

Introduction to Bhagavat Sandarbha

śrī-bhagavān uvāca
idaṁ tu te guhyatamaṁ pravakṣyāmy anasūyave
jñānaṁ vijñāna-sahitaṁ yaj jñātvā mokṣyase 'śubhāt

“Śrī Bhagavān said:

I shall teach you, who are devoid of envy, this most secret knowledge [of devotion] along with the means of its realization, knowing which, you will become free from the inauspiciousness of conditional existence.” (Bhagavad Gītā 9.1)

The real goal of life is happiness. In whatever we do, our ultimate goal is to be happy. Happiness can be attained in two ways: by pleasing our own senses or by pleasing the Supreme Person (Bhagavān), directly or indirectly. Those who seek their own happiness independent of Bhagavān ultimately remain unhappy. The reason is that we cannot truly please ourselves while we are confused about who we actually are.

A human being is a conscious self, animating a physical body, ego, mind and discriminating intellect. As such, the conscious self is our true identity, whereas the other four instruments are acquired, temporary and superficial dimensions of embodied life. Because we mistake the body, ego, mind and intellect to be the most important dimensions of our being, we fail to achieve happiness and try in vain to please our senses. When one recognizes oneself as a conscious being, as a part of Bhagavān distinct from the body-mind-complex, one will understand how to attain true happiness.

Vedic literature teaches that the basic cause of suffering is ignorance about our real self. The Vedic seers thus provided authentic knowledge to enable humanity to overcome this ignorance. They considered this effort to be the highest welfare for society. Keeping the ultimate goal of enlightenment in mind, they devised four pursuits (*puruṣārthas*) for human life. They did not teach us to neglect our physical needs, but to satisfy them in a way that we remain aligned with the ultimate goal, which is to realize our real identity.

Vedic society thus conceived of four human pursuits corresponding to the four aspects of a human being. The basic need of an individual is survival, which is directly related to the physical body. This primarily entails food, clothing and shelter. To acquire these necessities, there is a need for wealth (*artha*), because not everyone can produce all the requirements for their own survival. Consequently, there arises the need to exchange commodities or for a means of commerce.

Once the basic means for survival have been provided for, there is a natural tendency to seek pleasure or happiness (*kāma*), which is related to the mind. Wealth is also needed to fulfill a person's desires for happiness. To procure wealth and mental pleasure, there is a need for social organization. This necessitates striving not only for one's own economic welfare and sense pleasure but in such a way that one does not impede the goals of other members of society. Therefore, some order and discipline is required to maintain balance in society, and this integral system of morals is termed *dharma*.

The previous three objectives follow a single line of evolution, but the fourth goal arises to correct the ineffectiveness of all the previous goals. No matter how well defined and refined our ethics, how equitable and stable our financial base, and how opulent our standard of living, still we remain unfulfilled. Our reaction to this persistent dissatisfaction is to seek *mokṣa* — “freedom.” This begins with the simple desire to be disentangled from money and social restrictions, and culminates in the aspiration to be freed from all limitations imposed by finite existence within a relativistic universe. All four goals, however, are related only to the body, ego, mind and intellect, which together form the external covering of the self. Although the fourth goal extricates the self from the mire of the body-mind-complex, it does not deliver any positive happiness to the self.

Perceiving that sense gratification provides but limited and selfish satisfaction, people propose that seeing to the wants and needs of others, rather than our own, will bring true happiness. Certainly this comes closer to the mark, yet a feeling of emptiness persists within, because such acts of welfare are not aimed at the ultimate goal. Rather than catering to one’s own misidentification with the body-mind-complex, they cater to that same misidentification within others.

Why is this so? Because such acts do not take the root of the problem into consideration. True altruism lies not in merely taking care of the external persona of a living being; it lies in alleviating the ignorance that is the root of everyone’s disability in finding happiness—ignorance of one’s true identity in relation to Bhagavān. To enlighten the ignorant and conditioned self to its true identity solves the eternal problem of happiness at its very root.

Śrī Kṛṣṇa says in *Bhagavad Gītā* that one of the basic godly characteristics is to be compassionate towards others,¹ and that this compassion releases us from our beginningless suffering.² The core mission of the Vedas is to provide knowledge about the self and its relation to the Supreme Self,³ enabling true altruism and compassion.

