

BHAKTI CULT IN SOUTH INDIA

It is perhaps a mistake to call bhakti a cult, for it is on all hands accepted as a primary form of relationship between God and man manifested in what is designated as religious attitude. Religion and bhakti are synonymous terms. It is an attitude of devotion or offering of oneself to God so that the godhead may enjoy him. It is the recognition that one is a dependent part or individual portion of the Godhead, a recognition which entails the placing of oneself in the relation of a servant or slave of the Master, a lover of the beloved, and as the body of the supreme self. God is recognized as the Master, beloved and self by the soul. Bhakti is the ultimate form of a religious attitude, though the forms of works or service, or methods of knowledge or jñāna are implied in it and derive their strength and firmness from it, and impart in turn deeper quality to it.

South Indian Bhakti schools can be divided into two broad divisions, the Vaiṣṇavism and Śaiva. These two schools have had an uninterrupted history for well nigh two thousand years and even today have a vitality of their own. The Vaiṣṇavism schools trace their development to the Purāṇas and Āgamas of the Vaikhānasa and Pāñcarātra schools. These āgamas trace their authority to the Vedas. They hold that āgamas are practical commentaries on the Vedic literature. They are indeed different from the brāhmaṇa-mantra schools and differentiate their own schools by calling themselves as followers of the tantra. Though differentiated as tantra they lay greater emphasis on the yogic practices rather than on the Yajñā practices. They interpret all yajñā subjectively and worship the symbol or the Icon, the material form, specially installed by mantra and tantra. That the Vaiṣṇavism Seers or Ālvār as well as the Śaiva seers accepted the Veda and the Āgamas of the northerners can be shown amply from their hymns.

St. Śaṭhakopa, otherwise known endearingly as Nammaḷvār (our Saint) and St. Tirumalar have spoken of the āgama as the essence of the Vedic teaching the works of St. Śaṭhakopa are said to be the essence of the Four Vedas, and St. Tirumalar endorses the Vedic teaching and the Agnicayana or Agnikārya as fundamental to the proper understanding of the path to salvation in his esoteric work *tirumantiram*.

The peculiar quality of the āgamas is the practical method that they propose to attain liberation (mokṣa). Mokṣa is the realisation of unity with God and not mere nirvana. God is to be attained. He is to be attained through devotion. God is all that is and He is to be known as such. the Iconic form of worship is accordingly not only necessary for being the object of meditation or dhyāna but is constructed as the Divine in that form. Dhyāna is of God and though some consider that dhyāna may proceed gradually from the most concrete object to the most abstract through a series of stages, the āgamas have no doubt whatever that the icon is not merely a symbol but also a presence. The reason why the Vaiṣṇavism āgamas prefer the more concrete, even anthropomorphic representation of the Divine incarnation or manifestation, as the icon, lies in the fact that the Divine must be adored and worshipped and served in the most agreeable form to the devotee. The Śaiva Āgama prefers the Linga, as the form of the Divine, because no iconic form or any form of that matter of fact, can exhaust the infinity that is the Divine. Rather than find difference between the two modes of approach to the worship of the Divine, we should see here the complementary artiness of these two conceptions - saguṇopāsana and the nirguṇopāsana, the accessible and the transcendental forms of the Divinity suggested by the one all – pervasiveness of the Divine in the icon.

The Icon symbology then can be either of the *mūrta* (formed) kind or the *amūrta* (unformed or formless) kind. In either case they refer to the presence of the God head in the icon. We may say that there is always the double presence (*ubhaya-linga*) character of the Divine as the immanent presence and Transcendent presence in everything. The great saints of the Āgamas struck the

grandest note of Religion why they affirmed this double presence in the icon of the Diivne Godhead. In neither of the schools is the icon considered to be just a pratīka, a representation, an illusory though practically expedient image. Icon stands as a real presence both for the ordinary man as well as the advanced Yogi; only to the yogic consciousness grasps in a single perception the double poise (*ubhaya liṅga*), whereas the ordinary man hugs the immanent alone and the thinker the transcendent alone. The miracle (*adbhuta*) of God lies in His manifestation in the finite element or man as the immanent principle which is inseparable from his transcendent nature. The infinite mystery is the manifestation of the infinite in the finite. This is power (*māyā*) of the infinite which is deemed to be a realizing force rather than a de-realizing force of Brahman.

