

The Bhagavadgita and the Hindu Epics : A Study in Comparative Devotional Theology

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I

It is well-known that the Rāmāyaṇa and the Mahābhārata are the two great religious epics of India. It is also well-known that the "Bhagavadgītā lies inlaid like a pearl" in the Mahābhārata and has its own individual significance.

The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate that there is a slight difference in the theology of the Bhagavadgītā in particular and the epics in general as revealed by a semantic study of the word *bhakti*. The clarifying question asked is : when a devotee offers devotion to God what does he get in return ?

II

The Rāmāyaṇa and Mahābhārata in general seem to suggest that if *bhakti* is offered to God one *can* get His *bhakti* in return. Thus in the Mahābhārata Yama, the god of death, tells Sāvitrī that her devotion has aroused *bhakti* in him for her (*me tvayi bhaktir uttamā*). Similarly, the god Sūrya displays his pleasure with Karṇa by saying: *mamāpi bhaktir utpannā*.¹ Similarly, in the Rāmāyaṇa there is a clear reference of the *bhakti* of the people being returned with *bhakti* by Rāma in the verse :

Bhaktimanti hi bhūtāni jaṅgam'ā jaṅgamāni ca :
Yācamāneṣu teṣu tvam bhaktim bhakteṣu darśaya.
Both moving and unmoving creatures are devoted
and loyal to you : show an (answering) loyalty
to these loyal men who supplicate you..²

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1. See Marlasusal Dhavamony, *Love of God According to Śaiva-Sādhānta*, Oxford : Clarendon Press, 1971, p. 37.

2. Quoted by R. C. Zaehner, *The Bhagavadgītā*, Oxford : Clarendon Press, 1972, p. 181.

Thus it is possible in the Rāmāyaṇa and the Mahābhārata for devotion to be returned with devotion.

III

In the Bhagavadgītā, however, this never happens. One should note that the Gītā contains a clear statement of love being returned with love. Thus Kṛṣṇa says (Bhagavadgītā VII. 17): *Priyo hi jñānino' tyartham aham, sa ca mama priyaḥ.*³ Note the repetition of the word *priya*. There is also the pairing of a lover with the beloved in Bhagavadgītā XI. 44. Thus love is returned with love—but it is a striking fact that in the Gītā, as distinguished from the epics, even *devotion* is returned with *love*. The classic examples of this are proved by the terminal *pādas* of Bhagavadgītā XII. 14.16.17 and 19 :

Yo madbhaktaḥ, sa me priyaḥ ;
Yo madbbhakiaḥ, sa me priyaḥ ;
Bhaktimān yaḥ, sa me priyaḥ ;
*Bhaktimṇā me priyo naraḥ.*⁴

Kṛṣṇa calls Arjuna his *bhakta*⁵ but never declares himself a *bhakta* of Arjuna. Arjuna is devoted to Kṛṣṇa, in return Arjuna is dear to Kṛṣṇa.⁶

IV

To conclude : whereas in devotional theology of the epics in general there are moments of parity, in the devotional theology of the Gītā there are moments of camaraderie and affection, and no moment of devotional parity between the devotee and the object of devotion.

3. "For extremely dear to the possessor of knowledge Am I, and he is dear to Me" (Franklin Edgerton, *The Bhagavadgītā*, Harvard University Press, 1972, p. 39.

4. "Who is devoted to me is dear to me" ;
"Who is devoted to me is dear to me" ;
"Who is full of devotion, he is dear to Me" ;
"Full of devotion, that man is dear to me"
(Franklin Edgerton, *op. cit.*, pp. 63, 64).

5. Bhagavadgītā IV. 3.

6. Bhagavadgītā XVIII. 76.