The great seers of India illustrated this transcendental altruism by striving tirelessly to enlighten the masses. Among such luminaries, Śrī Jīva Gosvāmī is a brilliant moon who performed unparalleled welfare to humanity by presenting the essence of Vedic literature in the form of the *Ṣaṭ Sandarbhas*. Without the detailed guidance of a work like the *Ṣaṭ Sandarbhas*, a seeker of knowledge can easily get lost in the dense forest of Vedic literature, not knowing where to begin and how to pursue his spiritual life.

Śrī Jīva Gosvāmī, who had studied the entire gamut of Vedic literature, including the Vedas, Purāṇas, Āgamas, six *darśanas* and their various branches, came to the conclusion that in the present age, the easiest and best way to know our relation to Bhagavān is revealed in *Śrīmad Bhāgavatam*, the final work of Śrī Vedavyāsa. He considered the study of *Śrīmad Bhāgavatam* an integral process of realizing that relationship and thus finally attaining the ultimate goal of life: unadulterated joy.

¹ *dayā bhūteṣu*, 16.2

² *daivī sampad vimokṣāya*, 16.5

³ *vedaiś ca sarvair aham eva vedyah*, 15.15

To grant humanity a thorough, systematic understanding of *Śrīmad Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, Śrī Jīva Gosvāmī wrote *Bhāgavata Sandarbha*, “A Compilation of the *Bhāgavata*” (also known as *Ṣaṭ Sandarbha*, “Six Compilations,” because it has six divisions: *Tattva*-, *Bhagavat*-, *Paramātm*-, *Kṛṣṇa*-, *Bhakti*-, and *Prīti Sandarbha*).

Overview of the *Sandarbha*

Ṣaṭ Sandarbha is a systematically organized compilation of essential verses from *Śrīmad Bhāgavatam*, thoroughly revealing its essential message. According to Jīva Gosvāmī, *Śrīmad Bhāgavatam* describes three basic subjects: (1) our identity in relation to the Absolute (*sambandha-jñāna*), (2) the process to realize that identity (*abhidheya-tattva*), and (3) the ultimate goal achieved by doing so (*prayojana tattva*). In the *Ṣaṭ Sandarbhas*, Śrī Jīva elaborates on these three topics.

Tattva Sandarbha is the first of the six *Sandarbhas* and is an introduction to the rest. It can be divided into two parts: *pramāṇa* and *prameya*. The first part (*pramāṇa*) deals with epistemology, the means of acquiring valid knowledge. In this part, Jīva Gosvāmī establishes *Śrīmad Bhāgavatam* as the foremost source of valid transcendental knowledge. It is very important to note Śrī Jīva Gosvāmī’s conviction that *Śrīmad Bhāgavatam* is not merely a book containing valid knowledge of Reality; it actually qualifies the reader to directly perceive Reality and is itself non-different from Reality. This conviction is indeed shared by Śrī Vyāsa himself and proclaimed decisively at the very beginning of *Śrīmad Bhāgavatam* (1.1.2 and 1.3.44).

The second part (*prameya*) begins to focus on the actual meaning of *Bhāgavatam*, revealing its essence in summary by examining the vision of Reality that was disclosed to Vyāsadeva while in the state of trance. In short, Jīva Gosvāmī establishes that the ultimate subject of knowledge is Bhagavān in relation to His variegated energies.

In the next three *Sandarbhas* (beginning with this one, *Bhagavat Sandarbha*), Jīva Gosvāmī elaborates on the topic of ontology (*sambandha-jñāna*). He begins this volume by establishing Reality as the nondual absolute substantive, existing most completely as Bhagavān, the transcendent Supreme Person.

In the third volume (*Paramātm Sandarbha*) he delineates Bhagavān’s manifestation immanent within all entities, called Paramātmā, Īśvara or Puruṣa. He also describes the ontology of the individual living beings (*jīvas*) and the illusory potency (*māyā*). The *jīva* is a conscious integrated part of Paramātmā, and the illusory energy that enthralls and conditions the *jīva* is Paramātmā’s external energy.

The fourth volume (*Kṛṣṇa Sandarbha*) reveals Śrī Kṛṣṇa as Svayam Bhagavān, the original Supreme Person. It also describes how Śrī Kṛṣṇa has His eternal abode manifest in three places, namely, Vṛndāvaṇa, Mathurā and Dvārakā. He is timelessly present in these three places along with His ever-liberated associates, engaged in His eternal divine *līlā*.

