

# *The Place of Bhakti in Sri Sankara's Gita-bhashya*

## I

Saṅkara treats the Gīta with the utmost veneration. It is his conviction that it contains the quintessence of the sacred wisdom of the Vedas culminating in the Upanishads. He says 'तदिदं गीताशास्त्रं समस्तवेदार्थसारसंग्रहभूतम्' (Introduction). Hence his views expounded in the course of the exegesis on this central classic ought to be taken as representing his final standpoint. While commenting on the 15th Chapter of the Gīta, he asserts that the chapter sums up its entire message and that, in consequence, it sums up the entire substance of the Vedas. That the Gīta is the pivot of the scriptures on Vedānta is left in no uncertainty. Such is Saṅkara's estimate of the work and therefore, conclusion based upon his interpretation of the text carry the greatest weight.

## II

Two general principles are enunciated concerning the role of Bhakti. While laying down the qualification for meriting instruction in the Gīta, Bhakti is specified as the necessary and sufficient qualification. "भक्तिमात्रेण केवलेन शास्त्रसंप्रदाने पात्रं भवति" (18-68). It is an integral part of the attitude of Bhakti to rely upon Divine Grace as the determinant of all spiritual attainment and grace is thought of as responsive to the aspiration of the devotee. This principle of responsive grace is stated in all its amplitude of dimensions.

"ये यथा मां प्रपद्यन्ते तान् तथैव भजाम्यहम्" 4-11

ये फलार्थिनः तान् फलप्रदानेन, ये अफलार्थिनः मुमुक्षवश्च तान् ज्ञानप्रदानेन: ये ज्ञानिनः संन्यासिनः मुमुक्षवश्च तान् मोक्षप्रदानेन, तथा आर्तान् आर्थिहरणेन इत्येवं यथा प्रपद्यन्ते ये तान् तथैव अनुगृह्णामि ।"

The determining role of grace and the nature of devotion as determining the direction of its operation are both affirmed in a comprehensive formula.

## III

That Śaṅkara understands the Gita as enjoining on Arjuna the pathway of action is often over-looked and he is alleged to have advocated the pathway of contemplation combined with renunciation of actions. That this is a wrong statement of his position is brought out very clearly in the following passage.

“यस्मात् अर्जुनस्य अस्यन्तं हितेषी भगवान् तस्य सम्यग्दर्शनानन्वितं कर्मयोगं भेददृष्टिमन्तमेव उपदिशति ।”

That the Way of Work involves desirelessness and the renunciation of the fruits of action is fairly well understood in every ancient and modern exposition of the ethics of the Gita. But it is not equally well understood that the concept of ‘desireless’ action does not exhaust the meaning of Karma-Yōga and in fact it leaves out its core. Karma-Yōga is devotion to work in a spirit of worship. It is no mere duty for duty’s sake, but it is duty for God’s sake. Śaṅkara takes particular care to give prominence to this aspect of dedication to God, in all his deliberate formulations of the principle of Karma-Yōga. For instance :

मयि सर्वाणि कर्माणि संन्यस्य अध्यात्मचेतसा ।

निराशीः निर्ममो भूत्वा युध्यस्व विगतज्वरः ॥

मयि वासुदेवे परमेश्वरे सर्वज्ञे सर्वात्मनि सर्वाणि कर्माणि संन्यस्य - निक्षिप्य, अध्यात्म चेतसा - ‘अहं कर्ता इश्वराय भूत्वन्त् करोमि इति अनया बुद्ध्या युध्यस्व ।’

Activity desireless and dedicated to God is the essence of Karma-Yōga and as such involves the factor of Bhakti as a constituent element. Karma abstracted from Bhakti is not the Karma-Yōga of the Gita according to Śaṅkara, however desireless it may be.

The last verse of the 11th Chapter embodies for Śaṅkara the final import of the Karma-Yōga inculcated in the text as a whole.



