

# Our trajectory in the highway called Bhakti

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The college students living in student hostels in Madras in the 80s used to exhibit a strange behavior. In a normal sense they never appeared religious and did not visit temples or did any religious prayer on a regular basis. At times they even used to pass a remark that God is only a notion. But when the examination approaches, several of them would sport a religious mark on their forehead (*Vibhūti*, Sandal paste or Kumkum), perhaps the aftermath of visiting a temple. The temple visits usually happen just a few days before the commencement of the exams.

## Devotion – Forms, Meaning and Implications

We have also seen other types of devotees who are on the other side. There are devotees with prominent religious marks on their forehead, engaging in elaborate daily religious practices. A good number of people are also known to visit temples, offer prayers and special poojas because they had earlier taken a promise with the presiding deity that after successful completion of a certain event they will offer a “thanksgiving prayer”. In other cases, offerings are made to Guru, religious mentor or others who were responsible for these. Several events in life trigger this devotion in an individual. These events can range from simple things such as passing an examination to bigger ones such as bagging a Rs. 10 million order from a company for execution of business contract.

With these varieties of devotion, for a true seeker, there is a question lingering in the mind. How to make sense of these types of devotees and what is the basis for these approaches? Further it is also important to know where all these forms of devotion will lead one to. In order to clarify these doubts, Shri Krishna provides some direction in chapter 7 in *Gītā*.

## Four types of devotees

Shri Krishna mentions four types (*caturvidhāḥ*) people who worship and pray to Him (*māṃ bhajante*). Of these one set of people are those going through some mental hardships and agony (*ārthāḥ*). The second set is those who are desirous of acquiring more material wealth (*arthārthī*). The third set is those who are keen to acquire more knowledge of God and other related things (*jijñāsuḥ*). The last set are the true knowers of the ultimate truth (*jñānī*).

चतुर्विधा भजन्ते मां जनाः सुकृतिनोऽर्जुन ।

आर्तो जिज्ञासुरर्थार्थी ज्ञानी च भरतर्षभ ॥ 7.16

*caturvidhā bhajante māṃ janāḥ sukṛtino'ṛjuna,*  
*ārtho jijñāsuarthārthī jñānī ca bharatarṣabha.*

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## **Ārthā bhakti – A naïve form of devotion**

The simplest bhakta is *ārthā* bhakta. For such a person, the notion of God comes into memory only during periods of distress. When in trouble, call out for God's help. Alternatively, when the going is good, be aware that it is because of one's own hard work, effort etc. Nobody needs to be remembered (even the parents, well-wishers, neighbours or siblings), leave alone God. This is the simple mindset of such a bhakta. This is akin to the mental make-up of a two year old child. The child remembers the mother only when it is hungry or in trouble, otherwise it does not need anyone else other than his/her playmates and dolls. Therefore this form of devotion is very rudimentary.

## **The Journey of an Arthārthī**

Compared to an *ārthā* bhakta, an *arthārthī* comes with grater goals and more sophistication, when it comes to Bhakti. This is simply because the goal is loftier. For average individuals several worldly pursuits are often linked to the overarching goal of acquiring material wealth. For instance if we write an examination passing the examination is important from this perspective. Therefore, the bhakta will enter into a "contract" with say Lord *Ganeśa* with an offer of coconut. Similarly, if the person is appearing for a promotion interview in his job, he may re-approach Lord *Ganeśa*, but this time with 11 coconuts. Being an exercise in acquiring wealth, the cost – benefit issues become important and the devotee is very well aware of this. This type of devotee knows that for greater things to be achieved, more tempting offer of reward (11 coconuts Vs one coconut in our example) will have to be made.

