

# THE BHAKTI-YOGA OF SAINT KURIAKOSE ELIAS CHAVARA

## Retold in an Indian Tongue

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**Abstract:** This study demonstrates how new paradigms for inter-religious dialogue could be brought out by drawing on the life-example and spiritual teachings of the native saints and sages. The author aims to do this by proposing a set of key Indian concepts, largely articulated on par with the Indian *Bhakti-Sutras*, with which the spiritual treasury of, for example, Chavara may be opened up with greater ease, appeal and profit by the Indian Christians as well as the followers of other Indian religions. *Mutatis mutandis*, this method may be taken as a working model in introducing the other 'Servants of God' too of our country to its spiritual seekers, Christian or non-Christian.

**Keywords:** Dialogue, Indian spirituality, paradigm shift, inter-religiosity, bhakti, Upanishads, spirituality, sacred, secular, redemption, yoga, service, passions, community, language, culture, seeker, *jnana yoga*, *karma yoga*, *bhakti yoga*, communion, sutras, Vedas

### 1. A Much Needed Paradigm Shift in Religious Dialogue

Recently, as I was reading an article on the spirituality of our Founding Father, Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara, a thought to the following tune occurred to my mind so suddenly as though from nowhere: why can't we make an attempt to delve into the depths of the spiritual vision of St Chavara by using our inborn Indian categories rather than expound it by the Graeco-Roman concepts of the West? And my reasoning rested on the following premise: as an Indian by birth and rearing, his native, inbuilt unconscious must have been, to be sure, fundamentally indigenous in its warp and woof; upon it was imprinted or overlaid his Western mind-set through later vocational education and professional ministry. The recognition of this factual truth would warrant us that our prospects of getting at an in-

depth understanding of the hidden profundity of St Chavara, and for that reason of any other Indian Christian sage or saint, would be far greater, if we cared to elucidate it by means of expressly Indian spiritual concepts - a lesson, sad to say, we are yet to learn in our method of inter-religious dialogue!

Religious dialogue shouldn't be on our side a process of sitting in judgment on the truth or tenability of the doctrines of others with a view to framing a balance sheet or concession chart as to what degree their articles of faith are reconcilable with ours. In that case we would be committing the plain blunder of correcting their language with the grammar and syntax of our own! To start with, we have to let ourselves be educated of the religious language of our dialogue partners, so that with the aid of it we can translate our concepts and systems into a style and structure congenial to that of theirs. By doing so we shall be enabled to unveil, first to ourselves and then to them, the hitherto unnoticed or unexplored nuances/overtones of our own mental images or theoretical stances. Then only any religious dialogue worth its name will serve the purpose of making the Christian initiator of it a person enlightened as well as enlightening!

For a presentation of our religious message cast in the mould of the language construct of the other partner will alone equip the latter to respond to it intelligently, pointedly and fruitfully with mutual understanding and integral or conjoint perception, so that a common standpoint of meaningful, easy and feasible *unity in difference* may be arrived at.

## **2. The Doctrine of Saint Chavara's Bhakti-Yoga**

Keeping this mode of approach in mind, I made an endeavour to give shape to a broad spectrum of St Chavara's doctrine and practice of Bhakti-Yoga (union with God through serving love) drawing mainly on the Indian *Bhakti-Sutras* in general and those of Narada in particular. In view of brevity I shall give here only a general outline of it with very short annotations.<sup>1</sup> It is my hope that this sketch will serve as a useful model in presenting the spiritual paths of the majority of other Indian Christian 'Servants of God' too in a language congenial to our native culture and context so that they are made more easily

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<sup>1</sup>For the sake of easy readability parallel citations from Chavara's writings in support of the Indian spiritual concepts catalogued below are given against them. It may help the reader to see how closely Chavara's teachings on the inner dynamics of spiritual life are, in form and content, resonant of these Indian ideas on *Bhakti*.

intelligible and appreciable, also to the non-Christian spiritual seekers around us.

