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"BHAKTI AS ETHICAL PRACTICE IN THE BRAHMA VAIVARTA PURANA"

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ABSTRACT

This study examines *Bhakti* as an ethical practice in the *Brahma Vaivarta Purana*, highlighting how devotion is not presented merely as emotional attachment to the divine but as a lived moral discipline shaping everyday conduct. The Purana places Radha-Krishna devotion at the center of spiritual life and frames bhakti as a transformative force that refines character, relationships, and social responsibility. Through narratives, dialogues, and theological reflections, the text emphasizes virtues such as humility, compassion, self-restraint, fidelity, and selfless service as natural expressions of true devotion. Ethical behavior in the *Brahma Vaivarta Purana* does not arise from fear of punishment or rigid adherence to ritual law alone; rather, it emerges organically from loving surrender (*śaraṇāgati*) to the divine. Bhakti is portrayed as accessible to all, transcending caste, gender, and social status, thereby offering an inclusive moral vision grounded in empathy and mutual respect. The Purana also redefines dharma by aligning moral duty with inner devotion, suggesting that righteous action becomes effortless when motivated by love for God. In this way, bhakti functions as an inner ethical compass, guiding individuals toward harmony with themselves, society, and the cosmos. By interpreting devotion as an ethical practice, the *Brahma Vaivarta Purana* contributes a distinctive perspective to Hindu moral thought, where love-centered spirituality becomes the foundation of righteous living and social harmony.

KEYWORDS: Bhakti, Ethics, Brahma Vaivarta Purana, Dharma, Devotion, Moral Conduct, Radha-Krishna Tradition, Hindu Philosophy

INTRODUCTION

The concept of *bhakti* occupies a central place in the religious and philosophical landscape of Hinduism, where devotion to the divine is understood not only as a spiritual path but also as a guiding principle for ethical living. Among the vast corpus of Purāṇic literature, the *Brahma Vaivarta Purana* offers a distinctive and deeply affective vision of bhakti, particularly through its theological emphasis on Radha and Krishna. Unlike texts that primarily stress ritual observance or ascetic discipline, this Purana presents devotion as an all-encompassing way of life that shapes moral awareness, personal conduct, and social relationships. In this framework, bhakti is not confined to tem-

ple worship or scriptural recitation; it becomes an inner orientation that naturally expresses itself through ethical behavior. Exploring bhakti as an ethical practice in the *Brahma Vaivarta Purana* allows for a richer understanding of how devotion and morality are intertwined in devotional Hindu traditions.

The *Brahma Vaivarta Purana* belongs to the later phase of Purāṇic composition and reflects the growing influence of devotional movements that emphasized love and intimacy with the divine over formal ritualism. It reimagines cosmic creation itself as a transformation (*vaivarta*) rooted in divine play (*līlā*), with Krishna identified as the supreme reality and Radha as

the embodiment of devotional power. Within this theological vision, ethical life is not dictated by external codes alone but is shaped by one's emotional and spiritual relationship with God. The text repeatedly suggests that when the heart is filled with genuine devotion, moral virtues arise spontaneously. Qualities such as compassion, truthfulness, patience, humility, and generosity are portrayed as natural outcomes of loving surrender rather than obligations imposed by social or religious authority.

A significant ethical dimension of bhakti in the *Brahma Vaivarta Purana* lies in its inclusive spirit. The text

भक्तिर्मे परमा प्रीतिर्भक्तिर्मे परमं व्रतम् ।
भक्तिर्मे परमं ज्ञानं भक्तिर्मे परमं तपः ॥



LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholarly interest in *bhakti* (devotional devotion) as an ethical practice within Hindu scriptures has predominantly centered on major texts such as the *Bhagavata Purana* and the *Bhagavad Gita* rather than the *Brahma-Vaivarta Purana* itself. However, in recent years researchers have begun exploring how Purāṇic narratives integrate devotionism not only as a path to salvation but as a moral and social ethos shaping *dharma* (right conduct) and behavior. The *Brahma-Vaivarta Purana*, while less commonly the direct focus of contemporary journal articles, remains a critical text for understanding bhakti through its emphases on Radha-Krishna devotion and the ethical implications of divine love embedded in everyday life. According to Freeman Rocher and scholars who study Purāṇic history, this Purana includes multiple layers of ethical teaching alongside mythological and theological narratives, situating ethics within the bhakti paradigm rather than as an abstract legal code.

