

## **BHĀGAVATA A STUDY**

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**Key to Transliteration and Pronunciation**  
sounds like

अ, a-o in son,	ठ ṭh-th in ant-hill
आ , ā-a in master,	ड ḍ-d in den
इ i-i in if,	ढ ḍh-dh in godhood
ई ī-ee in feel,	ण ṇ-n in under
उ u-u in full,	त t-t in French
ऊ ū-oo in boot,	थ th-th in thumb
ऋ ṛ-somewhat between r and ri, द d-th in then	
	ध dh-the in breathe
ए e-ay in May,	न n-n in not
ऐ ai-y in my,	प p-p in pen
ओ o-o in oh,	फ ph-ph in loop-hole
औ au-ow in now,	ब b-b in bag
क k-k in keen,	भ bh-bh in abhor
ख kh-ckh in blockhead,	म m-m in mother
ग g-g (hard) in go,	य y-y in yard
घ gh-gh in log-hut,	र r-r in run
ङ ṅ-ng in singer,	ल l-l in luck
च c-ch in chain,	व v-v in avert
छ ch-chh in catch him,	श ṣ-sh in reich (German)
ज j-j in judge,	ष ṣ-sh in show
झ jh-dgeh in hedgehog,	स s-in sun
ञ ñ-n (somewhat) as in French,, ह h-in hot	
ट ṭ-t in ten,	
◦ ṁ-m in sum,	:ḥ-h in half

## 1. Introduction

Rāma and Kṛṣṇa (the most prominent of the incarnations of Viṣṇu-Nārāyaṇa), Śiva and Devī, form the four main pillars upon which the edifice of Hindu theism rests. The two epics, Rāmāyaṇa and Mahābhārata, as also the vast paurāṇika literature, form the basis for the various cults and sects that have woven the texture of the variegated Hindu fabric. Among the various purāṇas, however, it is the Bhāgavata that has earned a pre-eminent place for itself, not only for its philosophical content and devotional fervour but also for its exquisite literary beauty. Though basically a text of the Bhāgavata school preaching the Viṣṇu-Nārāyaṇa-Kṛṣṇa cult, it is remarkably catholic in its outlook and has successfully harmonized Advaita philosophy as also the Śaiva cults with its basic tenets. While a study of this work is definitely fascinating

and highly rewarding, it has also been considered as a test of one's scholarship.

## **2. Purāṇas**

The Bhāgavata has been classed among the purāṇas. Hence a few words about them will not be out of place here. Since early Vedic literature like the Atharva Veda, Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa, Gopatha Brāhmaṇa and Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad mention the word purāṇa (in singular), it may be inferred that the purāṇa was a branch of Vedic learning. The earliest beginnings of the purāṇa literature have been traced to the Pāriplava Ākhyānas or narrations, commemorating the genealogies of great kingly lines and allied subjects, recited during periods of intervals in sacrifices. In course of time, recitation of the purāṇa seems to have been relegated to the sūtas (members of a mixed caste) since it was not integral to the sacrifices. This bifurcation helped in the development of a number of purāṇas and upapurāṇas (minor purāṇas) under the leadership of eminent sūtas like Lomahaṛṣaṇa who was a disciple of Vyāsa. It is very likely that Vyāsa compiled the original Purāṇa-saṁhitā which was expanded and divided by Lomahaṛṣaṇa and his disciples, resulting in course of time, in eighteen purāṇas and eighteen upapurāṇas as extant now. In the light of this, it is understandable how Vyāsa has been taken to be the author of all these purāṇas and upapurāṇas.

There has been a controversy whether the 'Bhāgavata' included in the list of the eighteen purāṇas (also called sometimes, as mahāpurāṇas) is Devībhāgavata or this (Viṣṇu) Bhāgavata. Many scholars opine in favour of the latter.

## **3. Date and Authorship**

With several unknown or variable factors involved, fixing the dates of ancient Hindu scriptures, has always been a difficult exercise. The Bhāgavata is no exception to this. The internal evidence of the work, viz., Śuka teaching it to king Parīkṣit, takes the date to the beginning of the Kali-yuga, around 3000 B.C. This is the opinion of the orthodox groups. Another view, that poet Bopadeva (13th cent.) was the author, has been thoroughly discounted by several scholars. A few are of the conviction that the core of the purāṇa is very old. However, it was given the shape of a mahāpurāṇa in the early Christian era and further expanded by the Tamil saints of South India, contemporaneous with the Ālvārs (5th-8th cent. A.D. ). Thus, there has been a three-phase development of the text (vide Siddheswara Bhattacharya, Philosophy of the Bhāgavata Vol. I).

Though tradition ascribes the authorship to the sage Vedavyāsa, who was the author of the core of the work, those responsible for the second and third phases of development have remained unknown.

## **4. Synopsis of the Contents**

The Bhāgavata as available today, has been divided into 12 skandhas or books, further divided into 335 adhyāyas or chapters, containing in all a little more than 14,000 ślokas or verses. However, tradition has always put it at 18,000 verses.

