

BHAKTI, BUDDHISM and the
BHAGAVAD-GITA

Rob Reed
Eastern Washington State College

ABSTRACT

In this paper I wish to outline one possible influence in the development of the doctrine of Bhakti-Marga (a devotional type of worship in Hinduism) as presented in the Bhagavad-Gita (a Hindu philosophical text). This possible influence in the development of Bhakti-Marga is that of Brahmanic reaction to Buddhism. Of course, Buddhism is not the only reason for Bhakti-Marga's development, but I believe their interaction deserves a closer investigation. I would like further to point out that the Gita only formalized Bhakti-Marga, making it acceptable for the social elite and the rising middle class of India.

I. PREVIOUS TRADITIONAL MARGAS

I would like here, at the beginning, to devote some space to explain the traditional paths to moksha that predate the Bhagavad-Gita. Moksha (moksa) is the attainment of salvation, especially to be as one with the Supreme and to be free of the cyclic nature of birth and death. The traditional paths to attain moksha are Karma-Marga (The Way of Works) and Jñana-Marga (The Way of Knowledge). These formed the backdrop to Bhakti-Marga's intellectual acceptance.

Karma-Marga is essentially a way of ritual, especially those dealing with the household and its immediate environs. The Law of Karma is the concept that the thoughts, words and deeds of one's previous life has effected the station (caste, fortune, etc.) of one's present existence as the actions of this life will affect a future existence. Karma-Marga is, in Noss' words (1969:192):

"Not markedly emotional and still less intellectual, it is a methodical and hopeful carrying out of rites, ceremonies and duties that add to one's merit (favorable karma RR)."

Jñana-Marga is a path governed by jijñāsā, a disinterested passion for knowledge. This is the way of the intellectual, especially Brahmins. Jñana-Marga is based in the theory that ignorance, avidya, is the root of all evil. The systems or schools (darshana) for overcoming avidya by the use of the intellect are many and varied. Under these varied systems Jñana-Marga's culmination,

"....lifts man out of his narrow limits and makes him forget his self in the contemplation of the universal principles of existence " (Radhadrishnan 1973:55).

II. THE BHAGAVAD-GITA

In the Mahabharata, an epic poem dealing with two families (the Pandavas and the Kauravas), chapters thirteen through thirty-nine comprise the Bhagavad-Gita. The Gita is one scene in the Mahabharata in which the two families have met on the battlefield of Kurukshetra.

Before the onset of the battle one of the Pandavas, Arjuna, viewed both armies. When he saw relatives and friends in opposing armies,

"He was overcome with great compassion and uttered this sadness, 'When I see my own people arrayed and eager to fight, O Krsna, my limbs quail, my mouth goes dry, my body shakes and my hair stands on end.' (1:28-29) 'Having spoken this on the (field of) battle, Arjuna sank down on the seat of his chariot, casting away his bow and arrow, his spirit overwhelmed by sorrow.' (1.47 - Numbers in parenthesis, e.g. (1:2-3), refer to chapter and verse(s) in the Bhagavad-Gita, Radhakrishnan translation)

Arjuna's charioteer, Krishna (Krsna), who in actuality was an incarnation of the great god Vishnu, tried to convince Arjuna to go to battle, since this was Arjuna's caste duty. Krishna first appealed to Arjuna's pride and station by saying,

"Whence has come to thee this strain (this dejection) of spirit in this hour of crisis? It is unknown to men of noble mind (not cherished by the Aryans); it does not lead to heaven; (on earth) it causes disgrace; O Arjuna. Yield not to this unmanliness, O Partha (Arjuna), for it does not become thee. Cast off this petty faintheartedness and arise, O oppressor of foes (Arjuna)." (2:2-3).

Arjuna still refused to fight. Arjuna's failure to be swayed by this kind of reasoning secretly pleased Krishna, who then began to enlighten Arjuna with the theological arguments. These didactics of Krishna are the heart of the Gita.

