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Essence of the Bhagavata Purana

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Abstract

Bhagavata is best described in its own words: *rasa* which means nectar. The nectar in the Hindu philosophical context denotes the joy that one derives on listening to God's several *lilas* or divine sports. Though several incarnations of Lord Vishnu have been described in the Vishnu Purana, Lord Krishna occupies the place of prime importance in Srimad Bhagavata. Bhagavata Puranas is one of the greatest of the Puranas since it deals with *bhakti*. Man feels lonely because it is not possible to get a human companion fully to his liking. Human beings pass their time in fun and frolic when they are young and the body is strong and active.

Owing to aging, when the body becomes inactive and man is no longer able to remain joyful and energetic all the time, he longs for someone who is completely one's own. In the Bhagavata, which is considered as the essence of Indian spiritual lore, it is stated that the thought of God removes the sorrows and sufferings of man and makes him feel good. The paper attempts to elucidate the essence of the Bhagavata Purana which carries a hopeful message that reading it would not only help mankind remove his sense of loneliness but also serves as a step-by-step guide in attaining nirvana or liberation from the eternal cycle of birth and death.

Keywords: Puranas, Bhagavata Samhita, Maya, Kali Yuga

Introduction

The Padma-purana says that towards the end of the Dwapara Yuga, when the meaning of the Vedas became almost hidden in the darkness, gods resorted to Narayana. Narayana or Lord Vishnu who is indeed the embodiment of the Vedas then came to the earth as Vyasa and classified the Vedas into four parts viz. Rig Veda, Yajur Veda, Sam Veda and Atharva Veda. The Puranas are religious scriptures, through various stories and illustrations, they teach us about the message of the Vedas in a simple manner (Agarwal, 2022).

Having classified the Vedas, Vyasa thought that by following Vedic injunctions those beings alone will get liberation who remain engaged in sacrifices who remain engaged in the study of scriptures, and who are brilliant and sincere. He was worried about the women, the outcastes, and the fallen who are of little intellect, who do not have the time or the interest to remain immersed in studies or sacrifices and who are not yet ripe to understand the Vedas. Therefore, he decided to compile the Bhagavata to express the truths of the Vedas in the form of anecdotes, moral stories and life stories in the Mahabharata and the Puranas. He did this so that even ordinary people might cross over the delusion of *maya* by realising the truths stated in the Puranas (Gitananda & Vyasa, 2014)^[1].

Factors which Motivated Vyasa to Compose the Bhagavata

Though Vyasa had classified the Vedas, composed the Puranas, the Brahma Sutras and the Mahabharata, he had been unsuccessful in turning the minds of humans towards renunciation and emancipation. As he sat contemplating on the banks of the river Sarasvati, Sage Narada decided to give Vyasa a visit. Sage Narada was a great devotee while Vyasa was a man of great knowledge. On enquiry, Vyasa replied that even though Vyasa understood the true nature of Brahman and experienced it, he did not have any peace. To this, Narada replied that in none of his scriptures had Vyasa praised the sacred glory of the divine. By mere dry knowledge, which is devoid of the singing of the glories of Lord Vishnu, Vyasa had missed out glorifying the divine sports of God. He had failed to present the divine sport of Lord Vishnu as the chief idea in all of his texts. He had not discussed in a way that makes it clear that singing the glories of the Lord alone should be the supreme end of human life. Sage Narada explained that from time immemorial the individual soul has forgotten God and being in the clutches

of *maya*, keeps transmigrating in different bodies in this world. God is pleased if the soul frees itself from the clutches of *maya* and attains bliss. But one cannot attain this bliss through dry knowledge without any devotion or through ordinary works.

Sage Narada further pointed that none of Vyasa's works dealt with the glories of God's divine sport. But if a devotee joyfully listens and sings the narration of the God's divine sport even if the sentences are not grammatically correct or poetically perfect, the very act of listening and singing the Lord's praises itself removes all their sins. Narada advised Vyasa that the only way to attain peace for him was to compose a text which described the divine sports of the Lord. One who reads this text would be supremely blissful till the end of his days.