A brief synopsis of the contents may now be given here:

### **FIRST SKANDHA**

(19 chapters, 809 verses):

This skandha, though introductory in form, is the final section added to complete the narration of Kṛṣṇa's story and glory. In this sense, it may perhaps be considered as a supplement to the tenth skandha. The famous line 'Kṛṣṇastu bhagavān svayam' occurring here (3.28) also signifies the finale to the development of the Bhāgavata literature. It also describes how the Bhāgavata came to be written.

Śaunaka and other sages are performing a Sattrā-yāga (a long-drawn fire sacrifice) at Naimiṣāraṇya (now identified with the modern Nimsar near Lucknow in Uttar Pradesh). During the period of their recess they put questions to the sūta Ugrasravas on devotional themes. They are specially interested to know how a person can sustain his spiritual life after Kṛṣṇa's departure from this world and the commencement of the evil age of Kali. The sūta replies by expatiating on the glory of Bhāgavata-dharma or the life of devotion to the Lord, which can be cultivated through the study of the Bhāgavata and the teachings of Kṛṣṇa who lives in it.

The sūta learnt the Bhāgavata when it was taught to the king Parīkṣit at his death bed by the sage Śuka. Śuka had learnt it from his father Vyāsa, who was himself the author of the same. Vyāsa got no peace even after writing the voluminous epic Mahā-bhārata. Hence the sage Nārada advised him to compose the devotional classic containing the life, doings and sayings of Lord Śrīkṛṣṇa. This is how the Bhāgavata came to be written.

The book covers the last part of the story of the Pāṇḍavas, the reign of the king Parīkṣit, his earning the wrath of a sage due to an indiscreet act and his curse to die due to the bite of the serpent Takṣaka. When the king has resigned himself to his fate, the sage Śuka arrives. He is respectfully received and questioned by Parīkṣit as to what brings about spiritual good to a person threatened with imminent death like himself. Śuka starts the narration.

### **SECOND SKANDHA**

(10 chapters, 391 verses):

Smallest of the twelve skandhas, this book may probably be the nucleus of the original Bhāgavata.

Śuka, in his first sermon here, states how the ignorant and the foolish people of the world waste their life in ephemeral pursuits. But, those who want to attain to the state of fearlessness should worship Lord Hari. Then he goes on to describe how to meditate on the Virāṭpuruṣa or the Cosmic Divinity. This is followed by a dissertation on eschatology wherein two kinds of ascent of the soul of a yogi, to Brahman or Brahmaloḥa are described. Then comes a description of devotion, motivated as well as unmotivated. Hearing this, the sage Śaunaka then

expatiates on the glory of devotion.

In reply to certain questions of Parīkṣit, raised at this juncture, Śuka prays to the Supreme Lord with a beautiful hymn and then describes the glory of Lord Nārāyaṇa as expounded by Brahmā to the sage Nārada which includes a description of the various incarnations of the Lord also.

The well-known Catuśślokī-Bhāgavata forms an integral part of the ninth chapter. At the request of Creator Brahmā for some instructions that would save him from attachment while engaged in the task of creation, Mahāviṣṇu gives the same in these four verses (9.32-35). They describe how the Supreme Lord is unaffected by creation. The seeker after Truth has to grasp this truth.

A brief account of the cosmic theories and theological doctrines of the Bhāgavata is found in this skandha. It is also interesting to note that Brahmā advises Nārada to elaborate these teachings (7.50-53). Vyāsa expands and elucidates it further on the advice of Nārada, later.

### **THIRD SKANDHA**

(33 chapters, 1410 verses):

This consists of two long quotations by Śuka, of dialogues that took place between Uddhava and Vidura, and between Vidura and Maitreya. It is sometimes interspersed with hymns and remarks by Parīkṣit and Śuka.

Uddhava informs Vidura of the destruction of the Yādava clan and the ascension of Kṛṣṇa to His Abode. In doing so, Uddhava gives a somewhat detailed and highly devotional review of Kṛṣṇa's life.

As ordained by Kṛṣṇa and learnt from Uddhava, Vidura approaches the sage Maitreya for Self-knowledge. The various topics found discussed in the long conversations between the two are: Sarga (primary creation), Visarga (secondary creation by Brahmā), incarnation of the Lord as Varāha (the Boar), measurements of time and space, the circumstances leading to the birth of the two demons Hiraṇyākṣa and Hiraṇyakaśipu, the story of Kardama Prajāpati leading up to the birth of Kapila and the exposition of the philosophy of jñāna and bhakti (knowledge and devotion) by Kapila to his mother Devahūti.

### **FOURTH SKANDHA**

(31 chapters, 1431 verses):

The skandha deals mainly with the stories of the daughters of Svāyambhuva Manu (a progenitor of mankind) and their lineage.

