

Infusing Workplace Spirituality and Ethics with Bhakti Marg

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ABSTRACT

This study examines Bhakti marga, the devotional path in Hinduism characterized by deep immersion and complete submission to the divine. The research focuses on the Prema-margi branch of Bhakti, which emphasizes love-based devotion to deities with form, contrasting with the knowledge-based Gyan-margi tradition. This paper demonstrates how Bhakti traditions foster community engagement, compassion and emotional transformation through participatory devotional activities that transcend social boundaries. This has significant implications for management practices through service-oriented leadership models and emotional intelligence frameworks derived from various bhavas. The tradition's emphasis on ego dissolution, selfless service and authentic devotion provides valuable insights for an ethical living at both the individual and leadership levels.

Keywords: Spirituality in the workplace, Bhava, Types of Bhakti, Ethics, Compassion, Inclusive workplace, Emotions

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INTRODUCTION

The Bhakti tradition of Hinduism offers profound insights for contemporary management practices through its emphasis on selfless service and surrender of the ego. The tradition's focus on treating every action as service to the divine, translates into a service-oriented leadership approach where managers view their role as serving stakeholders rather than merely autocratic or transactional leaders, in other words ethical leadership with a purpose (Chess, Kaspary, Heilighenthaler, Neil & Ratcliffe, 2021). Also, the various bhavas demonstrate the importance of the affective dimension, which can help managers get in touch with their emotions as well as with emotions of their colleagues and customers.

Introduction to the Bhakti tradition

The Bhakti marga¹, or the devotional tradition, is noted for the devotee's deep immersion and complete submission to the divine. This tradition is characterized by its primary emphasis on devotion, with no specifications for the requirement of elaborate rituals, or visits to specific pilgrimage sites, or detailed knowledge of scriptures².

The Bhakti movement started in the southern part of India in the sixth century CE Slawek (1988). Ranganath (1983) says that over time the Bhakti movement became nearly pan-India, with many saints from different regions of India leading the movement – Namdev, Jnaneshwar, Tukaram (from the Maharashtra region), Dadu, Guru Nanak, Farid (from the Punjab region), Surdas³, Tulsidas, Kabir (from Northern India), Thyagraja, Ramdasa (Tamil Nadu).

The literature identifies two main branches of Bhakti marga – one was knowledge-based (Gyan-margi: Gyan (or jnana) means knowledge). The other was devotion-based (Prem-margi: prem means love). While the Gyanmargi saints such as Kabir, Dadu, and Guru Nanak worshipped the divine as formless (nirakara: no akar⁴), the Prem-margi branch was the one where the supreme deity with a form (sakar⁵ rupa) was praised and worshipped (Pattanayak, 1992).

In the present work, the focus is on the Prema-margi branch and the love and devotional aspects of the Bhakti marga. In the Prema-margi tradition, the devotee praises the divine being as a friend, companion, or even lover or spouse. Every action is supposed to be a seva, a service to the divine. The complete submission in front of the divine is clearly evident in the writings of the Prema-margi tradition, where the Bhakta-poets extoll the divine and its many virtues while using adjectives such as servant, worthless, inconsequential, etc, for themselves. (Dasgupta & Roy, 2021; Gupta, 2021; Pattanayak, 1992; Stewart, 1986)

While there were many Bhakti⁶ saints, and each worshipped various deities, two prominent Bhakti streams emerged in northern India. These streams are: first, worshipping the divine in the form of Rama, and second, worshipping in the form of Krishna. For the Rama-worshipping tradition, Ramcharitamanas, written by Goswami Tulsidas, is the main text. This tradition also includes bhajans (devotional songs) and exultations venerating Hanuman, the trusted servant of Rama. The second and the more popular tradition is that of Krishna-worshipping. The main books followed by this tradition are the Bhagavata Purana and the Bhagavad Gita. (Gupta, 2021).

