

Rethinking *Bhakti* Beyond Devotion: A Philosophical Critique by Daya Krishna

Dr. Baishali Majumdar

Assistant Professor, Department of Philosophy
Cooch Behar Panchanan Barma University
Vivekananda Street, Cooch Behar – 736101
West Bengal, India

Abstract

This paper revisits the concept of *Bhakti*, commonly translated as “devotion,” through the critical and dialogical lens of Indian philosopher Daya Krishna. Traditionally associated with emotional surrender and theism, *bhakti* has often been treated as a religious or poetic expression, sidelined in philosophical discourse. Saints such as Mīrābāī, Tulsīdās, and the Ālvārs enriched *bhakti*’s emotional legacy, but its association with uncritical piety limited its philosophical potential. Daya Krishna challenges this assumption by arguing that *bhakti*, far from being irrational or exclusively theistic, can be reconceived as a philosophical category rooted in existential commitment and reflective engagement. Drawing on classical Indian sources like the *Bhagavad Gītā*, *Nārada-bhakti-sūtra*, and *Vedānta* texts, the paper traces how *bhakti* has been framed as a path to liberation through personal devotion. It then presents Krishna’s critique of these theological assumptions and his proposal for a post-theistic interpretation of *bhakti*. The paper further engages with thinkers like Kant, Heidegger, Gandhi, and Tagore to situate *bhakti* within broader traditions of rational and moral concern. *Bhakti*, in this reimagining, becomes a form of care, fidelity, and ethical devotion—not limited to religion but extended to secular commitments and civic values. Ultimately, the paper argues that *bhakti*, when freed from rigid theological constraints, becomes a valuable philosophical attitude relevant to contemporary life. Krishna’s intervention not only reclaims *bhakti* for modern philosophy but also invites renewed reflection on the nature of commitment, meaning, and thoughtful living in a pluralistic world.

Keywords: *Bhakti*, Daya Krishna, Devotion, Rational Inquiry, Dialogical Method, Existential Commitment

Introduction

Bhakti, a term deeply embedded in the Indian intellectual and cultural landscape, has typically been associated with intense emotional devotion to a personal deity. From the poetic yearnings of Mīrābāī and Kabīr to the elaborate theological systems of Rāmānuja and Madhva, *bhakti* has been celebrated as a path of love, surrender, and divine intimacy. However, despite its central role in Indian religious life, *bhakti* has often been excluded from serious philosophical inquiry. It is commonly dismissed as an affective or mystical practice rather than a concept that can withstand rational analysis. This paper challenges that assumption and seeks to reconstruct *bhakti* as a philosophical category, one that deserves attention not merely in religious studies but within the broader sphere of intellectual reflection.

One of the strongest advocates for this rethinking of *bhakti* is Daya Krishna (1924–2007), a philosopher whose work pushed against both orientalist misconceptions of Indian thought and the rigidity of traditional commentarial systems. In his provocative essay “Three Myths About Indian Philosophy,” Krishna argues that Indian philosophy has been misrepresented as exclusively spiritual, monolithic, and unhistorical. These myths have discouraged critical engagement with central Indian categories, relegating them to the realm of religion or poetry rather than treating them as philosophically rich concepts. *Bhakti*, he suggests, is a prime example of a category that has been misunderstood and undervalued.¹ Krishna’s project is not simply to secularize *bhakti* but to recover its latent philosophical potential. He does this by employing what he calls *saṃvāda*—a method of philosophical dialogue that cuts across traditions, texts, and time periods. Through actual dialogues with Sanskrit scholars and contemporary philosophers, Krishna attempts to revive categories like *bhakti* by placing them under the scrutiny of reasoned conversation. *Bhakti*, in this framework, is no longer a devotional emotion but a concept that can be examined, contested, and rearticulated.²

