

## Preface to Śrī Bhagavat Sandarbha

India is a land of temples, which can be seen all over the country in different sizes and shapes. Most Indians participate in some kind of worship, if not regularly, then at least on special occasions such as marriage, birth or the death of a family member, or on festival days. Śiva Rātri, Kṛṣṇa Janmāṣṭamī, Navarātri, Daśahara and Dīpāvali are the major festivals when temples are crowded with the devotees of their respective deities. However, these temples do not all enshrine the same divine form as their central object of worship; some are dedicated to Kṛṣṇa, others to Rāma, Śiva, Viṣṇu, Kārttikeya, Ganeśa, Lakṣmī or Durgā, amongst many others. According to tradition, there are 33 million such deities, and each of them is held as Supreme by their particular devotees.

This diversity in worship gives the impression to an outsider that Hinduism is polytheistic. That is, however, far from the truth. Every educated Hindu knows that there is only one Supreme God. The most common generic appellation for this Supreme God is Bhagavān. The other common terms used are Brahman, Īśvara and Paramātmā. Who exactly is this Bhagavān? What are the basic characteristics that identify Him as Bhagavān? Do the words Bhagavān, Paramātmā, Īśvara and Brahman refer to one and the same entity? Can these words be used interchangeably? These are questions that most Hindus, even those educated in scriptures, cannot answer unambiguously.

Jīva Gosvāmī, a sixteenth century saint and follower of Lord Caitanya, offers very clear, elaborate, original and authentic answers to these questions in his philosophical magnum opus, *Ṣaṭ Sandarbha*<sup>1</sup> ("six treatises"), particularly the volume humbly being presented here, known as *Bhagavat Sandarbha*.

### An overview of the *Ṣaṭ Sandarbha*

*Ṣaṭ Sandarbha* constitutes a far-reaching synthesis of and commentary on the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*'s revelation of divine love, *prema*. Realization of *prema* as the bliss aspect inherent in the non-dual consciousness of Bhagavān is the crowning achievement brought about by two fundamental principles: (1) knowledge of truth as distinguished from illusion, and (2) a practical method that focuses and attunes our awareness to *prema*. These two together with *prema* itself constitute the three major topics Jīva Gosvāmī describes in the *Ṣaṭ Sandarbha*:

1. *Sambandha-jñāna*: the knowledge of Reality and the ontological categories of existence;
2. *Abhidheya*: the method or praxis that facilitates a radical shift of awareness;
3. *Prayojana*: the goal and beatific vision of *prema*.

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<sup>1</sup> The *Ṣaṭ-sandarbha* is really one book in six parts, namely *Tattva-*, *Bhagavat-*, *Paramātma-*, *Kṛṣṇa-*, *Bhakti-* and *Prīti-sandarbhās*.

The first book of *Ṣaṭ Sandarbha*, the *Tattva Sandarbha*, serves as an introduction to the complete work. This book can be divided into two parts, *pramāṇa* and *prameya*. The first deals with epistemology (*pramāṇa*), or the means of valid knowing. In it, Jīva Gosvāmī establishes the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* as the foremost source of knowledge and vision of Reality, for it evolved from, or is identical to, the vision of Reality disclosed to the author Vyāsa while in a state of trance. This is significant, for it implies not only that the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* is a textual revelation providing valid knowledge *about* Reality, but that it also bestows direct visioning capacity, gradually imparting to the receptive candidate the reality-view disclosed to Vyāsa in *samādhi*. Furthermore, it is not only the means of valid knowing, but is itself the supreme knowable (*prameya*), being non-different from the primordial form of the Godhead, or Svayam Bhagavān. The second part of *Tattva Sandarbha* explains that Bhagavān along with His energies is the only object of knowledge, the *prameya*.

In the next three volumes of the *Ṣaṭ Sandarbhas*, beginning with this one, Jīva Gosvāmī elaborates on the topic of ontology, *sambandha-jñāna*, knowledge of Reality as the non-dual Absolute, which finds its highest completion exclusively in Bhagavān, the transcendent personal Absolute. The third volume in the series, the *Paramātmā Sandarbha*, differentiates Bhagavān from His own feature of immanence, called Paramātmā, Īśvara or Puruṣa. It also describes the ontology of the *jīvas* who are His conscious integrated parts, and of *māyā*, which enthralls the *jīvas* into material conditioning. Volume Four, the *Kṛṣṇa Sandarbha*, reveals Śrī Kṛṣṇa as Svayam Bhagavān, the original personhood of God in His feature of ultimate manifestation.

Volume Five of the six *Sandarbhas*, *Bhakti Sandarbha*, elaborates upon *abhidheya*, the methodology of *bhakti*. All of this, namely, proper conceptual understanding as well as full participation of the being in transformative practice, prepares the ground for the goal, *prajoyana*, the ultimate realization of *prema*, which is to be discussed in the final volume, *Prīti Sandarbha*.

