

CONCEPT OF LIBERATION IN THE *BHĀGAVATAPURĀṆA*

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Abstract

The concept of liberation or *mokṣa* occupies a prominent place in Indian philosophical and religious traditions. Among the four *puruṣārthas*, viz., *dharma*, *artha*, *kāma* and *mokṣa*, the last *puruṣārtha* i.e. *mokṣa* is said to be concerned with the spiritual aspect of human life. *Mokṣa* is said to be *paramapuruṣārtha*, i.e. the ultimate value. The *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* is one of the important Mahā-purāṇas and also the primary sacred text of the *Vaiṣṇava* branch of Hinduism. The *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* is regarded as a highly authoritative work from the standpoint of religion and philosophy. In this Purāṇa, the concept of liberation occupies the position of the supreme importance. It holds that the realization of identity between the self and God or Absolute breaks the fetters of this worldly existence. This state is called the state of liberation. This Purāṇa mentions the different paths of liberation of the self and at the same time emphasizes its preference for the path of devotion or *bhakti*. Here an attempt has been made to highlight the doctrine of liberation as depicted in the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*.

Keywords: *mokṣa*, *avidyā*, *jñāna*, *karma*, *yoga*, *bhakti*, *puruṣārtha*.

INTRODUCTION

The Purāṇas are the most important literature of India after the Vedas and the two *Mahākāvyas*, i.e. the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata*. The influence of the Purāṇic literature on Indian life is profound and permanent. The study of the Purāṇas is indispensable for the proper understanding of our philosophical and socio-cultural roots. The *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* is the most popular and widely circulated among all the Purāṇas. This Purāṇa occupies a unique position in the devotional literature of India. The

Bhāgavatapurāṇa is the most valuable treatise from the standpoint of theological and philosophical doctrines. It is included in the *Sāttvika* group of the Purāṇas and dedicated to the glorification of Bhagavat or Viṣṇu. The *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* consists of twelve books called *skandhas* and approximately 18,000 verses.¹ It is narrated by Sūta to the Ṛṣis at *Naimiṣāraṇya*. Actually Sūta repeats what was said by Śuka, the son of Vyāsa to the king Parīkṣita, the grandson of Arjuna, at the time of his death. It is in reply to Parīkṣita's question on what a man should do who is about to die. He related this Purāṇa to him, for nothing secures final happiness so certainly as to die whilst the thoughts are wholly engrossed by Viṣṇu.

The *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* is unique in Indian religious literature for its emphasis on the practice of *bhakti*, compared to the more theoretical *bhakti* of the *Gītā*, for its redefining of *dharma*, and for the extant of its description of God in a human like form. The highest form of *bhakti* taught by this Purāṇa is unconditional and cannot be achieved by any worldly means. Devotion to God and love for fellow being is the essence of religion expounded in the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*.

Hinduism is concerned about the philosophy of values. Liberation or *mokṣa* is the highest and supreme value in Indian philosophy and religion. Among the four *puruṣārthas*, the first three, viz., *dharma*, *artha* and *kāma* are said to be concerned with worldly aspects of human life. The last *puruṣārtha*, i.e. *mokṣa* is said to be concerned with the spiritual aspect of human life. Hence, all these values taken together can be said to have taken care of both the worldly and spiritual aspects of human personality. *Mokṣa* is not a state of attainment but is the realization of one's own intrinsic nature. It does not negate the other three *puruṣārthas*, but is the fulfillment of all the three. Hence, *mokṣa* is said to be *parama-puruṣārtha*, i.e. the ultimate value of the four *puruṣārthas*.

The term *mokṣa* is derived from the root *muc* which means to let go, discharge, release or deliverance with suffix *ktin*.² In the *Amarakoṣa*,³ the following terms are given to denote liberation-*kaivalya*, *nirvāṇa*, *śreyah*, *niḥśreyasam*, *amṛtam*, *mokṣa*, *mukti* and *apavarga*. All these terms are identical in primary meaning with deliverance, emancipation, freedom, liberty and release.