The central questions are as follows: what becomes of *bhakti* once it is detached from theism? Can *bhakti* be understood not as submission to a divine figure but as an existential orientation—toward truth, justice, the good, or the ethical life? And if so, what philosophical resources—both classical and modern—can help us in this reconstruction? These questions are not merely academic. In a time when traditional religion is declining in many parts of the world, but existential commitments remain central to human life, reimagining *bhakti* could provide a language for a renewed understanding of care, value, and devotion beyond doctrinal boundaries. To pursue these questions, this paper unfolds in several stages. First, it revisits classical Indian sources such as the *Bhagavad Gītā* and *Nārada-bhakti-sūtra* to trace the historical and theological development of *bhakti*. Second, it presents Daya Krishna’s critique of devotional theism and his proposal for a conceptual rethinking of *bhakti*. Third, it places Krishna’s ideas in comparative dialogue with thinkers like Kant and Heidegger, as well as modern Indian figures such as Gandhi and Tagore, who also envisioned forms of devotion that transcended orthodox religious frames. Finally, it explores the implications of

a post-theistic *bhakti* for contemporary philosophy, education, civic life, and ethical practice.

This paper does not claim that *bhakti* should be stripped of all religious meaning. Rather, it contends that *bhakti*'s essence—understood as sustained commitment, existential concern, and care for what one finds ultimately meaningful—can be preserved even when its traditional religious scaffolding is removed or reinterpreted. In fact, *bhakti* may become more philosophically robust once it is freed from the dogmatic and hierarchical structures that have often confined it. In sum, this paper attempts to recover *bhakti* not as a relic of India's spiritual past, but as a concept with philosophical vitality and contemporary relevance. Guided by Daya Krishna's critical and dialogical spirit, it invites us to see devotion not as blind faith, but as thoughtful fidelity to what truly matters.

***Bhakti* in Classical Indian Philosophy – The Theistic Foundations**

Bhakti has long occupied a central place in the Indian philosophical and religious imagination. While the term literally means “sharing” or “participation,” in practice it has come to signify a mode of devotion, often directed toward a personal deity. The theological structure and emotional texture of *bhakti* have been elaborated through sacred texts, devotional poetry, and philosophical systems, especially within the broader framework of *Vedānta*. To understand the significance of Daya Krishna's reinterpretation of *bhakti*, it is first necessary to consider the traditional theistic frameworks in which *bhakti* has historically been situated.

Among the earliest and most influential articulations of *bhakti* as a spiritual path appears in the *Bhagavad Gītā*. Here, the divine speaker Krishna tells the warrior Arjuna that those who are devoted to Him with love and sincerity are especially dear: “*yo mad-bhaktah sa me priyah*” (*Gītā* 12.20). *Bhakti* is described not merely as an emotional state but as a complete orientation of life—marked by humility, discipline, surrender, and unwavering attention to the divine. Most significantly, in *Gītā* 18.55, Krishna says, “*bhaktyā mām abhijānāti*”—only through *bhakti* can one truly know Him. This elevates *bhakti* from a sentimental disposition to a valid path to *mokṣa* (liberation), on par with or even superior to *jñāna* (knowledge) and *karma* (action).³ This foundational claim is developed extensively in the theistic Vedānta traditions, especially by philosophers such as Rāmānuja and Madhva. In Rāmānuja's *Śrībhāṣya*—a commentary on the *Brahmasūtra*—*bhakti* is defined as *sādhana bhakti*, a cultivated and disciplined path rooted in loving contemplation of Viṣṇu as the Supreme Being. Rāmānuja argues that knowledge of the self and the Absolute cannot arise from reason alone but must be infused with a personal, emotional relationship grounded in grace. *Bhakti* is both the process and the culmination of this relationship.⁴