Vallabhacharya⁷ (1479-1531 CE) was a major proponent of Krishna Bhakti, and his approach is prevalent in northern India, Rajasthan, and Gujarat. His theological approach is called Pushti Marga and is linked to the Vedantic school of Shuddhadvaita (Pahlajrai, 2003). Vallabhacharya (and his son Vithalacharya) was instrumental in establishing Ashta Chap⁸ – a group of eight (Ashta means eight) devotee-poets⁹. In the Eastern part of India, Chaitanya (1486–1534 CE) started a movement of Krishna bhakti. Immersed in the devotion of love of Krishna, Chaitanya would dance in bliss and ecstasy. His dance and his involvement attracted many followers who would sing and dance together. The theological details of Chaitanya's approach towards the world

¹ Pronounced mārga

² Called the Gyāna or Jnāna mārga

³ Pronounced Sūrdas

⁴ Pronounced ākār and akar means shape

⁵ Pronounced Sākār. Means, with ākār

⁶ From now on, whenever we use the term Bhakti saints, this refers to the Prema-mārgi Bhakti saints.

⁷ Born in the greater Andhra region in the South India

⁸ Pronounced Chāp

⁹ Sūrdas is the most famous poet of Ashta Chāp

(called Gaudia Vaishnavism) were developed by his disciples Jiva Goswami, Rupa Goswami, and Krishnadas Kaviraj Goswami in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The theological approach, which forms a part of Vedanta philosophy, is called Achintya Bheda-Abhed (Barua, 2021; Gupta, 2021; Pahlajrai, 2003; Schweig, 2016).

One of the present-day well-known Bhakti tradition organizations, The International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), is closely connected to the Gaudia Vaishnavism path, which was initiated by Chaitanya. A notable exponent of this tradition was Mira Bai, a lady born in a royal household in Rajasthan in the 16th century. Since her childhood, she was devoted to the worship of Krishna. Her devotion towards Krishna was extraordinary, and she considered Krishna her spouse¹⁰. Mira relinquished all the riches of royalty and became immersed in the devotion of Krishna, singing songs of praise of Krishna publicly. During the medieval period, when married women, especially from royalty had several restrictions, Mirabai, a married lady, composed songs that were about breaking various social customs to meet her lover, Krishna (Dasgupta & Roy, 2021; Sharma, 2014).

Understanding Bhava – an integral aspect of Bhakti Marga

Bhava is a non-translatable term, which means an emotional state that is characterized by deep immersion and involvement. Gupt (2021) emphasises that you cannot separate a thought from a feeling or vice versa, and therefore defines Bhava as a representation of what you think and feel at a given time. Certain bhavas are of longer duration, called sthayi (steadfast), while the other bhavas remain for a shorter period and are called asthayi (transient). A sthayi bhava is a state that can be there for some time or even for a lifetime. The bhavas may be noticed by others by dramatic changes in the emotional and psychological state, or a bhava may be serene. Bhava Purna Bhakti (Bhakti that is embedded with bhava) implies an involved, voluntary, and complete devotion. Noted Bhakti exponents such as Chaitanya, Mirabai are known for having identifiable states in which they used to go into a trance and sing praises of the divine. Mira and Chaitanya, when in Bhakti bhava, went into a different state altogether, which was completely disconnected from the mundane reality. Such a state was viewed by devotees with awe as they were moved by the enormity of the emotional state (Stewart, 1986).

Bhavas can be many. There can be Matritva bhava (Matritva: maternal), which is also known as Vatsalya bhava. In this bhava, the divine is treated with love and care as if it were a small child. Various activities are done with the kind of involvement that a mother has for one's offspring. Noted Hindi¹¹ Bhakt-poet Surdas has written many compositions depicting Krishna as a child, who is lovingly adored by his mother (Pattanayak, 1992). Barua (2021) narrates that the parents of noted social reformer Bijoy Krishna Goswami used to cook the purest food¹² for the child form¹³ of Krishna. The Matritva or Vatsalya bhava brings an essential element of the Bhakti marga – the idea of selfless giving, of doing the utmost to nurture and care.

