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Prahlāda In Śrīmad Bhāgavatam: Symbol Of Devotion And Fearlessness

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Abstract: The Śrīmad Bhāgavatam contains several narratives that explore philosophical, ethical, and devotional ideas. Among them, the story of Prahlāda in the Seventh Canto is one of the most prominent. Prahlāda is portrayed as a figure who represents unwavering devotion and fearlessness, even while facing constant opposition from his father, the asura king Hiranyakashipu. This paper examines Prahlāda's character from an objective and analytical perspective. It focuses on the themes of devotion, authority, symbolism, and the narrative purpose of Prahlāda's role within the Purāṇic tradition. The study also highlights how the text uses the conflict between Prahlāda and Hiranyakashipu to discuss moral concepts as well as spiritual and philosophical themes.

Keywords - Śrīmad Bhāgavatam, Mahābhāgavata, Prahlāda, Hiranyakashipu, Bakhti.

I. INTRODUCTION

The Śrīmad Bhāgavatam is one of the most influential Purāṇas in Hindu literature, composed of twelve cantos and approximately eighteen thousand verses. It covers a wide range of subjects including stories of divine incarnations, principles of dharma, and the path of devotion (Bhakti). The Seventh Canto focuses primarily on the story of Hiranyakashipu and his son Prahlāda, and this account has attracted attention from scholars studying Purāṇic storytelling, Bhakti philosophy and the themes related to faith, courage, and surrender, as presented within the text.

Although Prahlāda belongs to an asura lineage, the narrative presents him as an ideal devotee of Vishnu. His story appears not only in the Bhāgavatam but also in related scriptures such as the Vishnu Purāṇa, indicating its wider importance in the devotional and mythological traditions. This paper analyses the content in a neutral and scholarly manner, describing what the text presents without adopting devotional or faith-based interpretations.

II. PRAHLĀDA'S STORY - NARRATIVE BACKGROUND

In the Seventh Skandha of the Śrīmad Bhāgavatam, Prahlāda is presented as the son of Hiranyakashipu, an asura king who is said to have gained near-invincibility through a boon from Brahma. The text describes how this power led Hiranyakashipu to assert supremacy over the gods and demand exclusive worship (SB 7.4.5-7). It also states that while Prahlāda was in the womb, Nārada Muni instructed his mother Kayādhu in devotional principles, outlining the qualities of a Mahābhakta, which are shown to shape Prahlāda's spiritual awareness (SB 7.7.14 – 16). Despite being born into a lineage opposed to Viṣṇu, Prahlāda consistently affirms devotion to Him, demonstrating steadiness, restraint, and absence of hostility. As Prahlāda continued to remain firm in his devotion despite repeated warnings and punishments, the narrative moves from disagreement to direct action, describing the measures taken by Hiranyakashipu to suppress his son through force and coercion.

A. Attempts by Hiranyakashipu to Kill Prahlāda

Following Prahlāda's refusal to abandon his devotion to Viṣṇu, the text records a series of deliberate actions undertaken by Hiranyakashipu to eliminate him. These attempts range from overt physical violence to psychological pressure and corrective measures. Presented below is a structured account of these methods as described in the text, with corresponding canto, chapter, and verse references.

Methods described in the text

No.	Method	Textual Description	Canto / Chapter / Verse
1.	Poison	Prahlāda was given poison to drink	7.5.43
2.	Trampling by elephants	Wild elephants were ordered to trample him	7.5.43
3.	Throwing from a mountain	He was thrown from a high mountain	7.5.43
4.	Attack by snakes	Venomous snakes were released upon him	7.5.43
5.	Weapons	He was attacked with sharp weapons	7.5.39 – 40
6.	Fire/cold/wind	He was placed in fire and in extreme cold	7.5. 43 – 44
7.	Water	He was thrown into the ocean	7.5. 43 – 44
8.	Crushing / binding	He was tightly bound and restrained	7.5. 43 – 44
9.	Starvation	He was deprived of food and basic sustenance	7.5. 43 – 44
10.	Destructive Spells	Use of mantra-induced and supernatural means intended to injure Prahlāda	7.5.43 – 44
11.	Conjuring Tricks	Employment of illusionary and deceptive methods to instil fear	7.5.43 – 44
12.	Imprisonment	Use of fear to enforce obedience	7.5.43 – 44
13.	Intimidation	He was attacked with tridents while issuing violent commands	7.5.39 – 40
14.	Re-education	Entrusted to Saṅḍa and Amarka to alter beliefs	7.5.52 – 53

