



Bhakti Philosophy of Madhusudana Saraswati: A Critical Evaluation of Bhakti Rasayana

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Abstract

The philosophy of bhakti occupies a significant place in the Indian spiritual and philosophical tradition, particularly within the broader framework of Vedānta. Among the later Advaita philosophers, Madhusudana Saraswati emerged as one of the most influential thinkers who sought to harmonise devotional spirituality with non-dual metaphysics. His celebrated work *Bhakti Rasayana* represents a remarkable synthesis of Advaita Vedānta and Krishna-bhakti, where devotion is elevated from a preparatory discipline to an independent and supreme path toward spiritual realisation. The present study critically examines the philosophical foundations, theological implications, and spiritual significance of Madhusudana Saraswati's bhakti philosophy as reflected in *Bhakti Rasayana*. The study analyses how Madhusudana reinterpreted bhakti as *parama-puruṣārtha* (the highest human goal) and argued that devotion culminates in the direct realisation of Brahman through divine love and spiritual ecstasy. It further explores his innovative integration of *jñāna* and bhakti, his identification of Lord Krishna with *Nirguṇa* Brahman, and his reinterpretation of *mokṣa* as a blissful state infused with devotion. The research is qualitative and philosophical in nature and employs analytical, descriptive, and interpretative methods based on primary and secondary textual sources. The findings reveal that Madhusudana Saraswati significantly expanded the scope of classical Advaita Vedānta by incorporating emotional spirituality, divine grace, and devotional consciousness into non-dual philosophy. His thought contributed to the democratisation of spirituality by making spiritual realisation accessible to ordinary devotees beyond intellectual and ascetic circles. The study also highlights certain philosophical tensions within his synthesis, particularly concerning the coexistence of devotional duality and non-dual realisation. Nevertheless, Madhusudana's integrative vision remains highly relevant in contemporary discussions on religious harmony, spiritual pluralism, and the relationship between faith and rationality. Thus, *Bhakti Rasayana* continues to stand as a timeless contribution to Indian philosophy and devotional theology.

Keywords: Bhakti, Advaita Vedānta, Madhusudana Saraswati, Bhakti Rasayana, Krishna-bhakti, Non-dualism

Introduction

Indian philosophy has long been concerned with fundamental existential questions regarding the nature of reality, the purpose of human life, liberation (*mokṣa*), and the relationship between the individual self (*ātman*) and

the Supreme Reality (*Brahman*). From the Vedic and Upaniṣadic periods onward, Indian thinkers developed diverse philosophical systems to explain the origin of the universe, the nature of consciousness, and the means of attaining spiritual liberation. Among the various schools of Indian philosophy, Advaita Vedānta, systematically developed by Adi Shankaracharya, emerged as one of the most influential and intellectually sophisticated traditions. Advaita emphasised non-dualism, asserting that Brahman alone is ultimately real, while the phenomenal world is a manifestation of *māyā* or illusion. According to this philosophy, ignorance (*avidyā*) creates the false perception of individuality and multiplicity, and liberation can only be attained through true knowledge (*jñāna*) of the identity between *ātman* and Brahman. Consequently, classical Advaita Vedānta primarily emphasised renunciation, scriptural study, meditation, and metaphysical inquiry as the essential means to liberation. Emotional and devotional practices were generally considered secondary or preparatory disciplines meant to purify the mind before attaining higher knowledge.

Medieval India witnessed the emergence and widespread influence of bhakti movements that emphasised personal devotion, divine love, surrender, and emotional communion with God as the primary means of spiritual realisation. These movements challenged the exclusiveness of purely intellectual spirituality and opened the path of liberation to ordinary devotees irrespective of caste, social status, or scholarly background. It was within this rich religious and philosophical environment that Madhusudana Saraswati emerged as an extraordinary philosopher and theologian. Although he remained firmly committed to Advaita Vedānta, he was also an ardent devotee of Lord Krishna and sought to harmonise bhakti with non-dual metaphysics. His philosophical contribution is especially significant because he attempted to demonstrate that devotion and non-dual realisation are not contradictory but complementary aspects of spiritual life. Through his famous work *Bhakti Rasayana*, Madhusudana presented bhakti not merely as a preparatory practice but as an independent and supreme spiritual path capable of leading directly to Brahman-realisation. He argued that intense devotion purifies the heart, dissolves ego-consciousness, and ultimately culminates in the realisation of non-dual reality. By identifying Krishna with Nirguṇa Brahman, Madhusudana elevated devotional experience to the highest metaphysical level and created a profound synthesis between Advaita Vedānta and Vaiṣṇava devotional traditions.