Then there is Sakha bhava (Sakha: friend, companion), in which the devotee treats Krishna as a friend, as a guide who is not to be feared. There can be no secrets with a true friend, and no part of one's personality has to be hidden. This bhava is quite popular, and one story where Krishna helped his impoverished friend Sudama is often retold and enacted (Pattanayak, 1992). When the devotee considers the Lord as her lover or her husband, this bhava is called "Madhurya bhava" (The emotion of affection, Madhurya: sweetness). Madhurya¹⁴ bhava is characterized by intense love – Prem. Pandey (1996) points out that as part of the kirtana, the Chaitanya tradition enacts several devotional musical dramas depicting Krishna with the Gopis and his consort Radha. Another female saint, Mira's devotion towards Krishna was in this bhava, and she treated Krishna as her lover, her spouse. It is important to recognize that this bhava signifies love and not lust. It is not about owning or seeking benefits, but is about giving (a connect with the Matritva or Vatsalya bhava is immediately apparent). Surdas has also written many compositions in this bhava (in his book Sursagar) which depict the interaction between the Gopis¹⁵ of Vrindavan and Uddhav, an emissary of Krishna. This discussion is particularly interesting because it depicts the debate between the mind and heart, between intellect and emotion. While Uddhav (who is trained in classical

¹⁰ Meera writes: "The one who adorns Peacock feather crown on his forehead, is my husband" (Jaake Sar mor-mukut, mera pati soi; sar: head, mor-mukut: peacock-feathered crown, pati: husband). Kṛiṣṇā is nearly always depicted wearing a peacock-feather crown on his forehead.)

¹¹ The dialect Sūrdas used is called Braja. It is spoken in and around areas of Mathura in Northern India.

¹² The food thus prepared is called Prasad; Prasad means a gift.

¹³ Called Laddū Gopāla in North (depicted by a small child on his knees, with a laddū (a sweet) in his hand.)

¹⁴ Another name for this bhāva is Śṛīṅāra.

¹⁵ Cow-herd ladies of Vrindavan who were deeply attached to Kṛiṣṇa. (Kṛiṣṇa was born and brought up in Vrindavan)

and religious texts) lectures the Gopis on duty and knowledge, he in turn gets lectured by the seemingly less educated village ladies. Uddhav returns, influenced by the involvement and commitment of the Gopis towards Krishna and tutored into the primacy of affection and surrender.

A bhava closely accompanying Madhurya is Viraha bhava (Viraha: separation, especially of lovers), which is about sadness because one is not able to meet the lover in person. While Madhurya is about conjugal bliss, Viraha is about a “desperate thirst, a longing for the lover” (Leu, 2020, p. 3).

Then there is “Dasya bhava”, the bhava of service, where the devotee reveres the Lord as the guide and the Guru, and every action is performed as a service to the divine. Hanuman is considered an ideal servant of Rama by depicting qualities such as unwavering commitment, complete loyalty, and going beyond the call of duty. Ramcharitamanas by Tulsidas is written in Dasya bhava. Services can be of various kinds. In the text Bhakti Rasamrita Sindhu, authored by Srila Rupa Goswami¹⁶, sixty-four activities have been identified as accepted seva (service) (Dasgupta & Roy, 2021; Pattanayak, 1992; Stewart, 1986).

Modes of Bhakti

Nine types of bhaktis have been defined in Bhakti literature (described¹⁷ in Bhagavata Purana 7.5.23), called Navadha¹⁸ Bhakti: **Shravana** (listening to the praise of the divine), **Kirtana** (Group or mass participation in reciting the name, deeds, glories of the deity), **Smran** (Always being with the thoughts and ideas of the divine, remembering her glory and contemplating on the aspects of divinity), **Padsevan** (Serving others as a service offering to the divine), **Archan** (Worshipping the divine in a systematic manner, few rituals along with best offerings), **Vandan** (Salutation and Showing respect to the divine and the divinity present in all), **Dasya** (The divine is viewed as the master and self is viewed as a servant who is always ready to serve: explained in Dasya bhava above), **Sakhya** (The divine is seen as a friend, companion, guide: explained in Sakha bhava above), **Atmanivedana** (completely surrendering to the will of the divine, having no boundaries or secrets) (Rani, 2015).

