

RAMAKRISHNA'S CONCEPT OF BHAKTI

Abstract

Ramakrishna who is considered as the God-man of modern India, is an eminent thinker and social reformer of 19th century. He is also recognised as an embodiment of Vedānta or Vedamurti. His sole aim is to awaken the spirituality of man for which he tries to restore the agnostic and atheistic mind set of people into spirituality. This study particularly deals with his emphasis upon Bhakti. In this paper I will try to focus on certain queries like why Ramakrishna has put forwarded so much of importance on Bhakti for this era of materialism or Kaliyuga? Moreover, the nature of Bhakti as it is understood by Ramakrishna is tried to be put forth as well as for practicing Bhakti is there any pre-requisite condition upheld by Ramakrishna is also a matter of inquiry in this paper.

Keywords- Bhakti, Bhakta, Kaliyuga, Mind, Premā, Jñāna, Karma

Author

Dr. Parmita Chowdhury
Dept. of Philosophy
Gauhati University
Guwahati, India

I. INTRODUCTION

Ramakrishna is a Vedāntist who believes in an Ultimate Reality who possesses both the aspects of transcendental and immanence. He even accepts that the Ultimate Reality Brahman is with and without names and forms, He has many faces, even māyā is one of the faces of Brahman in Ramakrishna's philosophy. Thus for him, truth or reality is same in both absolute and relative level and as such just to give a practical significance of the realization of reality particularly in the era of materialism which is known as Iron age or Kaliyuga, he tries to focus on the relative aspect of the Reality which is prevalent in the form of God. Moreover, he has maintained that everything whatever happens only because of the will of God and that is why man's sole aim is to get the grace of God and thus he is found to be stressing on the path of Bhakti which is for him the best suitable path for the people of this period of materialism to realize the Ultimate Reality. Here the study concentrates upon the nature of Bhakti as emphasized by Ramakrishna which is explained in the following.

1. Nature of bhakti : In Ramakrishna's philosophy Bhakti has been given the utmost importance. Ramakrishna has emphasized Bhakti as the most essential for life as it is the ultimate end of life to do 'Bhakti' or to love God. But the most important thing is that love is to be selfless or only with great desire to have the vision of God. As Ramakrishna remarks, "The bliss of worship and communion with God is the true wine, the wine of ecstatic love. The goal of human life is to love God."¹ In bhakti, God is loved like mother, brother, sister, friend as well as a companion and also as a child. Even the devotee loves to think himself as servant and the God as Master. This kind of love is possible towards God because in Bhakti, God in the human form is worshipped and Ramakrishna asserts that it is because of this love that God incarnates Himself in the form of man, as God is very much fond of this kind of ecstatic love of His devotees. Ramakrishna maintains that it is only for this love of the devotees that God incarnates Himself in this world to play His sport or līlā, which is nothing but the relative aspect of the reality. I-consciousness of the devotee remains while practicing bhakti, although when the love gets intense more and more, the devotee becomes one with God.

However, Bhakti is not the end in itself as it is the means to attain God. The term Bhakti has been emphasised as the most effective path for this age of materialism to realize God, though Bhakti as the path to attain Divinity is there from the Upanishadic time period, as it is maintained in the Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad, "He who has supreme devotion (bhakti) towards God, and towards the teacher, to him verily, all these things declared (thus far) will reveal themselves.

According to Ramakrishna, Bhakti is the single pointed devotion. It is *premā* or selfless love for God. Ramakrishna admits that it is through bhakti one gets naturally renunciation and discrimination which are requisites for the vision of God and as such Bhakti is considered by Ramakrishna as the core of all spiritual discipline because When it is asked how renunciation is possible through bhakti, Ramakrishna answered that out of love when man will pray, God gives them the will power to renounce what is unreal. Moreover, Bhakti in the initial stage involves prayer and singing the praises of God because this will help to purify the mind of the devotee or bhakta.