“अधुना सर्वस्य गीताशास्त्रस्य सारभूतः अर्थः निःश्रयसार्थः अनुष्ठेयत्वेन समुच्चित्य उच्यते—”

मत्कर्मकृत् मत्परमः मद्भक्तः संगवर्जितः ।

निर्वैरः सर्वभूतेषु यस्य मामेति पाण्डव ॥

मत्कर्मकृत्—मदर्थं कर्म मत्कर्म, तत्करोतीति मत्कर्मकृत् ; मत्परमः करोति भृत्यः स्वामिकर्म न तु आत्मनः परमा प्रेत्य गन्तव्या गतिः इति स्वामिनं प्रतिपद्यते ॥ अयं तु कृत् मामेव परमां गतिं प्रतिपद्यते इति मत्परमः । अहं परमः परागतिः यस्य सोऽयं मत्परमः तथा मद्भक्तः — मामेव सर्वप्रकारैः सर्वात्मना सवोत्साहेन भजते इति नद्भक्तः ।

संगवर्जितः — धन पुत्रमित्रकलत्र बन्धुवर्गेषु संगवर्जितः । संग - प्रीतिः - स्नेहः तद्गर्जितः

निर्वैरः — निर्गतवैरः - सर्वभूतेषु शत्रुभावरहितः आत्मनः अत्यन्तापकारप्रवृत्त-  
ष्वपि ।

यः ईदृशः — मद्भक्तः सः मां प्रति अहमेव तस्य परागतिः न अन्यागतिः किञ्चित् भवति ।

Here we have the full-orbed scheme of Karma in which actions are done for God's sake, the goal aimed at is God, the agent is filled with love of God, and it frees from all attachment to things earthly and from hatred even towards those who hate. This is zest for action anchored in the love of God and detachment and non-hatred are just the consequential implications. In Karma thus conceived, the factor of Bhakti instead of being merely an element constitutes the very centre and innermost essence.

Śaṅkara does not leave it to us to infer for ourselves this central role of Bhakti in Karma. He affirms it in the most emphatic words. He says “कर्मनिष्ठायाः परम रहस्यं ईश्वर शरणता” (18-65). The deepest secret of devotion to works is the surrender to God. Thus Śaṅkara's elucidation of Karma-Yōga serves to render it an expression and manifestation of the spirit of fervent adoration.

#### IV

So far the task has been easy. Śaṅkara facilitates both by implication and explicit assertion the interpretation that Karma has Bhakti as its inward essence. Doubts may be entertained

as to the possibility of demonstrating the primacy of Bhakti on the plane of Jñāna. But the remarkable fact is that Śaṅkara's commentary on the Gīta presents the presence and primacy of Bhakti in the Jñāna-Yōga with even greater clarity and power. No special investigation in this direction is called for and we see the alround dominance of Bhakti in the pathway of knowledge.

1. The antithesis of knowledge is Māyā. It is the principle of obscuration and delusion. It is characterised by the three aspects Sattva, Rajas and Tamas. It is that by virtue of which creatures do not see the omnipresent and self-revealing reality. It is by overcoming this fundamental hindrance to enlightenment that one comes face to face with the truth of truths.

Twice in the Gīta and Śaṅkara's commentary thereon the method of superseding and passing beyond the obstructive machinery of Māyā is enunciated. It is Bhakti that enables the aspirant to get beyond the three-stranded Māyā.

दैवी ज्ञोषा गुणमयी मम माया दुरत्यया ।

मामेव ये प्रपद्यन्ते मायामेतां तरन्ति ते ॥ (7-11)

मां च यो अव्यभिचारेण भक्तियोगेन सेवते ।

स गुणान् समतीत्यैतान् ब्रह्मभूयाय कल्पते ॥ (14-26)

सर्वधर्मान् परित्यज्य मामेव मायाविनं स्वात्मभूतं सर्वात्मना ये प्रपद्यन्ते ते मायां एतां सर्वभूतमोहिनीं तरन्ति अतिक्रमन्ति ॥ (7-11)

मां च ईश्वरं नारायणं सर्वभूतहृदयाश्रितं यो यतिः कर्मा वा अव्यभिचारेण भक्तियोगेन...सेवते स गुणान् समतीत्य एतान् यथोक्तान् ब्रह्मभवनाय मोक्षाय....समर्थो भवति ॥ (14-26)