Katha & Kirtana: Two modes of celebrating and practising Bhakti

A katha essentially means a story. While katha is a retelling of an important incident related to a deity and is generally in prose, a kirtana is a gathering where devotional music is sung. Both katha and kirtana are characterized by the use of vernacular language, which is in contrast to traditional worship mode, which is often conducted through formal rituals in the Sanskrit language (Ranganath, 1983). Katha is usually longer than a kirtana and can sometimes be a week or even a month long. The shortest katha session will usually take one full day, and hence, the session starts in the morning on an astrologically suitable day¹⁹. A katha session can be interspersed with kirtana sessions. In fact, the katha session for a day usually ends with the kirtana session. An independent kirtana session usually comprises of few hours and is usually organized in the evening.

A katha can be a single episode from the life of a deity, or the kathakar may combine several episodes from the lives of a deity. It can be connected to one deity, say the katha of Satya Narayana²⁰, or alternatively, it can have episodes from multiple deities. The katha can be based on epics such as Ramayana, Mahabharata, or Puranas such as Bhagavata Purana, or texts such as Bhagavad Gita or Astavakra Gita. The kathakar (lead storyteller) is expected to be well-versed in scriptural references, humour, and music. It is common for the kathakar to take up a contemporary topic related to lifestyle, food, respecting elders, harmony in society, and then highlight the views of sages, scriptures, or other wisemen on these topics. Along the main theme followed in the scripture, the katha session is interspersed with humorous anecdotes, or impromptu question and answer sessions. Some katha sessions that are of longer duration invariably have devotees’ questions at the end of every day. The kathakar is considered to have a connection with the divine and to have some insights into mundane issues. In response to various queries, the kathakar’s suggestions are usually to reassure the devotees that things would be all right, to let go, to reduce attachment, and to improve lifestyle²¹.

The reputed kathakars are known for communicating the involved philosophical concepts in a simple manner, combining the core message and entertainment in just the right proportion, in a dramatic and lyrical setting. Gupt

¹⁶ A major exponent of the Chaitanya’s Bhakti mārga

¹⁷ Another version of the types of Bhakti has also been described in the Aranya Kānd of Rāmcharitāmānas

¹⁸ Nav: nine; Navdha: nine types

¹⁹ Usually advised by a local Priest or a house elder or even the kathākār (lead storyteller).

²⁰ Vishnū – one of the three main Hindu deities, other two being Brahma and Shiva.

²¹ First author has witnessed several such sessions as a part of growing up in traditional household.

(2021) explains that during a performance, various bhavas contribute to creating rasa. Rasa signifies the overall mood of the performance and is about enjoying²² the performance. The kathakar through the katha narration creates an overall environment of Bhakti rasa. During this depiction, the kathakar uses a combination of various imageries in different bhavas such as raudra (anger), hasya (humour), karuna (compassion), and shringara (love) to create an overall rasa of Bhakti. Renowned kathakars are known to move their audience and take them on an emotional roller coaster by describing some of the key emotive events from scriptures²³ (Chapke & Bhagat, 2006; Sasireha, 1995).

The kathakars have also played a significant role as social reformers and educators. Ranganath (1983) documents few kathakars who worked for promoting a feeling of nationalism during India's independence struggle.

The kirtana²⁴ (also called Sankirtan²⁵) or congregational singing is an integral aspect of the Bhakti marga. Many bhakti saints were also poets and singers. Ancient texts describe the Puranic sage Narad as the originator of the kirtana tradition. The music, tempo, lyrics, and group singing of a kirtana influence the affective dimensions of personality (Chapke & Bhagat, 2006; Sharma, 2014). The Chaitanya tradition incorporated classical music traditions from the "Dhrupad style and the Kirtaniyas²⁶ of Vallabhacharya sect" (Pandey, 1996, p. 388).