One of the important episodes described in this skandha is that related to the destruction of Dakṣa's sacrifice. Dakṣa is one of the Prajāpatīs whose last daughter Satī has been married to

Rudra. Since he antagonizes Rudra by not inviting him for his sacrifice, and since Satī who goes to the sacrifice uninvited is slighted, and immolates herself, Rudra is obliged to teach him a severe lesson.

Another touching episode given here is that of the child devotee Dhruva. Dhruva is the son of king Uttānapāda and Sunīti. Taunted by his step-mother Suruci, the boy is touched to the quick and goes into self-exile, meditates on Lord Viṣṇu, gains His blessings, and returns to his father. In course of time he becomes the ruler. His many exploits are also described. He is one of the noted devotee-kings in the Hindu tradition.

Next comes the story of the devotee-king Pṛthu, classed as an incarnation. His rule is devoted to the spread of the gospel of bhakti.

This is followed by the story of Prācīna-barhis, the grandson of Pṛthu and of his sons known by the group name of 'Pracetās.' Prācīnabarhis is deeply devoted to Vedic ritualism but the sage Nārada makes him follow the path of devotion. A grand allegorical story of Purañjana, indicating all the foibles of worldly attachments and consequent pitfalls is also a part of this skandha.

It is interesting to note that Śiva acts as the guru of the Pracetas and teaches them the worship of Viṣṇu. He also avers his identity with Viṣṇu.

This skandha is specially important for the vivid account it gives of the life and character of several devotee kings.

## **FIFTH SKANDHA**

(26 chapters, 668 verses):

A considerable part of this skandha is in prose.

A schematic description of the Brahmāṇḍa or the universe and a detailed description of the earth form an important part of this book. The purpose seems to be to help the devotee to meditate on the physical universe as the body of the Lord.

This skandha also contains the stories of great devotee-kings. First comes Priyavrata who gave this earth its peculiar geographical features, described as seven dvīpas or continents, of which Jambūdvīpa forms the central region. Bhāratavarṣa forms an integral part of this continent.

Fourth in the lineage of Priyavrata, is the king Ṛṣabha, considered as an incarnation of Viṣṇu Himself. He is both a rājārṣi (a kingly saint) and a paramahansa (the best of realized souls). His eldest son Bharata is so great that this country known as Ajanābhavarṣa earlier, gets rechristened as Bhāratavarṣa after him. He is also a great devotee. However, his inordinate attachment to a fawn brings about his rebirth as a deer. He is again born as a great sage known as Jaḍabharata.

Towards the end, the book gives a vivid description of twenty-eight kinds of narakas or purgatories where the erring jīvas are purified through suffering.

## **SIXTH SKANDHA**

(19 chapters, 849 verses):

This skandha starts with the story of Ajāmila. Originally a pious person, Ajāmila takes to a life of sin due to evil association. On his death-bed, overcome by fear, he calls his son Nārāyaṇa. Since "Nārāyaṇa" is the name of the Supreme Lord, he is saved thereby. This reveals the mysterious power inherent in the divine name.

Another episode dealt with is that of Vṛtrāsura, a fiend created out of the sacrificial fire, duly consecrated by Tvaṣṭṛ, with a view to destroying Indra. To counter him and kill him, Indra forges the thunderbolt weapon with the bones of the sage Dadhīci, a holy man with great occult powers. Vṛtrāsura is ultimately killed in the battle. But, during the fight with Indra, the grandeur of the character of Vṛtra, in contrast to his ferocious appearance, is revealed. He is a great devotee of Lord Viṣṇu. The mystery of this is solved when Śuka tells Parīkṣit that Citraketu, a pious and devoted king, had been born as this fiend due to a curse. Indra is absolved of the sin of killing Vṛtra by meditation on Mahāviṣṇu and by the performance of Aśvamedha sacrifice in his honour.

The last part of the skandha describes the puṁsavana (a religious vow) observed by Diti (wife of the sage Kaśyapa) to get an issue capable of destroying Indra. But Indra forestalls it and the children born of her, become gods called Maruts and join him.

## **SEVENTH SKANDHA**

(15 chapters, 750 verses):

Misbehaviour provoking the displeasure of holy persons, results in downfall. On the other hand, pleasing them through devoted service can lead to spiritual evolution. This is the theme developed in this skandha.

The first example is that of Nārada, a gandharva singer. Since he ridicules some sages, he is cursed to be reborn on earth as a servant-boy of low birth. But by devoted service to holy men he is purified, takes to asceticism and attains to the state of a devarṣi (divine sage).

The second is that of Jaya and Vijaya, attendants of Lord Viṣṇu at His abode, Vaikuṇṭha. They misbehave with the sages known as Kumāras and are cursed to become asuras (demons).

In each of the three births as asuras, they bear intense hatred for Viṣṇu which-called as 'vidveṣa-bhakti' or devotion through confrontation-through intense concentration on the Lord, results in the end, in their purification and elevation.