One of the fundamental problems of a Philosophy of Religion is the status of the Godhead. God is certainly the transcendent Principle untouched by the created world in every sense, that is to say in respect of its imperfections, evils and ugliness; such a thing alone can release the souls from their imperfection and evil and sin. He who is not free cannot help others to become free. Transcendentalism then is the assurance of a saviur⁴ or liberator. This cosmos is undoubtedly a valuable fact but by itself it cannot satisfy, since God is also said to be the Creator or First Cause. God as Creator becomes related to that which He creates, Religion as philosophy demands a creator or cause who is the logical prius or ground. But then the question arises whether God is external to the universe which giving been created is permitted thereafter to go on un-interfered with like a well made machine, or it is something constantly attended to. Deism is the theory of an external God. Occasionalism is the theory of a God ever-interfering to set right the world created by Him, an imperfect God. Religion is not satisfied with these views. It demands an immanent God who is always present within the created and yet directing the Universe spontaneously, in creation, sustention and destruction.

Religion also emphasizes the fact that the soul becomes conscious in its own inner experience of the Godhead as its Self and inner guide and Voice and

authority. It also emphasizes the fact that God is also an incarnating deity who takes an historical role for the sake of redeeming the spouls and establishing moral order, dharama. Avatārs and prophets are such incarnating spirits.

According Religion in a fullest measure demands that God should be Transcendent, Creator etc., Immanent Self, Historical Avatār and the worshippable from of the Icon. The Āgama Śāstra which fully conforms to these demands is the Pāñcarātra Āgama, which enunciates the five-fold form of the Divine as Para, vyūhas, Vibhava, Antaryāmi or Hardā and the Arcā. The Para is exhibited or expressed in and through the other four forms.

The Vaikhānasa Āgama, another se Vaiṣṇavism Āgama also tracing its origins in the Sūtras of the Veidc Brāhmans, accepts the five forms (*beras*) so to speak and represents them even in the gross iconic patterns so much as to suggest correspondential realism. The five bears are called Dhruva, Snapana, Utsava, Bali and Kautaka. Thus a complete philosophy of religion must provide for all the five form of the infinite in a functional interpretation.

Indian philosophy of Religion then is a complete all inclusive statement of the principles of the nature of God. It satisfies the demands of spiritual, philosophical, moral and physical attitudes.

The achievement of the knowledge of the nature of God is rare. is almost impossible to say that one can or has comprehended completely the Inexhaustibel and the Infinite. As the Kenopaniṣad puts it; *yādi mānyase suvēdēit dābhram ēvāpi nūnam*. Slight indeed is the knowledge of the wisest even in respect of that Godhead. But the statement of the five-foldness of the nature of God is a result of the philosophical approach. The mystics always aimed at the knowledge of God. The Ālvār who are perl – divers in the ocean of the Divine qualities reveal the inseparable comprehension or integral vision of the five-fold forms of the One Supreme Godhead known as Nārāyaṇa. to see difference between these five from or even to hold that the lower ones are as such imperfect than the prior forms is to be ignorant and on the authority of the

scripture to be mortal. The five forms though apparently considered to be in some relation of effects to the cause are not really effects. Effects are held to be less perfect than the cause. They are therefore known as fulgurations (*vyūhas*) or Manifestations (*vibhavās*). They depend on the Īśavāsyuopaniṣad's śānti patha:

Pūrnamadah pūrnām idam pūrnāt pūrnām udacyate

Pūrnasya pūrnām adāy pūrnām evavasishyate

To consider any form to be less real or illusory or imperfect is to miss the transcendent occult secret of the Divine Nature. This is the meaning granted to the words, '*Tad ekam*'; '*Sarvam khalvidam Brahma*'; This is the One Divine who is known variously or named variously according to functional status or manifestation in the Cosmos, in the individual, in History and in the Icon. So universal is this realisation that not one hymn of the Āḷvār is devoted to any one exclusive form, since almost all the five forms coalesce into one Vision and Utterance. This may well be the test of a real mystical experience.

Though the śaiva āgama in the south has no such definitive formulation of the five-forms of the Godhead and has not evolved a philosophy in that regard, yet in one mystic utterances of the Nāyanmārs we can trace four forms excluding the *vibhava* or avatār. But even this is accepted in the allusions to the several *līlās* of Parama Śiva, which does duty to the *vibhava* of that Godhead.

The conception of the relationship between the souls and the five-fold Godhead in the Bhakti schools is realistic, practical and religious. It is over and above these occult. The nature of the soul must first be determined. It is not the body which is a form of the material prakṛit, though it is variegated into 24 *tattvas* (categories) and is characterized by the threefold qualities of sattva, rajas and tamas. The soul is a conscient category. There are several grades of souls, which could broadly be divided into three classes, the bonded (*baddha*), the freed (*mukta*) and the eternally free (*nityamukta*). But whatever the class, one has to

determine the nature of the soul. The soul is dependent on the Lord; it is inseparable from the Lord; It is that which has the Lord as its self; it can achieve all relationship with the Lord from the most physical to the most spiritual, such as *sākhatva*, *dāsatva*, *śarīratva*, *amśatva*, *ṣktitva*, *śeṣatva*, and *brhamabhūtatva*, or *sāyūjya*, *sārūpya*, *salokya* and *sāyūjya* with Brahman.

