translation) Likewise, those who worship the Lord with a view to knowing His non-qualified nature (*nirguṇa svarūpa*) is another class of the *jijñāsu* devotees, who gradually become a *Jñānī* devotee with the ripening of *bhakti*.

It is further to be noted in this connection that the present general definition of *bhakti*, proposed by us above, is also in tune with the *bhakti*, which is of the nature of the worship of the *Īśvara* (*īśvarapraṇidhānātmikā bhakti*), spoken of in the *Yoga Sūtra*-s of Patañjali (Bhattacharya, 2014, 678). Elaborating the nature of *īśvarapraṇidhāna*, Patañjali says ‘*tasya vācakaḥ praṇavaḥ*’ (Bhattacharya, 2014, 80), ‘*tajjapastadarthabhāvanam*’ (Bhattacharya, 2014, 83). The *yogarūḍha* meaning of the word ‘*praṇava*’ is *Omkāra*. But here *praṇava* has to be understood in the etymological sense of something through the medium whereof *Īśvara* is supremely lauded or eulogised, i.e. the various names of *Īśvara* and *mantra*-s (*pranūyate prakarṣeṇa stūyate īśvaro yena*). This is because the provision made in the various *śāstra*-s for worship of *Īśvara* through various names such as Brahmā, Viṣṇu, Śiva, Durgā, Kṛṣṇa, etc. and with the help of various *mantra*-s will be futile otherwise. As such the validity of those *śāstra*-s will be at stake. Moreover, in accordance with the dictum of the *Nṛsimhapūrvatāpanī Upaniṣad* (Panashikar, 2010, 185) that if women or *śūdra*-s ever learn the Vedic *gāyatrī*, *Omkāra*, Vedic *mantra*-s and the *bīja-mantra* of Lakṣmī, they will go to hell (*naraka*) after death; and no Vedic teacher (*ācārya*) would ever teach these to them and if he teaches, he too will go to *naraka* with them after death (*sāvitrīṃ praṇavaṃ yajurlakṣmīṃ yadi jānīyāt strīśūdraḥ, sa mṛto’dhogacchati, tasmāt sarvadā nācaṣṭe, yadyācaṣṭe sa ācāryasteneiva mṛto’dhogacchati*), the meaning of the word *praṇava* in the *Yogasūtra*-s has to be construed in the etymological sense. Otherwise, the *Yogasūtra*-s will either not be meant for women and the *śūdra*-s (which is not the case), or it will entail the defect of speaking of something contradictory to the provisions of the Vedas, which will put at stake its identity as an *āstika darśana*, i.e. a philosophical school subscribing to the authority of the Veda-s. Thus deliberations on *Īśvara*, aided by the muttering (*japa*) of any name (*nāma*) or sacred formula

(*mantra*), denotative of *Īśvara*, will lead to the performance of *īśvarapraṇidhāna* or the meditation of *Īśvara*.

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