Madhva's dualist philosophy intensifies this dynamic. In his *Anuvyākhyāna*, he insists on the eternal distinction between the individual soul and the Supreme Lord. *Bhakti* is not just a means to liberation; it is a lifelong recognition of the soul's

subordinate position to God. For Madhva, *bhakti* expresses the proper ontological order: the soul must recognize its dependence and act accordingly. Liberation is not absorption into the divine but eternal service to it. The *Nārada-bhakti-sūtra*, an influential devotional text likely composed between the 10th and 13th centuries, provides a more poetic and aphoristic approach. It defines *bhakti* as “supreme love for God” (*parāṇuraktiḥ īśvare*, Sūtra 2) and outlines nine forms of devotional practice (*navadhā bhakti*), including listening (*śravaṇa*), chanting (*kīrtana*), remembering (*smaraṇa*), and surrendering the self (*ātma-nivedana*). Although it avoids systematic metaphysics, the text reflects and reinforces a devotional orientation toward a personal deity, affirming the necessity of love, humility, and absolute surrender.⁵

Despite their theological differences, these traditions share a common structure: *bhakti* is fundamentally theistic, and the devotee's relationship to God is marked by asymmetry. God is the object of *bhakti*—omniscient, omnipotent, perfect—and the devotee is the subject, frail, limited, and dependent. While *bhakti* may vary in its emotional coloration (friendship, parental affection, romantic love), its metaphysical premise remains hierarchical and centered on divine transcendence. From a philosophical standpoint, this raises important questions: Can *bhakti* still be meaningful without these theistic commitments? Is *bhakti* intelligible without God as its object? What happens when the vertical, hierarchical model is replaced by a horizontal, immanent one? These are precisely the questions that Daya Krishna will take up in his critique.⁶

Additionally, traditional frameworks often present *bhakti* as secondary to knowledge. For instance, in Śāṅkara's Advaita Vedānta, *bhakti* is acknowledged as a helpful practice to prepare the mind for realization, but the ultimate goal is non-dual knowledge (*jñāna*) of *Brahman*, not devotional relationship. In texts like the *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi*, *bhakti* is associated with ritual and emotion—necessary for some, but inferior to the direct realization of self and *Brahman*. *Bhakti* here is instrumental, not ultimate.⁷ Daya Krishna finds this subordination troubling. For him, it reflects not only a bias against emotion but also a conceptual narrowing of *bhakti*'s potential. He sees *bhakti* not as an inferior alternative to knowledge, but as a different kind of philosophical engagement—rooted not in discursive abstraction but in lived, sustained commitment. Just as epistemology considers how we know and ethics how we ought to act, *bhakti* can be seen as a mode of orientation: how we care, how we are devoted, how we attach ourselves to what matters most.⁸

Furthermore, traditional accounts tend to emphasize *prasāda* (grace) as the key to successful *bhakti*. The devotee's effort is important, but final liberation depends on divine favour. This structure arguably undermines moral responsibility and personal agency. Daya Krishna, committed to a more autonomous vision of the human subject, resists such a view. He insists that *bhakti*, if it is to be relevant in a philosophical sense, must empower the subject rather than render them passive before divine power.⁹ Thus, while classical theistic frameworks of *bhakti* are rich

in emotional and theological expression, they also contain elements that restrict *bhakti*'s philosophical application. It is these limitations that Krishna seeks to overcome—not by discarding the tradition, but by reinterpreting its core ideas in a way that opens them to dialogue, reflection, and secular relevance.

Daya Krishna's Critique and Philosophical Reconstruction of *Bhakti*

Daya Krishna's philosophical project was driven by the conviction that Indian philosophy needed to liberate itself from both orientalist clichés and internal traditionalist dogmas. In this spirit, he turns his attention to the concept of *bhakti*, a term often regarded as outside the scope of serious philosophical inquiry due to its deep entanglement with emotion, mysticism, and theology. Krishna's goal is not merely to critique *bhakti*, but to re-conceptualize it—to extract from it a form of rational commitment and existential concern that can withstand philosophical scrutiny. His critique of *bhakti* is thus twofold: he questions the assumptions embedded in classical theistic interpretations, and he reconstructs *bhakti* as a post-theistic, even secular, form of philosophical devotion.