### 2.1. *Arhatvam* (Prerequisites of Bhakti)

1. *Arthitvam* (sincere seeking) (SW p. 75)<sup>2</sup>
2. *Sraddha* (faith in God and Guru) (SW pp. 13,36-37,39-40)
3. *Saktatvam* (inner valour) (SW pp. 49,51)
4. *Aparyudastatvam* (conditions conducive to bhakti)
  - i. *viveka* (discrimination of spirits) (SW pp. 60-64)
  - ii. *vimoka* (self-denial) (LW I. pp. 128-140)<sup>3</sup>
  - iii. *abhyasa* (spiritual practices) (SW pp. 74-75)
  - iv. *kriya* (observance of duties) (SW p. 74)
  - v. *kalya* (auspicious life) (LW XII.132)
  - vi. *anavasda* (peace of soul) (L VII.7)<sup>4</sup>
  - vii. *anuddhara* (even-mindedness)(SW pp. 20-21)

The spiritual aspirant of *bhakti* shall be resolved to uninterruptedly seek God with a heart replete with love, humility and ardour. God will no doubt bestow on the soul the gift of meditation, if he prays for it with true and sincere faith, presenting himself at His feet with all he is (*atmasamarpanam*), has (*bharasamarpanam*) and does (*phalasarpanam*). God will freely infuse His grace into the soul of the sincere seeker surrendering himself before Him in his utter nothingness (*akincanya-karpa*), regardless of his being worthy of it (*nirhetuka-karpa*). What is required of the seeker is only inner valour wherewith he should remain resolved on conquering/denying his self (*atmavinigraham*) through a life of asceticism (*taparyoga*) which is the irreplaceable gateway to mysticism (*rsiyoga*). Such power has to be instilled into the disciple through his being continually instructed at the feet of a divinely appointed Master (Guru).

What is entailed in the *srama* or constant endeavour to be made by the *sadhaka* (aspirant) at the *srama* are in the main the following: to master the power to discriminate (*viveka*) between the rules of serving God and mammon (Mt 6:24), between *sreyas* and *preyas* (Katha Upanisad 11.1); to habituate himself with a life crucified with Jesus (*vimoka*); to learn the art and science of prayer (*abhyasa*); to excel in charity and charitable works (*kriya*); to adorn one's life (*kalyana*) with the monastic or monk-like virtues such as nonviolence (*ahimsa*),

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<sup>2</sup>Spiritual Works of St Chavara.

<sup>3</sup>Literary Works of St Chavara.

<sup>4</sup>Letters of St Chavara.

benevolence to all living beings (*sarvabhutadaya*), forgiveness (*ksama*), generosity (*dana*), etc; to acquire a mind meek, peaceful and serene (*anavasada*); to remain even-minded in pain or pleasure, success or failure (*anuddhrsa*) by keeping one's *prajna* (conscience and consciousness) firmly settled on God (*sthithaprajna*).

## 2.2. *Bhakti* as *Parama-Prema* (Supreme Love)

1. *Parabhakti* (supreme love/ divine service) (SW pp. 18, 21)
2. *Paranurakti* (supreme attachment) (SW p. 61)
3. *Bhakti vis-à-vis Jnana* (love and knowledge) (SW pp. 13-16; LW VII.1,11)

True *bhakti* (*parabhakti*) is naught else than loving God alone above all else (*paramaprema*) the acid test of which is *ahaitukibhakti*, i.e., a love expressed in the total conformity of one's will (*hita*) with that of God. That alone will make the Christian *bhakta* conformed to Jesus. Such unity should be one of total unitedness (*paranurakti*) with Jesus in words, thoughts and deeds after the manner of the inseparable unity (*samavaya*) of the branches with the vine (Jn. 15: 5). It would demand of us that we be owned by Jesus (Phil. 3:12) and live in him (Gal. 2:12) so as to be buried in him (Col. 3:3). Such absolute surrender of love and dependence resulting in inseparable unitedness with Jesus is the gist of Christian *saranagati-bhakti*. Being no mere sentimentalism, *bhakti* (love) has to be preceded by true *jnana* (knowledge) to be acquired by the meditative reading of the Scripture (*svadhyaya*) and spiritual classics and consummated in the oblation of our human knowledge to the word and wisdom of God (*jnana-yajna*).