Madhusudana Saraswati's philosophy represents an important turning point in the development of post-Śaṅkara Advaita Vedānta. His reinterpretation of bhakti expanded the scope of Advaita by incorporating emotional spirituality, divine grace, and devotional bliss into a tradition previously dominated by intellectualism and asceticism. His ideas also contributed significantly to making spiritual realisation more inclusive and accessible to common devotees. At the same time, his philosophical synthesis generated important debates concerning the compatibility of devotion and non-dualism, particularly regarding the coexistence of the devotee-God relationship within an ultimately non-dual reality. Despite these philosophical tensions, *Bhakti Rasayana* remains one of the most creative and influential works in Indian philosophical and theological literature. Therefore, the

present study critically examines the philosophical foundations, theological implications, and spiritual significance of *Bhakti Rasayana*, with particular emphasis on Madhusudana Saraswati's synthesis of devotion and Advaita metaphysics and its relevance within the broader context of Indian philosophy and spirituality.

Conceptual Framework of Bhakti in Madhusudana Saraswati

Bhakti as Supreme Bliss

One of the central philosophical arguments in *Bhakti Rasayana* is that bhakti is not subordinate to jñāna (knowledge), but itself represents the highest spiritual bliss (*ānanda*). Traditional Advaita Vedānta generally considers devotion as a preparatory means for attaining self-knowledge. However, Madhusudana Saraswati challenged this idea by asserting that devotion is an independent and supreme spiritual experience. According to him, when the heart of the devotee becomes purified through constant remembrance and surrender to God, divine consciousness manifests directly within the devotee. Since Brahman or God is characterised by infinite bliss, the experience of devotion naturally becomes blissful. Thus, bhakti is not merely emotional attachment to God but a transcendental experience that leads to spiritual fulfilment and divine ecstasy. Madhusudana, therefore, elevated bhakti to the level of *parama-ṣuṣārtha* (the highest goal of human life).

Integration of Jñāna and Bhakti

A unique aspect of Madhusudana Saraswati's philosophy is his successful integration of jñāna and bhakti. Earlier Advaita philosophers often emphasised intellectual realisation and regarded devotion as secondary. On the other hand, many devotional schools maintained a dualistic distinction between God and the devotee. Madhusudana attempted to reconcile these seemingly contradictory positions. He argued that true devotion ultimately culminates in non-dual realisation. According to him, intense love for God gradually removes ego, ignorance, and worldly attachment, leading the devotee toward the realisation of the unity of *ātman* and Brahman. In this sense, bhakti becomes both the means and expression of ultimate knowledge. He therefore viewed jñāna and bhakti not as opposing paths but as complementary dimensions of spiritual realisation. This synthesis made Advaita Vedānta more emotionally appealing and spiritually inclusive.

Krishna as Nirguṇa Brahman

Madhusudana Saraswati made a remarkable theological contribution by identifying Lord Krishna with Nirguṇa Brahman, the ultimate formless and attributeless reality of Advaita Vedānta. Classical Advaita generally considered personal deities (*saguṇa Brahman*) as lower manifestations of the supreme impersonal Brahman. Madhusudana, however, elevated Krishna devotion to the highest metaphysical level. He argued that devotion to Krishna is not merely worship of a personal God but direct communion with the supreme absolute reality itself. Through this interpretation, he brought together the emotional devotion of Vaiṣṇavism and the metaphysical monism of Advaita. This synthesis was highly innovative because it preserved the devotional intimacy between

devotee and God while simultaneously affirming non-dual realisation. His philosophy, therefore, created a bridge between Advaita Vedānta and Krishna-bhakti traditions.

