

# The Dynamics of Belief Compared Between the Fourth Gospel and the Gita

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The Fourth Evangelist is attested by the Editorial group in stating at the end of the Gospel "We know what he testifies is true" (Jn. 21.24). The witness or the testimony of the Editorial group implies that the one who had written these things was also the witness to these things. On this basis the Evangelist gives invitation to the readers at the end to put their faith in Jesus, "These are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ and the Son of God and that believing you may have life in his name" (20.31). The premise on which the Fourth Gospel was written was that through belief based on the report of the witnesses one should come to believe that Jesus is the Son of God.

In the episode of Thomas in the post-Resurrection scene (20.29) from the lips of Christ himself the writer sets the requirement for those who wish to follow him: Blessed are those whose knowledge of Jesus' true identity is received through faith against those who wish to base their knowledge on physical evidence. This was what Thomas at first demanded about Jesus (20.25). We find that even during Jesus' time though the people had more accurate historical knowledge than the succeeding generations, only few followed him. As Soren Kierkegaard pointed out in his concept of 'the contemporary disciple' that acknowledging Jesus as the divine Son belongs to the sphere of belief. What John recorded as his witness was his 'faith-knowledge', i.e. in faith he acknowledges Jesus as the Christ and the Son of God. This was expressed in the statement of Peter, "We have *believed* (faith) and have come *to know* (knowledge)..." (6.69).

1. Soren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, (Tr.) (Princeton: 1958), pp. 44f.

What is faith-knowledge? It is "believing without seeing", for to the Evangelist "seeing (the signs) and believing" (4.48) is inferior to "believing without seeing" (20.29). In the incident of the healing of the born-blind man, Jesus commended the healed blind man: he believed and therefore he sees (9.39). This refers not only to his physical sight but also to his perception of the divine identity of Jesus (9.38). This second aspect of the blind man's sight corresponds with John's notion of faith, which is spiritual perception. Likewise the blindness of the Pharisees, which Christ referred, refers to their 'disbelief' (9.41). This shows that even though one sees Jesus performing signs, yet without faith he does not really see who Jesus is (4.43ff.).

This faith-perception is different from the normal sensory perception, for it is not sight but insight. This is referred to in terms of faith, for it is faith-perception. Without faith approach, Jesus will remain to that person just a human being, be it as a prophet, and nothing more. Without a particular mode of mind, the experience ('anubhava') of Jesus as the Son of God is not possible. Such mode of mind is referred in Bhagavad Gita as the clear and undoubted awareness that one is Brahman.<sup>2</sup> The meditation ('tapas') of the Hindu rishis alone in the forests was for the cultivation of such mode of mind.<sup>3</sup> To the Fourth Evangelist this is possible through the operation of the Holy Spirit in a person's life.

How is this faith-perception related to the Revelation? Revelation in the religious sense is the divine communication with the divine initiative to mankind. The 'givenness' is there in the Revelation. In the Gita (11.8) Krishna gives to Arjuna 'divya dristi' ('divine sight') by which he could see the true nature of Krishna. Krishna himself takes the initiative to behold his divine power through granting the 'divya caksu' ('divine eye'). We have the classic example of the servant of prophet Elisha, who on seeing the Syrian army invading Israel, when given the 'divine eye' could see the armies of the God of Israel protecting them (II Kings 6.15-20). The

2. S. W. Bhakle, "Experience: Anubhava as Pramana", *The Bhagavad Gita and the Bible*. (CRSC, Dehradun), 1972, pp. 40ff.

3. Vinoba Bhave, *Talks on Gita*. (Varanasi: Sarvasangh Prakashan), 1982, pp. 71f.

4. Sri Aurobindo, *Essays on the Gita*.

experience of the inner circle of the disciples of Jesus on the Transfiguration Mount (Mk. 9.1ff.) can come under the same category.

In the case of Arjuna in Gita it is referred as a vision, which was a theophany of such terrific grandeur before which the creature trembles and falls at the splendour of a thousand suns shining simultaneously.<sup>5</sup> In the case of the born-blindman it was a quiet confrontation with Jesus, which resulted in his adoration of him as the Lord (9.38).