According to Ramakrishna, Bhakti or love of God is the ultimate because it gives you everything else. In this regard it may be said that Bhakti and Jñāna are blended in his

philosophy because for him, through Bhakti even Jñāna can also be attained. For Ramakrishna, through bhakti one may get everything even knowledge because God bestows on the devotees whatever he prays with pure heart. But here knowledge is nothing but knowing that God is the ultimate doer of everything and whatever position man holds that is only by the will of God. Furthermore, this knowledge helps the devotee to get liberation in this life even if God wills so. As Ramakrishna admits that everything happens by the will of God so also God's grace can make one realise the highest end of life thus Ramakrishna prefers for the people to follow the path of Bhakti through which one can even see God. Moreover, Ramakrishna also emphasises that though everything happens by the will of God yet the devotee can bring everything under his control through his sincere love towards God which in turn bring the grace of God. Here it seems that it is through bhakti when the grace of God descends on the devotee, the latter gets the control over everything

Though Bhakti and Jñāna both can be attained by the grace of God thus it entails that they are not totally apart in Ramakrishna's view but it is also found that Bhakti is that path where the I-consciousness does not totally relinquish like in Jñāna mārga, rather the duality between the object of devotion and the devotee remains. The object of devotion or Bhakti depends upon the bhakta that means Ramakrishna emphasises that the devotee has liberty to choose any Ideal for Bhakti. It entails that Ramakrishna has given emphasis upon the element of feeling i.e., the feeling towards the Ideal rather than the Ideal itself and he also maintains that it is the feeling which makes the difference between people otherwise all are same from outside. Moreover, he also reminds that a bhakta should not think that his way is the best way neglecting the others.

The term Bhakti is always associated with bhakta. So in order to understand what Bhakti is, Bhakti in relation to bhakta is to be understood. Thus, the different types of Bhakti as characterised by Ramakrishna are tried to be highlighted here.

- 2. Bhakta and bhakti:** According to Ramakrishna, a bhakta is a vijñāni, a state beyond jñāni. Vijñāni is the man of realization for Ramakrishna. Jñāni is a former state of a vijñāni because jñāni can only have a knowledge of God but not realisation. These two states of jñāni and vijñāni are compared with a man who has seen milk and drunk the milk respectively by Ramakrishna. Bhakta has been given a higher position than jñāni in Ramakrishna's philosophy.

However, it may be said that there are three different types of bhakti prevalent in Ramakrishna's philosophy depending upon the nature of bhakta which may differ because of the three different guṇas of sattva, rajas and tamas as these guṇas characterise man. Here in the following we may highlight how Ramakrishna explains the three different characteristics of bhakti i.e., tāmasic bhakti, rājasic bhakti and sattvik bhakti.

According to Ramakrishna, tāmasic bhakti is such a kind of bhakti where the devotee asks for boons from God. This kind of bhakti, Ramakrishna compares with that of Dacoits who robs man to get money. That means this kind of bhakti is done because of getting something from God. It is not selfless bhakti. Moreover, a person having rājasic bhakti takes care of his outer appearance to look like a bhakta rather than his inner feeling and that is why the devotee puts tilak over his forehead and wears rudrāksha beads around

the neck. But a person having sattvik bhakti worships God silently and more importantly secretly. He rather gives importance to inner feeling than that of his outer expression. However, he maintains that the nature of the supreme bhakti or ecstatic love is of transcending the three guṇas of sattva, raja and tama.

In this regard, it may be said that in Ramakrishna's view devotees are of three kinds. The lowest kind of bhakta considers God to be resided in heaven whereas the mediocre devotee considers God to be the Inner Controller who dwells in the heart of man. But the highest devotee considers God to be all-pervading and in fact God has become everything. Whatever is that is the manifestation of God.² Thus the three classes of devotees related with bhakti, bhāva and premā respectively. Here bhakti as it is understood is the single pointed devotion to God where one's mind and soul merge in God. After bhakti, bhāva comes and when one reaches to this, the devotee becomes speechless. His outer expression ceases. The highest kind of bhakti reaches when prema comes, there remains nothing except God for the devotee, he go into that extent of forgetting his own body even. So, in the Bhakti Yoga or path of realization of God through devotion, first the devotee needs bhakti, then bhakti grows to bhāva and finally the devotee merges in premā bhakti.