Bhakti and Mokṣa

In traditional Advaita Vedānta, mokṣa (liberation) is primarily understood as the destruction of ignorance through self-knowledge. Liberation is often described as a state beyond all forms of duality, emotion, and relational experience. Madhusudana Saraswati reinterpreted this concept by incorporating devotional bliss into the liberated state. According to him, liberation does not eliminate devotion; rather, devotion continues even after the realisation of Brahman. The liberated soul experiences eternal delight in divine love and devotion. This interpretation gave mokṣa a more positive and emotionally rich dimension compared to earlier Advaitic descriptions of pure consciousness. Madhusudana thus transformed liberation from a purely intellectual realisation into a spiritually dynamic and blissful communion with the divine. His interpretation also made the concept of mokṣa more relatable and attractive to ordinary devotees who sought emotional connection with God alongside philosophical understanding.

Related Literature Review

Lance E. Nelson's seminal study *Bhakti in Advaita Vedanta: A Translation and Study of Madhusudana Saraswati's Bhaktirasayana* remains one of the most authoritative works on the subject. Nelson critically examined the philosophical structure of *Bhakti Rasayana* and highlighted Madhusudana Saraswati's attempt to redefine bhakti as the highest spiritual realisation rather than merely a preparatory means to attain jñāna. The study emphasised that Madhusudana successfully integrated devotional spirituality within the non-dualistic framework of Advaita Vedānta. Nelson further observed that devotion, according to Madhusudana, culminates in the direct realisation of Brahman through divine love and spiritual ecstasy.

Saha. N analysed the concepts of *saguṇa* and *nirguṇa bhakti* in Madhusudana Saraswati's philosophy. His study demonstrated how Madhusudana philosophically reconciled devotion to a personal God, especially Lord Krishna, with the Advaitic concept of nirguṇa Brahman. Saha argued that Madhusudana's interpretation transformed Krishna-bhakti into a higher metaphysical realisation rather than limiting it to emotional worship. The study also emphasised the influence of Vaiṣṇava devotional traditions on post-Śaṅkara Advaita philosophy.

D. Loundo explored the relationship between reason (*jñāna*) and devotion (*bhakti*) in Madhusudana Saraswati's interpretation of the *Bhagavad Gītā*. Loundo pointed out that Madhusudana did not reject Advaitic rationalism; rather, he reshaped it through devotional consciousness. According to the study, Madhusudana viewed bhakti and jñāna as complementary spiritual paths that ultimately lead to the same non-dual realisation. Loundo also highlighted the role of spiritual emotion and surrender in transcending purely intellectual understanding.

S. Dasgupta, study *A History of Indian Philosophy*, discussed the evolution of Advaita Vedānta and briefly referred to Madhusudana Saraswati as a major figure in the later development of Advaitic thought. Dasgupta observed

that Madhusudana's philosophical contribution lay in harmonising emotional devotion with strict metaphysical monism. He further noted that this synthesis represented an important transformation within medieval Indian philosophy, where devotional spirituality became philosophically respectable within Advaita traditions.

S. N. Gupta explores his study, *Advaita Vedānta and Vaiṣṇavism: The Philosophy of Madhusūdana Sarasvatī*, which examines the theological and philosophical dimensions of Madhusudana's works. Gupta argued that Madhusudana attempted to establish a bridge between Advaita Vedānta and Vaiṣṇava bhakti traditions by presenting Krishna as the embodiment of supreme Brahman. The study highlighted that Madhusudana's devotional Advaita was not a rejection of Śaṅkara's philosophy but rather an expansion that incorporated emotional and devotional experiences into non-dual realisation.

Research Gap

Existing studies primarily focus either on Madhusudana Saraswati's Advaitic philosophy or on his devotional orientation separately. Limited research has critically examined how *Bhakti Rasayana* systematically integrates non-dual metaphysics with emotional devotion. Moreover, there is insufficient discussion regarding the contemporary relevance of his synthesis in the context of spiritual pluralism and modern religious discourse. This study seeks to address these gaps through a comprehensive philosophical evaluation.

Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the philosophical foundations of *Bhakti Rasayana*.
2. To analyse Madhusudana Saraswati's synthesis of bhakti and Advaita Vedānta.
3. To critically evaluate the concept of bhakti as *parama-puruṣārtha*.
4. To explore the theological and spiritual implications of his philosophy.
5. To assess the contemporary relevance of Madhusudana's devotional non-dualism.

Research Questions

1. How does Madhusudana Saraswati define bhakti in *Bhakti Rasayana*?
2. In what ways does he reconcile bhakti with Advaita Vedānta?
3. Why does he regard bhakti as the supreme human goal?
4. What are the major philosophical strengths and limitations of his theory?
5. How is his philosophy relevant in the contemporary spiritual context?

Methodology of the Study

The present study is qualitative and philosophical in nature. It employs analytical, descriptive, and interpretative methods. Primary sources include *Bhakti Rasayana*, *Bhagavad Gītā*, and selected Advaitic texts. Secondary sources

include books, journal articles, dissertations, and scholarly commentaries related to Madhusudana Saraswati and Advaita Vedānta.

The study follows textual analysis to interpret the philosophical doctrines embedded in *Bhakti Rasayana*. Comparative analysis is also used to distinguish Madhusudana's ideas from classical Advaita and Vaiṣṇava traditions.

Result and Discussion

1. Reconciliation of Devotion and Non-Dualism

The study reveals that Madhusudana Saraswati successfully reconciled bhakti with Advaita Vedānta without rejecting the fundamental principles of non-dualism. Classical Advaita philosophy mainly emphasised self-knowledge (*jñāna*) as the only path to liberation and often regarded devotion as a secondary or preparatory practice. Madhusudana challenged this rigid distinction by presenting bhakti as a direct spiritual experience leading to Brahman-realisation. According to him, intense devotion purifies the mind and removes ego-consciousness, thereby enabling the devotee to realise the non-dual nature of reality. In this way, bhakti becomes not merely emotional worship but a transformative spiritual discipline that culminates in self-realisation.

2. Philosophical Innovation

Madhusudana Saraswati's interpretation of bhakti as *parama-puruṣārtha* (the highest human goal) represents a major philosophical innovation in Advaita Vedānta. Earlier Advaitins generally considered liberation through knowledge superior to devotional practices. Madhusudana, however, elevated devotion to the same status as ultimate knowledge and even described it as the highest form of spiritual fulfilment. This reinterpretation expanded the scope of Advaita philosophy by integrating emotional and devotional dimensions into metaphysical inquiry. His philosophy, therefore, introduced a more inclusive spiritual path that appealed to both intellectual seekers and ordinary devotees.

3. Influence of Bhāgavata Tradition

The influence of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* is clearly visible in *Bhakti Rasayana*. Madhusudana Saraswati adopted the devotional spirit of Krishna-bhakti that characterises the Bhāgavata tradition. The emotional intensity, surrender, divine love, and ecstatic devotion found in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* significantly shaped his philosophical outlook. Through this influence, he emphasised that love for Krishna is not merely symbolic worship but a genuine spiritual realisation of the Supreme Reality. This devotional orientation allowed him to merge Advaitic philosophy with the emotional spirituality of Vaiṣṇava traditions.

4. Democratisation of Spirituality

Madhusudana Saraswati's synthesis of bhakti and Advaita made spirituality more accessible to ordinary people. Pure philosophical inquiry and metaphysical reasoning were often limited to scholars, ascetics, and intellectual elites who possessed deep scriptural knowledge. Bhakti, however, provided a simpler and more universal

spiritual path based on love, surrender, and devotion to God. By legitimising devotion within Advaita Vedānta, Madhusudana opened the possibility of spiritual liberation to common devotees irrespective of their educational or philosophical background. His approach, therefore, contributed to the democratisation of spirituality in medieval Indian religious thought.

5. Internal Philosophical Tension

Despite its originality and depth, Madhusudana Saraswati's philosophy contains certain internal tensions. Some scholars argue that complete non-dualism leaves little room for genuine devotional duality between devotee and God. If the individual self and Brahman are ultimately identical, then the distinction necessary for devotion may disappear at the highest stage of realisation. This raises an important philosophical question regarding how devotion can continue in a fully non-dual state. Although Madhusudana attempted to resolve this tension by describing devotion as a blissful expression of realised consciousness, debates regarding the compatibility of bhakti and Advaita continue among scholars.