As outlined above, Hiranyakashipu subjects Prahlāda to multiple attempts on his life but Prahlāda is portrayed as surviving each trial unharmed due to divine intervention. The account reaches its climax with the appearance of Viṣṇu in the form of Narasimha (SB 7.8.17), who brings about the death of Hiranyakashipu (SB 7.8.29 – 30). Within the textual framework, this episode signifies the restoration of order and the reinforcement of the moral and theological themes central to the account.

III. CHARACTER ANALYSIS

A. Prahlāda as a devotee (Mahābhāgavata)

The Śrīmad Bhāgavatam presents Prahlāda as an ideal devotee (Mahābhāgavata) (SB 7.9.4) within the Vaishnava tradition, emphasizing his steadfast devotion to Vishnu despite his birth in a lineage traditionally opposed to the divine.

His devotion is described not as ritualistic practice but as a sustained, internal orientation marked by continuous remembrance and faith. Throughout the discourse, Prahlāda is subjected to various trials, yet he is shown neither requesting divine protection nor expressing concern for his personal safety. Instead, he remains focused on reciting Vishnu's name and maintaining a devotional attitude. The text also highlights that Prahlāda does not seek personal liberation or material benefit, presenting his devotion as selfless and oriented toward the welfare of others, including his father, who opposed him.

The text further emphasizes Prahlāda's role as a teacher to his peers. He is depicted explaining the nine forms of devotion (navavidha bhakti) (SB 7.5.23 – 24) —śravaṇam (hearing the Lord's glories), kīrtanam (chanting), smaraṇam (remembering), pāda-sevanam (serving the Lord's feet), arcanam (worship), vandanam (offering prayers), dāsyam (servitude), sakhyam (friendship), and ātma-nivedanam (complete surrender)—framing these practices as accessible to individuals regardless of age, circumstances, or family background. Within the textual tradition, these teachings are used to illustrate the broader theological concept that devotion is grounded in sincerity, self-surrender, and continuous remembrance of the divine. The navavidha bhakti, even today is a greatly respected concept since it is not only about the devotion, that shows great respect and surrender, but also includes other methods that portray sincerity, love and dedication by listening, praying, being friendly etc

B. Embodiment of Fearlessness (Nirbhaya)

Within the narrative, Prahlāda is depicted as remaining composed and fearless despite being the son of Hiranyakashipu, who is portrayed as a powerful and authoritarian ruler. The text describes Prahlāda's confidence in Vishnu's protection as arising from his devotional conviction rather than from defiance or hostility toward his father. Even when subjected to severe hardships at a young age, Prahlāda is presented as maintaining calmness, clarity of mind, and control over his senses. When questioned by Hiranyakashipu regarding the whereabouts of Vishnu, Prahlāda is said to affirm, with certainty, that the deity is present everywhere (SB 7.8.18). According to the storyline, this assertion precedes the appearance of Narasimha from a pillar, an event interpreted within the text as validating Prahlāda's devotion and challenging Hiranyakashipu's authority.

Prahlāda's fearlessness is portrayed not as a denial of danger but as an outcome of his unwavering trust in divine protection. Within the textual framework, his story is used to illustrate the theological idea that steadfast devotion enables individuals to endure adversity and perceive challenges as occasions for the manifestation of divine support.

C. Prahlāda as a philosophical figure

The narrative further presents Prahlāda as instructing his classmates on the principles of devotion from an early age. His teachings, as described in the text, emphasize qualities such as humility, self-discipline, compassion, and service, and are consistent with the broader framework of Bhakti Yoga outlined in the Bhāgavatam. Following the death of Hiranyakashipu, the exposition states that Narasimha offered Prahlāda various blessings. Prahlāda is depicted as declining these material or worldly boons, expressing the view that such rewards could hinder spiritual advancement, and instead demonstrating complete surrender to the deity (SB 7.10.7).