According to the Indian tradition, liberation is not a state to be realized but only the awareness of what already is. Regarding the nature of liberated self the *Bhagavadgītā* explains that the person who sees all beings in himself and himself in all beings- dislikes none.⁴ Liberation means freedom from bondage, which is due to ignorance for which we understand the unreal as real. Thus, liberation is nothing but the search for the real.

It is said in the Indian tradition that the world is a moral stage wherein the individual can practice all his activity to attaining liberation. Good actions take a person to salvation; whereas bad or evil actions prevent one from attaining liberation. The Purāṇas also offer a moral as well as spiritual outlook in understanding human life. It teaches how our mortal life has to be lived to lead us to immortal life. Human can thus make progress from the mortal to immortal, the unreal to real and from ignorance to knowledge. However, all the Purāṇas made effort to establish the overall supremacy of the Supreme Being or God, which is in complete conformity with the monistic idea of liberation.

NATURE OF LIBERATION

The *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* elaborately describes the concept of liberation or *mokṣa*. This Purāṇa considers human birth as an excellent opportunity offered by the Supreme Being to an individual for breaking down the shackles of *māyā*. Those persons who waste their lives by attachment to the worldly objects are unaware of the real advantage of human life.⁵ In the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*, it is mentioned that the mind alone is cause of bondage and liberation of the self. When attached to the worldly objects, it causes bondage and when attached to the Supreme Being, it brings liberation to the self.⁶ Liberation, according to the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*, is the realization of the true nature of the self by discarding the false nature that is hiding the real one.⁷ The *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* also says that the self has no liberation, because it never had any bondage. The characterization that 'I am bound' or 'I am liberated' is determined only with the reference to the *guṇas*.⁸

Like the other Purāṇas, the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* upholds that liberation consists in reaching the blessed region inhabited by Lord Viṣṇu. The *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* also establishes that the union of the

individual soul with the Supreme Soul or God is the ultimate goal of human life. It has declared that the realization of identity between the individual and supreme consciousness breaks the fetters of this worldly existence, which is called liberation. In this state, the liberated soul is free from earthly bondage and sufferings; and it is a state of pure bliss in oneself with God which is omniscient and is endowed with all the perfections.

PATH OF LIBERATION

The *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* has mentioned all the paths for attaining liberation.⁹ The *jīva* may accept any path according to his choice, since all lead to *mukti*. If one desires to follow the path of action, one is advised to perform sacrifices etc. without any selfish desires. Again, it is said that when a man feels disgusted for actions and becomes dispassionate and when his senses are controlled, he should practice the yogic method. He, who has humble faith for God and who feels disgusted for all actions, should worship God with sincere devotion and firm faith. Those who constantly worship God, all the desires are destroyed as God dwells in their hearts. The *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* is very liberal in accepting all the possible courses leading to God, but its heart is set on devotion.

In the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*, the path of action has been mentioned as a necessary means for attaining liberation. In the chapter on *kriyā-yoga* (XI.27), the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* describes the details of idol-worship. *Śraddhā* or faith is said to be the basis of this worship.¹⁰ The *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* mentions the three types of worship, viz., *Vaidika* (Vedic), *Tāntrika* (tāntric) and *Miśra* (mixed). One may adopt any one according to his choice.¹¹ According to the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*, the essence of this idol-worship is mentally merging oneself in God.¹² It is also said in the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* that those who worship images without any desire obtain the *bhakti-yoga* whereby they become one with God and thus attain the state of final beatitude.¹³

The *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* advocates the path of *yoga* as one of the ways of attaining liberation. The practices of the eightfold-*yoga* (*aṣṭāṅgayoga*) are repeatedly mentioned in the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*. In the twenty-eighth chapter of the third *skandha* of the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*, the process of the eightfold *yoga* is discussed.