6. Contemporary Relevance

The integrative nature of Madhusudana Saraswati's philosophy offers valuable insights for the contemporary world. In modern times, religion is often divided between intellectual philosophy and emotional spirituality. Madhusudana's thought demonstrates that reason and devotion are not mutually exclusive but can complement each other in spiritual life. His philosophy also promotes religious harmony and spiritual pluralism by showing that multiple paths may lead to the same ultimate truth. Furthermore, his synthesis of knowledge and devotion remains relevant for contemporary discussions on interfaith dialogue, inclusive spirituality, and the relationship between faith and rationality.

Major Findings

1. *Bhakti Rasayana* Presents Bhakti as an Independent and Supreme Spiritual Path

The study finds that Madhusudana Saraswati did not treat bhakti merely as a supporting practice for attaining knowledge, as was commonly done in traditional Advaita Vedānta. Instead, he established devotion as an independent and complete spiritual path capable of leading directly to liberation. In *Bhakti Rasayana*, bhakti is described as the highest form of spiritual realisation because it unites the devotee with the divine through love, surrender, and inner transformation. This interpretation significantly elevated the status of devotion within Indian philosophical thought.

2. Madhusudana Saraswati Synthesised Advaita Metaphysics with Krishna Devotion in a Unique Manner

Another important finding is that Madhusudana Saraswati successfully combined the non-dual metaphysics of Advaita Vedānta with intense devotion to Lord Krishna. Classical Advaita generally emphasised the impersonal and attributeless Brahman, while Krishna devotion belonged mainly to Vaiṣṇava devotional traditions.

Madhusudana created a philosophical bridge between these two traditions by identifying Krishna with the ultimate non-dual reality. This synthesis was unique because it allowed emotional devotion and metaphysical monism to coexist harmoniously.

3. His Philosophy Expanded the Scope of Classical Advaita Vedānta

The research also reveals that Madhusudana's philosophy broadened the intellectual and spiritual scope of classical Advaita Vedānta. Earlier Advaitic thinkers focused mainly on self-knowledge, renunciation, and intellectual inquiry. Madhusudana expanded this framework by incorporating emotional devotion, divine love, and spiritual surrender into the Advaitic tradition. As a result, Advaita Vedānta became more spiritually inclusive and relatable to a wider community of practitioners beyond scholarly and ascetic circles.

4. Bhakti Was Interpreted Not Merely as Worship but as the direct realisation of Brahman

A major philosophical contribution of *Bhakti Rasayana* is the reinterpretation of bhakti as a direct realisation of Brahman rather than simple ritual worship or emotional expression. Madhusudana argued that true devotion leads to the dissolution of ego and ignorance, enabling the devotee to experience the ultimate unity of self and Brahman. Thus, bhakti becomes a transformative spiritual consciousness through which divine reality is directly experienced. This interpretation gave devotion a deeper metaphysical significance within Advaita philosophy.

5. His Thought Contributed Significantly to the Democratisation of Spiritual Experience

The study further finds that Madhusudana Saraswati's philosophy made spiritual realisation more accessible to ordinary people. Pure metaphysical inquiry often required advanced scriptural learning and intellectual discipline, which were limited to a small group of scholars and ascetics. Bhakti, however, offered a universal spiritual path based on love, faith, and devotion that could be practised by people from different social and educational backgrounds. By validating devotion within Advaita Vedānta, Madhusudana contributed to the democratisation of spirituality and widened participation in religious life.

6. The Work Remains Philosophically Relevant in Contemporary Discussions of Spirituality and Religious Harmony

The findings indicate that *Bhakti Rasayana* continues to hold relevance in contemporary philosophical and spiritual discussions. Madhusudana's integration of reason and devotion demonstrates that intellectual inquiry and emotional spirituality can complement one another. His philosophy also supports ideas of religious tolerance and spiritual pluralism by acknowledging multiple approaches to ultimate truth. In the modern world, where conflicts often arise between rationalism and faith, Madhusudana's synthesis provides a balanced framework for understanding spirituality more inclusively and harmoniously.