Regarding the different classes of Bhakti as emphasised by Ramakrishna, it may be said that it is not the ordinary Bhakti through which one may attain God, it is only through love with great yearning or longing that the vision of God is possible which is termed by Ramakrishna as premā bhakti or rāga bhakti. Rāga-bhakti, says Ramakrishna, is pure love for God. In this kind of bhakti God is loved only for the sake of God alone and not for any other end of worldly glories. Further Ramakrishna affirms that, with this passionate attachment of Rāga-bhakti, God is easily attracted. Thus, it may be said that according to Ramakrishna there are two stages of Bhakti, first Vaidhi Bhakti and then comes Premā Bhakti. Vaidhi-Bhakti is that type of Bhakti where the devotee has to practice sacrifices, worship with offerings, make pilgrimage, fast etc. Practicing of these for a long time can lead one to premā-bhakti. But the possessor of premā-bhakti can directly get the vision of God, without following Vaidhi-Bhakti. Following Vaidhi Bhakti one will lead to Premā Bhakti but who have Premā Bhakti is not required to practice Vaidhi Bhakti. It is only with the ripe or premā or Rāga Bhakti that one attains God. It is that kind of love which is ecstatic and having greatest longing.

These two kinds of Bhakti entails that for Ramakrishna, practicing of spiritual discipline is not meant for all aspirants, as there are two kinds of aspirants one who tries to realize God through practicing various rites and rituals and another is that kind of devotee who simply love God earnestly. In the foremost type of bhakti, the aspirant finds that it is compulsory to repeat the name of God for a fixed number of times as well as meditation for a certain period. Whereas another kind of aspirant does not go for any fixity of repeating names and meditation but only with great yearning cries in the name of God. Ramakrishna admits that towards the latter type of bhakta, God reveals Himself. But before reaching the ultimate state of Bhakti i.e., Premā Bhakti one should perform certain rites but this will come to an end when the devotee gets pure love for God. So, Vaidhi Bhakti will end when a devotee can shade tears only at the name of God. It is the symbol of entering into Premā Bhakti. Thus for Ramakrishna, a true devotee must have three signs viz., first, he has a controlled mind who can abide by the instructions of his Guru.

Secondly, he can also assimilate all the instructions obtained and thirdly he is freed from lust i.e., his sense organs are controlled.

Ramakrishna, thus, tries to emphasise the simplicity of following Bhakti for realizing God as there is no fixed or prescribed rule for Bhakti. Ramakrishna seems to be trying to bring forth the practical necessity of Bhakti Yoga at this era of materialism where man are concentrated on food. So he remarks, "Those who have the time must meditate and worship. But those who cannot possibly do so must bow down wholeheartedly to God twice a day. He abides in the hearts of all; He knows that worldly people have many things to do....You don't have time to pray to God; therefore give Him the power of attorney." Moreover, even if a man pray for selfish desires at the initial stage that is also encouraged because if that is done earnestly finally it will turn to selfless worship. No doubt "One must pray to God without any selfish desire. But selfish worship, if practised with perseverance, is gradually turned into selfless worship."³

Although Bhakti is emphasised as the simplest and easiest path for Ramakrishna to follow in life but question may arise, is it really so easy to follow? The answer to this question may be understood when we will focus on the prerequisite conditions to follow Bhakti.