The kirtana singing starts at a slow tempo and then steadily gathers rhythm. As the kirtana begins, the lead singer sings a line, which is then repeated by the devotees. Each line is repeated twice or even more than that, depending upon the improvisation by the lead singer, who can change the order of pauses, or modify the tune, or involve more bhava (emotion). As the song is about to reach its culmination, the tempo of the music becomes really fast, and finally, the song ends with hailing the deity (Pandey, 1996; Ranganath, 1983; Rani, 2015; Sharma, 2014; Slawek, 1988).

The kirtana bhajans are usually well-known devotional songs that have been nurtured through the oral tradition. Some of these are metered in the form of standard poetic forms of the doha²⁷, sortha²⁸, chaupai²⁹ and some are mukta chhand (free verses). These bhajans are usually about reciting various names and forms of the Lord, about exalting the attributes of the Lord, about self-abasement, about the ephemeral nature of human life, of the will of the divine that reigns supreme, of the eternal divinity that is omnipresent, etc. The kirtana singing is usually accompanied by musical instruments such as dholki (drum), kartal (hand clapper), manjira (metal balls), pakhawaj³⁰, sarangi³¹, tabla (a set of two drums), and the tanpura³² (Chapke & Bhagat, 2006; Pandey, 1996).

A specific variant of the kirtana is called Akhand kirtana. Akhand means continuous or non-stop. It may be noted that some kathas are also Akhand, i.e. continuously conducted. An Akhand Ramayan does not stop even at night, and the entire text is recited without a break in between³³. Nama-kirtana is a specific form of kirtana wherein the lyrics are only comprised of the name of the deity or the name of the deity with the consort. The deities can be varied – Shiva, Vishnu, Rama, and Krishna. A simple example of Nama-kirtana is given below:

²² A Nī-rasā (without rasā) performance is boring and a person watching it can easily get distracted. On the other hand, a marvellous painting, a play, a movie, or an enactment can completely engross a person and take the attention of a person away from mundane affairs. (Gupt 2021)

²³ Events from Mahābhārata include disrobing of Draupadi and Kṛṣṇa saving her grace, Bhīma brutally killing Duśāsana and fulfilling his revenge, Bhīṣma forcing Kṛṣṇa to take up arms, Abhimanyu being brutally killed, Karna's last moments. Events from Rāmāyana include Bharat requesting his elder brother Rāma to return back to Ayodhyā, Sītā being abducted by demon king Rāvana

²⁴ The Sikhs, a religious sect, also have a well-developed tradition of Kīrtans. However, in this article we have focused on the kīrtana tradition of the Hindūs.

²⁵ "San" prefix means good or divine.

²⁶ Performers of kīrtana

²⁷ A dohā is a couplet of two lines with twenty-four syllables in each line. Each line divides into unequal parts of thirteen and eleven syllables. Source: (Hirsch 2014)

²⁸ Sorthā is an inverted dohā (Syllables arranged as 11-13, 11-13 in one line)

²⁹ A verse of four lines with sixteen syllables in each line.

³⁰ A double headed percussionist instrument, which is held horizontal and played at the two ends with hands.

³¹ A short-necked string instrument.

³² A string instrument similar to Sitar but used to provide steady tones.

³³ Specific persons read the text at designated times. During changeover, the next person reads few sections together with the incumbent one and then takes over the lead role, while the earlier reciter quietly leaves.

Hare Rama Rama Ram, Sita Ram Ram Ram³⁴

Chapke & Bhagat (2006) point out that both events are organized on the occasion of important events such as childbirth, birthdays, the inauguration of a new house or a new business, or during sacred days³⁵ or important festivals. They can also be organized when there is some misfortune. Slawek (1988) corroborates the above observations by pointing out that in the holy month of Kartik, kirtans were held on a daily basis. He further points out that the Hindus usually conducted kirtans on Tuesday³⁶ or Saturday – the two days that are considered to be governed by malevolent planets, Mars and Saturn. Depending upon the scale and financial ability of the lead organizer, either both events or only one of them is organized. (katha is usually a more elaborate occasion than kirtana.) While the prominent kathakars are usually professionals, the kirtana team is usually composed of like-minded people who find comfort and solace in coming together. Some are good vocalists, while others play various instruments. These people are recognized and respected for their contributions and often receive invites from people staying in far-flung areas.