The getting rid of the ignorance or the bond of ignorance. *pāsa*, which arises from the identification of oneself with body and material modifications and dependence on them must be got rid of. This ignorance can only be got rid of through God's Grace, as no effort on the part of the individual can get rid of the egoism even as no observer can abolish himself in any experiment that is made in respect of microcosmic atoms and electrons etc., sic he himself will form the field which affects the behavior of those minute bodies. Utter selflessness is a gift from God. That is the reason why South Indian Bhakti Schools believe that the culmination if not the possibility of real bhakti is prapatti, self surrender and self-offering.

Self-surrender is made when one is defeated and seeks to be saved by Him whom one has disobeyed or fought against. It is an act of seeking to be excused for misbehavior or sin against God. Nothing is so sinful as to seek independence from God and disobedience to His will. Self-offering on the other hand is an act of pure submission to God's pleasure and Will out of the knowledge that God is the Self of oneself without whom one cannot even live or move or have one's being. self-offering is therefore different from self-surrender. But both these stages are available to the devotee. Man becomes conscious of his sinfulness and transgressions as he grows to become conscious of God's presence and achieves his peace with God by surrendering himself to Him. the most poignant passages in the Hymns of the great saints are precisely those which express their sinfulness-sometimes called *naicyanu-sandhanna*- belittling of oneself sincerely albeit, for in the consciousness of the glory and grace of God they find that they have a sinful nature which acted against the over-powering and mastering love of God to them. It would of course be wrong to say that the

consciousness of one's sinfulness is the precise necessary or causal condition for the act of surrender, just as the consciousness of God's transcendent beauty or Saccidānanda, is to the *precise* causal condition for the act of offering. There as elsewhere a little awareness of the nature of the soul is sufficient germ for the growth of the fuller knowledge and its counterparts of surrender and offering- *svalpamāpyasya dharmasya tryāte manartō bhāyat*. Religious knowledge and practice start and grow slowly from little beginnings, but gather momentum as the awareness of the Godhead becomes greater and greater and all-inclusive. The five stages of the Divine nature already mentioned from the *Arcā* to the *Parā* indeed provide of the double movement of Surrender and Offering till finally is realised that Embrace of the Infinite in an utter oneness.

It is realised in these poises of the soul in respect of the statuses of the infinite Godhead that the Lord is inseparable from it. The realisation of the inseparable unity is expressed in the relationship which are multiplanal, since God's creation is multiplanal, at least has as even planes, seven above and seven below as the Indian Purāṇas hold. The inseparable unity is expressed in the spiritual level as lover and beloved, in the philosophical level as identity, in the creative relationship of śaktimān and śakti (Śiva and Śakti), in the biological relationship of Soul and body (*śarīra-śarīrī-bhāva*), in the social relationship of *śeṣa-śeṣī* (or *Svāmi-dāsa*) in the physical relationship of *amśa-amśī bhāva* (whole part relationship). Yoga always lays great store on the *śarīra-śarīrī-bhāva* as it seeks to discover the inner Self secret within, who is God, the Saccidānanda.

Religion as a great path towards experience of God includes the exposition of the relationships of the individual to the Divine. These relationships when consciously assumed help the realisation of freedom from the bondage to the Ignorance gradually. It is just possible that advanced souls may start with any one form of the Divine or any type of relationship with the Divine, but sooner or later they also realise the other relationships and other forms of the Divine. This is the perennial interest of the Mystic movement, the inner drive of the Infinite. Catholicism develops and grows into a permanent feature of the religious

consciousness. Tolerance transforms itself as the realisation of unity or rather Perfection of the Divine Nature's many-sidedness.

When the soul worships the Icon-form it realises the relationship of devotion which is necessarily of the outer order. The worship strictly follows the well laid down canons worship. Āḷvār especially Viṣṇucitta entranced himself in its mode of worship, it gradually led him to experience the five – foldness of the Divine Nature.