Their first birth is as Hiraṇyākṣa and Hiraṇyakaśipu. Hiraṇyākṣa is killed by the Lord Viṣṇu as Varāha (Boar) and Hiraṇya-kaśipu also by him as Narasimha (Man-lion).

The story of Hiraṇyakaśipu is identical with the saga of Prahlāda, his son, one of the greatest exemplars of divine love. Though severely oppressed by his father, Prahlāda survives all attempts at killing him due to the protection afforded by the Lord Viṣṇu at whose feet he has totally surrendered himself. True, Prahlāda is the scion of an asura, whose natural tendencies should have been towards violence and sensuality. However, his inclinations were completely transformed when he was in his mother's womb, due to the discourses of the sage Nārada given to his mother. The great spiritual power of the sage changed the tendencies of the foetus too!

Prahlāda gives several discourses on the cult of bhakti-known as the Bhāgavata- dharma-apart from a wonderful hymn addressed to the Lord Narasimha after the death of his father in His hands.

Then comes a brief description of the Varṇāśrama-dharmas, ideals of the social system according to castes and stages of life, given by Nārada to Yudhiṣṭhira, the eldest of the Pāṇḍavas. A list of thirty virtues like satya (truth), dayā (compassion), tapas (austerity), titikṣā (forbearance), dama (self-control), ahimsā (non-injury) and santoṣa (contentment) are also given here. Though the Saṁnyāsin is pictured as the crown of human life, it is also conceded that anyone in any stage of life can attain mokṣa (liberation) if he lives according to the ideal set before him.

## **EIGHTH SKANDHA**

(24 chapters, 964 verses):

This skandha contains three important incidents: the story of Gajendra, the elephant king; the churning of the ocean of milk and the obtaining of amṛta or nectar by the gods; the story of Mahābali, the king of the asuras being vanquished by Lord Viṣṇu as Vāmana (the Dwarf ).

King Indradyumna of the Pāṇḍya country and a great devotee of Mahāviṣṇu once disregards the sage Agastya and is cursed by him to be born as an elephant. In this birth as Gajendra or the king of elephants, he is caught by a crocodile in a tank to where he has gone to bathe and play along with his herd. In spite of his best efforts he starts losing the battle. Then he suddenly remembers his last birth and begins praying to the Lord Viṣṇu out of utter helplessness. Then the Lord intervenes, kills the crocodile and rescues him. This narration is remarkable for the great hymn on the Divine as the Impersonal that occurs in it.

As a result of the curse of the sage Durvāsas, the devas lose their prowess and celestial glory. They are then easily overcome and expelled from heaven by the asuras headed by Bali. To recover it, a strategy is worked out. According to it, the devas should make a truce with the asuras, and together, churn the ocean of milk. When this is done amṛta, the immortal drink is obtained. The devas with the help of Lord Viṣṇu as Mohinī, the enchantress, deprive the asuras



of it and consume the whole of it themselves. Rendered invincible by this, they attack the asuras and regain their old glory and status.

At another time, Mahābali, the king of asuras wrests the heavenly worlds from the devas, after reviving his strength through special sacrificial rites, conducted by his guru, Śukrācārya. Again, Lord Viṣṇu comes to the rescue of the devas by assuming the form of Vāmana (the Dwarf), requesting Mahābali for three feet of land and in the process of measuring it, occupying the whole of earth and heaven, and pushing him to the netherworld. Since Mahābali is a great devotee, he is rewarded by being made the master of the paradise of the nether world and with the prospect of being made the Indra of the next manvantara.

This skandha also gives the details of the manvantaras. A manvantara is an epoch of Manu, a patriarch endowed with divine powers and an instrument of the Divinity for directing the orderly progress of the world, during a long period of nearly 308 million human years.

The last part of the skandha deals with naimittika-pralaya (intermediary deluge) that occurs at the end of a day of Brahmā, the Creator and the Matsyāvatāra (Fish- incarnation).

## **NINTH SKANDHA**

(24 chapters and 964 verses):

Dealing mainly with genealogy of the great kingly and priestly lines, this skandha also gives accounts of some eminent personalities from among them.

First comes the story of the sage Cyavana. Once he sits in meditation in the forest and this continues for some years so much so that an anthill grows around him. Sukanyā, the young daughter of the king Śaryāti, who has come to the forest along with her father during this period, pierces the anthill by way of childish pranks. This results in the old sage losing his eyesight. To atone for this sin, king Śaryāti gives his daughter in marriage to the sage. She serves him with great earnestness and loving care. Pleased with this, the sage prays to the twin gods, the Aśvins and through their grace regains youth and beauty. The couple live happily for many years.

The story of the king Ambarīṣa comes next. He is a great devotee of Lord Viṣṇu. Once, after completing a religious vow which includes fasting, he is about to break his fast when the sage Durvāsas appears on the scene. The king requests him to dine with him. The sage agrees but goes out for his ablutions. Since he is late in returning and since the auspicious moment for ending the fast is about to pass away, Ambarīṣa is obliged to sip a little water, symbolically breaking the fast. The sage Durvāsas returns, but learning of this transgression of etiquette, gets incensed and tries to kill the king by creating a monster. The king however is protected by the Sudarśana-cakra, the Discus of the Lord Viṣṇu, which turns against the sage Durvāsas himself. The sage is ultimately forced to seek protection from the king himself who exonerates him.