From the human side this divine revelation has to be comprehended and this is possible only through that bent of mind called faith. Faith therefore is an exercise of the intellect, though the will takes part in it in one's decision. The faith-perception is chiefly a human experience of mind and will, where the revealed is comprehended or perceived. According to Sankara (in *Gita Bhasya*) it is 'Anubhava' or experience, which is the assured conviction that one is Brahman. This is the awareness of the infinite in one's life through personal meeting. This meeting of the two, both the first experience and the subsequent ones, is known as 'Saksatkara' in Gita, which is the actualisation of the revelation.

In the Fourth Gospel also we find emphasis in similar way called 'witness' Stather Hunt<sup>6</sup> branding the Fourth Gospel as the 'Gospel of Witness' divides the whole Gospel record into 34 episodes of witness. What is a witness? The Greek word 'Marturia' for 'witness' occurs 22 times in the Gospel, referring to the testimonies about Jesus. The disciples were witnesses of Jesus of what they have seen and heard (Acts 3.15; 4.20). The replacement for Judas Iscariot from among the disciples was on the basis that he was a witness to Jesus from his baptism till his ascension (Acts 1.22ff.). Mary Magdalene was a witness to the resurrection of Jesus to what she has seen and heard of it (20.18). The 'witness' is thus what one has experienced personally, which is his 'Anubhava'. In the first chapter of the Gospel in the account of the call of the first batch of the disciples, we find

5. B. R. Kulkarni, *The Bhagavad Gita and the Bible*, Op. Cit., p. 4f.

6. B. P. W. Stather Hunts, *Some Johannine Problems*. (London: Skeffington), 1958, pp. 51ff.

it was a time of witnessing what one has experienced about Jesus Christ (1. 35-51).

The Greek expression 'PISTUEIN EIS' (= 'to believe in') is used 45 times in the New Testament of which the Evangelist has 37 references of his 100 times reference to 'PISTUEIN' (= 'to believe') in the verbal form. J. H. Moulton<sup>7</sup> sees this expression same as the Pauline 'EN CHRISTO' (= 'in Christ') expression. The Johannine phrases 'abiding in' (6.56; 15.4-7; I Jn. 2.6,24,27-28; 3.6,24) and the "being in" (14.10.20; 17.21, 23, 26; I Jn. 2.5; 5.20) refer consistently to the relation to the person of Christ. Thus the faith-perception of the Fourth Evangelist is not just the awareness or the 'Anubhava' (experience) of the Divine alone but also being one with him.

The devotion or the 'bhakti' to the object of worship is seen in the attachment of the worshipper to the Divine being. The 'Bhakta' is the devotee offering his devoted service similar to a loyal servant to his master. 'Bhakta' is one who shares the 'bhaga' of wealth of the Bhagawan, the possessor of wealth.<sup>8</sup> Like the kinship of a clan or a tribe, so also is seen the religious kinship between the 'Bhakta' (=devotee) and the Bhagavan (=God). In the case of the healed born-blindman it was a gradual development of the ripening relationship (9.11-38) : When the blindman was healed he recognised Jesus first as a Man (vs. 11), next he came to know him as a Prophet (vs. 17,35), next while in dispute with the Jewish leaders, affirms that Jesus was 'one sent from God' (vs. 31,33) and finally when he was put out of the synagogue, he confesses him as the 'Lord' on meeting him (vs. 38). He thus progresses from blindness to illumination, physical and spiritual and ends up with adoration (vs. 38). R. H. Strachan truly observes that this can be taken "as a study in the development of Christian experience of Jesus"<sup>9</sup>

In Hinduism also we find references to such steps of development in the relationship between the devotee and the

7. J. H. Moulton, *A Grammar of New Testament Greek I* (Prolegomena), 1906, p. 68.

8. Bhakti was first referred in the Sweta Upanishad (vi, 23). It means a share or portion of the divine benevolence, as such it was equated with religious devotion.

