

Bhakti and Philosophy

R. Raj Singh

Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2006. 113 pp. CAD \$65.00 (hardcover)

The main aim of R. Raj Singh's relatively short text is, as the title implies, to reconnect in the minds of contemporary Indologists the philosophical traditions of India with devotional practice. Singh contends that the intellectual traditions of India have been divorced, in the minds of scholars and those whom they teach, from their lived practice—understood here as encapsulated by the love of wisdom (*philosophia*). He proceeds through five movements. First he gives an overview of the place of *bhakti* in the long sweep of Indian thought. He then considers *bhakti* in early Buddhist and Jain traditions, and subsequently moves to how *bhakti* has been understood and represented in two seminal texts: the *Bhagavadgītā* and the *Nārada Bhakti Sutra*. Finally he considers *bhakti* in Indian philosophies of art and theories of *rasa*. The text is written in a fairly accessible style and appears to be aimed at middle-level undergraduates with a reasonable familiarity with texts such as the *Bhagavadgītā*, the *Mahāparinibbana Sutta* and the *Nārada Bhakti Sutra*.

The underlying premise of the arguments contained in this book is relatively simple to state: *philosophia* must be taken as a whole, that is *philia* (love) cannot be divorced from *sophia* (wisdom) and the two together are necessary elements in what we have come to think of as the hard-headed rationality at the centre of philosophy. It is at least noteworthy that the author very often connects his readings of Hindu and Buddhist texts to those of Plato. As Singh is at pains to remind us, in Indian thought, as in the *Phaedo*, the aim of philosophy is right living, or rather a way of life through which one might apprehend the true nature of the universe, the good, the just and the beautiful. Such comparisons—while not the aim of the text—betray a tendency in the book towards over-generalisation. One is struck early on (p. 7), for instance, by a reference to “the Eastern mind,” and later (p. 13) by the author's comment that both Buddhism and Jainism inherit not only the basic concepts of karma, *mokṣa* and rebirth, but also the ‘spiritual ethos of *bhakti*.’ Such sweeping statements are found in abundance in the text, regularly tripping up the careful student and generally obscuring the more central points Singh tries to make.

Chief among these, Singh argues, is the expansion of the idea of *bhakti* from its relatively narrow connection with the medieval theistic *bhakti* sects of southern India, to encompass secular and religious devotional love including *guru-bhakti*, the general reverence felt towards elders and sages, as well as *karuṇā* or compassion towards all living beings. “*Bhakti*” in this wider sense derives from the root

bhaj-, which Singh suggests connotes *partaking, participating, sharing* etc., and hence *bhakti* came to include the feelings towards others with whom one was sharing, partaking and participating. Thus the synonyms of *bhakti* are also the synonyms of *prema* or love.

Of course a term's various definitions come down to its use in a context and Singh provides a number of case studies to support his thesis, the key ones pertaining to early Buddhism, the *Bhagavadgītā* and the *Nārada Bhakti Sutra*. In each case Singh provides contextual support for his reading. In the Buddhist context these come primarily from the *Mahāparinibbanna Sutta* (MPS); however, before isolating and elucidating the understanding of *Bhakti* in this text, Singh first argues that *bhakti* was:

...already in vogue in religious circles when the Buddha appeared on the Indian religious scene. This ancient form of *bhakti* was not only the catalyst in the formation of the Buddha's new worldview, but *bhakti* continues to pervade the dharma of the Buddha in its early doctrinal period as well as in its Mahayana developments. In order to identify the pervasive but subtle presence of *bhakti* in the earliest statements of the Buddha dharma, both *bhakti* and dharma need to be precisely defined in terms of their essential as well as relevant philosophical meanings and implications. (p. 24)

It seems we are in murky waters here since to identify what was "in vogue" at the time of the Buddha would be highly speculative at best. Of course we are dealing with a period during which oral traditions predominate and many, if not most, of the traditions that would have contributed to the prevalent modes of thought are now lost to us. This should cause the reader to exercise some scepticism towards the brief historical overview of the historical context of the Buddha, which Singh then provides, as well as to Singh's interpretation of the MPS.

With respect to this important text, my main criticism is neither of Singh's contextualisations nor his translations of the MPS, but rather his interpretations, which, at times, seem rather forced. For instance, Singh seems to read *bhakti* into the text when he considers the Buddha's admonishment of Ananda, in chapter 2 of the MPS, not to look for external authority after the Buddha's death. The text can be read rather straightforwardly as the *Tathāgata* advising his followers to carry on in the way they have been taught for over forty-five years. Singh, however, argues that the real meaning of the text is to preach a movement from *saguna bhakti* to *nirguna bhakti*, that is, from devotion to deities to devotion to dharma itself. (p. 42) While Singh's reading is not entirely without merit, it is not, I suggest, the most parsimonious

interpretation. Singh may be overstretching somewhat to justify his thesis, a feeling one has regarding many of his conclusions.

The same can be said of his reading of the *Bhagavadgītā*. Singh argues that the *Gīta* has been interpreted in too theistic a way such that *bhakti* loses its proper place in the text and becomes elevated as the "religion" of the *Gīta*. (p. 69) *Bhakti*, according to Singh, should be understood as a necessary concomitant to *jñāna* and *karma mārgas*, rather than a full-fledged *mārga* of its own. While one might agree that the *Bhagavadgītā* has been interpreted in very theistic ways, particularly after the Hindu reform movements of the 19th century, the text itself does have strongly theistic elements. In this context *Krishna-bhakti* reaches the level of a religious tradition, at least in practice if not on a more formal level. Moreover, the tying of *bhakti* to *jñāna* and *karma mārgas* turns out to be little more than acknowledging that the *Gīta* asks us to pursue both knowledge and action with utmost seriousness. Again it seems a stretch to label this *bhakti* while at the same time denying the theistic devotion seen in *Gīta*.

Despite this critical commentary, Singh's text contains some useful material. The range and diversity of the term's use is well illustrated and, while not as critical an analysis as one might hope, as an extended essay on the idea of *philo-sophia* in Indian thought, the book is interesting. Indeed the text would be a good introduction to more finely-grained studies such as K. Sharma's *Bhakti and the Bhakti Movement* or a helpful addendum to more ambitious comparisons such as McEvelley's *The Shape of Ancient Thought*.

Dr. Tinu Ruparell
University of Calgary