At the heart of Krishna's approach is the dialogical method (*saṃvāda*). In contrast to scholastic commentary (*bhāṣya*) or doctrinal assertion, Krishna employs a method of open-ended philosophical dialogue. He does this both in practice—and in principle, by encouraging conceptual cross-pollination between traditions. In his edited volume *Samvāda: A Dialogue Between Tradition and Modernity*, he stages some of these interactions, where traditional thinkers and modern scholars reflect on concepts like *Brahman*, *mokṣa*, *dharma*, and *bhakti*. His goal is not to produce consensus but to revive Indian concepts as sites of living philosophical engagement.¹⁰ When Krishna turns to *bhakti*, he immediately identifies a problematic tendency: the assumption that *bhakti* must be theistic. In classical sources, *bhakti* is almost always directed toward a divine being with specific attributes—omniscience, omnipotence, compassion, and often personhood. Krishna questions this. Why must *bhakti* assume the existence of a personal God? Could *bhakti* not be directed toward abstract ideals, toward truth, justice, or even philosophical inquiry itself? In his "Prolegomena to Any Future *Bhakti* Theory," Krishna proposes that *bhakti* be detached from its theological anchors and reconceived as a category of concern or care—a way of relating to what one holds as ultimately significant.¹¹

He draws an analogy with Kant's moral philosophy. In *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant describes the human capacity to act according to duty as grounded in reverence for the moral law. This reverence is not servile fear but a recognition of value that commands our commitment. Similarly, Krishna argues that *bhakti* can be reimagined as this kind of rational devotion—not to God, but to values and ethical principles. *Bhakti* thus becomes a way of being attuned to what matters, a mode of disciplined concern for what we affirm as meaningful. Krishna writes, "*Bhakti* is not blind surrender but a form of dialogical relationship with the divine, where questioning is not antithetical to devotion, but part of its very essence."¹²

Krishna also addresses the issue of hierarchy inherent in classical *bhakti* traditions. The structure of *bhakti* is often asymmetrical: the devotee is small, dependent, and ignorant; God is great, autonomous, and all-knowing. While this structure can create an intense emotional relationship, it also embeds problematic assumptions about human agency. Krishna is critical of such hierarchies. He insists that philosophical *bhakti* must affirm the autonomy and dignity of the subject. *Bhakti* should not be about self-abasement before a higher power but about the wholehearted investment of the self in a worthwhile object or pursuit. To this end, Krishna proposes that *bhakti* be seen not as emotional submission but as rational commitment. He distinguishes between irrational devotion (based on fear, custom, or unexamined belief) and philosophical devotion (based on reflection, choice, and engagement). The former is prone to dogmatism and authoritarianism; the latter can support dialogue, pluralism, and moral growth.

Another key part of Krishna's reconstruction is his challenge to the emotion/reason binary. *Bhakti* is usually treated as an affective mode, in contrast to the rational pursuit of knowledge. Krishna argues that this is a false dichotomy. Emotions can be intelligent, and rational commitments can be emotionally charged. He sees *bhakti* as a hybrid category—at once affective and intellectual, subjective and reflective. This allows *bhakti* to serve as a bridge between different modes of human experience, and not just a relic of pre-modern religiosity.¹³ Krishna's reconstruction also takes inspiration from the *Bhagavad Gītā* itself. While the *Gītā* is often cited to support devotional theism, Krishna notes that it also contains passages where action, knowledge, and devotion are treated as equally valid paths. Krishna interprets this pluralism as a clue that *bhakti* is not necessarily tied to one theological framework. Instead, it can be interpreted flexibly—as a category open to philosophical re-articulation in different contexts. Perhaps most provocatively, Krishna proposes that philosophy itself can be a form of *bhakti*. The long, patient, and passionate pursuit of truth, undertaken not for reward but for its own sake, resembles the structure of *bhakti*. Just as the devotee returns to the deity again and again, despite silence or struggle, the philosopher returns to the question, the concept, the argument—not out of habit, but out of care. This kind of intellectual *bhakti* is not a metaphor; it is a recognition that philosophical life itself requires devotion in the deepest sense.