The story of the king Khaṭvāṅga (or Dilīpa) is interesting. When he learns that he has hardly one muhūrta (48 minutes) to live, he concentrates his mind on God, prays intensely and attains salvation.

This is followed by the well-known story of Rāma and of Paraśurāma.

Another notable episode is that of the king Rantideva. He is well-known for his generosity. After gifting away everything to the poor and the needy, he is living in great want.

Once, after a long period of religious fasting, when he is about to take his food, several guests appear at his door begging for food. He gives away all the food he has and fasts. The gods who were testing him thus, appear before him and bless him.

The stories of the kings Yayāti, Duṣyanta and his wife Śakuntalā as also the story of the Pāṇḍavas are the other episodes that appear in this section.

## **TENTH SKANDHA**

(90 chapters, 3946 verses):

This is the biggest book of the Bhāgavata and is generally divided into two parts: the Pūrvārdha (the first part) consisting of 49 chapters and 2005 verses; the Uttarārdha (the second part) comprising 31 chapters and 1941 verses. It deals with the story of Śrīkṛṣṇa in great detail.

The story starts with the assurance given by Lord Mahāviṣṇu to Mother Earth and the gods, to incarnate Himself on the earth and destroy the dānavas (demons) who, as kings, are oppressing the people. Kaṁsa is the worst among them. Having been warned by a celestial voice that he will meet his death at the hands of the eighth son of his sister Devakī, Kaṁsa imprisons her and her husband Vasudeva and contrives to kill all their offsprings. The Lord is born as their eighth son and is immediately transported to Nandagokula, a village of cowherds, to protect him from Kaṁsa. Meanwhile, the seventh son of Devakī has already been mysteriously transferred-even at the stage of the foetus-into the womb of Rohiṇī, another wife of Vasudeva, living in Nandagokula. He is born as her son. He is Balarāma, elder brother of Kṛṣṇa.

As the baby Kṛṣṇa grows into a child and a boy, he becomes the darling of the whole village due to most charming beauty and manners. All efforts of Kaṁsa to kill Kṛṣṇa are set at naught by his divine prowess. Demon after demon is dispatched to the world of Death. Other exploits of Kṛṣṇa are: subduing the serpent king Kālīya, protecting the village against torrential rain by lifting the hillock Govardhana and holding it up like an umbrella, and rāsakṛīḍā or dancing with the gopīs.

Invited by Kaṁsa to participate in the dhanuryāga ('festival of the bow') Kṛṣṇa and Balarāma arrive at Mathurā, the capital of Kaṁsa. After a few more exploits Kṛṣṇa and Balarāma foil the

murderous attempts of Kāṁsa to kill them. Finally Kṛṣṇa manages to kill Kāṁsa, liberate Ugrasena (Kāṁsa's father who had been kept in prison) and pacify his parents. Then Kṛṣṇa and Balarāma undergo the upanayana ceremony and formal education under the guidance of the sage Sāṁdīpani.

This completes the first part. The second part begins with the invasion of Mathurā by Jarāsandha, the king of Magadha, his being routed in the battle and his withdrawal. Kṛṣṇa builds Dvārakā, the new capital inside the sea to make it impregnable to the enemies. The marriage of Balarāma with Revatī (the daughter of Raivata) and that of Kṛṣṇa with Rukmiṇī (the daughter of Bhīsmaka) after vanquishing her brother who had opposed the marriage, are the next topics dealt with. The episode of the syamantaka gem, slaying of the demons Śambara, Naraka and Bāṇa, getting Jarāsandha killed in a duel with Bhīma, the Rājasūya sacrifices of the Pāṇḍavas, killing Śiśupāla and Dantavakra, the inveterate enemies of Kṛṣṇa, and a host of other topics are dealt with in this part. It closes with a brief description of Kṛṣṇa's family life.

## **ELEVENTH SKANDHA**

(31 chapters, 1366 verses):

The main topic of discourse in this skandha which is the concluding part of the Kṛṣṇa saga, is mokṣa or attainment of illumination and consequent liberation from transmigratory existence. It opens with a chapter on the circumstance leading to the destruction of the clan of the Yādavas by the curse of holy men. Then comes the episode of the Navayogīs or nine sages instructing Vasudeva in Bhāgavata-dharma wherein the whole doctrine of bhakti and jñāna is dealt with.