## 2.3. *Loka-Veda-Vyapara-Nyasa* (Total Offering of Actions both Secular and Sacred)

1. *Atma-vinigraham* (total self-emptying)
2. *Sannysa* (religion or relationship)
3. *Ekanta-bhakti* (single-pointed love)
4. *Bhagavat-prema-karanatoat* (rooted in God's love or us)
5. *Loka-raksana-yajnam* (sacrifice for cosmic redemption)
6. *Sarva-Sraivesvara-Dasyam* (service of God and Humanity)

More than a mere mental attitude, *bhakti* is also a style of action having a negative and positive pole. Negatively, it demands a total elimination of every sort of self-centredness (*atmavinigraham* or *manah-nigraham*). Positively, it calls for a total offering or consecration of all our actions, secular as well as sacred, into the hands of God (*loka-veda-vyapara-nyasa*). What is thereto entailed is *upeksa* (total renunciation) in

view of *apeksa* (relatedness to God and all) wherein lies the very core of religion (*sannyasa*) as total offering. It's very dynamics consists in remaining detached to what we are (*kartrva-tyaga*), have (*phala-tyaga*) and do (*samga-tyaga*) so as to make our persons, resources and actions single-pointedly consecrated to God the Father with an ensuing obligation on our part to share them with all His children (creatures) as a matter of their right.

Such an obligation on the part of the *bhakti* to live a life of consecration and sharing accrues from his realization that it is God who has loved him first as well as from the commandment of God to break and share his body - his person and resources - for the redemption of the entire cosmos. By consecration he causes the world to reach the hands of God, and by sharing he makes it reach the hands of all, with the consequence that the entire cosmos happens to be supported *up* by the hands of God, and *down* by the hands of humanity, so much so that the world has nowhere to fall down. This is how the *bhakta* is called upon to make his life as a sacrificial offering to God (*madarpanam* = 'an offering to Me' - Gita IX.27) in view of the redemption of the world (*lokasamgraham*, Gita III.20), that is to say, as a service to the ALL and all. The enlightened man is to do all his works with this double end in mind and should set others too to act in the same way (cf. Gita III.26).

#### 2.4. Yogatraya (the Triple Yoga)

1. *Jnana Yoga* (unity by spiritual enlightenment) (LW II. 292-296)
2. *Karma Yoga* (unity by selfless action) (LW VI. 240-252)
3. *Bhakti Yoga* (unity by universal love) (LW III. 36,44)
  - i. *samipyā bhakti* (being in the nearness of God) (LW VII. 6)
  - ii. *salokya bhakti* (being in the world of God) (LW V.174,182)
  - iii. *sarupya bhakti* (being in the likeness of God) (LW III. Appendix 56)
  - iv. *sayujya bhakti* (being in absolute oneness with God) (MA 40-50)<sup>5</sup>

*Jnana*, *karma* and *bhakti* are so intertwined to each other that one cannot be practised independently of the other two. True *Jnana* transcends our rational knowledge of things (*aparavidya* or *matijnana*). It is the very wisdom of God enshrined in His word (*paravidya* or *brahmavidya*) and is obtained by listening to it (*sravana*), reflecting over it (*manana*) and treasuring it up in one's heart (*nididhysana*). All our human reasonings have only relative validity as pointers to the supreme or ultimate Reality (*paramrtha*) concealed in appearances

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<sup>5</sup>Martyrdom of Anasthasia.

(*pratibhasa*) and as practical guides in our day-to-day actions (*vyavahra*). The object of true knowledge is the word of God enfleshed in the cosmic, which is revealed to us in the Christ-event (*Yesu-sambhava*). *Karmayoga* should lead us to unity with Christ, and, Christ being both God and Man, it entails service both of God (*madhavaseva*) and Humanity (*manavaseva*). Through such service we have to grow into a love of nearness to Christ (*samipyra*), fully alive to the demands of his kingdom (*salokya*), thereby attaining conformity or likeness (*sarupyra*) and inseparable unity (*sayujya*) with him, that is, with God and Humanity.