2. While Bhakti is thus destructive of the hindrance to the knowledge of ultimate reality, it has an additional positive potency. It is the source of knowledge. Knowledge in its real and final sense is the direct apprehension of the absolute Being, and this apprehension is said to be granted to an aspirant by Divine Grace in response to Bhakti. In other words, Bhakti is the source of knowledge through the Grace of God. This truth is the import of the great final verse of instruction (18-66). Therein Lord Krishna enjoins on Arjuna to abandon all other courses of karma and to resort to Him alone as the sole refuge. In response to such utter surrender. He promises to liberate



him from all sins and exhorts him, in consequence, to put down depression and despair. Commenting on this verse Śaṅkara explains that the Lord liberates the self-surrendering devotee by revealing Himself to him. That signifies that the liberating vision is a gift conferred on the devotee and is by no means an achievement by mere personal effort. This direction of the flow of Divine Grace is made possible by the nature of the devotion involved in the surrender. God saves through knowledge 'स्वात्मभाव प्रकाशीकरणेन' and that self-revelation on his part is a reciprocation to the complete self-surrender on the part of the devotee. In this sense Bhakti is source of Jñāna. This point has already been laid down in the statement 'ये अफलार्थिनः सुमुखवः तान् ज्ञानप्रदानेन अनुगृह्णामि'. Further, the entire doctrine of Jñāna as arising from Bhakti through the mediation of Divine Grace is magnificently elaborated in the Gītā and the Bhāṣya of Śaṅkara.

तेषां सततयुक्तानां भजतां प्रीतिपूर्वकम् ।  
 ददामि बुद्धियोगं तं येन मामुपयान्ति ते ॥  
 तेषामेवानुकम्पार्थमहमज्ञानजं तमः ।  
 नाशयाम्यात्मभावस्थो ज्ञानदीपेन भास्वता ॥ (10-10, 11)  
 तेषां सततयुक्तानां नित्याभियुक्तानां निवृत्तबाह्येपणानां  
 भजतां सेवमानानां किं अर्थित्वादिना कारणेनेत्याह-  
 प्रीतिपूर्वकं प्रीतिः स्नेहः तत्पूर्वकं मां भजतां.....।  
 ददामि प्रयच्छामि बुद्धियोगं बुद्धिः सम्यग्दर्शनं-  
 मात्रत्वविषयं तेन योगः बुद्धियोगः तं बुद्धियोगम् ।  
 येन बुद्धियोगेन सम्यग्दर्शनलक्षणेन मां  
 परमेश्वरमात्मभूतं आत्मत्वेन उपयान्ति प्रतिपद्यन्ते ॥  
 तेषामेव कथं नाम भ्रयः स्यात् इति अनुकम्पार्थं  
 दयाहेतोः अहमज्ञानजं अविवेकतः जातं मिथ्याप्रस्ययलक्षणं  
 मोहान्धकारं तमः नाशयामि आत्मभावस्थः आत्मनः  
 भावः अन्तःकरणशयः तस्मिन्नेव स्थितः सन् ज्ञानदीपेन  
 विवेकप्रत्ययरूपेण....सम्यग्दर्शनं भास्वता (10-10, 11)

3. Moving forward from this characterization of Bhakti as the hindrance of hindrances and as the source of knowledge Śaṅkara boldly identifies it with knowledge. This is the decisive and the most weighty part of the argument. The

identification is made in several crucial points of the commentary. I select five instances.

(a) The seventh chapter classifies devotees of God into four types and the greatest kind of devotion is said to be that of the man of knowledge.

चतुर्विधा भजन्ते मां जनाः सुकृतिनोऽर्जुन ।  
 आर्तो जिज्ञासुरर्थार्थी ज्ञानी च भरतर्षभ ॥  
 तेषां ज्ञानी नित्ययुक्तः एकभक्तिः विशिष्यते । (7-16, 17)  
 तेषां चतुर्णां मध्ये ज्ञानी तत्त्ववित् तत्त्ववित्त्वात्  
 नित्ययुक्तः एकभक्तिश्च अन्यस्य भजनोपस्य  
 अदर्शनात् अतः एकभक्तिः विशिष्यते अतिरिच्यते ॥

(b) In the eighth chapter the supreme spirit is held to be attainable by the highest type of Bhakti and Śaṅkara maintains that this Bhakti has knowledge as its defining characteristic.

