On bhakti in the Bhagavadgītā

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Bhakti, one of the peculiarities of Hindu thought, was first introduced in the Bhagavadgītā. In the Śvetāsvatara-upaniṣad, the word bhakti has been used in the sense of devotion to deva and guru, which, however, is different from the sense in BhG, in which to love Kṛṣṇa as the Absolute is meant.

The sense of bhakti, according to Śaṅkara in his commentary on BhG, is bhajana and jñānalakṣaṇa. Bhakti-yoga is interpreted by Rāmānuja as knowledge (vedana), adoration (upāsana) and meditation (dhyāna). But in this case bhakti-yoga is identically equal to bhakti. And in BhG, xiii. 24, Rāmānuja takes dhyāna to be bhakti-yoga. Since dhyāna in this verse is used together with sāṁkhya yoga and karma-yoga, he uses the term bhakti-yoga instead of bhakti. And Yāmuna, the teacher of Rāmānuja, explains bhakti-yoga as abidance in such things as meditation with one-pointed devotion (paraikāntya-priti, dhyānādīsu sthitih). Therefore, the sense of bhakti in BhG is devotion to the Absolute and bhakti is practiced chiefly by meditation and knowledge.

There are two bhaktas, devotees, in BhG: right bhaktas, viz. those who worship Kṛṣṇa and wrong bhaktas, viz. those who do other gods. As the latter is allowed to worship Kṛṣṇa indirectly, BhG looks liberal to them.

yanti devavrata devanitrnyanti pitvratāh/
bhatani yanti bhavejya yanti madyajino' 'pi mam/ (ix. 25)

Thus those who worship other gods transmigrate and those who worship Kṛṣṇa release themselves from transmigration. BhG permits of no alternative to bhaktas. It must be noted that in vii. 16, those who worship Kṛṣṇa are fourfold, that is the afflicted (ārta), the knowledge-seeker (jijnāsu), the wealth-seeker (arthārthin), and the possessor of knowledge (jñānin). Of them jñānin is the best bhakta and dear to Kṛṣṇa. Therefore, bhakti in BhG attaches a great weight to jñāna and does not mean ecstatic love. And jñāna is the best yajña of all. Because in BhG yajña is a spiritual sacrifice to God. Jñāna-yajña is
sacrificing jñāna to Kṛṣṇa and worshiping Him. And BhG makes much of it. It is generally admitted that bhakti rests on faith viz. śraddhā and results in God’s grace viz. prasāda, which leads bhakta to liberation. Bhakti follows śraddhā. The latter is intellectual and objective and the former is emotional and subjective. The original sense of the word śraddhā which is used many times in Upaniṣads is a belief in a religious rite. In BhG, therefore, śraddhā means merely faith. There are also two śraddhās. One is rightly connected with Kṛṣṇa and the other is wrongly connected with other gods. The former is mentioned below.

mayyāveśya mano ye māṁ nityayuktā upāsate/
śraddhaya parayopetāte me yuktatamā mātaḥ || (xii. 2)

Hence those who revere Kṛṣṇa with constant discipline embrace supreme śraddhā. Wrong śraddhā is mentioned in the following, in which it neglects the law’s injunction.

tridvādha bhavati śraddhā dehināṁ sa svabhāvajā/
sattvikā rajast caiva tāmasā cete tāṁ śṛṇu || (xvii. 2)
yajante sattvikā devanyakṣaraksāṁsi rājasāh/
pretāṅbhataṅgaṇāṁśe yajante tāmasā janaḥ || (xvii. 4)

Therefore, wrong śraddhā is of three kinds. Those who worship other gods (devah) embrace sattvikā śraddhā. Those who worship sprites (yakṣāṁ) and ogres (rāksāṁsi) embrace rājasā śraddhā, whereas those who worship ghosts (pretaḥ) and hordes of goblins (ḥataganāḥ) embrace tāmasā śraddhā. Also about śraddhā BhG says:

yo yo yāṁ yāṁ tānuṁ bhaktah śraddhayārcitumīcchati/
tasya tasyācaḥ śraddhāṁ tāmeva vidadhāmyaham || (vii. 21)

Whatsoever divine form bhakta seeks to worship with śraddhā, Kṛṣṇa makes śraddhā unswerving for bhakta. So bhakta viz. one who embrace bhakti can deepen śraddhā in God, if he worships Him with śraddhā. Therefore, should I say in other words, the deepened śraddhā follows bhakti.

Thus bhakti follows śraddhā and deepened śraddhā also follows bhakti. Hence it follows that one deepens the other or vice versa.

On bhakti in the Bhagavadgīta (H. Nishio) (12)


3) Śvet Up vi. 23.


7) Śrīmadbhagavadgītā, Śāṅkarabhāṣya with Ānandagīrīṭkā (ASS, No. 34, Poona, 1936), p. 423.

8) Ibid. p. 273.


10) Ibid. p. 584.


12) BhG ix. 23.

13) Śaṅkara interprets jiñāsu as jiñāsurbhagavattattvam jiñātumicchati yaḥ. ŚBh, p. 248.

14) Śaṅkara interprets jñānin as jñāṇi viṣṇostattvavit. loc. cit.

15) BhG vii. 17.


18) BhG iv. 33.


20) BhG ix. 15.


23) Chānd Up i. 1. 10, iv. 1. 1, v. 4. 2, vii. 19. 1, Brhad Up i. 5. 3, iii. 9. 21, vi. 2. 15, etc.

24) BhG xvii. 1.

25) Rāmānuja interprets divine form (tānu) as madtyāmindrādikāṃ tanum. RBh, p. 396.