### 2.5. *Avyavarta Bhajan* (Uninterrupted Service of God)

1. *Sravana* (listening to God's word) (SW p. 14)
2. *Kirtana* (praising Him) (LW VI. 292)
3. *Smarana* (remembering Him) (LW II. 64)
4. *Padasevana* (surrendering oneself to Him) (SW p. 17)
5. *Arcana* (offering our actions to the Lord) (SW p. 68)
6. *Vandana* (doing obeisance to the Lord) (LW V. 28)
7. *Dasya* (waiting on the Lord as a servant) (LW II. 244; VII. 240-252)
8. *Sakhya* (communing with the Lord as a friend) (SW p. 69)
9. *Atma-nivedana* (total offering of oneself to the Lord) (LW IV. 208)

Our life has to be lived in an uninterrupted service of God (*bhajan*), which is made possible through the practice of it in the above-mentioned nine ways (*navavidha bhakti*). The community of *bhaktas* must be a resort of persons who have meditatively and experientially tasted for themselves how sweet the word of the Lord is by listening to it (*sravana*), praising it (*kirtana*) and pondering over it (*smarana*). They must find their joy and happiness in serving the Lord at His feet (*padasevana*), in offering Him the fruits of their actions (*arcana*) and in rendering Him praise and honour through different gestures and symbols (*vandana*). Their passion for action must erupt from their supreme love, attachment and adhesion to the Lord. It will induce them to perform actions for His sake alone as selfless servants in His vineyard (*dasya*). But they are not only His servants but also His friends. In prayer they will commune with Him as his most intimate friends (*sakhya*) and will open even the innermost secrets of their hearts to Him in absolute love, faith and hope (*atma-nivedana*).

### 2.6. *Ekadasadhaasakti* (Eleven Spiritual Passions)

1. *Guna-mahatmya-asakti* (SW p. 34)
2. *Rupa-asakti* (LW I. 1ff)

3. *Puja-asakti* (SW p. 74)
4. *Smarana-asakti* (LW VII. 352-368)
5. *Dasya-asakti* (SW pp. 36,73,31)
6. *Sakhya-asakti* (SW pp. 21,22)
7. *Vatsalya-asakti* (LW VII. 380)
8. *Kanta-asakti* (SW p. 23)
9. *Atma-nivedana-asakti* (SW pp. 68-70)
10. *Tanmayata-asakti* (SW p. 49)
11. *Parama-viraha-asakti* (Mother's Lamentation, 24-44)

The steadfast practice of *bhakti* will engender in the seeker after God-realization certain ardent spiritual passions (*asakti*) corroborating and confirming his quest for *paramaprema* (supreme love) and *paranurakti* (supreme attachment). They are: 1. *Guna-mahatmya-asakti* is an inner urge to sing the glories (*guna*) and greatness (*mahatmya*) of the Lord. 2. *Rupa-asakti* is a vehement desire to see the Lord in his incarnate form (*rupa*). 3. *Puja-asakti* refers to a feeling of immense pleasure in offering *puja* (oblation) to the Lord. 4. *Smarana-asakti* denotes an inner need to keep a constant memory (*smarana*) of the Lord. 5. *Dasya-asakti* is an absolute readiness to serve the Lord in any form as selfless servants (*dasya*). 6. *Sakhya-asakti* refers to supreme joy in intimately communing with the Lord as with one's own dear friend (*sakhya*). 7. *Vatsalya-asakti* signifies an inner craving to be loved by God as by a parent (*vatsalya*) as well as to love him like a child (*santa-bhakti*). 8. *Kanta-asakti* stands for the feeling of an intensely passionate bridal love for the Lord, the bridegroom (*kanta*) of the soul. 9. *Atma-nivedana-asakti* means an inner urge to narrate even the utmost secrets of one's heart (*atma-nivedana*) to the Lord. 10. *Tanmayata-asakti* signifies a great desire to become conformed (*tanmayata*) to the Lord. 11. *Parama-viraha-asakti* denotes a feeling of intense sorrow in the absence (*viraha*) of the Lord. Even hatred to sin as well as acceptance of God's punishments are for a *bhakta* a means to grow and get confirmed in the love of God (*dvesa bhakti*).