Here, it is said that by practising *yama* and the other disciplines of *yoga*, the mind is able to think of the Supreme God. Here, one is asked to meditate on God. By the prescribed meditation, he should gradually disengage his mind from the object of concentration. Then he should meditate on his soul. When his mind becomes unattached and withdrawn from the sense-objects, he experiences divine bliss and merges with Brahman just like the wick of a lamp that is merged in the flame when its oil is exhausted.¹⁴ In this stage, he becomes free from the flow of *guṇas*, i.e. the limitations of the body etc. Then he realizes his soul directly as one with Brahman. The *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* also says that even if the devotee keeps his body, that enlightened soul takes it like the cloak worn by a man under the effect of drinks. For him no worldly attachments remain.¹⁵ In this way, the invincible *Prakṛti* is overcome by the devotee.¹⁶

In the ninth chapter of the seventh *skandha* of the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*, it is mentioned that *mauna* (silence), *vrata* (vowed observance), *śruta* (sacred knowledge), *tapas* (austerity), *adhyayana* (study), *svadharma* (observance of rules of own caste), *vyākhyā* (exposition of scriptures), *rahaḥ* (living in solitude), *japa* (recital of mantra) and *samādhi* (concentration) lead to liberation.¹⁷ Again, in the nineteenth chapter of the eleventh *skandha* of the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*, it is mentioned that the *yamas* and *niyamas* are of twelve kinds each.¹⁸ But according to Patañjali, *yamas* and *niyamas* are of five kinds each. According to the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*, the *yamas* are-- *ahimsā* (non-fliction of pain), *satya* (truth), *asteya* (non-stealing), *asaṅga* (non-attachment), *hrī* (modesty), *asañcaya* (non-storing), *āstikya* (faith in religion) *brahmacarya* (continence), *mauna* (silence), *sthairya* (steadiness), *kṣamā* (forgiveness) and *abhaya* (fearlessness). The *niyamas* are – *śauca* (bodily and mental purity), *japa* (mental repetition of the *mantra*), *tapas* (asceticism), *homa* (sacrificial offerings), *śraddhā* (faith), *ātithya* (hospitality), *arcanā* (daily worship), *tīrthāṭana* (visiting places of pilgrimages), *parārthehā* (desire for the supreme object), *tuṣṭi* (contentment) and *ācāryasevana* (service of the spiritual teacher).¹⁹ In this way, the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* describes the path of *yoga* in its own style.

However, according to the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*, the path of knowledge and action are full of pitfalls and are delicate and as

such not suited to the average man, while the path of devotion is very easy. The *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* is essentially a gospel of *bhakti*. It preaches the highest form of *bhakti*, which is unconditional and is not practised for any other worldly objects or fulfillment of desire. In one place, the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* mentions that God cannot be attained so easily by *yoga*, *jñāna*, *svādhyāya*, *tapas* or *dāna*, as He is attained by *bhakti*.²⁰ No study or training is required to follow this path. Whatever a man does, whether it be the body or the speech or the mind or the senses or the intellect or the sense of I-ness that acts, let him offer everything to the Supreme God or Nārāyaṇa.²¹

The *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* mentions the nine kinds of devotion : (i) *śravaṇa*- listening to the attributes, deeds, names etc. of God; (ii) *kīrtana*- recital of the glories of God; (iii) *smaraṇa*- remembering His form, name etc.; (iv) *pādasevana*- serving His feet; (v) *arcanam*- worshipping Him; (vi) *vandanam*- saluting Him; (vii) *dāsyam*- slavish serving God; (viii) *sakhyam*- considering Him a friend; and (ix) *ātmanibedanam*- surrendering the self to Him.²² Though these nine kinds of devotion have been mentioned, yet in fact any sort of love for the Supreme is devotion. The *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* holds that *kīrtana* leads to the highest stage in this *kalī* age.²³ It grants the same spiritual fruits as was obtained by meditation in the *kṛta* age, performance of sacrifice in the *tretā* age and the worship of God in the *dvāpara* age.²⁴

The *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* classifies the devotees into three categories, viz., *tāmasa*, *rājasa* and *sāttvika*. The person, who worships God with the feeling of violence, vanity etc. is a *tāmasa* devotee. One who worships God for fame or prosperity is a *rājasa* devotee. And one who worships God merely for His devotion is a *sāttvika* devotee. When the mind of a devotee runs towards God at the very hearing of His attributes and when he has intense and desireless devotion for the Supreme Being, his devotion is called *nirguṇa bhakti* or unqualified devotion. Such type of devotees spurns salvation and always meditates on the God with affection²⁵ and thus *mukṭi* comes to them unasked for.²⁶