### ***Bhagavat Sandarbha***

The *Bhagavat Sandarbha* is the second book of Jīva Gosvāmī's *Ṣaṭ Sandarbhas* and, quite simply, it is a book about Bhagavān. Conventionally, Bhagavān means God, the Supreme Being. While this understanding is not without value, the ideas commonly associated with these notions are far too narrow and far too misleading to even begin a discussion of Bhagavān. For this reason Śrī Jīva Gosvāmī first establishes an objective and far-reaching context in which Bhagavān can be self-evidently understood, free from constrictive or reductionist interpretations.

The definitive context for the discussion of Bhagavān is provided by one of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*'s key verses (1.2.11). What makes this verse so essential to an objective discussion

of Bhagavān is that it does not attempt to define Bhagavān directly, which might immediately bring up certain objections. Rather, it offers an irreducible, undisputed and universally acknowledged description of Truth. The verse says that all those who have directly realized or witnessed the Truth, regardless of their path, declare it to be non-dual consciousness (*advaya-jñāna*). By stating that this realization is the common experience of all seers, the verse identifies the common denominator upon which all ancient wisdom traditions can concur, however much they may subsequently diverge.

From this essential starting point, the verse goes on to say that the one undivided Truth is realized in three distinct features, as Brahman, Paramātmā and Bhagavān. Having established Truth as non-dual consciousness, the *Bhāgavata* cannot subsequently redefine it as something dualistic. From this it must be concluded that Bhagavān, complete with name, form, qualities, potencies and action, is the *non-dual* Absolute. For this to be so, His name, form, qualities, potencies and action, indeed His personhood itself, must be of the nature of non-dual being. Yet, in the realms of philosophy and metaphysical speculation, all of these features are almost automatically associated with limitation and dualism. So the unique revelation that the *Bhāgavata Purāna* and Jīva Gosvāmī have brought forth is that non-dual being in its highest manifestation is necessarily inclusive of transconventional personhood, encapsulated in the term Bhagavān, of which Brahman, devoid of all characteristics, is but a generic glow.

Furthermore, Jīva Gosvāmī points out that the verse implies not only three degrees of completion of the Truth, but three degrees of completion in surrender. The Truth is revealed exactly in accordance with the core disposition of surrender of the supplicant. This means that Bhagavān, as He is in His essential nature, replete with transcendental name, form, qualities and action, is perceptible on the culmination of surrender, only to those transcendentalists whose view is sufficiently enlarged and refined to accommodate Him. Those, on the other hand, who arrive at the non-dual Truth by mere negation of all phenomena can accommodate no more than the remainder, which is Brahman, devoid of characteristics.

Thus although realization or direct witnessing (*viñāna*) is of greater significance than mere knowledge (*jñāna*), conceptual understanding nonetheless influences and shapes the nature of the culminating realized experience, because the Absolute appears as such in correspondence to the actual being of surrender. All of this is to say that without a sufficiently elaborated conceptual map of reality (*sambandha-jñāna*), and without a praxis that affords immediate reciprocation with that reality (*abhidheya*), the truth in its highest manifestation can never be disclosed. It remains outside the reach of the seeker. As such, Brahman can be understood as the final limit of Bhagavān's non-disclosure. So, the whole point of *Bhagavat Sandarbha* is to construct a map of non-dual being that will serve as the basis of direct realization of the complete personal Absolute, Bhagavān, to bring self-transcending devotion and love for Him within the range of possibility.

With this understanding, the *Bhagavat Sandarbha* can be viewed effectively as a commentary on the *Bhāgavata Purāna*, elucidating and distinguishing the ontology of

Bhagavān in a systematic way. This in turn is set forth solely with the view to specify the exact nature of the practice that makes possible the direct revelation of the Absolute as Bhagavān. This method is known as causeless devotion, which is a function of the inherent potency of God (*svarūpa-śakti*) and is in no way influenced by phenomenal existence or the *guṇas* of nature (*prakṛti*). Once Bhagavān is sufficiently and accurately understood, devotion that corresponds to such truth-visioning becomes a possibility. It is for this reason that Jīva Gosvāmī first wrote the *Bhagavat Sandarbha* (“The Treatise on Bhagavān”) and *Bhakti Sandarbha* (“The Treatise on Devotion”) only appears later in the anthology.

Once Jīva Gosvāmī provides sufficient context for the discussion of Bhagavān, the entire investigation proceeds on the basis of that understanding. When Bhagavān is recognized as a personal non-dual being, He cannot be reduced to the creator God, nor to any idea of God as utterly separate from His creation. Additionally, no conventional or dualistic idea of God can be promoted to the Supreme Reality. Thus, beginning with this general understanding that Bhagavān is the non-dual Absolute, Jīva Gosvāmī examines all of His primary features, one-by-one, to show how they too, being inherent aspects of Bhagavān’s complete being, are necessarily non-dual in nature.

Śrī Jīva first points out that the characteristics of Bhagavān are inherent and self-existing in Him, they are in no way distinct from Him. As such, He is the shelter of mutually conflicting potencies. He includes and transcends both duality and non-duality, and hence He is inconceivably both one and diverse simultaneously (*acintya-bheda-abheda*). Once it is understood that Bhagavān is inherently self-endowed with potency and that such potency is one with and yet distinct from Him, the vast interior of non-dual consciousness is opened up, revealing the transcendental glory of God.