In Krishna's hands, *bhakti* is no longer a devotional artifact belonging to a religious tradition. It becomes a philosophical stance, a way of being in the world. It allows us to explore what we care about, how we commit ourselves, and why some things matter more than others. This vision of *bhakti* is not confined to temples or rituals; it is available in classrooms, courtrooms, laboratories, and kitchens. Wherever there is care, concern, and a sense of the sacred in the secular, there is *bhakti*. He also combines *bhakti* with *jñāna*, saying, “The traditional opposition between *jñāna* and *bhakti* is itself suspect. True *bhakti* is not possible without knowledge, and knowledge is barren without the involvement which *bhakti* brings.”¹⁴ Through this reconstruction, Krishna opens the door to a new kind of Indian philosophy—

one that does not reject the past, but critically engages with it. His dialogical method encourages us not to repeat ancient formulas but to reinterpret them in light of present concerns. *Bhakti*, then, becomes not a historical concept to be studied from a distance, but a living possibility—a philosophical mode of devotion that invites participation, not just analysis.

***Bhakti* as Secular and Existential Devotion – Comparative Dialogues**

Having freed *bhakti* from its traditional theological constraints, Daya Krishna opens the way to a broader interpretation of the concept as a form of existential and secular commitment. This section explores that philosophical expansion by bringing Krishna's reconstruction of *bhakti* into dialogue with Western and modern Indian thinkers who similarly wrestled with questions of devotion, value, and meaning outside or beyond theistic frameworks. In doing so, we begin to see how *bhakti*, reimagined in this manner, becomes a cross-cultural philosophical category relevant to both ancient and modern contexts.

One of the closest analogues to Krishna's secular *bhakti* is Immanuel Kant's idea of moral reverence. In the *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant identifies a deep moral feeling like reverence that arises when one contemplates the moral law. This reverence is not fear of an external power but awe before the intrinsic authority of ethical duty. It is a rational effect; a feeling grounded in reason. Kant writes that the moral law "humbles every man when he compares it with the maxims of his own conduct."¹⁵ Daya Krishna, in his "Prolegomena to Any Future *Bhakti* Theory," implicitly echoes this thought when he suggests that *bhakti* can be directed toward ethical ideals rather than divine beings.¹⁶ In both Kant's moral philosophy and Krishna's reinterpretation, we see a shared structure: an unwavering commitment to something that commands our respect, demands our fidelity, and shapes our lives. Whether that object is moral law or a principle like justice, the orientation resembles devotion. But it is a devotion not born of theological dependence, but of rational concern. Thus, secular *bhakti* becomes possible—not as diminished spirituality but as elevated ethical seriousness.

Another relevant dialogue partner is Martin Heidegger, whose concept of *Sorge* (care) in *Being and Time* articulates the existential condition of human beings. For Heidegger, we are not primarily thinking beings but caring beings—*Dasein* is defined by its concerned involvement in the world. Our choices, our anxieties, our projects—all stem from this fundamental structure of care.¹⁷ Daya Krishna draws on this insight to argue that *bhakti* need not be directed toward a supernatural object. It can be understood as a mode of existential care—how we live with what matters most to us, how we respond to the call of value.¹⁸ *Bhakti* as care allows for a more grounded, humanistic understanding of devotion. A teacher devoted to her students, a doctor to her patients, a writer to her craft—these are secular forms of *bhakti* that involve long-term commitment, emotional engagement, and ethical responsibility. Krishna's interpretation validates these commitments, affirming that devotion is not the monopoly of the religious. It belongs wherever there are existential concern and ethical intentionality.