One of the more recent and relevant academic discussions on bhakti ethics, while not limited to *Brah-*

challenges rigid social hierarchies by affirming that devotion, not birth or status, determines spiritual worth. Women, lower castes, and those traditionally excluded from Vedic ritual life are portrayed as capable of attaining the highest spiritual and moral ideals through sincere devotion. This inclusivity carries important ethical implications, as it promotes dignity, equality, and respect within society. By grounding moral value in inner devotion rather than external identity, the Purana subtly critiques social discrimination and encourages a more compassionate and egalitarian moral outlook.

ma-Vaivarta Purana, is the article “The Principles of Bhakti Ethics in Hinduism” by Ida Bagus Gde Yudha Triguna, I Putu Suweka Oka Sugiharta, and Anak Agung Ngurah Gede Sadiartha (2025). This qualitative study articulates bhakti as an ethical framework characterized by compassion (*ahimsa*), empathy, sincere devotion (*lascarya*), respectful surrender to God, and service to other beings. The authors argue that true bhakti transcends ritualistic devotion to become an all-encompassing ethical orientation wherein *worship of God and respect for fellow beings are inseparable**. They emphasize that in Hindu thought, since all beings are manifestations of Brahman, bhakti naturally extends into ethical behavior toward others—a theme that echoes Purāṇic narratives where *relationship ethics* between devotees, community, and divine figures reinforce moral living.

While Triguna et al. provide a broader Hindu context, several researchers of Puranic literature have implicitly situated the *Brahma-Vaivarta Purana* within this bhakti-ethical framework. For example, academic work like “Exploring the Puranas: The Cul-

tural and Spiritual Tapestry of Hinduism” by Sanjay Koul (2024/2025) highlights how Purāṇas, including *Brahma-Vaivarta*, are repositories of moral teachings expressed through narrative rather than prescriptive ethical formulas. These texts use stories of deities, sages, and devotees to model dharmic conduct, making devotion a lived ethic. Scholars note that in *Brahma-Vaivarta*, the Radha–Krishna ethos underscores selfless love, loyalty, and surrender, which in lived religious contexts becomes a moral compass guiding behavior toward compassion, humility, and social harmony—core values of traditional Indian ethics.

Further, research on *bhakti* in Purāṇic contexts, such as studies on the *Bhagavata Purana*, confirm that devotion inherently includes moral conduct—described as “*worship without ulterior motive and with a kind disposition toward all*”—which reinforces ethical conduct not only toward the divine but toward society at large. Although this study (Kurmas Das et al., cited in mainstream scholarship) primarily focuses on the *Bhagavata Purana*, its conceptualization of *bhakti* as that which fosters universal compassion and contextual dharma is relevant for understanding ethical threads in *Brahma-Vaivarta Purana* as well.

Another important dimension of recent research is the recognition of *Brahma-Vaivarta Purana* as a text deeply interwoven with devotional theology which raises ethical implications about social roles and duties, including references to the duties of individuals through stages of life (*ashramas*) and their righteous conduct. Rocher (2014) and Hazra (1987), in their historical analyses of this Purana, suggest that later additions to the text reflect *smṛiti*-style ethical content (like duties of women, varna, and individual conduct), suggesting that devotion in this text operates hand-in-hand with social ethics.

Finally, while there is a noticeable gap in direct contemporary journal articles specifically analyzing *bhakti* ethics solely within *Brahma-Vaivarta Purana*, recent research trends in comparative Puranic ethics and Bhakti studies strongly indicate that devotion is neither merely mystical nor purely personal. Instead, *bhakti* in this text emerges as an ethical lens through which devotees are expected to align their conduct with ideals of compassion, humility, and service—making *bhakti* an ethical practice woven into the

moral fabric of Purāṇic devotion.

UNDERSTANDING BHAKTI AS ETHICAL PRACTICE IN THE *BRAHMA VAIVARTA PURANA*

To understand *bhakti* as an ethical practice in the *Brahma Vaivarta Purana*, it is necessary to move beyond the common assumption that devotion belongs only to the inner, emotional, or ritual sphere of religion. In this Purana, *bhakti* functions as a comprehensive way of life that reshapes how individuals think, act, and relate to others. Devotion is not portrayed as a passive feeling directed toward God but as an active force that disciplines the mind and guides moral behavior. The text repeatedly suggests that when devotion becomes sincere and all-encompassing, ethical conduct arises naturally, without coercion or fear. In this sense, *bhakti* becomes a living ethical framework rooted in love rather than obligation.