Vyasa then composed the Bhagavata which is also known as the Sattvata – Samhita (scripture of devotion) for the benefit of man grovelling in the ignorance of his spiritual nature – to teach him that Bhakti is the one means by which the darkness of ignorance can be dispelled and the spiritual glory of mankind can be restored. Thus, for the good of human beings who are blinded by the enjoyment of the objects of the world, he composed Sattvata – Samhita, that is the Srimad Bhagavata Samhita (Gitananda & Vyasa, 2014)^[1].

Essence of the Bhagavata Samhita

The true nature of the Bhagavata Samhita is expressed in the following verses:

*Yasyam vai srutyamanayam krsne paramapuruse;
Bhaktirutpadyate pumsah soka-moha-bhayapaha-1.7.7*
(Gitananda & Vyasa, 2014)^[1].

The meaning of the above verse is that merely by starting its study or listening to it, the mind of the reader or the listener develops bhakti, or devotion to the supreme Lord which destroys all his sorrow and fear. If one somehow listens to the Bhagavata even a little, one attains devotion for the supreme being, Sri Krishna and the individual will be released from the bondage of worldliness, delusion, misery and fear.

*Vasudeva param jnanam vasudeparam tapah:
Vasadeva-para dharmo Vasudeva-para gatih-1.2.29*
(Gitananda & Vyasa, 2014)^[1].

Vasudeva is the one being to whom all disciplines and doctrines are ultimately directed. The Vedas have Him as their goal. Sacrifices, yoga, the yogic practices, learning, tapas, dharma-all have him as their aim. In him is the end and destiny of man. Vasudeva is the giver of liberation. Therefore, it is advisable that one renounces everything and worships him alone. The end and aim of all actions is the adoration of Vasudeva. Through his spiritual practices, the yogi attains Vasudeva as the Supreme Soul; when the person striving on the path of knowledge succeeds in reaching the goal, he too attains Vasudeva as the supreme Brahman; those following the path of ritualistic actions, they too, as the result of their actions attain heaven, which again is nothing but Lord Krishna's manifestation.

According to Ludo Rocher, the most important texts are Bhagavata Purana, Vishnu Purana, Naradeya Purana, Garuda Purana and Vayu Purana. These Puranas have

several encyclopedic entries about various aspects of life. In one of the Puranas, it is stated that Vishnu's eye is at the Southern Celestial Pole from where he watches the cosmos. In the Vayu Purana, Vishnu is the Hiranagarbha or the golden egg from which all masculine and feminine beings were born in this universe (Tatavarthy & Sastry, 2019)^[4].

Thus, the end and aim of everything in life should be attaining Lord Krishna's grace. One's austerities, worship, prayer, and everything should be offered to Lord Krishna. The fruits of yoga, meditation, austerity, and everything else should be surrendered to Lord Krishna. He alone is to be known; he alone is to be attained. He is the supreme Brahman. He is both with qualities and without qualities. If one is devoted to him, one can also attain the supreme knowledge of Brahman.

The third verse which captures the essence of the Bhagavata is as follows:

*Vasudeve bhagavata bhaktiyogah prayojitah
Janayatyasu vairagyam jnanca yadahaitukam 1.2.7*
(Gitananda & Vyasa, 2014)^[1].

Devotion to Lord Krishna quickly generates abhorrence for sensual life and bestows the transcendental knowledge which is beyond the grasp of logical controversies. Through the medium of this shloka, Lord Krishna says that if one adores the supreme being, Vasudeva with one pointed devotion, he or she will quickly attain dispassion for worldly life and attain supreme knowledge.

