Introduction to Bhagavat Sandarbha

*çré-bhagavän uväca*

*idaà tu te guhyatamaà pravakñyämy anasüyave*

*jïänaà vijïäna-sahitaà yaj jïätvä mokñyase 'çubhät*

“Çré Bhagavän 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 Gétä 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 (Bhagavän), directly or indirectly. Those who seek their own happiness independent of Bhagavän 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 Bhagavän 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 (*puruñärthas*) 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 (*käma*), 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 *mokña* — “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 Bhagavän. To enlighten the ignorant and conditioned self to its true identity solves the eternal problem of happiness at its very root.

Çré Kåñëa says in *Bhagavad Gétä* that one of the basic godly characteristics is to be compassionate towards others,[[1]](#footnote-2) and that this compassion releases us from our beginningless suffering.[[2]](#footnote-3) The core mission of the Vedas is to provide knowledge about the self and its relation to the Supreme Self,[[3]](#footnote-4) enabling true altruism and compassion.

The great seers of India illustrated this transcendental altruism by striving tirelessly to enlighten the masses. Among such luminaries, Çré Jéva Gosvämé is a brilliant moon who performed unparalleled welfare to humanity by presenting the essence of Vedic literature in the form of the *Ñaö* *Sandarbhas*. Without the detailed guidance of a work like the *Ñaö 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.

Çré Jéva Gosvämé, who had studied the entire gamut of Vedic literature, including the Vedas, Puräëas, Ägamas, six *darçanas* and their various branches, came to the conclusion that in the present age, the easiest and best way to know our relation to Bhagavän is revealed in *Çrémad Bhägavatam*, the final work of Çré Vedavyäsa. He considered the study of *Çrémad Bhägavatam* an integral process of realizing that relationship and thus finally attaining the ultimate goal of life: unadulterated joy.

To grant humanity a thorough, systematic understanding of *Çrémad Bhägavata Puräëa*, Çré Jéva Gosvämé wrote *Bhägavata Sandarbha,* “A Compilation of the *Bhägavata*” *(*also known as *Ñaö Sandarbha,* “Six Compilations,” because it has six divisions: *Tattva-, Bhagavat-, Paramätm-, Kåñëa,- Bhakti-,* and *Préti Sandarbha*).

**Overview of the *Sandarbha***

*Ñaö Sandarbha* is a systematically organized compilation of essential verses from *Çrémad Bhägavatam,* thoroughly revealing its essential message.According to Jéva Gosvämé, *Çrémad Bhägavatam* describes three basic subjects:(1) our identity in relation to the Absolute (s*ambandha-jïäna)*, (2) the process to *realize* that identity (*abhidheya*-*tattva*), and (3) the ultimate goal achieved by doing so (*prayojana tattva)*. In the *Ñaö Sandarbhas*, Çré Jéva 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: *pramäëa* and *prameya*. The first part (*pramäëa*) deals with epistemology, the means of acquiring valid knowledge. In this part, Jéva Gosvämé establishes *Çrémad Bhägavatam* as the foremost source of valid transcendental knowledge. It is very important to note Çré Jéva Gosvämé’s conviction that *Çrémad Bhägavatam* 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 Çré Vyäsa himself and proclaimed decisively at the very beginning of *Çrémad Bhägavatam* (1.1.2 and 1.3.44).

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

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

In the third volume (*Paramätma Sandarbha)* he delineates Bhagavän’s manifestation immanent within all entities, called Paramätmä, Éçvara or Puruña. He also describes the ontology of the individual living beings (*jévas)* and the illusory potency (*mäyä).* The *jéva* is a conscious integrated part of Paramätmä, and the illusory energy that enthralls and conditions the *jéva* is Paramätmä’s external energy.

The fourth volume (*Kåñëa Sandarbha)* reveals Çré Kåñëa as Svayam Bhagavän, the original Supreme Person. It also describes how Çré Kåñëa has His eternal abode manifest in three places, namely, Våndävaëa, Mathurä and Dvärakä. He is timelessly present in these three places along with His ever-liberated associates, engaged in His eternal divine *lélä*.