When the worship is of the Lord as Antaryāmin as seated in the Heart, it is the relationship of self and body. God is the Self of oneself and all. One becomes the instrument of the Divine; One realises devotion through utter dedication and obedience to Lord, who is also the Lord of all and Self. The soul of man becomes the body of God, and the Divine offers Himself to the soul so to speak, embodies Himself in the Individual. As the Āḷvār puts it: "Today He has made me an Object (or existence) and place Himself in me": *inrennai porulakki tannai yennul vaittan* -: Yogis achieve this tanmāyatva and consider this to be the highest realisation of God. God's centrism of the soul or ego however is not the all of the religious quest. God – centrism of the soul is the aim and for this the Divine takes Him to higher levels of His Vastness. It must however be stated that the Āḷvār agree with the Pāñcarātra (*avatāra*) of the *parā*, and is to be distinguished from the Antaryāmi of the Upaniṣads who is the indwelling self of all things always and who is the *sarva śārīri*. As the great teacher Venkaṭanātha stated, the presence of God of omnipresence is capable of being viewed in two ways: one through pervasion by power as in the case of the law or dharma or rule of a King which extends to all the corners of his territory, and the other omnipervasiveness which is the possibility of the Divine entering and occupying in person any soul or thing, space or time. Antaryāmi of the Upaniṣads is both, though predominantly the former, whereas the later is the view of the Pāñcarātra and Āḷvār who speak of the Divine coming with all His eternal glory and auspicious six qualities of *aiśvarya-vīrya, bala-jñāna śakti and tejas*, and centering the soul and abiding there permanently (that is to say for ever)

thereafter. The *muktalakṣaṇa* is this, the eternal residence of the Divine Lord within oneself in separably in fullness of puissance of Bhagavat.

When the soul worships God as the Avatār or divine historical form, the soul assumes the role of the *dāsa* (slave). The *dāsatva* concept is not to be identified with the meaning which is given to it in modern times, that is to say that a slave is one who is not to be identified with the meaning which is given to it in modern times, that is to say that a slave is one who is not to be treated as a person who has life and self-realisation to achieve. The spiritual concept of *dāsa* implies the free offering of one's all to God in service for the purposes of Divine redemption of oneself and the society. It is not annihilation that is demanded of one in respect of his rights as well as redemption as in the modern state, as in ancient tyranny. But there is a close similarity between the economic and ethical subjugation of the individual to the Dictator or Tyrant or State and the spiritual renunciation of the Selfness of God through selfless service and devotion. The concept of Avatār is such that the recognition of an avatār becomes rather difficult. Two criteria have been provided by Śrī Kṛṣṇa. The protection of the good and the destruction of the evil on the one hand and the restoration of dharma on the other. It is difficult indeed to recognize an avatār when it happens as the Lord *sr* Kṛṣṇa himself declared. A *jñāna* alone recognizes the Historical personality. The fullness of the six attributes in *aiśvarya-vīrya*, *bala-jñāna*, *śakti-tejas*, must be in that personality. Above all that supreme altitude of occult existence must be present. Nowadays almost every knower in some measure of Brahman seeks to assume the divine role of the Descent. The *mukta puruṣas* also appear as avatārs because of the realisation of the *antaryāmitva* of the Divine in them. But Historical *Vibhavas* they are not. They are all ascending souls out of the Ignorance, not descents of the Divine for the sake of a Cosmic Righteousness to be established in the conduct of men. These descents are for the purpose of establishing new planes of consciousness in the individual souls, so that they can become organic with God in more and more number of planes of Cosmic being and live and move and have their being in them with freedom. A soul that becomes a *dāsa*, spiritual servant, has unbounded faith in the Divine Master, for

whose sake he lives and strives unremittingly to do whatever is demanded of him.

When the soul worships o the Divine Godhead as Cause etc., of the Universes, as the vyūhas it becomes liberated utterly from the wheel of samsāra. Rightly the *Vedānta Sūtras* show that the liberating knowledge is the knowledge that Brahman is the cause etc., - *Janmadyasya yataḥ*. More than this liberation is added to the individual. The individual begins to participate in the Divine Cosmic Activity as Śakti of the Śaktimān. The relationship transcends the physical and social or historical levels. The soul becomes cosmosizes; its consciousness, cosmic consciousness, or to adopt the language of Sri Aurobindo, supermentalised, so well was this known, that great seers of the past thought of plunging into this experience directly and sought the liberation into the *parā* straightaway, so that there can be no return the vyūhas even. But Pāñcarātra, nay every tantra, recognizes that the knowledge of the Divine is always liberative at any point or in any relationships but it must be realised at every level, and integrally. Realism is the keynote of the mystic relationships. Nothing is unreal except the attempt to hold on to any one aspect and deny others, or deny any one aspect whilst claiming the others to be justified. The Iconic manifestation is as much real as the *Hardā* or the *Vibhava* or the vyūhas and derives its reality from the Transcendent which equally fully present in all the four forms. The Primal or the *Turiyatitā* is suffusing like an uninterrupted flow of oil all the other form manifestations of itself. Spiritual evolution attains the highest level at this point when integrated with the other relationships.