- 3. Pre-requisite conditions:** Bhakti being a Yoga, may not be that easy, says Ramakrishna because we need to practice some spiritual discipline but it may be said that as Bhakti is related to the feeling or emotional aspect of man which is prominent in a particular person, in that case may be Bhakti is relatively easier in comparison to other paths which are more intellectual or action oriented. According to Ramakrishna, the path of knowledge is very difficult because it needs total detachment from everything else except Brahman without name and form. As Ramakrishna says that knowledge cannot be attained if one is even slightly attracted towards the glories of God i.e., 'woman and gold' Moreover, until one is freed from the feeling that he is the body, knowledge is not possible for him because he will be bound to concentrate on food and as such the best way possible for Kaliyuga is the path of devotion or Bhakti. Ramakrishna further maintains that, being a finite it is not possible for us to know Him who is infinite and as such the supreme end for a human should be to cultivate the pure love for God A devotee loves to be in the realm of duality and his sole aim is to love God. Furthermore, Karma Yoga is also not that suitable for this Kaliyuga to practice for Ramakrishna because in the age of materialism one will find it very difficult to practice scriptural rites So Karma and Jñāna Yoga are not that conducive for this era to follow for the realization of God. For the realization of the Ultimate Reality through the path of Bhakti, one should not give up the world and go for a deserted place in fact he can do all the duties of the world but the only condition is that the mind should be kept on God. However, it should be pointed out here that in spite of being an easier path in comparison to others as Ramakrishna affirms, but to follow the path of Bhakti in itself not seems to be easy as one may need some pre-requisite conditions which are trying to discuss below:

The first and foremost condition which is needed for the realization of God is the purity of heart because an impure heart cannot love God. As Ramakrishna holds, "You should first cleanse the shrine of your heart. Then you should install the Deity and arrange worship." Here, love means selfless love i.e., love for its own sake, though love with

desire is also permissible at the initial stage which is already stated. Such a kind of selfless love is compared with the love of cowherd boys for Krishna, as Ramakrishna maintains. Now question arises why people become impure? It is because of attachment with the worldly matters specially attachment to woman and gold. Such as the magnet cannot attract a needle with mud similarly the mind with impurity cannot be attracted by God and thus the repetition of God's name on the part of devotee can bring tears in eyes which may wash away the dirt and then only God will attract the devotee. To love God one must have a pure heart and for acquiring that purity of heart Ramakrishna advised people to look for holy company and chant the name of God or sings His praises. Holy company is very much needful in order to get the desired yearning for the vision of God and without that yearning realization is impossible. That is why it may be said that another important requisite is the sincere yearning for the vision of God. Again, Ramakrishna asserts that such kind of earnest longing or yearning is needed when one sings the glories of God and that should also be done constantly. But it should also be noted that this attitude of restlessness does not reflect on the part of devotees until his worldly desires are fulfilled. Thus the devotee with a pure heart and mind freed from attachment, can only be restless for God and surely he will have the vision of God. For Ramakrishna even householders can realize God through praying to God unceasingly and having holy company. But there must not be impurities of the mind which can be eradicated being in the holy company. Ramakrishna has cited the example of King Janaka who had succeeded in leading the spiritual life being a householder. For realization we no need to renounce the world but we need to live it rightly. Being in the world and to do all the duties and also to practice spiritual discipline is for Ramakrishna, like to fight from the fort. Moreover, the devotee should go into solitude now and then to develop Bhakti or pure love. Solitude is necessary in order to think about God. Leading a householder's life as well as practicing of spiritual discipline seem to be contradictory to one another but Ramakrishna shows even that too is possible by thinking about God in solitude and having holy company.

Thus to follow Bhakti we need first a pure heart and mind because a pure heart can only have pure love for God and eventually, out of that pure love, vision of God is possible, but above all we need grace of God. For, without the will of God nothing happens and when one attains that pure heart God will reside in the heart of the devotee and automatically his will is directed by God.

Now question arises how to attain the grace of God? For this Ramakrishna says, one must be freed from ego because this ego will make one feel that instead of God he is the doer of everything which in turn will not allow one to see God. Again, for renunciation discrimination is needed because renunciation is possible when we have knowledge of discrimination between the real and the unreal i.e., alone God is the real and all else is unreal. Such kind of knowledge of discrimination naturally grows in devotee when the love for God grows and because of which sense organs are controlled, for, the devotee no more finds any attraction towards sense pleasures. With align to this, Vivekananda also considers Prahlada's famous prayer as the best definition of Bhakti from Viṣṇu Purāṇa, which is as 'That deathless love which the ignorant have for the fleeting objects of the senses—as I keep meditating on You—may not that love slip from my heart'.