Incidents Leading to Shukadeva Narrating the Bhagavata

After having composed the Bhagavata, Vyasa thought that this sacred text, which gives instant devotion and liberation, should be spread far and wide in the world, and the only worthy instrument to accomplish this was his son, Shukadeva. Vyasa realised that with the passing of time, the lifespan and strength of human beings would be reduced. It would then be extremely difficult for them to practice meditation on the formless Brahman which is without attributes. Unfortunately, Shukadeva would be immersed in samadhi somewhere in the dense forest or a mountain cave and it would be very difficult to find him.

To bring Shukadeva out of his samadhi, Vyasa went to the forest, met some woodcutters, taught them a verse from the Bhagavata, extolling the childhood beauty of Sri Krishna, and requested them to roam about in the forest singing the verse. No sooner did this charming song fall on the ears of Shukadeva than slowly he got up from samadhi. Shukadeva got up from samadhi and asked them who had taught them the song and said that he wanted to meet the person who had composed the song. The woodcutters then took him to Vyasa.

Shukadeva was overjoyed to meet his father and asked him about was the main theme of the song. To that, Vyas replied that song extolled the virtues of the sweet embodiment of Brahman, the sportive Brahman called Vasudeva. He is the Paramatman of the Yogis and the Bhagavan for the devotees. Dealing with this Supreme God he has composed a Purana which compares with the Vedas, it called the Bhagavata. Vyasa said that he wished Shukadeva to learn it from him and preach it to the world for the good of mankind.

After studying the Bhagavata, Shukadeva became attracted to the glories of Krishna and taught it to his excellent devotee Parikshith, the son of Abhimanyu and the grandson of Arjuna. From then on Bhagavata came to be known as the scripture of the paramahansas (Paramahansa Samhita) (Gitananda & Vyasa, 2014)^[1].

Bhagavata as a means to Salvation in the Kali Yuga

According to John Bentley, historian of Indian Astronomy, whose findings which was published in the year 1823, stress that the division of time into yugas and kalpas are astronomically and not historically interpolated. For the purposes of chronology, Hindu history was divided into four periods. The creation began with Kruta Yuga also called Satya Yuga or true conjunction. This was the radical point from which calculation began. The second yuga was called the Threta Yuga, the third was called Dvapara Yuga and the fourth was the Kali yuga. Bentley placed the beginning of Kali Yuga as 204 B.C. It was during the Kali Yuga that accurate calculations were made on the planetary positions and equations were introduced to make these calculations. (Sarma, 1987)^[3]. By the time Shukadeva narrated the Bhagavata to Parikshit, the Kali Yuga had already begun. In the Kali Yuga, human beings naturally forget God and become immersed in worldliness. Sages like Shaunaka wondered what the way would be out for those who sincerely wish to think about God, but cannot do so because of the influence of the Kali Yuga. Where would they go free themselves from the influence of Kali?

Brahma then advised them to perform sacrifices for Lord Vishnu in the Naimisha Forest, which was always protected by God from the influence of Kali. When Shaunaka and his companions were performing the sacrifice, they saw a Suta, ("Sūta, 2022) called Ugrashrava, who was passing by the forest singing the glories of Lord Krishna. Ugrashrava had heard the story of the Bhagavat from Shukadeva and had become intoxicated with the thought of Lord Krishna. He was forever in ecstasy, singing his glories.

It was in that state that Sage Shaunaka and others saw him, brought him to their dwelling place with great respect and humbly asked him to impart the vast knowledge that is essential for man to attain salvation. They requested Ugrashrava to tell them the essence of all that he had understood from the scriptures. In various scriptures, different paths were shown, the practice of which takes a lot of time, and one might unknowingly commit a lot of mistakes while practising them. Moreover, in the Kali Yuga, life span of human beings is very short. Shaunaka appealed to him to tell them about that spiritual practice, practising which humans can attain the highest within a short time and without difficulty.