The fifth volume (*Bhakti Sandarbha*) elaborates upon the methodology of self-realization (*abhidheya*). Śrī Jīva Gosvāmī explains that devotional service performed for the pleasure of Śrī Kṛṣṇa (*bhakti*) without any tinge of vested interest is the method to realize one’s relationship to Absolute Reality, which naturally entails realization of one’s

true identity. Without *bhakti*, no other process, such as *jñāna-yoga*, is efficacious in realizing the Absolute. He describes the various types and practices of *bhakti* and concludes that the highest form of *bhakti* is performed following the intrinsic mood and nature of the eternal associates in Vraja.

Bhakti leads one to the ultimate goal, *prayojana*, which is the subject matter of the sixth and final volume, *Prīti Sandarbha*. Here Śrī Jīva Gosvāmī provides a detailed analysis of *prīti*, love for Kṛṣṇa. He shows that *prīti* is not just a sentiment (*bhāva*), but an aesthetic relish of that sentiment (*rasa*). *Prīti* brings about the union of the devotee and Kṛṣṇa without any loss of ontological individuality. This union or oneness is indeed the secret meaning of the non-dualistic statements of the *Upaniṣads*, such as *tat tvam asi* – You are that.

Summary of *Bhagavat Sandarbha*

The central theme of Jīva Gosvāmī's discussion in *Bhagavat Sandarbha* is based upon the second line of the famous verse from *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* (1.2.11): “Knowers of the Absolute describe it as nondual consciousness, naming it as Brahman, as Paramātmā and as Bhagavān.”

Jīva Gosvāmī's purpose in writing this *sandarbha* is to establish Bhagavān, consisting of a trans-empirical form replete with transcendental energies, as the highest manifestation of the Absolute, superior even to Brahman. Although Absolute Reality is one and indivisible, an individual will realize it in three stages of completion, as far as his or her individual capacity of realization permits. Thus, individuals can realize Absolute Reality as Brahman, Paramātmā or Bhagavān. The specific sequence of nouns used in this verse (“Brahman, Paramātmā and Bhagavān”) indicates the increasing importance and completeness of each succeeding manifestation. Śrī Jīva Gosvāmī also points out that Absolute Reality is never authentically realized as the *jīva*, the individual living being.

When one realizes the Absolute Truth without perceiving any distinction between its energies and the Absolute itself as Energetic Source, it is called Brahman. When through deeper intuitive insight one apprehends a distinction between the energies and the Energetic Source, but perceives this distinction only in relation to phenomenal energies (the world and the living entities within it), the Reality thus realized is called Paramātmā. When one's discernment of the distinction between energy and Energetic Source moves still deeper to include the internal, transcendental energies of Reality, one begins to perceive Reality as Bhagavān.

Thus, it is clear that there is no ontological difference between Brahman, Paramātmā and Bhagavān. The difference lies only in the level of perception of the respective seekers. Nevertheless, the difference is not just one of nomenclature.

For example, the phrase “blue lotus” has three components: (1) “lotus” — the noun itself, a substance unqualified by any adjective, (2) “blue” — the adjective qualifying the noun, and (3) the complete phrase, “blue lotus” — a qualified substance. There is no real difference between “lotus” and “blue lotus” except that the former does not convey

any specific features, whereas the latter clearly states its color. The distinction between Brahman and Bhagavān is similar.

In this way, even though He is qualified with all potencies, Bhagavān is the undifferentiated Reality because He is the complete manifestation of the Absolute Truth. Brahman, on the other hand, exhibits no specific qualities and is therefore an incomplete manifestation of that same Truth, just as “lotus” conveys an incomplete depiction of “blue lotus.” As such, even though there is no real difference between Brahman and Bhagavān, they are not one and the same in all respects. The difference lies in the limitation of vision on the part of the seeker.

Śrī Jīva explains that when the Absolute is perceived as unqualified (i.e., as Brahman), it amounts to bare awareness of the substantive prior to the specification of its intrinsic nature. At this stage it is known as *viśeṣya*, or that which is yet to be defined. The energies that inhere in the Absolute are its qualifiers (*viśeṣaṇa*). When the same Absolute is perceived as inclusive of its intrinsic power (i.e., as Bhagavān), it amounts to complete awareness of the substantive as a qualified entity (*viśiṣṭa*).