9. R. H. Strachan, *The Fourth Gospel*. (London : SCM), 1920, p. 142.

object of worship : the first stage is referred as 'Samipya' or nearness; the second stage is referred as 'Salokya' or friendship; the third stage is referred as 'Sayujya' or partnership; and the final stage as 'Samadhi' or oneness. So the bhakta progresses from serving the Divine to union with him. In the Fourth Gospel we find the disciples were first called to be with Jesus (1.39); later they were called 'friends' (15.14.) thus progressing from servant-master relationship to partnership (15.15). Lastly Jesus prays for the unity of of the disciples not only among themselves but also with the Father and himself (17.21-23). Here the oneness is not on the organisational or organic basis as in the Pauline analogy of the 'Body' or the 'Building' (I Cor. 12.12-30; Rom. 12.4-8; Eph. 2.20-22 etc.). The reference "that they may be one in us" (17.21) carries a mystical union realised in the spiritual life. It is a unity based on personal relationship of mutual love (13.35), trust and purpose (14.10f., 20 etc.).

The knowledge of the higher realm is not mere sight ('drstam') or appearance ('Pratyaksha'). This is not possible through sense organs or visual experience as it is normally done of the physical realm. For this, the Fourth Evangelist quotes from the prophecy of Isaiah (6.10) to show that after seeing so many miracles or signs yet many did not acknowledge Jesus as the Divine Son (12.40). : The people see yet do not see, hear yet do not hear etc. The perceiving of what they see or hear according to the Evangelist comes only through faith on the part of the individual. This is similar to 'Parabhakti' of the Gita (10th chapter). Through the aid of the 'guru' (teacher) this is made possible but in the Fourth Gospel it is obtained not through human agency but through the help of the Holy Spirit, the third person in the Godhead (14.26), based on the principle of 'like is known by the like' (4.24; Rom. 8.16).

In Gita we find God is referred as a 'Purusha' or person in the analogies of a father, mother and friend (9th chapter). The perishable ('kshara') and the imperishable ('Akshara') Purusha is referred of Prakriti and the Jiva (15th chapter). Yet higher than these two is the Purushottama, the Supreme Person. This Purushottama proclaims "I enter the three

worlds and sustain them, as their undying Lord (Avyaya Isvara')"<sup>10</sup> This sounds similar to the testimony of the disciples about Jesus, "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, the glory of the only begotten Son who is in the bosom of the Father" (1.14; cf. 1.18). This is a reference to the pre-existent being of Jesus as the Word ('Logos' in Greek) (1.1-3).

In the conception of Gita, true knowledge is the realisation that Brahman alone is real and all else is unreal or illusion.<sup>11</sup> It is also seeing the unity in diversity, the one Brahman or the Universal Soul in the many objects of this physical or created world. The Gita rewords the Upanishadic idea of 'Jnana' (=knowledge) as the realisation that which is known, nothing more remains to be known. Though Krishna as the Avatar of Vishnu is shown as a person, yet behind it is the principle of life and the conscientiousness, the realisation of these two through the eight-fold prakriti. To the Fourth Evangelist true knowledge is to know the unity of the Son and the Father and in that the acknowledgement of Jesus as the Divine Son. It is more personal than the Gita concept of the recognition of the metaphysical source and unity of this world. The reference to Jesus as the "only begotten Son" (1.14,18) puts the created world distinct from the Godhead.

On the whole, the concept of faith or personal devotion is emphasised in both Gita and the Fourth Gospel, with the given characteristic differences or peculiarities of each in terms of the approaches of the realisation of the object of devotion. Given this semblance it is no wonder the Fourth Gospel is most congenial to the Indian mind. Likewise the presentation of Jesus as the pre-existent Son of God, the object of worship, will strike a deeper response in the Indian mind than the historically localised Jesus in the other Gospels. This affords us a point of dialogue to start with our Hindu friends of India indeed.

10. A. V. Matthew, *The Message of Gita*, (Bangalore : Ecumenical Christian Centre), 1969, p. 72f.

11. R. D. Ranade, *The Gospel of God Realisation*, (Bombay : Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan), 1964. (quoted from *The Conception of Spiritual Life in Mahatma Gandhi and Hindu Saints*), p. 81f.