## 2.7. Satsang (Religious Communion/Community)

1. *Mahat-bhagavat-krpa* (grace of great souls and God) (L VI. 4)
2. *Nasti ... bheda* (a community without inequalities) (L VI. 4)
3. *Nistraiguyam* (mastery over the three overpowering forces) SW pp. 62,27)
4. *Sangat ... sarvanasam* (sensuality leading to total destruction) (SW pp. 67,37,62,64,16)
5. *Moksa-tirtham* (ford or path to heaven) (LW IX. 7; SW pp. 55,61,49)

6. *Samgachadvam, samvadadham* (walk together, speak together) (L VI. 4, VII.3)

A *satsang* is a religious community in which its members, enlightened as they are by the divine Spirit, live united with God in prayer, with each other by fraternal love, with the people, especially the poor, through liberating actions. In such communities of the *bhaktas* the guidance of the great-souled holy people together with God's grace is obtained much more easily and abundantly. They are indeed a prefiguration of the Kingdom of Heaven to come in the end. For in them the members, as they are all equally God's, live with perfect freedom, fraternity and equality, without any difference or discrimination based on "social status, educational standard, physical beauty, family position, financial condition, greatness of office and the like" (Narada-Bhakti-Sutras 72, 41). They are great spiritual victors (*gina*) and heroes (*vira*) who have overcome the three pulling powers of sensuality, money and self-will. To the spiritual seekers journeying on this vale of sin and darkness the *satsangs* serve the purpose of being a ford or isthmus (*tirtha*) to liberation (*moksa*). With their love, service and hospitality the members thereof create a sense of heaven in all those who come to their abode.

The following *tirthas* shine forth in the *satsangs* more particularly: spiritual knowledge (*jnana*), forgiving gentleness (*ksama*), mortification (*indriyanigraha*), compassion to all beings (*sarva-bhuta-daya*), truth (*satya*), integrity (*arjavam*), charity (*dana*), self-discipline (*dama*), contentment (*samtosa*), etc. In them are people in the world to find spiritual Gurus who are persons established in God and his wisdom.

The way leading to spiritual destruction has been well analyzed by Narada (sutra 44) and Bhagavad Gita (II.62-63), with which the ascetical teachings of Bl. Chavara stand in perfect agreement: when a man dwells his mind on the objects of sense, attachment to them (*sanga*) is produced; from attachment springs lustful desire (*kama*); from inordinate desire, anger (*krodha*) towards the things seen as impediments to the fulfilling of one's desire is born; anger makes the mind infatuated with (*moha*) the thought of obtaining the desired pleasure at any cost; infatuation or bewilderment gives rise to a state of loss of memory (*smrtivibramah*) in regard to the right principles previously learnt from the instructions of the spiritual masters; this is followed by the destruction of intelligence (*buddhinasa*), that is, the power to discriminate between what is conducive to the progress or perdition of the soul; when the power of spiritual discrimination is lost, the man is lost (*sarvanasa*).

The *asrams*, playing the role of *satsangs*, are not only *viharas* (monasteries) where members live in prayer, study, social service and care of the poor; they are also sojourns for all pilgrims to be received with hospitality and trained in the art of living co-existentially and pro-existentially.

Walk together, speak together:

Let your minds be of one accord.

As the *devas* of the old, being of one mind,

Accepted their share of sacrifice.

May your hymn be common, your dwelling common,

Common the mind and the thoughts of these united.

A common hymn do I chant with you,

And worship with your common oblation.

Your call is the same:

Let your hearts be of one accord.

And all of you be of one mind,

As you dwell well together.

(Rgveda X, 191.2-4)

### 3. Conclusion

Saints and sages are not the private property of any particular country or community. They are, indeed, great souls (*mahatma*), liberated persons (*mukta*), unique human beings (*visesapurusa*), teachers for all (*jagatgurus*). As path-finders (*tathagatas*) and bridge-makers (*tirthankaras*), never putting up walls but only creating ways, they belong to the entire world-family regardless of caste, creed or church.

It being so, their followers have an obligation of presentifying (*aggiornamento*) their Founding Guru's person and teachings by recasting them in a style compatible with the collective, conscious/unconscious mental types of the religious psyche of the people or communities of other creeds, particularly of the nearby places where they live or work. Only by doing so any given religious group shall succeed in facilitating its animating Guru (in our case St. Chavara) being regarded as worthy of serious attention and earnest emulation by its dialogue partners. For it is by creating mutual responsiveness in an atmosphere of co-existential/co-operative living that new working models and refreshing paradigm shifts are to evolve gradually, short of which the prospects of religious dialogue will ever remain alarmingly scant and highly unlikely. Indeed, God began his dialogue with humanity, inaugurated with creation, by having His

*messengers* translate the eternal word of His love and wisdom in the words of the peoples to whom they were sent.