If one realizes Bhagavān, one will naturally understand Brahman, just as one who beholds a blue lotus automatically sees a lotus. This is why Śrī Jīva did not dedicate a separate *Sandarbha* to Brahman. Whatever is essential to know about Brahman is contained within *Bhagavat Sandarbha*.⁴

As there is no absolute difference between Bhagavān and Brahman, so too there is no absolute difference between Bhagavān and Paramātmā, the latter being a partial manifestation (*svāmśa*) of Bhagavān. In the Paramātmā manifestation, the Absolute is understood as the source of creation who enters the individual *ātmās* constituting His “intermediary energy” (*taṭastha-śakti*), catalyzes the evolution of material elements and various forms from *pradhāna*, and acts as the inner regulator and facilitator of the interface between the *ātmā* and the material elements.

Although there is no absolute difference among the three aspects of the One Absolute Reality, Śrī Jīva Gosvāmī’s evaluation is that Bhagavān is the most complete manifestation (*pūrṇa āvirbhāva*), replete with unparalleled variegated potencies. In comparison to Bhagavān, Brahman and Paramātmā are incomplete manifestations (*asamyag āvirbhāva*) of the One Absolute Reality. The realization of Bhagavān naturally includes that of Brahman, but not vice versa.

The rest of this *sandarbha* involves a further elaboration on the nature of Bhagavān, revealing the transcendental character of His form, name, abode, devotees, activities and His superiority over Brahman. Hence, Jīva Gosvāmī rightly calls it *Bhagavat Sandarbha* — an essay on Bhagavān.

⁴ Thus, Śrī Jīva’s understanding of Brahman is notably distinct from the Advaita definition, which considers Brahman ultimately to be entirely devoid of all energies, manifest as qualities, forms, names and actions. Śrī Jīva Gosvāmī exerts considerable effort to establish that the energies of Bhagavān are real, eternal, and not superimposed or borrowed, countermanding the philosophy of Advaita-vāda, which claims that they are superimpositions of *māyā* (*Pañcadaśī* 1.236).

Referencing the statements of sage Parāśara in *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* (6.5.74), Jīva Gosvāmī shows that the word Bhagavān means one who has six-fold majesties in infinite fullness: the power to regulate all existence from within, inconceivable potency, fame, wealth, knowledge and detachment. The word Bhagavān also means one who is never influenced by the three *guṇas* of *prakṛti* (*Viṣṇu Purāṇa* 6.5.79). His energies have a relationship of inherence (*samavāya*) with Him. They are inherent within His being, and thus He is never devoid of such potencies.

Although Bhagavān is endowed with infinite potencies, these potencies are categorized in three groups: internal (*antaraṅga* or *svarūpa-śakti*), intermediary (*taṭastha* or *jīva-śakti*) and external (*bahiraṅga* or *māyā-śakti*). The internal potency (constituting the true self of Bhagavān) is fully and directly displayed in Him. The other two potencies are displayed indirectly through Paramātmā. By virtue of His inscrutable, inherent potency, the singular Ultimate Reality eternally manifests in four forms: (1) His own essential form (*svarūpa*), (2) His partial self-expansions (*vaibhava*), (3) conscious entities with distinct individuality (*jīva / ātmā*), and (4) the potentiality inhering in the material elements (*pradhāna*). Thus, Bhagavān is simultaneously endowed with conscious energy (*cit-śakti*) and inert matter (*acit-śakti*, also called *māyā-śakti* or *bahiraṅga-śakti*).

Māyā-śakti, or the external energy, can never exercise its influence on Bhagavān. However, it has the power of causing delusion to the individual *ātmās*. The *cit-śakti* and *māyā-śakti* are mutually antagonistic (one reveals, whereas the other deludes), and yet their manifold functions are founded in the common substratum of Bhagavān.

Śrī Jīva Gosvāmī stresses that Bhagavān's energies have two important features: they are trans-rational (*acintyatva*) and intrinsic to Him (*svābhāvikatva*). Since they are trans-rational, the energies of Reality are ultimately inscrutable and not fully within the grasp of human thought and reason (*tarka-asaham*). “Trans-rational” also indicates that these energies can accomplish logically impossible feats. Another import of “trans-rational” is that the relationship between these energies and their energetic source is not entirely within the grasp of logic. These energies are not distinct from the Energetic, but also not entirely identical to Him. It is by virtue of this understanding that the philosophy of Śrī Caitanya has become known as *acintya-bheda-abheda-vāda* (the school of trans-rational simultaneous oneness and distinction).

That Bhagavān's energies are “intrinsic” indicates that they are natural to Him and constitute in their totality His very essence, although He remains transcendent to their totality, as their source. These energies are neither borrowed nor superimposed on Him from any other source.