Vyasa, the legendary compiler of the Mahabharata, is said also to have composed the Gita. Most scholars (e.g. Basham

1959:409 and Zimmer 1971:68) agree with Sir Charles Eliot (1954:200-201) that the Gita is an interpolation into the Mahabharata. However, whether it is original or a Vishnavite revision of some earlier work is still in question. Opinion as to the date of composition of the Gita differs, but as A. C. Bouquet (1962:82) sums up,

"...the most recent scholarship inclines to the view that it was composed in its original form a little earlier than the Christian era, and that in its final form it cannot be later than the second century A.D."

Traditionally, the battle at Kurukshetra is dated at 3102 B. C. According to A. L. Basham (1959:39), however, this date is quite impossible. From the scanty archaeological remains and documentary evidence Basham has set the date of the battle at the beginning of the ninth century B. C.

III. BHAKTI-MARGA

In contradistinction to Karma-Marga and Jñana-Marga, Bhakti-Marga may be regarded as The Way of Devotion. Swami Vivekananda (1959:7) says of it,

"Bhakti-Yoga (Bhakti-Marga RR) is a real genuine search after the Lord, a search beginning, continuing and ending in Love....Bhakti is an intense love of God. When a man gets it he loves all, hates none; he becomes satisfied forever."

This devotion often takes the form of a passionate love which transcends all else. However, Swami Vivekananda (1959:7) states this 'intense love' may become a problem, "...its (Bhakti's) great disadvantage is that in its lower forms it oftentimes degenerates into hideous fanaticism." As a metaphysical idea, Bhakti contains few complexities, but it has inspired some very sophisticated philosophical systems.

One of the most lucid expressions of Bhakti-Marga is found

in the Bhagavad-Gita. Bhakti is presented in the Gita with a suggestion of traditional folk belief. Only a small number of people were able to follow the Way of Knowledge (Jñana-Marga), since intellectually it was extremely arduous and financially it represented the loss of an able-bodied worker from the family. Jñana-Marga required that the student live with his master (guru) and eat by begging door to door. Therefore, the rest of the Hindu population followed The Way of Works (Karma-Marga). For them the Supreme was simply believed in, not speculated about. The pragmatic character and stark cause/effect relationship of the Way of Works suited these people admirably - for as far as it went. By the performance of various rites they could avert troubles and/or acquire favorable karma. The rituals could also be used to acquire practical benefits, such as good crops or healthy sons. While this no doubt gave a sense of religious participation, Karma-Marga's emphasis was not directed primarily toward the emotional nature of man, which is so clearly Bhakti-Marga's emphasis as expressed above.

IV. SECTARIANISM

Seen in conjunction with Bhakti-Marga, and as shall be shown even predating its official sanction in the Bhagavad-Gita, is the evidence of sectarianism. Sects arose devoted to individual gods, while at the same time, not completely ignoring the other individual gods in the ample Indian pantheon. These common people developed predilections such that they were, in Eliot's words (1954:194), "...neither in complete sympathy with the ancient Brahmanism nor yet excommunicated by it..." At this point Hinduism was being approached differently by priests, by philosophers, and by the common people.

"While the priests and the theologians were absorbed in elaborate sacrificial rites and muttered litanies in honor of Prajapati, the First Sacrificer and the Embodiment of Sacrifice, philosophers threw doubts on the efficacy of ritual, speculated about the underlying unity of the universe, and strove for union with the supreme Brahman or Paramatman, the universal Soul or the Absolute 'that dwelleth in every thing, that guideth all beings within, the Inward Guide, Immortal.'

"The common people, however, did not understand abstruse theological or philosophical speculations and began to show predilection for certain deities already known to the Rig-Veda..." (Majumdar, et al 1967:46).

This division of religious central concerns represents one of the basic differences between Bhakti-Marga and Jñana-Marga. A Jñani (follower of Jñana-Marga) sought in Western terminology a "force". He sought the Impersonal, Unmanifested Brahman. A Bhakta (follower of Bhakti-Marga) worshipped a personal anthropomorphized god. The Bhagavad-Gita (12:1-5) stresses that while the contemplation of the Unmanifested Brahman is good and does, finally, effect moksha, it is too intellectual for the majority of people.