As the time for the destruction of the Yādava clan by fratricidal fighting nears, indicated by many an evil omen, Kṛṣṇa advises the Yādavas to move to Prabhāsa, a nearby holy place, for prayers to ward off the evil. At this point, Uddhava the great devotee and attendant of Kṛṣṇa, apprehending the impending danger, approaches him for spiritual instructions. This section, spread over 23 chapters (from the 7th to the 29th) deals with the teachings given by Kṛṣṇa to Uddhava. It is now well-known as the Uddhava-gītā. In the Gītā-literature it ranks only next to the Bhagavad-gītā.

The topics dealt with are: the story of the Avadhūta who had 24 teachers, which list includes inert elements like the earth, and animals like the elephant and the python; limitations of Vedic ritualism; sanctifying power of holy association; supremacy of devotion; Varṇāśrama dharmas; the four Yogas or paths to enlightenment; the story of the mendicant and his discovery that the mind is the cause of all misery; exhortation to avoid evil company and cultivate holy association; devotional ritualism and concluding instructions.

The book ends with the final destruction of the Yādavas by mutual fighting in a state of intoxication and the exit of Kṛṣṇa after being shot at by a hunter.

## **TWELTH SKANDHA**

(13 chapters, 566 verses):

This is practically the prologue to the whole work.

It opens with the genealogy of kingly lines that ruled after Kṛṣṇa's ascension, during the Kaliyuga, the ascension itself being taken as the beginning of Kali. It is interesting to note that the lists mention the Nandas, the Mauryas and the Śuṅgas known to our modern history.

The book avers that though the Kaliyuga has been pictured as an evil age, it affords favourable circumstances for the practice of devotion through Saṅkīrtana (chanting and singing of the divine name).

The demise of Parīkṣit, the departure of Śuka, the Sarpa-yāga or the serpent sacrifice of Janamejaya the son of Parīkṣit, details of pralaya or dissolution are the other topics dealt with. A synopsis of the whole Bhāgavata, and the ceremonial way of studying it have been added at the end.

## **5. Śrīkṛṣṇa**

Sage Vyāsa composed the Bhāgavata solely to express his devotion to the Lord by describing His glory through the Kṛṣṇa incarnation. Hence no study of the book can be complete without touching upon Kṛṣṇa, the person and the personality, his doings and sayings.

The Bhāgavata declares that Kṛṣṇa is God Himself, *kṛṣṇastu bhagavān svayam* (1.3.28). Since God is perfect, Kṛṣṇa, His human manifestation, too is perfect. His physical form and beauty are highly bewitching. His speech is exceedingly sweet. His intellect and wisdom, shrewdness and farsightedness, are matchless. His strength and power, valour and heroism are simply awesome. But, he is not a tyrant, though tyrants quake on hearing his very name. His heart is as soft as the butter he loves to consume in liberal quantities. A friend of the lowly and the meek, compassion incarnate, he is the first to rush to protect those in distress. Destroyer of demons, conqueror of emperors, he makes and unmakes kings, himself never accepting a throne. Wealth and power come rolling to his feet unasked, but he is most detached towards them.

Kṛṣṇa is as great a spiritual preceptor as he is a warrior. Lord of Yoga and goal of the Yogīs, his teachings as given to the gopīs or Uddhava, reveal the rarest of insights, but are intensely practical.

Kṛṣṇa's dealings with the gopīs of Vṛndāvan are often cavilled at, without a careful scrutiny. The king Parīkṣit himself raises serious doubts about Kṛṣṇa's (apparently) unwholesome doings. Śuka's reply which sets his doubts at rest, runs on these lines: Even the sages who have gone beyond the bonds of karma due to spiritual enlightenment got by meditating upon the feet of the Lord, are beyond the dos and don'ts of dharma. Then what to speak of Him who is born out of His free will to save mankind? Sometimes these great ones act, transgressing dharma, but

with a higher purpose. In such cases their words, and not actions, should be emulated. For instance, Śiva drank the deadly poison hālāhala to save the worlds. We cannot do so. Agni or fire can consume anything that is cast into it. We cannot.

In whichever way the devotees approached Kṛṣṇa, in the same way did he respond. He knew that the gopīs' love was tainted with sex-passion. Like an expert psychiatrist he responded to it, in order to draw it out from the subconscious levels and destroy it, himself remaining all the while unaffected (vide 10. 33. 26). That this technique worked, is shown by the fact of their realizing him as their very Self (10.47.53).

Born in a prison, he liberates others from prisons and bondage. Brought up by the cowherds he is highly admired and respected even by great sages and mighty kings. Though subjected to all kinds of tyranny, he frees others from tyranny and fear. He is an ideal householder, an ideal man of renunciation, a hero of thousand battles who knows no defeat, the terror of despots and hypocrites, a master statesman, a consummate man of action, a friend of the poor and the weak, a champion of the rights of women and of the socially lowly ones including the untouchables-he is all things to all persons and hence, 'Puruṣottama,' the Best of Men.

## **5. Philosophy of the Bhāgavata**

The Bhāgavata is a gospel of divine life and love, and not a treatise of philosophy. It is based upon vijñāna, the direct experience of the Reality but includes jñāna (rational philosophy built on it) also.