When the soul worships the Lord or the Godhead as the Para, beyond all manifestations and Forms, it becomes verily an undifferentiated *amśa*, indistinguishable from His essence.

In every stage of the relationship, at every point of realisation, there is available the occult inseparability between the Divine and the soul, though the relationship seems to be flexible apparently giving rise to the conception of

separability, or apartness, or divorce, which give rise to the experience of misery, *viśleṣa*, *viraha*, *viyoga*.

The above are the five statuses of the soul in relation to the five-fold Divine Nature and Being, expressed in the language of Religious and mystical experience, and the fivefold manner of devotion possible to the soul.

vīraśaiva religious thought has evolved an interesting parallel conception. The *sat-sthala* theory of six forms of relationship possible between the soul and the śiva reveals the religious need to posit corresponding statuses of the śiva as in Pāñcarātra, the fulfillment of the relationships in tanmayatva or brahmabhūtatva or Brahmabhāva. But to realise all at once in a single simultaneous experience is the integral hope of the Āḷvār in sr Vaiṣṇavism . \

the Vaiṣṇava and Śaiva Āgamās have contributed to a wonderful extent to the science of Religious and Mystical experience or Yoga as might be seen from what has been stated above. They are urged by the sense of or rather imperative of 'Wholeness', which is correspondingly echoed by the philosophical imperative of completeness, coherence and self-consistency. It is a travesty to hold that mysticism of religion is fanciful, fanatical, and partial. In the deepest spiritual or occult experiences of the saints of all religions, we find this essential urge to completeness, comprehensiveness and Wholeness or Integral understanding of the Nature of God, and the soul and Nature. This is the point of unity even identity in the Revelations of the diverse religions.

It is this multiplanal realisation of relationships that bridges the gulf that separates religions. In a sense, all religions are partial affirmations of one or more of the Real features of God in an exaggerated manner. True Religion cuts across these and reveals the integral pattern of the Divine Nature, which includes the Transcendent and the Immanent, being and Becoming, *Satya and Dharma*, Prāṇa and Rāyi, Breath or life and being.

The Āḷvār have further enriched the relationship at every level by the transcendent experience of Śringārā. Śringārā is a sublimated experience of love which is considered by the Bhāgavata purāṇa as the highest experience which results in absolute attunement in the levels of the Transcendent (para). It is the experience of *para-bhakti*, *para-jñāna* and *Parama-bhakti*, all rolled into one. Śringārā is an all inclusive experience. The love Divine is not comparable in any sense with its inversion or rather perversion, which is lust. Carnality is possessive, Love is self-offering. Śringārā is an act of integral self-offering. The feminization of oneself taught in the Veda, practiced by the Gopis and sublimated by the Āḷvār is the creative point of the Divine transformation or integral transformation of oneself. The creative union with Divine is Śringārā, and is a basis for creative existence and is a complete departure from reactive and perverse living. Śringārā includes all the five statuses of the Divine and the soul and the relationship of *dāsatva*, *śarīratva*, *amṣatva*, *śakhatva*, *śiṣutva*, *matṛtva*, *putratva*, and *śeṣatva*. It is this completeness that makes it madhura-bhāva. The Divine is experienced as Sundarā as Tad VAnam, the garden of infinitely auspicious attributes, inexhaustible attractiveness, incomparable fullness, and Infinite Saccidānanda.

The most classic exposition of Religion is given by Hinduism in and through the literature of the Āgamās of Pāñcarātra and Vaikhānasa. God is All (*Sarvam*).

The Īśāvāsyaopaniṣad beautifully taught the truth that all this is from the habitation of the Lord (Īśāvāsyaṃ idam sarvam yat kinca jagatyāṃ jagat). God must be seen in all things and all things in God: *sarvaṅī bhūtāni ātmanyevaṇupasyati, sarvabhūteṣu ca ātmanām*. The realisation of God as such makes all real to man. Illusion is transcended, ignorance surmounted, death turned over, and immortality won.

South Indian bhakti has immensely made this synthesis of the Vedic, Āgamaic, and the Āḷvār-Nāyanmār and Dāsar Hymnal outpourings a synthetic

expression of the True Eternal Religion of Hinduism. It pleases for that one-pointed dedication to the Fullest Nature of the Divine. Philosophically justified as five – fold (quintuple) of Bliss, Liberty, and Reality, and knowledge.