However, Ramakrishna talked about renunciation for Bhakti but he rejects extreme renunciation in Bhakti, because for him, “The man who renounces all looks dry.”⁴ Moreover, he affirms that the world is illusory until God is known. After the realization of God the devotee comes to know that the world is also the manifestation of God Himself and as such “The devotee of the Divine Mother attains dharma and moksha. He enjoys artha and kāma as well. Once I saw you in a vision as the child of the Divine Mother. You have both – yoga and bhoga; otherwise your countenance would look dry.”

Thus it may be added here that for Ramakrishna ‘reason’ is not to be used too much in the path of Bhakti because it needs a great effort to cultivate Bhakti towards God and reason may injure the aspirant’s feeling by considering the divine play also as a dream. However, the place of reason will come later on after the vision of God as reason without vision may consider the divine play also as a dream as it is mentioned above, that is why Ramakrishna emphasises first to try to visualise God and then use the reasoning. And for the vision of God what is required more than reason is intense love with faith.

Faith is required in the path of Bhakti, without faith one cannot love God selflessly. To have faith means to be ready to do whatever is prescribed by the Guru as required to practice for the realization of God. If there remains a little doubt then the devotee will be failed to get the vision of God. What is more important for meditation is not a form or formless God but sincere and whole-hearted faith and mind is the place to meditate. Through faith alone one attains everything. Here Ramakrishna wants us to have faith like Hanumān who leapt over the sea by taking the name of Rāma.

Moreover, self-surrendering is another requisite in the path of Bhakti, without which the grace of God cannot descend on the devotee and such self-surrendering will be possible when the devotee has complete faith. Ramakrishna instructs the devotees to self-surrender everything to God out of faith because everything happens by the will of God and then only he can think “Let Him do whatever He thinks best.

Above all, says Ramakrishna, we need controlling of the mind because a mind which is attached to the glories of the world i.e., woman and gold, God remains unknown to him. Even Ramakrishna asserts that when Vedas affirm God to be beyond mind and speech that only means that God cannot be known by the mind which is attracted to worldly objects.⁵ Moreover, according to Ramakrishna, any Yoga we follow, the controlling of the mind we need the most. For Ramakrishna, mind can be controlled through the love of God i.e., through Bhakti with discrimination. In this regard, Ramakrishna holds that “When the mind is quiet the prāna stops functioning. Then one gets kumbhaka. One may have the same kumbhaka through bhaktiyoga as well: the prāna stops functioning through love of God too.

Thus among the pre-requisite conditions which are discussed above for following the path of Bhakti we need purity of heart first of all because without the purity of heart love of God will not be pure or selfless. For that purity we need renunciation of the ego because ego will be a hindrance to think that God is the doer of everything. But by following the path of Bhakti itself will help in renunciation. When we repeatedly think that it is God who does everything, eventually we will feel that it is not the ‘I’ who is responsible for what we are but everything is because of the will of God. As Ramakrishna

himself says that a doctor is a doctor because God wills it to be. And for this renunciation we must have knowledge of discrimination about the real and the unreal. But we must reason cautiously in the path of Bhakti because reason may deviate the devotee to do Bhakti and may indulge to think the world as unreal. So reasoning should only be used after the visualisation of God with love and faith. So it seems here faith has been given more importance over reason in the path of bhakti. Moreover, self-surrendering and sincere yearning together with controlled mind will enable the devotee to get the grace of God which eventually helps in the realization of God.