The *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* holds that it is very difficult even for the very learned people to conquer *Prakṛti* except for those who are devotees of God.²⁷ Thus, the wise person worships the Supreme

Lord with unfailing devotion. According to the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*, when man surrenders all his actions to God, then God sets him free from the selfhood and offer him the nectar of liberation.²⁸ He merges in God and becomes God himself. Similar quotation is found in the *Bhagavadgītā*, where God appeals to the devotees to surrender to Him whole heartedly.²⁹

In the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*, five kinds of *mukti* or liberation are enumerated. These are *sālokya*, which is residence in the same *loka* with the Supreme Being in all divine attributes; *sārṣṭi*, i.e. equality with the Supreme; *sāmīpya*, which is proximity to the Supreme; *sārūpya*, which is absorption into the Godhead; and *sāyujya*, i.e. attaining *Brahmanhood*.³⁰

According to the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*, liberation can be attained even in this life. It is not essential to leave the body for attaining liberation. The only requisite is that one must realize the true nature of the *ātman* and discard attachment to body or any other worldly object. Just as the expert who knows the science of separating gold from stone, collects gold from goldmine, so the knower of spiritual truth realizes Brahman by *ātma-yoga*.³¹

CONCLUSION

From the above discussion, it is clear that the concept of liberation occupies an eminent position in the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*. In accordance with the Indian philosophical tradition, the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* holds that ignorance is the cause of bondage and the right knowledge is the cause of liberation. The *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* upholds that the course of the self's journey towards liberation passes through many births. At some point of time, due to past *karman* and more importantly through God's grace, the self realizes the ultimate purpose and begins the search for this goal. Thus, it is clear that, according to this *purāṇa*, liberation consists in reaching the blessed region inhabited by the Lord Viṣṇu. In other words, the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* made attempts to establish the overall supremacy of the Lord Viṣṇu, which is in complete conformity with the monistic idea of liberation. In this context, Ramnarayan Vyas rightly mentions, "this is proved by the fact that it has adopted the Vedāntic view of emancipation against the background of Sāṃkhya metaphysics in the sense that it holds

that salvation is attained by realizing the true nature of the *ātman* in isolation from matter.”³²

Further, though the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* accepts the path of knowledge or the path of action, as the paths for attainment of liberation, it upholds the path of devotion or *bhakti* to be the predominant one. According to the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*, devotion is a spiritual discipline which immediately generates renunciation and motiveless spiritual knowledge.³³ According to this Purāṇa, truth can be realized in any ways, such as, through the path of knowledge, the path of action or through the path of devotion. In other words, an individual can attain liberation following the paths of *jñāna*, *karma* or *bhakti*, but he or she must have God’s grace for attaining the same. Thus, it is clear that though the chief emphasis of the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* is on devotion, it stresses the other paths also.

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1. daśāṣṭau sribhāgavatam..... BP, XII. 13.5; NP, I.96
2. *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, Vol. VIII, p.770
3. AK, 1.5.6
4. sarvabhūtasthamātmānaṁ sarvabhūtāni cātmani/
ikṣate yogayuktātmā sarvatra samadarśanaḥ // SBG, VI.29
5. BP, II.1.2-4
6. cetaḥ khalvasya bandhāya muktaye cātmano matam/ gaṇeṣu
saktam bandhāya rataṁ vā puṁsi muktaye//Ibid., III.25.15
7. muktirhitvā’nyathārūpaṁ svarūpeṇa vyavasthitiḥ / Ibid., II.10.6
8. cf., Ibid., XI.11.1
9. yogāstrayo mayā proktā nṛṇāṁ śreyovidhityayā/ jñānaṁ karma ca
bhaktiśca nopāyo’nyo’si kutracit// Ibid., XI.20.6
10. yathā yajeta mām bhaktyā śraddhayā tannibodha me/ Ibid., XI.27.8
11. vaidikastāntriko mīśraitī me trividho makhah /
trayāṇāmīpsitenaiva vidhinā mām samarcayet // Ibid., XI.27.7
12. Ibid., XI.27.44
13. Ibid., XI.27.53
14. muktāśrayaṁ yarhi nirviṣayaṁ viraktaṁ
nirvāṇamṛcchati manaḥ sahasā yathārciḥ /