According to it, Brahman or Ātman is the only absolute Reality. The whole universe is only an expression in name and form of this Reality. Other terms used to indicate it are:

Paramātmān, Pratyagātmān, Puruṣottama, Akṣara, Turīya, Bhūman and so on, as in the Upaniṣads. But the Bhāgavata calls It also by such other names as Kṛṣṇa, Vāsudeva, Nārāyaṇa, Hari etc. It is however pure consciousness, beyond words and thought, and free from all limitations.

The Bhāgavata accepts four pramāṇas or valid sources of knowledge: pratyakṣa (direct perception), anumāna (inference), āptavākya (tradition of spiritual experience of saints) and śruti (Vedas). However, all these can only point to the Brahman, but cannot give direct experience.

The work describes Brahman as an impersonal super-person, the creator, sustainer and final refuge of the world of matter and mind. He is present in every atom of the universe in all his glory. Māyā is the infinite power he wields. He takes whatever form his devotees desire to worship him in, continuing to remain formless too. The emphasis in the text is more on personal God with form, as more suited to love, devotion and worship. And, Kṛṣṇa is God Himself: or, rather, God is Kṛṣṇa Himself !

`Bhagavat' is one of the central concepts of the text. The word `Bhagavān' frequently used both for the personal God and the Absolute, means the `gracious Lord,' `the Adorable One.' It is also used as a term of respect while referring to saints and holy men.

Then comes the concept of `avatāra,' God come down (avatāra = coming down) as a living being, in order to help mankind to rise to divine levels by restoring the spiritual equilibrium. The Bhāgavata refers to several avatāras, there being no uniformity in the number or sequence, which varies from ten to forty.

The Bhāgavata also refers to the four `Vyūhas' or emanations from Lord Viṣṇu. They are sometimes classed under avatāras though considered as different from avatāras that arise as a response to certain cosmic situations. They are: Vāsudeva, Saṅkarṣaṇa, Pradyumna and Aniruddha. They are different aspects of manifestation of the six qualities known as `bhaga' (like jñāna or knowledge, bala or power, aiśvarya or lordship and so on). While Vāsudeva has all the six qualities in full measure, the other three have two each in greater measure than the others.

The Ṛgvedic concept of `Puruṣa' also can be seen here. He is the Cosmic Person manifesting Himself objectively as the individual and the universe. He is also called `Puruṣottama' and Kṛṣṇa is Puruṣottama.

Then comes māyā, the power of God. It has three guṇas or strands, sattva, rajas and tamas. The whole universe is a product of the permutation and combination of these three when their equilibrium is disturbed by the will of God, who himself remains inactive like a magnet, itself at rest, inducing movement in iron filings.

The world process appears to the devotees of the Lord as only his `līlā' or sport. He takes pleasure in it, the redemption of the struggling souls being its main purpose.

The most important aspect of the teachings of the Bhāgavata is the mode of sādhanā it prescribes for attaining perfection. Bhakti, love or devotion, has been given the pride of place, though jñāna (knowledge), yoga (contemplation) and karma (right activities) too find an important place in its scheme. Bhakti has been advocated as a more natural and hence an easier path to perfection.

Bhakti has two aspects. When undertaken as the preliminary discipline, it is called `sādhana-bhakti' or `vaidhī-bhakti.' It is more of the nature of karma or activities like worship or chanting or singing the divine names or other rituals. This ripens into `aikāntikī' or `ahaitukī' or `ātyantikī' (intense, single-pointed) bhakti, wherein love flows unobstructed towards God even as a river flows into the ocean. It is also termed as `nirguṇā bhakti.' One who has attained to this state of intense devotion is called a `mahābhāgavata' ('a great devotee of God') or `bhāgavatottama' ('the best of devotees').

The object of bhakti may be the personal God or an avatāra, or the whole universe. Of these, bhakti towards an avatāra is the easiest and the sweetest. This bhakti can take several forms

depending upon the relationship that the devotee cultivates towards the Deity: śānta (peaceful contemplation), dāśya (servitude), vātsalya (parental love), sakhya (friendship) and kānta or mādhyura (conjugal love).

Sometimes, even hatred and fear of God have been included within the orbit of bhakti by the text, since the intense concentration brought about by them on God can purify and liberate them that do so.

Since love naturally expresses itself as service of the loved ones, the Bhāgavata lays great stress on service of the Personal God or saints or even the beings of the world as God's manifestation. Service to the poor, the needy and the suffering is especially advocated.

Another peculiar feature of the work is the special reverence it advises one to cultivate towards the mother-land. Bhāratavarṣa, named after the great rājarṣi (sage king) Bharata, is not a mere geographical unit but the mother of civilization and, the very embodiment of moral and spiritual culture.

There is a fairly detailed treatment of the subject of varṇāśrama-dharma (scheme of duties according to castes and stages of life) which is a vindication of man's right to grow to the heights of spiritual realization. Character and conduct, rather than birth, are recognized as the sine qua non of greatness. It is also stressed that devotion helps one to transcend the limitations imposed by birth.