Closer to home, Daya Krishna's rethinking of *bhakti* finds resonance in modern Indian thinkers like Mahatma Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore. Gandhi, though religious in language, often articulated his devotion to *satya* (truth) in terms that transcended sectarian belief. His famous statement—"God is Truth" and later "Truth is God"—signals a movement from theism to ethical devotion.¹⁹ Gandhi's lifelong commitment to nonviolence (*ahimsā*), self-discipline, and political struggle was itself a kind of *bhakti*, directed not toward a deity but toward moral truth. Krishna appreciates this shift and considers it evidence that *bhakti* can survive outside ritual and myth, provided it remains grounded in moral seriousness.²⁰ Tagore, too, offers a rich reinterpretation of devotion. In *The Religion of Man*, Tagore speaks of the divinity within humanity, the sanctity of the human spirit, and the deep harmony between self and cosmos. His poetry celebrates not gods of myth but the beauty of everyday life—the farmer, the rain, the mother's touch.²¹ This orientation is deeply devotional, yet not narrowly theistic. For Tagore, *bhakti* is not a relationship with a supernatural being, but a form of aesthetic and ethical openness. Krishna draws inspiration from such visions to show how *bhakti* can manifest in civic life, in art, and in human relationships.²²

These examples point to a larger philosophical move: from *bhakti* as vertical submission (devotee to deity) to *bhakti* as horizontal commitment (subject to value, principle, or community). This transition is significant. It allows *bhakti* to operate in secular spaces—education, politics, ethics—where religious language may not be appropriate, but deep forms of commitment still persist. In this new frame, *bhakti* is about how one orients oneself toward what one finds most meaningful. It is not about the object (God, truth, art) but about the quality of the relation—sustained, serious, caring, and engaged. Importantly, Krishna does not deny the power of traditional devotional forms. He respects the beauty and cultural depth of *bhakti* poetry, the existential urgency of the *bhakti* saints, and the ethical insights of classical devotional traditions. What he challenges is the monopoly these traditions have claimed over the term. His project is not to secularize *bhakti* in the narrow sense but to pluralize it—to open it up to multiple meanings, including the secular, the philosophical, and the existential. He writes, "*Bhakti*, in its original sense, is not merely an emotional or devotional attitude, but a mode of existential involvement of the whole being in a relationship which transforms both the self and the other."²³

In this pluralized view, *bhakti* is compatible with rationality, autonomy, and ethical reflection. It no longer requires belief in divine command or submission to authority. It can be cultivated by anyone—believer, skeptic, or seeker. This is what makes Krishna's vision so compelling in today's world. As societies grow more diverse and less uniformly religious, the need for non-theistic languages of commitment becomes urgent. Krishna's *bhakti* offers one such language—rooted in Indian tradition, but open to global conversation. *Bhakti*, reimagined in this way, becomes a bridge between emotion and reason, between tradition and modernity, between philosophy and everyday life. It affirms that one can be deeply devoted

without being dogmatic, emotionally engaged without being irrational, and culturally rooted without being exclusive. In this sense, Krishna does not simply rehabilitate *bhakti*; he reclaims it as a vital category for a pluralistic and thoughtful world.

Relevance of Reimagined *Bhakti* for Contemporary Life

Daya Krishna's philosophical reinterpretation of *bhakti* does not merely offer an abstract revision of an ancient concept. Its true value lies in its capacity to speak to the pressing concerns of the modern world. When *bhakti* is decoupled from its exclusive association with religion and theism, it transforms into a universal category of meaningful commitment. This opens up a space where *bhakti* can operate not only in spiritual contexts but in moral, intellectual, social, and even political domains. In this section, we explore how Krishna's post-theistic, rational *bhakti* becomes especially relevant in contemporary life—marked by existential anxiety, moral pluralism, and the erosion of traditional forms of belonging.

