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 Janmāstami, Navarātri, Daśahara and Dipāvali 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 Brahma, Iṣvara and Paramātmā. Who exactly is this Bhagavān? What are the basic characteristics that identify Him as Bhagavān? Do the words Bhagavān, Paramātmā, Iṣvara and Brahma 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.

Jiva 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, Sat Sandarbha ("six treatises"), particularly the volume humbly being presented here, known as Bhagavat Sandarbha.

An overview of the Sat Sandarbha

Sat 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 Jiva Gosvāmī describes in the Sat 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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1 The Sat-sandarbha is really one book in six parts, namely Tattva-, Bhagavat-, Paramātmā-, Kṛṣṇa-, Bhakti- and Pṛti-sandarbhas.
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, Jiva Gosvāmi 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 Śvayam 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, Jiva Gosvāmi 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 Paramātma 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 Śvayam 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, prayojana, the ultimate realization of prema, which is to be discussed in the final volume, Pṛti Sandarbha.

**Bhagavat Sandarbha**

The Bhagavat Sandarbha is the second book of Jiva Gosvāmi’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 Jiva Gosvāmi 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 Bhagavân is that it does not attempt to define Bhagavân 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, Paramātma and Bhagavân. Having established Truth as non-dual consciousness, the Bhāgavata cannot subsequently redefine it as something dualistic. From this it must be concluded that Bhagavân, 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 Purāṇa and Jiva Gosvāmī have brought forth is that non-dual being in its highest manifestation is necessarily inclusive of transconventional personhood, encapsulated in the term Bhagavân, of which Brahman, devoid of all characteristics, is but a generic glow.

Furthermore, Jiva 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 Bhagavân, 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 (vijñāna) 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 Bhagavân’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, Bhagavân, 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 Purāṇa, 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-sakti) 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-
existant 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, Bhagavân must also have an abode where this glory eternally self-exists. This abode is known as Vaikuntha, the realm and condition of freedom from diffidence, contraction and fear. This freedom is the perpetual state of Vaikuntha, because there is no influence there that can obstruct or impede its uninterrupted flow.

Jiva Gosvami devotes much attention to the elaboration of Vaikuntha. Briefly, Vaikuntha belongs to the Lord’s essential being, and as such, it is beyond the material world. There is no fall from Vaikuntha, and it is attained only by those who are completely free from the gunas 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, Vaikuntha surpasses liberation, for it fully embodies transcendental being, consciousness and bliss (sat-cit-ānanda). Since Vaikuntha 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 Bhagavân’s potencies—His names, forms, qualities, actions, abodes and associates—Jiva Gosvami concludes that Bhagavân is the most complete manifestation of Brahman. Even ātmārāmas, or those who delight in the Self alone, render service to Bhagavân, 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 Bhagavân, His bodily effulgence. Bhagavân is the shelter of everything, including Brahman, and so the primary meaning of the word Brahman is Bhagavân.

At this point Jiva Gosvami is drawing near the end of his exposition, but not without one last emphatic tour-de-force. He had already established the Bhagavata Purâna as his chief pramâna, the chief means of valid knowledge of Bhagavân. And it is amply suited to do so because it both includes and transcends the truth contained in other scriptures. The entire Bhagavata is summarized and encapsulated in four essential seed verses, known as the catuh-śloki. Jiva Gosvami now examines these four verses to show how they disclose the Absolute Truth as Bhagavân.

Briefly, these four verses treat four topics: analytical knowledge of Bhagavân as He is (jñāna), the direct witnessing of the truth of Bhagavân in each and every act of perception (vijñāna), the revelation of the mystery of divine love (prema-rahasya), and the practice of devotion, which is the component part of such mystery (tad-āṅga). In culmination, Jiva Gosvami concludes that all scriptures are reconciled in Bhagavân, 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, Jíva Gosvámi points out that the one Absolute described throughout the text exists both as energy (Lakṣmī) and as energetic source (Bhagaván). He devotes two sections here to the discussion of Lakṣmī, the Lord’s eternal consort, and the various saktis of Bhagaván.

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 Bhagaván. For this reason, Jíva Gosvámi reminds us that Bhagaván, 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