"The difficulty of those whose thoughts are set on the Unmanifested is greater, for the goal of the Unmanifested is hard to reach by the embodied beings." (12:5).

The Gita considers it easier to become a Bhakta and worship the Manifested form. Krishna states in the Gita, "...them (Bhaktas) do I consider most perfect in yoga." (12:2) The reasons thus given for preferring one "Way" to another are founded in expediency. And this expediency is directed toward those who do not have the capabilities (intellectual or financial) to follow Jñana-Marga. Bhakti, however, requires an individual god(s) to whom one pays homage and this in turn implies sectarianism, at least in relation to the rest of the Brahmanical order.

"The earliest sect of which we have any records (my emphasis) is that of the Bhāgavatas, who were or became Vishnuites. At a date which is impossible to fix but considerably before the epoch of Pānini (fourth century Indian grammarian RR)..."
(Eliot 1954:194 - Majumdar et al /1967:70/ corroborates this evidence)

Here we see evidence of sects at least before the fourth century B.C. Indeed considering how very few are given to or have the capabilities for a life of recondite philosophical speculation, we can safely assume the spirit of sectarianism, i.e., the devotion to a personal god, goes back even further in time.

I would argue that the introduction of Bhakti-Marga in the Bhagavad-Gita, as a viable path to moksha, was not the introduction of a new philosophy but the acceptance and refinement of a very old one based in popular tradition.

The question arises, if a form of Bhakti-Marga existed before the Bhagavad-Gita, why was Bhakti-Marga put forth in this form, in an epic poem? In answer to this question, it would seem that it was so put forth primarily for the use of the social elite and the rising middle class. The epic poem form, while popular in style, was obviously aimed at these people, as they were the only ones who systematically studied, memorized and contemplated the philosophy of these stories and texts.

"Though philosophically the Bhagavad Gita's whole conception of reality and of the meaning of life is shot through with unresolved inconsistencies, its practical effect has been to stimulate and deepen Hinduism on its religious side and to make the Bhakti-Marga of popular Hinduism intellectually respectable"
(Noss 1969:201).

These "unresolved inconsistencies" are, according to Zimmer (1971:381) "precisely the value. For they represent the beginning of the great rapprochement and, besides, are readily resolved

by a realization of the One in all."

However, to continue with Noss' (1969:201) statement:

"It must be quite evident at this point that neither the the Way of Knowledge, which is so highly intellectual and self-disciplinary, nor the Way of Works, which is so largely moral and practical can satisfy the religious need of the average man as can the Way of Devotion...educated Hindus of all sects honor it as a worthy expression of the emotional factor (my emphasis) in religion" (Noss 1969:201).

Assuming that the development of Bhakti-Marga in the Gita was done primarily for the benefit of the social elite of India, three questions remain. Why was it felt necessary to recognize it at all; why, now after so many years of intellectual disregard; and why place it above the traditional paths in terms of efficacy?

V. BUDDHISM

An historical factor that might account for this is the rise of Buddhism (and Jainism to a smaller extent) in India. The seventh and six centuries B.C. in India were times of great turmoil.

"By the seventh and sixth centuries B.C. many areas in northern India were under the influence of Aryan culture even in the absence of direct political authority. However, the old Aryan cult of social system were subject to countervailing pressures. At the economic and political level there were significant developments in urban commerce based on a money economy, the beginnings of rational bureaucracy, and a new and increasingly affluent middle class. In addition there were protracted wars between newly emerging states and petty kingdoms for control of territory and economic resources. These power struggles resulted in the uprooting and extirpation of political minorities and the corrosion of the old forms of communal solidarity and legitimation. As the archaic means for maintaining religious and social integration dissolved, the situation provoked a deep spiritual malaise which intensified earlier speculations about the meaning of the self and the world. The value of all traditional worldly forms and of life itself was called into question with unparalleled sharpness" (Pardue 1971:3)

In this volatile milieu, two new religious leaders arose: Mahavira, founder of the Jains, and Siddhartha Guatama, the Buddha. As Ralph Linton (1961:195-6) stated it:

"The increasing pretensions of the Brahmans, and the development of more and more elaborate and expensive rites which only they could perform, was met in the sixth century B.C. by a religious revolution instituted by two great leaders, Guatama Buddha and Mahavira, founder of the Jains."