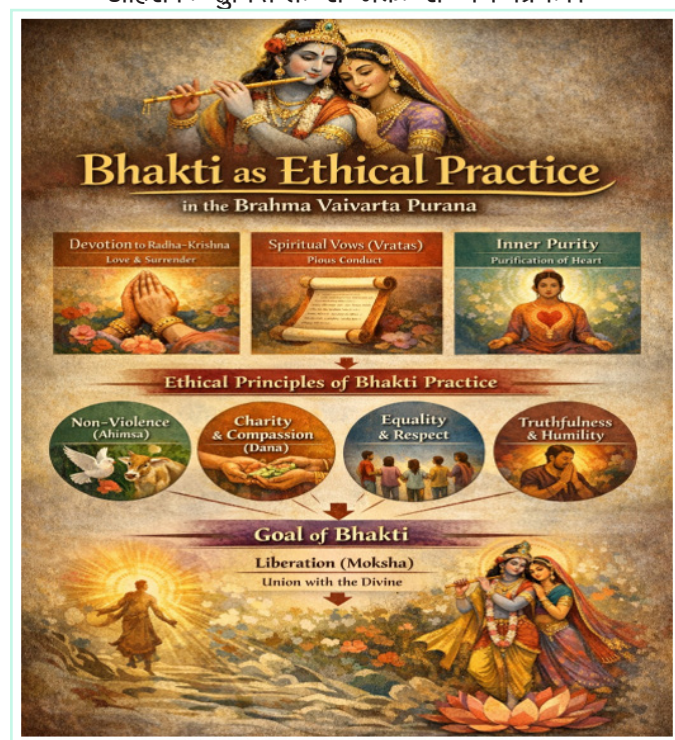
The *Brahma Vaivarta Purana* presents Krishna as the supreme reality and Radha as the highest embodiment of devotion. Their relationship establishes the ethical tone of the text, emphasizing qualities such as loyalty, selflessness, emotional honesty, and mutual care. Radha’s devotion is not expressed through ascetic withdrawal or ritual precision but through total inner surrender. This surrender, however, is not portrayed as weakness; instead, it is a source of moral strength that enables her to transcend ego, desire, and social limitations. Through Radha’s example, the text communicates an important ethical lesson: true devotion dissolves selfish motivations and replaces them with compassion and self-giving love. Ethical behavior, therefore, is understood as the outward expression of an inward transformation brought about by *bhakti*.

A key aspect of *bhakti* as ethical practice in the *Brahma Vaivarta Purana* is its emphasis on intention (*bhāva*) rather than mere action. The Purana repeatedly highlights that actions acquire moral value through the consciousness with which they are performed. Rituals, charitable acts, and social duties are meaningful only when infused with devotion. Without *bhakti*, even correct actions are considered empty or spiritually ineffective. This focus on inner motivation aligns ethical life with emotional and spiritual integ-

urity, encouraging individuals to cultivate sincerity, humility, and awareness in their daily conduct. Ethics, in this context, is not a rigid code but a reflection of one's inner relationship with the divine.

The text also presents bhakti as a powerful ethical equalizer within society. By affirming that devotion alone determines spiritual and moral worth, the *Brahma Vaivarta Purana* challenges hierarchical structures based on caste, gender, or social status. Devotees from all backgrounds are depicted as capable of attaining the highest spiritual realization through sincere love for Krishna. This inclusive vision carries ethical implications that extend beyond theology, fostering values of equality, respect, and empathy. By locating ethical authority within the heart rather than social position, the Purana encourages a moral outlook that resists discrimination and promotes social harmony.

मदभक्तः सर्वभूतेषु दयालुर्निष्प्रपञ्चकः ।
अहिंसकः शुचिर्दान्तः स भक्तः स मम प्रियः ॥



EVALUATION AND METHODOLOGY

The evaluation of bhakti as an ethical practice in the *Brahma Vaivarta Purana* requires a careful methodological approach that respects the literary, theological, and cultural nature of the text. Rather than reading the Purana solely as a mythological or devotional work, this study approaches it as a source of ethical

reflection embedded within narrative, symbolism, and theological discourse. The methodology adopted is primarily qualitative and interpretative, drawing upon textual analysis to understand how moral values are communicated through stories, metaphors, and devotional ideals. This approach allows ethical meaning to emerge organically from the text, avoiding the imposition of external moral frameworks that may distort its devotional context.

The first methodological step involves close reading of selected passages from the *Brahma Vaivarta Purana*, particularly those related to Radha-Krishna theology, descriptions of ideal devotees, and discussions of devotion in relation to dharma. Attention is given not only to explicit moral statements but also to the implicit ethical messages conveyed through character behavior and narrative outcomes. By examining how devotion shapes actions and relationships within the text, this method highlights the subtle ways in which ethical norms are embedded in devotional practice. This narrative-based analysis is especially important because Purāṇic literature often communicates values indirectly, relying on exemplars rather than abstract moral reasoning.