At this point, Jīva Gosvāmī offers us a front row seat to witness the unfolding of that glory, as he freezes the frame on select details so that the vision he is describing gradually becomes clear. The documentation begins with a look at the attributes of Bhagavān. They are intrinsic to Him and, as such, they constitute His essential nature; His qualities are thus transcendental to Māyā and her *guṇas*. Moving forward to the next frame, we examine the Lord’s body. A few of the points that Jīva Gosvāmī brings out in this context are that the Lord’s body is transcendental, all-pervading, unlimited, eternal, that it contains everything and is in fact *advaya-brahman*, the non-dual Absolute. Similarly, His senses and bodily limbs are also transcendental.

The Name of Bhagavān is identical with Him, which is to say that He is fully present in His Name and that His Name exists prior to the act of creation, hence prior to the act of mental conceptualization (*akalpana*). His Name does not designate Him, rather it is Him. His actions too are inherent and spontaneous expressions of His internal potency. For a still more microscopic view, Jīva Gosvāmī shows us that even the Lord’s attire and ornaments, and even His weapons, belong to His essential being.

For all this to be possible, Bhagavān must also have an abode where this glory eternally self-exists. This abode is known as Vaikuṅṭha, the realm and condition of freedom from diffidence, contraction and fear. This freedom is the perpetual state of Vaikuṅṭha, because there is no influence there that can obstruct or impede its uninterrupted flow.

Jīva Gosvāmī devotes much attention to the elaboration of Vaikuṅṭha. Briefly, Vaikuṅṭha belongs to the Lord's essential being, and as such, it is beyond the material world. There is no fall from Vaikuṅṭha, and it is attained only by those who are completely free from the *guṇas* of nature. It is not attained by dualistic or result-oriented action of any kind, including dualistic devotion. It is attained only by causeless unalloyed devotion, in which the subject-object dualism is not annihilated but transcended through the pervasion of divine love. As such, Vaikuṅṭha surpasses liberation, for it fully embodies transcendental being, consciousness and bliss (*sat-cit-ānanda*). Since Vaikuṅṭha is beyond the material world, it naturally follows that its residents are also transcendental, exactly like the Lord, for they too belong to His essential being. Hence, a devotee's highest aspiration is to be in their company.

After having described at length the transcendental and non-dual nature of Bhagavān's potencies—His names, forms, qualities, actions, abodes and associates—Jīva Gosvāmī concludes that Bhagavān is the most complete manifestation of Brahman. Even *ātmārāmas*, or those who delight in the Self alone, render service to Bhagavān, for such service transcends Brahman awareness. For the same reason, devotional transcendentalists do not desire liberation, in which there is an absence of such service. Brahman is the attributeless magnificence of Bhagavān, His bodily effulgence. Bhagavān is the shelter of everything, including Brahman, and so the primary meaning of the word Brahman is Bhagavān.

At this point Jīva Gosvāmī is drawing near the end of his exposition, but not without one last emphatic tour-de-force. He had already established the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* as his chief *pramāṇa*, the chief means of valid knowledge of Bhagavān. And it is amply suited to do so because it both includes and transcends the truth contained in other scriptures. The entire *Bhāgavata* is summarized and encapsulated in four essential seed verses, known as the *catuḥ-slokī*. Jīva Gosvāmī now examines these four verses to show how they disclose the Absolute Truth as Bhagavān.

Briefly, these four verses treat four topics: analytical knowledge of Bhagavān as He is (*jñāna*), the direct witnessing of the truth of Bhagavān in each and every act of perception (*viñāna*), the revelation of the mystery of divine love (*prema-rahasya*), and the practice of devotion, which is the component part of such mystery (*tad-aṅga*). In culmination, Jīva Gosvāmī concludes that all scriptures are reconciled in Bhagavān, and brilliantly shows how it is that words, whether the Vedic sound or even human speech, can describe the Absolute at all.

As a final distinction, Jīva Gosvāmī points out that the one Absolute described throughout the text exists both as energy (Lakṣmī) and as energetic source (Bhagavān). He devotes two sections here to the discussion of Lakṣmī, the Lord's eternal consort, and the various *śaktis* of Bhagavān.

It must be emphasized once again, however, that all of this discussion provides but a conceptual map of Reality, known as *sambandha-jñāna*, or fundamental knowledge of the complex interrelations that constitute Reality, most integral to which is the transcendental self's direct relation to Bhagavān. For this reason, Jīva Gosvāmī reminds us that Bhagavān, as He is in His essential being, as He has been described throughout this work, can be realized only through the practice of devotion. Thus, the investigation in this book serves as the basis for *bhakti*, which will be outlined in the fifth book of the series, *Bhakti Sandarbha*. Equipped with the vision that is disclosed in this book, spiritual aspirants of all paths may come to discover in completion the one and only Reality that is the beginning, middle and end of their search.

**Satyanarayana Dasa**