The text also presents Prahlāda as advocating the cultivation of devotional practice from childhood, suggesting that divine response is based not on birth or social status but on sincerity and surrender. His refusal of worldly gifts is used within the storyline to signal his philosophical understanding that lasting fulfilment does not arise from material possession or power. Through these episodes, Prahlāda is depicted not only as an exemplary devotee but also as a philosophical figure who conveys the theme that essence of life lies in selfless devotion, inner purity and perception of the divine in every being and place.

D. Devotion and Power: The Conflict with Hiranyakashipu

In this account, Hiranyakashipu and Prahlāda are commonly understood as symbolic figures that convey key theological and philosophical ideas in the text. Hiranyakashipu is portrayed as embodying qualities such as arrogance, ego, and hostility towards the divine, whereas Prahlāda represents humility, faith, and devotion. The text describes Hiranyakashipu's challenge to divine authority and his subsequent death at the hands of Narasimha (SB 7.8.29 – 30), an event frequently understood as illustrating the eventual decline of unchecked pride and ego. In many traditional commentaries, Hiranyakashipu is interpreted as symbolizing inner human tendencies—such as anger, desire, and envy—that are considered obstacles to spiritual development.

The appearance of Narasimha (SB 7.8.17) and the defeat of Hiranyakashipu are presented as affirming the principle that dharma ultimately prevails despite the apparent strength of opposing forces. Within this interpretive context, divine intervention symbolizes the transformative power of the inner divine presence, which is believed to dissolve moral and psychological impurities when individuals seek refuge in it. The narrative is often read as emphasizing that devotion, humility, and adherence to dharma are more enduring than power driven by ego, and that the story serves as a metaphor for the internal struggle toward spiritual refinement.

E. Prahlāda in the Bhakti Tradition

Objectively, the text attributes Prahlāda's status as a great devotee to early spiritual instruction, continuous remembrance of Visnu, and unwavering adherence to dharma. The narrative aligns his protection with the principle expressed in the Bhagavad Gītā (4.7–8): “Yadā yadā hi dharmasya glānir bhavati Bhārata...”, which states that divine manifestation occurs when there is a decline of dharma and the rise of adharma, a principle illustrated through the appearance of Narasimha. In this narrative, Prahlāda acts as the lens, Visnu as the goal, and bhakti as the path leading to that goal. More broadly, the Purānic framework often portrays most of the antagonistic figures as individuals who possess devotion or divine favour but deviate from dharmic conduct due to ego or misuse of power, thereby creating imbalance. Through such contrasts, the text presents devotion aligned with dharma as a stabilizing force, using figures like Prahlāda to demonstrate consistency of faith, while others serve as examples of deviation from the intended spiritual path.

IV. CONCLUSION

As described in the Śrīmad Bhāgavatam, Prahlāda is presented as a central example of devotion (Bhakti) and fearlessness. The text describes his steady faith, compassion for all beings, and calm acceptance of adversity, portraying him as an exemplary devotee (mahābhāgavata). His devotion is depicted as continuous and selfless, remaining unaffected by external pressures or suffering. Through Prahlāda's character, the Purāṇa communicates the idea that sincere devotion can transcend social, familial, and circumstantial limitations.

The text also highlights the contrast between Prahlāda's adherence to dharma and Hiranyakashipu's ego and pride, illustrating the broader theme that ethical conduct ultimately prevails over destructive tendencies. Prahlāda's teachings to his peers emphasize humility, compassion, and trust in the divine. His story is used within the text to suggest that spiritual strength arises from devotion rather than material power and that the goal of life is understood as cultivating a connection with the divine.

The concept of good triumphing over evil has long been a significant theme in classical literature and the arts. It has remained central to Bhakti literature, where numerous episodes are presented in engaging narrative forms that both educate and entertain. These moral teachings often resonate particularly strongly with younger audiences, shaping their values and contributing positively to society. The study of such characters through psychological, philosophical, and social perspectives remains relevant across time. Insights of this kind form an integral part of the cultural and artistic heritage of an evolved society.

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