The theme of katha and lyrics of kirtana are deliberately kept simple, which in turn enables everyone to appreciate the glory of the divine. The central theme in a kirtana is usually quite simple: praising the attributes of the divine (physical features, say Krishna as the name signifies is dark in complexion), or praising the victory over evil forces (Rama defeating demon king Ravana) – events that are part of folklore, or to lead a life of service. The kirtana tempo encourages a person to completely submit the ego and enjoy the kirtana process – this submission is not forced but is voluntary and participatory.

Implications of bhakti tradition for workplace spirituality and ethics

- There are several definitions of workplace spirituality (WS), including in intrinsic origin view in which WS is seen to stem from the individual's inner consciousness to a religious view (Krishnakumar & Neck, 2002). Once seen to only be part of a personal, inner consciousness, WS has now evolved into an interest area for organizations too (Que & Teehankee), especially since it is said to be related to work satisfaction, greater meaning in life, and even creativity and greater productivity (Kumar & Sudarshan, 2022).
 - Bhakti teaches that every action needs to be performed with devotion and integrity, and that rather thinking from a transactional viewpoint of 'what's in it for me?', tasks need to be offered to the divine in the form of selfless service for a higher purpose.
 - The Bhakti tradition's emphasis on self-abasement, surrender, and viewing others as manifestations of the divine leads to a better interpersonal connection and also a more inclusive workplace (Marques, Kumar & Culham, 2024). This also leads to the idea of recognition of common thread and therefore respecting the "other".
 - The practice of complete submission and ego dissolution promotes humility, reduces selfish motivations, and encourages actions that benefit the collective good rather than personal gain.
 - The tradition's focus on emotional authenticity and genuine devotion over ritual compliance suggests that ethical behaviour should stem from sincere conviction rather than mere rule-following, creating a more sustainable foundation for moral conduct.
 - The participatory nature of kirtana and katha, which breaks down social barriers and encourages collective engagement, provides a model for inclusive team building and democratic decision-making processes. (Marques et al., 2024; Tungtakanpoung & Postoyeva, 2023)

CONCLUSION

The Bhakti tradition represents a profound and accessible spiritual path that has shaped Hindu religious practice for over fourteen centuries. This devotional tradition's emphasis on emotional engagement and personal relationship with the divine offers an alternative to ritual-heavy or intellectually demanding spiritual approaches.

³⁴ Hail Lord Rāma and Mother Sītā!!

³⁵ The nine-day period called Navratri is celebrated twice a year, in honour of the Sacred Feminine – Devi.

³⁶ Tuesday: Mangal Var (The day of Mangal or Mars); Saturday: Shani Var (The day of Shani or Saturn)

This tradition, with its focus on love-based devotion, has created a rich tapestry of spiritual expression through various bhavas that accommodate different temperaments and relationship dynamics with the divine.

The significance of bhava in Bhakti practice cannot be overstated—these emotional states provide frameworks for authentic spiritual experience that transform mundane activities into sacred service. Whether through the nurturing care of Matritva bhava, the intimate friendship of Sakha bhava, or the passionate devotion of Madhurya bhava, practitioners find meaningful ways to connect with the divine that resonate with their natural inclinations and life experiences.

The practices of katha and kirtana demonstrate the tradition's democratic nature, making spiritual wisdom accessible through vernacular storytelling and participatory singing. These communal activities break down barriers of literacy, social status, and formal religious training, allowing anyone to participate in devotional life. The integration of entertainment with spiritual instruction ensures engagement while facilitating gradual spiritual transformation.

The Bhakti path's emphasis on surrender, service, and emotional authenticity offers valuable insights for contemporary spiritual seekers, providing a model for combining personal devotion with community engagement in meaningful spiritual practice. For leaders it offers a spiritual-ethical framework of compassion and love for others, not domination, and purpose above performance.

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