However, as Michael Edwards shows (1961:33), the 'religious revolution' was not so much against Hinduism but "against the diverse polytheism and the arrogant claims of the Brahmins."

Two hundred years after Gautama died, Buddhism had a large following of lay people. A boon to the relatively new movement was the conversion of Asoka (ruler of most of India 273-232 B.C.) He helped to spread Buddhism far beyond the borders of his country and made it a world religion. (Majumdar et al 1967:133). Buddhism became so strong in India during this time that of all the religious relics found dating from 200 B.C. - 200 A.D. "...those of Buddhism far outnumber those of Brahmanism, Hinduism, and Jainism together" (Basham 1959:263).

Buddhism eventually died out in India only after more than a thousand years of strength in the subcontinent. Yet from Gautama's lifetime (c. early fifth century B.C.) to the seventh century A.D., it presented a very real danger to Brahmanism. During the Buddha's lifetime many ideas were gaining popularity, popular creeds were being recognized by the upper classes, humanitarian movements grew and animal sacrifice diminished (Majumdar et al 1967:77). Buddhism brought most of the trends together. It

"...denied the ultimate sanctity of the Vedas, the religious superiority of the Brahmans, and the ritual significance of caste. Their messages of salvation were preached openly. Admission was based on personal conversion, usually without ascriptive limits of caste, class, or sex. And it is not surprising, therefore, to find evidence that their teachings found rich soil among upwardly mobile urban commercial and political groups, who held that both religious and social standing should be based on personal talent and achievement rather than hereditary right. It is significant that, according to the traditions, both the Buddha and Mahavira - founder of Jainism - were from indigenous non-Aryan tribes" (Pardue 1971:7).

VI. THE GITA AND BHAKTI-MARGA AS RESPONSE TO BUDDHISM

The most significant effect of all was that Buddhism converted many rich former patrons of Hinduism. According to A. C. Bouquet (1962:72-3), Hinduism had a number of 'Theistic Reactions' to Buddhism, among them a reduction of animal sacrifice, stiffening of the caste system and even the use of one of Hinduism's most effective weapons - absorption. The Buddha became the ninth avatara of Vishnu.

"Very interesting too is the ninth avatara...or Buddha. The reason assigned in Brahmanic literature for Vishnu's appearance in this character is that he wished to mislead the enemies of the gods by false teaching, or that out of compassion for animals he preached the abolition of Vedic sacrifices. Neither explanation is very plausible and it is pretty clear that in the period when degenerate Buddhism offered no objection to deification and mythology, the Brahmans sanctioned the worship of the Buddha under their auspices. But they did so only in a half-hearted way. The Buddha was so important a personage that he had to be explained by the intervention, kindly or hostile, of a deity (my emphasis)" (Eliot 1954:148).

The Gita - whether culled from various Upanishads or an original text - was coming into prominence during the period of the rapid expansion of Buddhism under Asoka. It would seem that the Bhagavad-Gita and Bhakti-Marga (which is such an important idea in the Gita) were being put forward as more than just a new theistic doctrine.

"The stern ethics of the Gita are clearly intended as a defense of the old established order against the attacks of reformers and unbelievers" (Basham 1959:342).

I think we can see the development and/or recognition of Bhakti-Marga as another 'Theistic Reaction'. Much of the excitement over Buddhism was in the intellectual, mobile middle, and upper classes (though many of the lower castes were joining because it did not discriminate by caste). Many wealthy patrons, especially Kshatriyas who were irritated at the pretensions of

many of the Brahmans were turning to Buddhism.

Much of the Gita can be seen as a method to entice the mobile upper classes, the social elite, away from Buddhism and back to Hinduism. In the Gita, Arjuna's dilemma (i.e. having the action and results of this fighting affect his karma or becoming inactive and disobeying sacred caste duty) can be seen as a metaphor for the dilemma facing many Kshatriyas and other upwardly mobile classes. Action is seen as indicative of Karma-Marga and Hinduism and the Brahmanical value system. Inaction represents the Buddhist ideal of monastic withdrawal. Krishna in the Gita is expounding the Brahmanical view.