A comparative interpretative method further strengthens the evaluation. Bhakti in the *Brahma Vaivarta Purana* is examined in relation to broader Hindu ethical concepts such as dharma, karma, and mokṣa, as well as in comparison with other bhakti-oriented texts. This allows for an assessment of what is distinctive about the ethical vision of this Purana. While many Hindu texts emphasize duty and social order, the *Brahma Vaivarta Purana* foregrounds love and emotional surrender as primary ethical forces. Evaluating this shift helps clarify how bhakti reorients moral life from external regulation toward internal transformation. The comparative approach also reveals how this text contributes to the wider bhakti tradition by offering a more intimate and relational understanding of ethics.

From an evaluative perspective, the ethical model presented in the *Brahma Vaivarta Purana* demonstrates both strengths and limitations. One of its most significant strengths lies in its emphasis on intention and inner disposition. By locating ethical value in sincerity and devotion, the text promotes au-

thenticity, compassion, and moral sensitivity. Ethical behavior becomes meaningful because it arises from love rather than fear or obligation. This approach has enduring relevance, as it encourages self-reflection and emotional responsibility in moral decision-making. Additionally, the inclusive nature of bhakti ethics, which transcends caste and gender distinctions, offers a powerful moral critique of social inequality and affirms the dignity of all devotees.

However, the evaluation also requires a critical awareness of potential limitations. The intense inward focus of bhakti may, at times, risk underemphasizing structured social responsibility or collective ethical action. While personal transformation is central, the text does not always provide clear guidance for addressing complex social injustices or institutional ethics. The moral framework is deeply personal and relational, which can be both its strength and its constraint. Recognizing this balance allows for a nuanced evaluation that appreciates the ethical depth of bhakti while acknowledging the historical and devotional context in which the text was composed.

Another important methodological consideration involves interpreting the symbolic language of the Purana. The relationship between Radha and Krishna, often expressed in poetic and emotional terms, must be read symbolically rather than literally to uncover its ethical significance. The methodology therefore employs a contextual and allegorical reading, understanding divine love as a metaphor for selfless commitment, moral discipline, and emotional integrity. This approach prevents misinterpretation and enables a deeper appreciation of how devotion functions as an ethical ideal.

CONCLUSION & FINDINGS

The exploration of bhakti as an ethical practice in the *Brahma Vaivarta Purana* reveals that devotion, as presented in this text, is far more than an act of worship or emotional attachment to the divine. It emerges as a deeply transformative moral force that shapes individual character, social relationships, and spiritual consciousness. One of the most significant findings of this study is that the Purana consistently presents ethical living as a natural outcome of sincere devotion rather than as obedience to external rules or fear of divine punishment. By placing love

for Krishna at the center of moral life, the text offers an ethical vision grounded in inner transformation, where moral behavior flows spontaneously from a heart oriented toward the divine.

A key conclusion drawn from this analysis is that the *Brahma Vaivarta Purana* redefines the relationship between bhakti and dharma. Instead of treating dharma solely as social duty or ritual obligation, the text aligns righteousness with devotion and inner intention. Ethical action gains meaning when it is motivated by love and performed without selfish desire. This devotional reinterpretation of dharma shifts moral responsibility from rigid conformity to heartfelt participation in divine will. The Purana thus presents an ethical framework that values sincerity, humility, and emotional integrity over outward compliance, making morality more personal and accessible.

Another important finding concerns the inclusive nature of bhakti ethics in the *Brahma Vaivarta Purana*. The text repeatedly affirms that devotion transcends social hierarchies, granting spiritual and moral authority to individuals regardless of caste, gender, or social status. This inclusivity carries profound ethical implications, as it promotes equality, dignity, and mutual respect within society. By locating ethical worth in inner devotion rather than external identity, the Purana challenges discriminatory practices and offers a moral vision rooted in compassion and shared humanity. This aspect of bhakti ethics remains especially relevant in contemporary discussions on social justice and ethical inclusiveness.

The central role of Radha-Krishna devotion further highlights the ethical depth of bhakti in the Purana. Their relationship functions as a symbolic and emotional model of selfless love, loyalty, and surrender. Radha's devotion exemplifies an ethical ideal marked by self-transcendence and unwavering commitment, while Krishna's response reflects grace and moral reciprocity. Through these narratives, the text teaches that ethical excellence arises not from moral calculation but from deep emotional attunement and self-giving love. This finding underscores the Purana's unique contribution to Hindu ethics, where emotional depth and moral responsibility are inseparable.

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