The fifth volume (*Bhakti Sandarbha)* elaborates upon the methodology of self-realization (*abhidheya)*. Çréla Jéva Gosvämé explains that devotional service performed for the pleasure of Çré Kåñëa *(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 *jïäna-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, *Préti Sandarbha.* HereÇré Jéva Gosvämé provides a detailed analysis of *préti*, love for Kåñëa. He shows that *préti* is not just a sentiment (*bhäva)*, but anaesthetic *relish* of that sentiment (*rasa)*. *Préti* brings about the union of the devotee and Kåñëa without any loss of ontological individuality. This union or oneness is indeed the secret meaning of the non-dualistic statements of the *Upaniñads*, such as *tat tvam asi* – You are that*.*

**Summary of *Bhagavat Sandarbha***

The central theme of Jéva Gosvämé’s discussion in *Bhagavat Sandarbha* is based upon the second line of the famous verse from *Bhägavata Puräëa* (1.2.11): “Knowers of the Absolute describe it as nondual consciousness, naming it as Brahman, as Paramātmā and as Bhagavān.”

Jéva Gosvämé’s purpose in writing this *sandarbha* is to establish Bhagavän, 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, Paramätmä or Bhagavän. The specific sequence of nouns used in this verse (“Brahman, Paramätmä and Bhagavän”) indicates the increasing importance and completeness of each succeeding manifestation. Çré Jéva Gosvämé also points out that Absolute Reality is never authentically realized as the *jéva*, 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 Paramätmä. When one’s discernment of the distinction between energy and Energetic Source moves still deeper to include the internal, transcendentalenergies of Reality, one begins to perceive Reality as Bhagavän.

Thus, it is clear that there is no ontological difference between Brahman, Paramätmä and Bhagavän. 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 Bhagavän is similar.

In this way, even though He is qualified with all potencies, Bhagavän 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 Bhagavän, they are not one and the same in all respects. The difference lies in the limitation of vision on the part of the seeker.

Çré Jéva 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 *viçeñya*, or that which is yet to be defined. The energies that inhere in the Absolute are its qualifiers (*viçeñaëa*). When the same Absolute is perceived as inclusive of its intrinsic power (i.e., as Bhagavän), it amounts to complete awareness of the substantive as a qualified entity (*viçiñöa*).

If one realizes Bhagavän, one will naturally understand Brahman, just as one who beholds a blue lotus automatically sees a lotus. This is why Çré Jéva did not dedicate a separate *Sandarbha* to Brahman. Whatever is essential to know about Brahman is contained within *Bhagavat Sandarbha*.[[4]](#footnote-5)

As there is no absolute difference between Bhagavän and Brahman, so too there is no absolute difference between Bhagavän and Paramätmä, the latter being a partial manifestation (*sväàça*) of Bhagavän. In the Paramätmä manifestation, the Absolute is understood as the source of creation who enters the individual *ätmäs* constituting His “intermediary energy” (*taöastha-çakti)*, catalyzes the evolution of material elements and various forms from *pradhäna,* and acts as the inner regulator and facilitator of the interface between the *ätmä* and the material elements.

Although there is no absolute difference among the three aspects of the One Absolute Reality, Çré Jéva Gosvämé’s evaluation is that Bhagavän is the most complete manifestation (*pürëa ävirbhäva*), replete with unparalleled variegated potencies. In comparison to Bhagavän, Brahman and Paramätmä are incomplete manifestations (*asamyag ävirbhäva*) of the One Absolute Reality. The realization of Bhagavän naturally includes that of Brahman, but not vice versa.

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

Referencing the statements of sage Paräçara in *Viñëu Puräëa* (6.5.74), Jéva Gosvämé shows that the word Bhagavän 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 Bhagavän also means one who is never influenced by the three *guëas* of *prakåti* (*Viñëu Puräëa* 6.5.79). His energies have a relationship of inherence (*samaväya*)with Him. They are inherent within His being, and thus He is never devoid of such potencies.