Rather than have Arjuna (the Kshatriyas and others) opt for inaction (Buddhism) Krishna (the Brahman) puts forth a new way of approaching the actions which certain castes are duty-bound to perform. Krishna states that only those actions performed with personal desire or motive are the ones which affect karma. All other actions (e.g. those done only because of caste duty) have no affect on one's karma. Essentially this makes the latter type of action inaction. As Dasgupta states:

"Morality from this point of view (performing actions without personal interest in them or the results RR) becomes wholly subjective and the special feature of the Gita is that it tends to make all actions non-moral by cutting away the bonds that connect an action with its performer" (1961:507, Vol. II).

Or as Krishna states: "Therefore, without attachment, perform always the work that has to be done, for man attains to the highest by doing work without attachment" (3:19).

Furthermore, the Brahmans, seeing that those who were less philosophically inclined were not greatly affected by Buddhism, seemed to have worked out a justification for the emotional factor in religion. This was done by developing (not originating)

the concept of Bhakti-Marga (perhaps even interpolating it into the original Gita) or by expounding the merits of Bhakti-Marga which until that time may have existed in the Gita but had had little serious attention directed towards it.

To summarize, I believe I have shown that one possible reason for the development of the doctrine of Bhakti-Marga in the Bhagavad-Gita was that of Brahmanic reaction to Buddhism. Also that the Gita only formalized a popular creed to make it palatable for the social elite of India, those who were most affected by Buddhism and who were generally the most disenchanted with the ancient Brahmanism.

However, Bhakti-Marga came to be recognized, the development of devotional religion no doubt had an influence on Hinduism. Because of it Hinduism was able to persist during (and after) the Buddhistic period. One would not be so apt to be swayed by the dialectics of another religion when your own was stressing love and devotion to a personal deity. This would be especially true, when the devotion was encouraged to reach a point where one's life is seen as meaningful only in relation to this personal deity. The religion that was once simply a philosophical system and a conglomeration of rituals suddenly becomes a very personal affair.

"The Gita is unique. It is the Scripture of scriptures. Why? Because it has taught the world that emotion pure, the devotion genuine can easily run abreast with the philosophy solid, the detachment dynamic" (Chinmoy 1973:xvi).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Basham, A. L.
1959 The Wonder That Was India. New York:
Grove Press, Inc.
- Bouquet, A. C.
1962 Hinduism. London: Hutchinson & Co. Ltd.
- Chinmoy, Sri
1973 Commentary on the Bhagavad Gita. Blauvelt,
NY: Rudolph Steiner Publications.
- Dasgupta, Surendranath
1961 A History of Indian Philosophy. Cambridge, MA:
University Press.
- Edwards, Michael
1961 A History of India. New York: Farrar, Straus
and Cudahy.
- Eliot, Sir Charles
1954 Hinduism and Buddhism: An Historical Sketch.
New York: Barnes and Noble, Inc.
- Linton, Ralph
1961 The Tree of Culture, abridged by Adelin Linton.
New York: Vintage Books
- Majumdar, R. C., Raychaudhuri, H. C. and Datta, Kalikinkar
1967 An Advanced History of India. London: Mac-
Millian and Company, Ltd.
- Noss, John B.
1967 Man's Religions (4th edition). New York: The
MacMillian Co.
- Pardue, Peter A.
1971 Buddhism. New York: The MacMillian Co.
- Radhakrishnan, Sarvepalli
1973 The Bhagavadgita. New York: Harper Torchbooks.
- Vivekananda, Swami
1959 Teachings of Swami Vivekananda, edited by Swami
Gambhirananda. Calcutta: Advita Ashrama.
- Zimmer, Heinrich
1971 Philosophies of India, edited by Joseph Campbell.
Princeton, NJ.: Princeton University Press,
Bollingen Series XXVI