Religious emotion leads to reverence which expresses itself as worship. The Bhāgavata deals with ritualistic worship also as a part of the practice of devotion. Worship of pratimās (icons) and pratīkas (symbols), the sun, holy rivers like the Gaṅgā and the Himālaya mountains are mentioned as aids to devotion. It is also stressed that the devotee should never pray to God for anything for himself since the omniscient God knows what is best for him.

The highest goal of life is called mukti. It is a state of freedom from all bondage and getting back one's natural state of divinity or bliss. Bhakti and japa (repetition of God's name) are the most efficacious means of purifying the mind leading ultimately to mukti.

It is interesting to note that the work considers bhakti as the fifth puruṣārtha or value of life, beyond the other four, including even mokṣa or liberation. Bhakti is not merely the purifying agency, a means for a higher end, as in the view of many monistic thinkers, but, at its highest, is the acme of life, transcending mukti.

Though several varieties or aspects of mukti such as sārūpya (having a form similar to that of the Lord) or sālōkya (living in the world of God, viz., Vaikuṇṭha) are described, Bhāgavata is more inclined towards parābhakti, the highest or the most intense love of God, as the goal of life, wherein a semblance of the duality between the devotee and the Deity is kept up.

Following the usual traditions of the purāṇas, the Bhāgavata also deals with many concepts involving immense time-periods and almost boundless regions of space in its narrations about

creation. They become intelligible and meaningful only when it is recognized that the purāṇas trace the origin of the universe to the Supreme Being and accept the cyclic theory of creation, preservation and withdrawal as against the linear theory held by the modern scientists. Thus, they deal with cosmic history and geography.

## **7. Literary Grace**

The Bhāgavata is also a work of exceptional literary merit. It is as graceful as it is tough. Whether it is a description of nature (10.20) or of places like Mathurā and Dvārakā (10.41; 10.37) or depiction of the wellknown navarasas (nine poetic sentiments) (10.29; 10.60; 10.37; 10.8; 10.80,81), Bhāgavata excels in every way. No wonder then, that the community of scholars have, for centuries, accepted it as a touchstone of their erudition.

## **8. Traditional Commentaries**

For this very reason, the Bhāgavata has attracted the attention of several scholars who have composed commentaries on it. As many as 44 commentaries are known to exist.

By far, the Bhāvārthadīpikā of Śrīdhara-svāmin (14th cent.) seems to be the most popular of these commentaries. Brevity and clarity, a rather difficult combination, are its chief characteristics. It has also steered clear of controversies. Dīpinī is a sub-commentary on this work by Rādhāramaṇadāsa Gosvāmin. Since Śrīdhara was a monk of the Advaita school of Vedānta, the other two schools-Viśiṣṭādvaita and Dvaita-did not want to lag behind. The Bhāgavata-candrikā of Vīra-rāghavācārya and the Padaratnāvalī of Vijayadhvaja-tīrtha are the commentaries, respectively, of these two schools. The other wellknown commentaries still holding their sway among the followers of the respective cults are: Subodhinī of Vallabhācārya ( A.D. 1473-1531); Siddhāntapradīpa of Nimbārkā-cārya (12th cent.); Kramasandarbhā of Jīvagosvāmin (15th cent.) and Sārārthadarśinī of Viśvanātha-cakravarttin (17th cent.). Sanātana Gosvāmin (15th cent.) has chosen to comment only on the tenth skandha. This work, Bṛhad-vaiṣṇava-toṣiṇī, is highly venerated by the followers of the Caitanya school.

## **9. Conclusion**

The Bhāgavata is essentially a devotional text. Much of the metaphysics found in it is theological in nature, supporting the devotional doctrines. The metaphysics, however, is that of Vedānta. Hence, ideas stated in the Upaniṣads are often found here, sometimes using the very words or expressions. Though the work leans heavily towards advaita, the supremacy of the Personal God, especially as Nārāyaṇa or Mahāviṣṇu or Śrīkṛṣṇa, is always upheld; so also bhakti or devotion to Him as the best means of achieving anything in life.

However, the bhakti advocated here is not sentimentalism. It is upāsana or meditation brought about by vairāgya (renunciation towards the world) and jñāna (knowledge of the Reality). Even sentimental devotion can help since it is directed towards the Lord, who knows how to react,



correct, lead and guide his devotees.

Attempts have also been made in the work to reconcile the Śiva and the Viṣṇu cults, at loggerheads with each other at that time.

Synthesis of the paths of jñāna, bhakti and karma is another feature noticed here.

But the greatest achievement of the Bhāgavata is the projection of the Kṛṣṇa saga and the Kṛṣṇa personality in the most poetical, and yet, powerful and graceful language. If Kṛṣṇa remains as the darling of millions of Hindu hearts even today, it is not a little due to this matchless work.