Although Bhagavän is endowed with infinite potencies, these potencies are categorized in three groups: internal (*antaraìga* or *svarüpa-çakti*), intermediary (*taöastha* or *jéva-çakti*) and external (*bahiraìga* or *mäyä-çakti*). The internal potency (constituting the true self of Bhagavän) is fully and directly displayed in Him. The other two potencies are displayed indirectly through Paramätmä. By virtue of His inscrutable, inherent potency, the singular Ultimate Reality eternally manifests in four forms: (1) His own essential form (*svarüpa*), (2) His partial self-expansions (*vaibhava*), (3) conscious entities with distinct individuality (*jéva* / *ätmä*), and (4) the potentiality inhering in the material elements (*pradhäna*). Thus, Bhagavän is simultaneously endowed with conscious energy (*cit-çakti*) and inert matter (*acit-çakti*, also called *mäyä-çakti* or *bahiraìga-çakti*).

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

Çré Jéva Gosvämé stresses that Bhagavän’s energies have two important features: they are trans-rational (*acintyatva*) and intrinsic to Him (*sväbhävikatva*). 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 Çré Caitanya has become known as *acintya-bheda-abheda-väda* (the school of trans-rational simultaneous oneness and distinction).

That Bhagavän’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,* Çré Jéva Gosvämé explains that these energies have distinct personalities, names and forms. This is why in almost all Indian temples dedicated to Bhagavän as Kåñëa or Viñëu, Bhagavän is accompanied by His consort, Çré Rädhä or Çré Lakñmé, the personification of His internal potency.

The internal energy of Bhagavän also has three aspects: existence (*sandhiné*), awareness (*saàvit*) and bliss (*hlädiné*). The *sandhiné* potency is the intrinsic power of existence of the Self-existent Bhagavän, and it upholds the existence of the individual *ätmäs* and nature. The *saàvit* potency is the power of knowledge of Bhagavän by which He is all-knowing and which enables all others to know. The *hlädiné* potency is the power of bliss, which bestows bliss both to Bhagavän — who is inherently full of bliss — and to others. These three aspects of the internal potency are the very nature of Bhagavän and thus exist eternally in Him.

The *saàvit* potency includes and supersedes *sandhiné* potency, and the *hlädiné* potency includes and supersedes the other two. This threefold internal energy of Bhagavän constitutes His very nature and that of His abode and associates.

Next, Çré Jéva establishes that the form of Bhagavän is not material like that of human beings. It is spiritual and consists of existence, consciousness and bliss (*sac-cid-änanda-rüpatvam*). Such a form cannot be cognized by ordinary material senses, and yet it is self-revealed by the trans-rational potency of Bhagavän. Unlike mortal beings, the form of Bhagavän is not different from His essential nature. Although the form of Bhagavän 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 Bhagavän is always beyond the limits of time and place even when manifest in the material world.

Like the form of Bhagavän, His dress, ornaments, abode and associates are all manifestations of the *svarüpa-çakti*, the internal potency. Similarly, just as Bhagavän’s form is non-different from His essential being, so too His name is identical with Him. It has the same power as Bhagavän 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 Vaiñëavism lays great stress on *näma-japa* and *näma-saìkértana* — celebrating the names of Bhagavän in a solitary quiet manner (*japa*) or en masse to the accompaniment of music and dance. (*saìkértana)*. Çré Caitanya Mahäprabhu proclaimed that in the present age, Kali-yuga, congregational chanting of the names of Bhagavän is the most efficacious means for attaining perfection in spiritual life.

The birth, acts, name, form, color and other features of Bhagavän are all spiritual, being manifestations of His *svarüpa-çakti*; they manifest to enhance the bliss of His devotees. The Lord is *ätmäräma,* one who delights in His own Self, yet He bestows grace upon His devotees. Bhagavän’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 Bhagavän 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 Bhagavän 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 Bhagavän is possible only through *bhakti.*

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

In this way, Jéva Gosvämé 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 indispensible foundation for spiritual practice (*sädhanä)*.

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.

1. *dayä bhüteñu*, 16.2 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. *daivé sampad vimokñäya*, 16.5 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. *vedaiç ca sarvair aham eva vedyaù,* 15.15 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Thus, Çré Jéva’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. Çré Jéva Gosvämé exerts considerable effort to establish that the energies of Bhagavän are real, eternal, and not superimposed or borrowed, countermanding the philosophy of Advaita-väda, which claims that they are superimpositions of *mäyä* (*Païcadaçé* 1.236). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)