In reply, Ugrashrava began to describe Krishna's divine sports. He said that when the brilliant Shukadeva was narrating the Bhagavata on the banks of the river Ganga, he sat in a corner and by the Lord's grace heard everything. He said that he would narrate it to Shaunaka and his companions to the best of his ability and remove their doubts. In this way, the story of Srimad Bhagavata was narrated by Shukadeva and retold by Ugrashrava before Shaunaka and other sages. He said that listening to the Bhagavata was the shortest way to salvation for human beings in the Kali Yuga.

Benefits of Listening to the Bhagavata

In the words of Narada, extroverts may say a hundred things and do several things but in no way can they bring their minds under control. If one wishes to control the mind and cross over the ocean of worldliness, there is no other way than resorting to the glories of Sri Krishna. As long as there are desires for objects of enjoyment the mind does not turn towards God.

According to many philosophers, the concept of maya is very complicated. It is an important pillar of Hindu philosophy discussed in the Advaita Vedanta. Adi Shankaracharya has written several treatises on the concept of maya. The concept of maya appears in all the religious traditions of India including Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism and Sikhism (Virk, 2020)^[5].

The panacea for the sufferings caused by avidya (ignorance generating aspect of *maya*) is devotion to the Lord. According to Hindu philosophy, *maya* is the illusion of that which is not there. It is the deluding power which deludes humans to worldly life. This power of *maya* is greater in the Kali Yuga. It vanishes only when we surrender to God. Maya is the inscrutable power of Ishwara. Swami Vivekananda conquered *maya* through sadhana and grew to such huge dimensions that *maya* could not catch him. Another devotee of Sri Ramakrishna, Durga Charan Nag reduced himself to such small dimensions through sadhana and devotion that Maya could not catch him. His ego was reduced to zero. Through either of the ways, the sadhaka should overgrow the influence of equipment, that is body, mind and intellect (Gupta, 2012)^[2].

According to the Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna written by Mahendra Nath Gupta, *satva*, *rajas* and *thamas* are the three qualities of *maya*. The attachment to *satva* quality binds the seeker of truth through knowledge about the matter. Material knowledge is nothing more than ignorance about the Supreme Reality for a spiritual seeker. Through devotion, spiritual study, meditation and other spiritual activities, the seeker can overcome the materialistic influence of *satva*, to attain liberation. The second quality of *maya*, *rajas*, binds the seeker through worldly activities like attachment to matter and takes the seeker away from divinity. The third quality of Maya, *thamas* keeps the seeker in ignorance about the divinity itself. All the three qualities are robbers within the seeker that loot the seeker of his divinity which is the real intrinsic nature of every living being (Gupta, 2012)^[2].

It is possible to subdue and conquer *maya* by listening to the divine sports of the Lord.

To listen to God's divine sports as described in the Bhagavata is so delightful that it fills the heart with bliss. It lets the listener experience the world and liberation simultaneously. It results in renunciation in and through the actions apparently oriented towards the world. The moment the soul resorts to the glories of God's divine sports, it will be freed from worldly passions and the desire to worship and serve God will be born. A person who longs to derive happiness from listening to something will derive true joy if he is made to listen to the glories of the Divine. In that way he can destroy his bad karmas from his previous lives, conquer *maya*, speed up his spiritual progress, attain peace and prosperity and lead a joyful life.

Conclusion

This paper describes the essence of the Bhagavata, Bhagavata as a means to salvation in the Kali Yuga, the benefits of listening to the Bhagavata, the essential characteristics of *maya*, how listening to or reciting verses from the Bhagavata releases one from *maya's* entanglement and the material, personal, professional and spiritual benefits that one can derive by reading verses from the Bhagavata on a daily basis. Resorting to Lord Krishna's name, whether in a mood of distress or helplessness, one entangled in the cycles of births and deaths would be released at once, for even the God of death is afraid of him. Due to the results of actions performed in many lives, the individual keeps transmigrating in this world. But the glory of God's name is such that if a person utters his name even in a state of helplessness, he will get immediate salvation. Hearing the name of Lord Krishna, all run away in fear, like enemies taking to heels hearing the lion's roar.

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