One of the most salient features of modern life is fragmentation. Individuals are increasingly alienated from community, tradition, and sources of meaning. As secularism expands and organized religion recedes—especially in urban, globalized societies—many experiences a spiritual vacuum. Values like truth, justice, compassion, and integrity remain important, but the language to articulate commitment to them often feels inadequate. In such a climate, Krishna's reimagined *bhakti* offers a powerful vocabulary for care, concern, and meaningful orientation without requiring theological belief.²⁴ For example, a teacher deeply committed to nurturing her students' growth, who devotes time and care beyond formal requirements, embodies a kind of *bhakti*—not in the sense of religious devotion, but in sustained, reflective commitment to the value of education and human development. This *bhakti* is not ritualistic but ethical. It is not commanded by scripture but inspired by conscience. Similarly, a doctor who serves patients in underserved areas, or an activist who endures persecution in the fight for justice, can be seen as *bhaktas*—not of a god, but of their chosen cause.

This secular *bhakti* also has implications for how we think about citizenship and political engagement. In democracies around the world, the health of civic life depends not only on institutional design but on citizens' commitment to shared ideals. Patriotism, when stripped of chauvinism, can be a form of *bhakti*—devotion to the constitutional values of freedom, equality, and justice. Participating in public discourse with honesty, serving in communities, and defending the rights of the marginalized can all be expressions of philosophical *bhakti* as Krishna envisions it: rational, ethical, dialogical commitment.²⁵ Moreover, Krishna's vision of *bhakti* helps reframe the relationship between emotion and reason in public and personal life. Too often, public discourse either demands cold rationalism or indulges in unchecked emotionalism. *Bhakti*, reconceived as a fusion of deep feeling and reflective engagement, challenges this binary. It shows that commitment can be emotionally rich without becoming irrational, and intellectually rigorous without being emotionally detached. In an age of ideological polarization, this balanced

model of devotion can help cultivate a more thoughtful, empathetic, and principled mode of engagement.

In educational settings, Krishna's *bhakti* can re-enchant intellectual life. Students often feel disconnected from the subjects they study, viewing education as instrumental rather than meaningful. Teachers, too, may struggle with burnout or cynicism. Reviving the idea of intellectual *bhakti*—as devotion to truth, inquiry, and the life of the mind—can help restore a sense of purpose. Philosophy, science, and literature cease to be mere disciplines and become forms of engagement with what one finds ultimately important. *Bhakti* thus becomes a way of reclaiming education as a moral and existential practice. This perspective also has therapeutic and psychological significance. In contemporary life, individuals often struggle with questions of identity, direction, and purpose. *Bhakti*, redefined as existential concern, offers a response to this condition. Rather than prescribing dogma, it invites individuals to ask: What do I care about? What is worth my time, energy, and life? The process of answering these questions—of finding one's *bhakti*—is itself a therapeutic journey. It encourages self-discovery, ethical clarity, and emotional depth. Importantly, this view does not require uniformity. Krishna's *bhakti* is pluralistic. Different individuals can devote themselves to different values without conflict, so long as their commitments are grounded in reason and open to dialogue. This pluralism is especially crucial in a multicultural world where competing worldviews often collide. *Bhakti*, in this sense, becomes a shared form of life—expressed differently by different people, but united by the seriousness of care and the integrity of commitment.

The ecological crisis also invites *bhakti* in a new form: devotion to the earth. Movements for environmental protection often appeal to care, reverence, and stewardship. These are not just scientific concerns; they are moral and emotional ones. A *bhakta* of nature might live simply, advocate for conservation, or teach others about the interdependence of life. Again, this is not mythic worship but philosophical *bhakti*—a way of orienting one's life toward something greater than oneself, with humility and responsibility. Daya Krishna's model of *bhakti* also supports the idea of lifelong ethical formation. In classical *bhakti* traditions, the devotee matures over time—moving from ritual practice to deeper awareness, from emotional attachment to spiritual realization. Similarly, philosophical *bhakti* implies an evolving relationship with one's chosen values. Early commitments may shift, deepen, or refine. What matters is not fixity but fidelity: the willingness to keep returning, questioning, and affirming. This aligns closely with the Socratic tradition of the examined life, where devotion to wisdom is a lifelong pursuit.