- ātmanamatra puruṣo'vyavadhānameka-
manvikṣate pratinivṛttaguṇappravāhaḥ // Ibid., III.28.35
15. Ibid., III.28.37-38
16. tasmādimām svām prakṛtiṁ daiviṁ sadasadātmikām/
durvibhāvyaṁ parābhāvya svarūpeṇāvatiṣṭhate// Ibid., III.28.44
17. maunavrataśrutatapo' dhyāyanasvadharmā- vyākhyārahojapa-
samādhaya āpavargyāḥ / Ibid., VII.9.46
18. ete yamāḥ saniyamā ubhayordvādaśa smṛtāḥ / Ibid., XI.19.35
19. ahimsā satyamasteyamasarṅgo hrīrasaṅcayāḥ /
āstikyāṁ brahmacaryaṁ ca maunaṁ sthairyaṁ kṣamābhayam//
śaucam japastapo homaḥ śraddhā'tithyaṁ madarçaṇam/
tīrthāṇaṁ parārthehā tuṣṭirācāryasevanam// Ibid., XI.19.33-34
20. na sādhayati mām yogo na sāmkyāṁ dharma uddhava /
na svādhyāyastapasyāgo yathā bhaktirmamorjitā //Ibid., XI.14.20
21. kāyena vācā manasendriyairvā budhyātmanā vānuṣṛtasvabhāvāt/
karoti yadyasatsakalām parasmai nārāyaṇāyeti samarpayettat//
Ibid., XI.2.36
22. śravaṇaṁ kīrtanaṁ viṣṇoḥ smaraṇaṁ pādasevanam /
arcanāṁ vandanaṁ dāsyāṁ sakhyamātmanivedanam //
iti puṁsārpitā viṣṇau bhaktiścennavalakṣaṇā /
kriyate bhagavatyaddhā tanmanyē'dhītamuttamam//Ibid., VII,
5.23-24
23. kīrtanādeva kṛṣṇasya muktasaṅgaḥ paraṁ vrajet / Ibid., XII.3.51;
also see XI.5.36.
24. kṛte yad dhyāyato viṣṇuṁ tretāyāṁ yajato makhaih /
dvāpare paricaryāyāṁ kalau tad harikīrtanāt // Ibid., XII.3.52
25. Ibid., III.29.7-14
26. Ibid., III.25.32-34
27. viduṣāmapī viśvātman prakṛtirhi baliyāsī / Ibid., XI.22.60
28. martyo yadā tyakta samastakarmā niveditātmā vicikīrṣito me/
tadā'mṛtatvaṁ pratipadyamāno mayātmabhūyāya ca kalpate vai//
Ibid., XI.29.34
29. sarvadharmān parityajya māmekaṁ śaraṇaṁ vraja/SBG, XVIII.66
30. sālokyasārṣṭirsāmīpyasārūpyaikatvamapyuta/
dīyamānaṁ na gṛhṇanti vinā matsevanāṁ janāḥ//BP, III.29.13
31. svarṇaṁ yathā grāvasu hemakāraḥ kṣetresu yogaiṣṭadabhijña
āpnuyāt/
kṣetreṣu deheṣu tathātmayogairadhyātmavid brahmagatiṁ
labhet// Ibid., VII.7.21

32. cf., Vyas, Ramnarayan, *The Synthetic Philosophy of the Bhāgavata*, p.142
33. vāsudeve bhagavati bhaktiyogaḥ prayojitaḥ/
janayatyaśu vairāgyaṁ jñānaṁ ca yadahaitukam// BP, I.2.7

Abbreviations :

AK	-	Amarakośa
BP	-	Bhāgavata Purāṇa
SK	-	Sāmkhykārīkā
SBG	-	Śrīmadbhāgavadgītā
YS	-	Pātañjalayogadarśanam

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