In the final section of *Bhagavat Sandarbha*, Śrī Jīva Gosvāmī explains that these energies have distinct personalities, names and forms. This is why in almost all Indian temples dedicated to Bhagavān as Kṛṣṇa or Viṣṇu, Bhagavān is accompanied by His consort, Śrī Rādhā or Śrī Lakṣmī, the personification of His internal potency.

The internal energy of Bhagavān also has three aspects: existence (*sandhinī*), awareness (*saṁvit*) and bliss (*hlādinī*). The *sandhinī* potency is the intrinsic power of existence of the Self-existent Bhagavān, and it upholds the existence of the individual *ātmās* and nature. The *saṁvit* potency is the power of knowledge of Bhagavān by which He

is all-knowing and which enables all others to know. The *hlādinī* potency is the power of bliss, which bestows bliss both to Bhagavān — who is inherently full of bliss — and to others. These three aspects of the internal potency are the very nature of Bhagavān and thus exist eternally in Him.

The *samvit* potency includes and supersedes *sandhinī* potency, and the *hlādinī* potency includes and supersedes the other two. This threefold internal energy of Bhagavān constitutes His very nature and that of His abode and associates.

Next, Śrī Jīva establishes that the form of Bhagavān is not material like that of human beings. It is spiritual and consists of existence, consciousness and bliss (*sac-cid-ānanda-rūpatvam*). Such a form cannot be cognized by ordinary material senses, and yet it is self-revealed by the trans-rational potency of Bhagavān. Unlike mortal beings, the form of Bhagavān is not different from His essential nature. Although the form of Bhagavān is one, it can manifest in unlimited places in infinite aspects simultaneously, in direct correspondence to the mood of His devotees.

The contradictory attributes of localization and all-pervasiveness were present in the form of Krishna simultaneously. The form of Bhagavān is always beyond the limits of time and place even when manifest in the material world.

Like the form of Bhagavān, His dress, ornaments, abode and associates are all manifestations of the *svarūpa-śakti*, the internal potency. Similarly, just as Bhagavān's form is non-different from His essential being, so too His name is identical with Him. It has the same power as Bhagavān and is similarly beyond the grasp of the material senses. Realizing His name even once can free one from the bondage of the material world. This is why Bengal Vaiṣṇavism lays great stress on *nāma-japa* and *nāma-saṅkīrtana* — celebrating the names of Bhagavān in a solitary quiet manner (*japa*) or en masse to the accompaniment of music and dance. (*saṅkīrtana*). Śrī Caitanya Mahāprabhu proclaimed that in the present age, Kali-yuga, congregational chanting of the names of Bhagavān is the most efficacious means for attaining perfection in spiritual life.

The birth, acts, name, form, color and other features of Bhagavān are all spiritual, being manifestations of His *svarūpa-śakti*; they manifest to enhance the bliss of His devotees. The Lord is *ātmārāma*, one who delights in His own Self, yet He bestows grace upon His devotees. Bhagavān's grace is one of His infinite attributes, and it is an aspect of His particularly wonderful nature whereby He displays His internal bliss. It is through the grace bestowed on His devotees that Bhagavān discloses His birth, form, pastimes and so on. Other than bestowing bliss upon His devotees, there is no other purpose behind such revelations because He is inherently complete in Himself. The realization of Bhagavān together with the various unique characteristics constituting Him as the essence of Ultimate Reality is said to be perfect and complete. Such complete and perfect realization of Bhagavān is possible only through *bhakti*.

Śrī Jīva Gosvāmī concludes *Bhagavat Sandarbha* with the glorification of divine love, *prema bhakti*, the only means that self-discloses Bhagavān. But to realize the full benefit of *bhakti*, one must have a clear conceptual understanding of Bhagavān, without any lingering doubts.

In this way, Jīva Gosvāmī lays the groundwork for *abhideya tattva*, or the truth regarding the means of attainment. Therefore, a serious spiritual seeker should invest the time and attention necessary to thoroughly study this book with great care, because it forms the indispensable foundation for spiritual practice (*sādhana*).

In this book we have employed certain terminology that may be unfamiliar to the reader. There is an essay in the appendix entitled, “The language of transcendence”, that lucidly explains these terms and any neologisms. Without going through this essay, one may be at a loss to grasp the precise meaning of the terminology used. Therefore, we recommend readers to first acquaint themselves with this terminology before entering into the book proper.