Recommendations

1. Universities should incorporate Madhusudana Saraswati's philosophy into advanced Indian philosophy curricula.
2. Comparative studies between Advaita and Bhakti traditions should be encouraged.

3. More English translations and critical editions of *Bhakti Rasayana* should be published.
4. Interdisciplinary research connecting philosophy, theology, and psychology may further enrich the understanding of devotional consciousness.
5. Scholars should explore the relevance of devotional non-dualism in contemporary spiritual practices.

Scope for Future Research

The present study opens several important avenues for future research in the field of Indian philosophy and devotional studies. Future scholars may undertake a comparative analysis between Madhusudana Saraswati and Ramanujacharya to examine similarities and differences in their understanding of devotion, liberation, and the relationship between God and the individual self. Further research may also explore the development of bhakti within post-Śaṅkara Advaita traditions to understand how later Advaitins incorporated devotional spirituality into non-dual philosophy. Another significant area of study could be the influence of Madhusudana Saraswati's devotional Advaita on Bengali bhakti movements and regional devotional traditions. Researchers may additionally investigate the psychological dimensions of devotional experience described in *Bhakti Rasayana*, particularly the emotional transformation, spiritual ecstasy, and inner consciousness associated with bhakti. Comparative theological studies between Hindu bhakti traditions and mystical traditions of other religions, such as Sufism, Christian mysticism, and Buddhist devotional practices, may also provide deeper insights into universal dimensions of spirituality, divine love, and religious experience.

Conclusion

Madhusudana Saraswati occupies a unique and highly significant position in the history of Indian philosophy because he successfully attempted to reconcile the metaphysical principles of Advaita Vedānta with the emotional and spiritual dimensions of bhakti. Through his celebrated work *Bhakti Rasayana*, he challenged the rigid intellectual orientation traditionally associated with classical Advaita philosophy, which generally regarded self-knowledge (*jñāna*) as the sole means to liberation. Madhusudana argued that devotion (*bhakti*) is not merely a preliminary discipline intended to purify the mind but an independent and supreme spiritual path capable of leading directly to ultimate realisation. By identifying Lord Krishna with Nirguṇa Brahman, the supreme non-dual reality, he elevated Krishna devotion to the highest metaphysical status and established a profound synthesis between Advaita Vedānta and Vaiṣṇava devotional traditions. This innovative interpretation enriched Advaita philosophy by incorporating divine love, surrender, emotional spirituality, and devotional bliss into a tradition that had previously emphasised renunciation and intellectual inquiry. Consequently, spirituality became more inclusive and accessible not only to scholars and ascetics but also to ordinary devotees who sought liberation through faith, love, and devotion. His philosophy, therefore, contributed significantly to the democratisation of spiritual experience in medieval Indian religious thought.

Madhusudana Saraswati's philosophy presents a broader and more balanced vision of harmony between reason and devotion, intellect and emotion, and philosophy and spirituality. His reinterpretation of bhakti as a direct realisation of Brahman transformed the traditional understanding of mokṣa by infusing liberation with devotional consciousness, divine grace, and spiritual ecstasy. Although certain philosophical tensions remain unresolved, particularly regarding how devotional duality between devotee and God can coexist with the Advaitic doctrine of non-duality, his integrative approach remains one of the most creative and influential developments in post-Śaṅkara Advaita Vedānta. His thought demonstrates that knowledge and devotion are not contradictory but complementary paths that ultimately lead to the same supreme truth. In the contemporary world, where conflicts frequently arise between rationalism and faith, philosophy and religion, or intellectualism and emotional spirituality, Madhusudana's teachings provide a deeply relevant and inclusive spiritual framework. His synthesis of bhakti and Advaita continues to inspire scholars, theologians, and spiritual seekers by promoting religious harmony, spiritual pluralism, and a holistic understanding of human spiritual experience. Thus, *Bhakti Rasayana* remains a timeless philosophical and theological masterpiece whose relevance extends beyond its historical context into contemporary discussions on spirituality, devotion, and interreligious understanding.

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