Such bhaktas travel in this journey for a long time, perhaps even cutting across janmas. This long journey is an expression of the various opportunities and options available for the bhakta to invoke the Divine force for accumulation of material wealth. It is also the time required for the bhakta to evolve and outgrow this mind-set based on experiences. The journey has the following characteristics:

- (a) The list becomes larger and larger – eventually reaching a stage where every item of life (small to big) is contracted with the God with some offer
- (b) As some of the events turn out to be favourable, the offer terms for the God keeps increasing. This sounds strikingly similar to horse racing. The only unfortunate part is that the bhakta does not know that God is neither a player in this game nor the judge in the event nor the jackpot.
- (c) New avenues will be found to tap the Divine force – beginning from Lord *Ganeśa*, more will be accessed. The list includes Goddess Lakshmi, Kubera the Lord of Wealth, family deities etc.
- (d) New methods to achieve this goal will be discovered – special spiritual personalities, Godmen and Gurus will come into the picture and offer specialized advise and methods to achieve this; Jewellers, Gem Stone merchants, Palmists, Numerologists, Namealogists, High impact astrologers, specialized purohitis known for offering special homas etc., will all become part of the ecosystem for this bhakta.
- (e) The more success the bhakta sees, more and more of the above opportunities will be tapped over time

## **The arrival of a *jijñāsu***

However despite all these multi-faceted efforts by an *arthārthī*, certain things will happen over time. Such a devotee will slowly see that the quality of his/her approach change over time. From an initial “strictly what is in it for me” approach, the devotee will evolve into a much softer and an open approach towards God, even though the underlying theme of acquiring material wealth will not change. This is partly orchestrated by the wealth so acquired.

With more wealth he/she will be willing to give a fraction of it to noble and religious causes. After all it is another form of thanksgiving by that person. This brings into contact some pious souls and divine personalities with this bhakta and thereby increases the propensity to change his/her world view and ideas about divinity. Moreover, anything other than what is Divine strictly follows the law of diminishing marginal returns. Therefore, the bhakta will be weaned away from this pursuit in his/her life as the search for something more meaningful and long lasting will continue. Therefore, albeit a beginning with a transactional frame of mind, these efforts will unwittingly draw the bhakta towards the notion of Divinity.

This signals the arrival of a *jijñāsu*, someone who gets “actively” interested in knowing what true Divinity is. At this stage, the quality of bhakti will upgrade from “transactional” to “relational”. The true seeker will see that all the transactional aspects of dealing with Divinity are uninteresting and therefore will push them to the background. A *jijñāsu* will develop a burning desire to know the truth behind divinity and its relationship to him/her. This will attract him/her towards pure spiritual masters, good satsanga, sources of material available in the multi-media (including book, audio and video discourses).

Such a bhakta will realise after these interactions the importance of *sāadhanā*, as a means to internalize these ideas. He/she will increasingly become aware of the need to experientially understand the notion of divinity and begin to do many things in his/her life in this search. This is again a very long drawn process taking these bhaktas through several janmas, but there will be no loss of continuity.

## ***Jñānī* – The moment of realization**

A long journey in the stage of being a *jijñāsu* prepares one to eventually reach the last in the list of bhaktas, the *jñānī* that Shri Krishna has mentioned. Unlike other stages of bhakti, this stage is not a stage of continuous evolution of increasing degree. It is a state of perfection which is attained at a particular moment merely from an experiential point of view and once reaching that stage there is no going back to earlier stages. The knowledge that a *jñānī* obtains is such that it dispels all ignorance that was shrouding him/her and brings that person to a state of eternal peace, fulfillment and contentment. It is indeed a stage in which there is no need for knowing anything more or attaining anything higher.

## **Four stages of Bhakti – An evolutionary path for an individual**

The mention of four types Bhaktas is indeed indicative of the different stages of evolution of Bhakti. The initial two stages (*ārtha* bhakti and *arthārtha* bhakti) are merely transactional, dealing with God strictly on a requirement basis. It does not warrant any continuity in thought or relationship. Transition from *ārtha* bhakti to *arthārtha* bhakti itself signals the evolution of the individual. Once the imperfect nature of the *ārtha* bhakti and *arthārtha* bhakti are understood it paves way for graduating to the next stage of being a *jijñāsu*. A *jijñāsu* is bound to become a *jñānī* it is only a matter of time.

By indicating these types of devotees, Shri Krishna has laid before us an agenda and a framework to travel on the highway called bhakti. It is left to us to decide how and in what speed we need to perform our journey on this highway. We need not worry too much about the destination. The Lord will set the destination for us as we perform our journey in the right path.