II. CONCLUSION

Thus from the above discussion it may be said that Bhakti in Ramakrishna's philosophy is prescribed as the most suitable Yoga for the realization of God. Though Ramakrishna has given importance to all the paths for the realization of God but for him this age of materialism is not conducive to follow the path of Jñāna and Karma for the realization of Reality of ultimate Oneness and as such he has been found to be emphasising the path of Bhakti as the most effective Yoga for practice specially for the householders. It may be said that the answer to this question that why Bhakti has been given so much of importance in Ramakrishna's Philosophy is connected with the metaphysics of his philosophy. As it is already mentioned that Ultimate Reality for him is one which is both with form and without form. Both are one and the same and the aim of life is to realize this reality. Now for realizing the Ultimate Reality if we try to concentrate upon the Reality without form then it may need great effort which may not be possible for everyone particularly for the householders. For, Ramakrishna maintains that it is not that easy to get complete detachment from the world and to give up the feeling that we are the body. Moreover, in this age of materialism it is also not that possible to practice the rituals that are mentioned in the scriptures. Knowing it well the necessity of this era Ramakrishna tries to bring the attention to concentrate upon the relative aspect of the reality which is nothing but same as that of the absolute. This world, which is considered as māyā is nothing different from the Ultimate Reality, in fact māyā is one of the faces of the Ultimate Reality i.e., Brahman. So he tries to say that there is no harm to be in the world and doing all the duties of householders. But it is always needed to be kept in mind that we are not the doer rather we are directed by God, who is the ultimate doer of all things, by the will of whom everything is going on. That is why he prescribes the simplest way to realize God that is singing the praises of God, repeating the name of God, seeking holy company and if possible go into solitude.

The goal of realization can be attained by any other paths like Jñāna and Karma but the same can be attained in a simpler and easier way through Bhakti. It is found that the importance of Bhakti is emphasised specially because of the people of Kaliyuga because people of this era cannot give away their mind from food and worldly attachments easily. That is why the effectiveness of the path of Bhakti is shown as discussed above. But it must also be noted here that by saying easy Ramakrishna only meant to say that Bhakti is relatively easy in comparison to other paths because for following Bhakti one need not to escape from his household duties, he can carry on his life being in the world seeking all the four Puruṣārthas i.e., dharma, artha, kāma and mokṣa. But the only thing required is that duties should be done as duty towards God. Moreover, focussing on the conditions that require to follow Bhakti, it may be said that Bhakti being a Yoga is not that easy, rather comparatively this is the best Yoga for the householders because spiritual discipline is needed to follow in

any Yoga which again needs some effort to practice. It seems that stressing more upon the Bhakti Yoga, Ramakrishna wants to make the realization of God easily approachable for all the people and not particularly for a few scholarly people.

However, it may be pointed out that though the steps of Bhakti Yoga start with the discrimination that Brahman is only real and everything else is illusory but finally he wants to make us understand that everything is Brahman. So the first step is 'Not this, not this' but it is ended up with 'All this, all this'. So, in the initial step one may start Bhakti with the thinking of discrimination that God alone is real but ultimately the devotee will find in everything the vision of God when he will reach the ultimate state of bhakti. The universe and all living beings will appear as God Himself for the bhakta. So, for Ramakrishna, in the path of Bhakti, one should not negate anything but affirm everything as God. After realizing the Ultimate Reality the world will not vanish but it will reappear as divine, i.e., everything manifests itself as God and there remains perfect unity. Thus it may be said that according to Ramakrishna, to realize the Ultimate Reality which is the goal of life, Bhakti Yoga is the most essential, suitable, easiest, and simplest for the age of materialism. And in emphasising Bhakti, Ramakrishna is found to be very practical who can understand the need of the moment. It is not that by reasoning we can realize God instead we need faith, controlled mind, pure heart, selfless love or Bhakti and yearning for God and eventually it is only with the grace of God when descends upon the devotee, the truth is revealed to the bhakta.

REFERENCES

-
- [1] *The Gospel of Ramakrishna*, Swami Nikhilananda (Trans.), Mylapore, Chennai, Sri Ramakrishna Math Printing Press, Twenty-third Print, 2015, vol.1, p.94
 - [2] *Ibid*, p.396
 - [3] *Ibid*, p.379
 - [4] *The Gospel of Ramakrishna, Op. Cit.*, p.362
 - [5] *Ibid*, p.158