पुरुषः स परः पार्थ भक्तय लभ्यास्त्वनन्यया । (8-20)

पुरुषः पुरि शयनात् पूर्णत्वाद्वा स परः निरतिशयः यस्मात् पुरुषात् न परं किञ्चित् सः भक्त्या लभ्यस्तु ज्ञानलक्षणया अनन्यया आत्मविषयया ।

(c) In the 13th chapter devoted to the metaphysical discrimination of the spirit and matter and the description of the highest knowledge, there occurs the characterization of that knowledge as “मयि चानन्ययोगेन भक्तिरव्यभिचारिणी” (13-10). This is the least theistic chapter and it is significant that the supreme knowledge described in it is said to contain as an element the highest Bhakti. Śaṅkara says.

मयि ईश्वरे अनन्ययोगेन अपृथक्समाधिना ‘न अन्यः भगवतो वासुदेवात् परः अस्ति अतः स एव गतिः’ इत्येव निश्चिता अव्यभिचारिणी बुद्धिः अनन्ययोगः तेन भजनं भक्तिः न व्यभिचरणशीला अव्यभिचारिणी सा च ज्ञानम् ॥

No supersession of Bhakti by philosophical knowledge even at its highest stage of development is contemplated.

(d) The 12th chapter is very important in this connection. Arjuna raises the question of the relative superiority of devotion to the personal God of religion and the contemplation of the impersonal Absolute. Sri Krishna praises the former as its fructification is both easy and quick, while the contemplation of the Absolute is difficult, though it also eventually leads to the



same consummation. Then follows a glowing description of the ideal Bhakta who is said to be very dear to the Lord. In the normal course of interpretation by a commentator who accords a lower status to Bhakti than to knowledge, this account of the ideal devotee ought to have been taken as dealing with the devotion to the lower Brahman. But Śaṅkara does not do so. He assimilates it to the ideal of knowledge and sees in it a grand unfoldment of the highest Bhakti that is identical with the highest knowledge. Commenting on the last line :

“ मत्परमा भक्ताः अतीव मे प्रियाः । ” (12-20)

he writes

“ मद्भक्ताः उत्तमां परमार्थज्ञानलक्षणां भक्तिमाश्रिताः अतीव मे प्रियाः । ”

In reality, the consideration of Śaṅkara's commentary on this chapter is by itself sufficient to demonstrate how he actually welds Bhakti and Jñāna into one integral mode of Sādhanā and knows nothing of the Jñāna supposed to surpass Bhakti.

(e) This unity of Jñāna and Bhakti is set forth with all the requisite clarity and adequacy in the 18th chapter.

“ ब्रह्मभूतः प्रसन्नात्मा न शोचति न कांक्षति ।

समः सर्वेषु भूतेषु मद्भक्तिं लभते परां ॥

भक्त्या मामभिजानाति यावान्यश्चास्मि तत्त्वतः ।

ततो मां तत्त्वतो ज्ञात्वा विशते तदनन्तरम् ॥ (18-54, 55)

ज्ञाननिष्ठः मद्भक्तः मयि परमेश्वरे भक्तिः भजनं परां उत्तमां ज्ञानलक्षणां चतुर्थी लभते तत्त्वतः ज्ञात्वा विशते तदनन्तरं मामेव । नात्र ज्ञानप्रवेशक्रिये भिन्ने विवक्षिते । किं तर्हि फलान्तरभावात् ज्ञानमत्रमेव ।

शास्त्राचार्योपदेशेन ज्ञानोत्पत्तिहेतुं सहकारिकारणं बुद्धिविशुद्धत्वादि अमानित्वादिगुणं च अपेक्ष्य जनितस्य क्षेत्रज्ञपरमात्मैकत्वज्ञानस्य कर्तृत्वादिकारक भेदबुद्धि निबन्धन - सर्व-कर्मसंन्यास सहितस्य स्वात्मानुभव निश्चयरूपेण यत् अवस्थानं सा परा ज्ञाननिष्ठा उच्यते । इयं ज्ञाननिष्ठा तर्हि भक्तित्रयापेक्षया परा चतुर्थी भक्तिरिति उक्ता । तथा परया भक्त्या भगवन्तं तत्त्वतः अभिजानाति । यदनन्तरमेव (ईश्वर-क्षेत्रज्ञ-भेदबुद्धिः) अशेषतः निवर्तते । अतः ज्ञाननिष्ठा लक्षणया भक्त्या मां अभिजानाति इति वचनं न विरुध्यते ।”

**This culminating fusion of Jñāna and Bhakti discredits conclusively any attempt to distinguish them qualitatively and to exalt**

Jñāna over Bhakti. Śaṅkara is no party to the spurious intellectualism of the popular Advaitin.