Finally, Krishna's dialogical method ensures that *bhakti* remains open-ended. There is no final doctrine, no infallible authority. The *bhakta*, in this framework, is not a disciple who follows but a seeker who thinks, reflects, and dialogues. This emphasis on dialogue distinguishes Krishna's *bhakti* from blind faith and authoritarian religion. It invites community, conversation, and transformation.²⁶ In all these ways, reimagined *bhakti* provides a philosophical language for modern

life—a language of engagement without dogma, of seriousness without rigidity, of love without superstition. It preserves what is most vital in the traditional idea of devotion—intensity, fidelity, humility—while freeing it from the theological assumptions that may no longer speak to all people. As such, Daya Krishna's contribution is not only a reinterpretation of an ancient Indian concept but a reorientation of how we think about the very nature of commitment in an age of complexity. In a world hungry for meaning, his philosophical *bhakti* invites us to live thoughtfully, passionately, and with care.

Conclusion: *Bhakti* as a Way of Thoughtful Living

This paper has traced the philosophical journey of *bhakti*—from its classical theistic formulations to its radical reinterpretation by Daya Krishna as a category of existential, ethical, and secular concern. What emerges from this exploration is a concept no longer confined to devotional religion, but open to multiple modes of meaningful human engagement. Krishna's critical intervention allows *bhakti* to move beyond the realm of ritual and myth into that of reason, dialogue, and reflective commitment. In rethinking *bhakti*, Krishna does not merely critique its theistic foundations. Rather, he reclaims its existential core—its capacity to represent care, fidelity, and orientation toward that which one finds ultimately significant. By relocating *bhakti* from the temple to the world, from transcendence to immanence, Krishna invites us to see devotion not as blind surrender but as a thoughtful and ongoing concern for what truly matters.²⁷ This vision of *bhakti* is particularly urgent in the modern age. In an era marked by moral confusion, political polarization, ecological crisis, and cultural dislocation, the need for sustained, value-driven commitment is as strong as ever. Yet many traditional sources of meaning have eroded or lost credibility. Krishna's philosophical *bhakti* offers a bridge—a way to cultivate depth, responsibility, and passion without recourse to dogma.

Through Krishna's dialogical method, *bhakti* is no longer a fixed doctrine but a space for inquiry. It invites us to ask: What is worthy of devotion? What values should guide our actions? How do we sustain commitment in a world of change? These questions are not merely intellectual—they are existential. *Bhakti*, in this reimagined sense, becomes a path of living with care, of affirming value through action, and of returning again and again to the sources of our deepest concern.²⁸ This is the philosophical legacy Daya Krishna leaves behind. Not a system, but a method; not a dogma, but a challenge; not a closed worldview, but an open invitation to engage the world with seriousness, concern, and fidelity. In this sense, *bhakti* becomes a way of life—not in the narrow sense of a religious practice, but in the broader sense of a thoughtful, committed existence.

The Indian tradition has long valued the integration of thought and life—of philosophy and practice. Daya Krishna's reinterpretation of *bhakti* restores this integration, reminding us that philosophy need not be cold or abstract, and that devotion need not be irrational or uncritical. Between these poles lies a middle path—*bhakti* as a form of engaged, thoughtful living. In reclaiming *bhakti* for

philosophy, Krishna does more than expand the boundaries of Indian thought; he offers a model for how ancient concepts can be reinterpreted in the service of contemporary life. He demonstrates that intellectual traditions need not remain static; they can evolve, respond, and remain vital—so long as we are willing to think with care and live with fidelity.

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