4. Jñāna one with Bhakti is the means of deliverance. But Śaṅkara maintains that deliverance is granted to the devotee with ripe knowledge and devotion by God. The completeness of the means does not render the Grace of God superfluous. On the contrary, it makes the completion of the condition for the descent of Grace. This seems a strangely theistic way of looking at the matter. But Śaṅkara seems definitely to admit this amount of theism. The Grace issues in liberation for the individual if his devotion is of such a character as to invoke that direction of the operation of Grace. As we have already noticed, Śaṅkara understands Lord Kṛṣṇa to say

“ये ज्ञानिनः सन्यासिनः सुमुक्षवः तान् मोक्षप्रदानेन अनुगृह्णामि ।”

Deliverance is a gift of Divine Grace and God is prompted to grant this gift by the quality of devotion in the highest illumined devotee. So the liberating grace is directly determined by the excellence of Bhakti.

God is said to take upon Himself the sole responsibility of conserving the spiritual goods and effectuating the highest attainment in the life of the supreme devotee. This proposition is most movingly presented in the elucidation of the following passage :

“अनन्याश्चिन्तयन्तो मां ये जनाः पर्युपासते ।  
तेषां नित्याभियुक्तानां योगक्षेमं वहाम्यहं ॥” (9-22)

Śaṅkara sets down his interpretation in these words :

“ये पुनः निष्कामाः सम्यग्दर्शिनः अनन्याः अपृथग्भूताः परं देवं नारायणं आत्मत्वेन गताः सतः चिन्तयन्तः मां ये जनाः सन्यासिनः पर्युपासते, तेषां परमार्थ-दर्शिनां नित्याभियुक्तानां सतताभियोगिनां योगक्षेमं - योगः अप्राप्तस्य प्रापणं क्षेमः तद्रक्षणं च तद्दुभयं वहामि प्रापयामि अहम् ।

ननु अन्येषामपि भक्तानां योगक्षेमं वहस्येव भगवान्, सस्यं वहस्येव । किंतु अयं विशेषः— अन्ये ये भक्ताः ते आत्मार्थं स्वयमपि योगक्षेमं ईक्षन्ते । नहि ते जीविते मरणे वा आत्मनः गृद्धिं कुर्वन्ति केवलं भगवच्छरण्यास्ते । अतः भगवानेव तेषां योगक्षेमं वहति ।”



In the state of absolute self-surrender, the possibility of self-effort is extinguished and hence, Divine Grace becomes the sole operative factor. That it blesses the devotee with the final emancipation is due to the very height of love and adoration that has both extinguished self-effort and thrown the entire responsibility on Divine Grace. *Self-obliteration in devotion is the way for the self-exaltation through the sole initiative of the Supreme.*

The final efficacy of Bhakti in relation to deliverance needs no more effective affirmation. Knowledge independent of surrender and grace is not the means of release. God's grace is the liberating power. This power is rendered operative by knowledge in so far as it develops into absolute self-surrender. The man of perfect knowledge is 'saved' because his knowledge has acquired fruitfulness by becoming self-surrender. In the last analysis it is the Bhakti involved in knowledge that brings about emancipation.

Thus in the elevated plane of knowledge also the role of Bhakti is dominant as (1) it destroys hindrances to Jñāna, (2) it constitutes the source of it, (3) it is one in substance with Jñāna, and (4) as it is the cause of the descent of the emancipating Divine Grace. To Śaṅkara, Bhakti is all in all in spiritual life.

Though this conclusion dawns on us with the force of revelation, it is fundamental in the philosophy of Śaṅkara as embodied in his commentary on the Gita. It is indeed a radical error of interpretation not to see in his philosophy a powerful vindication of the importance of Bhakti.