

Jayadeva and the Gitagovinda

Among the myriad of Indian epic poets, Jayadeva, the twelfth century composer of the unparalleled *Gitagovinda* (Song of the Cowherd), stands alone as a poet of paramount prominence. As a fervent devotee of Krsna, there is a strong undercurrent of Vaisnava faith (the worship of Visnu or his associated avatars, principally as Rama and Krsna, as the original and supreme God) and *bhakti* (loving devotion) in his articulation as he sings of the mystical amours between Krsna and Radha. As Jayadeva elaborates the love of this cosmic duo, he creates an aesthetic atmosphere of *sringararasa* or erotic-mystical mood that is bliss for the devotees of Krsna. Indeed, the *Gitagovinda* of Jayadeva, divinely adorned and devotionally oriented, is a source of religious inspiration in both medieval and contemporary Vaisnavism [for a detailed analysis of Vaisnavism, see Dimock (1966)].

The widely renowned lyrical composition and religious eroticism of the *Gitagovinda* earned sainthood for Jayadeva, and has been a powerful influence on several genres of creative and performing arts in various parts of India. It is the incredibly vivid imagery of this devotional text finds itself as an ideal subject for India's visual and performing arts (Kaminsky 2). It is Jayadeva's intent, not only to rouse the devotional depths of the *bhakta* (those engaged in devotional worship or *bhakti*), but to transport one literally into the heart of the love scene. The sensory imagery of Jayadeva's poetry allows the reader or devotee to be a honey bee on a lotus blossom: seeing, touching, smelling the flora and fauna of the enchanting Indian forest. One gets close enough to "taste the sweat glistening on the upper lip of the young maiden [Radha]"(Kaminsky 2), experiencing the beatific delights of sporting with her lover. The jingling of the bells draping Radha's

waist titillates and tantalizes the soul's inner ear as the reader sways with the melodious motion of their lovemaking. For the *bhakta*, it is in the union of this woman and the deity in the form of a man that the soul can find a path to oneness with the cosmic essence of the divine [on the depiction of tangible and intangible elements in Jayadeva's *Gitagovinda*, see Mahapatra (2008)].

The birth and life of Jayadeva are masked in the various legends and regional paeans of the provinces of West Bengal and Orissa, each province claiming him to be their own (Kaminsky 24). Indeed, after completing the *Gitagovinda*, such was Jayadeva's fame and eminence, that numerous local versions of this legend grew into disagreeing traditions about Jayadeva's origin and poetic activity. Contemporary scholars of Bengal, Orissa, and Mithila have published claims locating the hamlet of his birthplace in their respective regions. Indeed, two strong traditions say that "Kindubilva" mentioned in the *Gitagovinda* is either a village near Puri in Orissa or a village in the modern Birbhum district of Bengal. A third tradition recognizes the village of Kenduli near Jenjharpur in Mithila as Jayadeva's place of birth (Miller 3-5). Sources are ambiguous on whether or not he wrote the *Gitagovinda* while he was the court poet of Laksmanasena Kam, the last Hindu king of Bengal (1179-1209) (Siegel 209-210), but it is generally accepted that after the completion of the *Gitagovinda*, Jayadeva and his wife went on a pilgrimage to Vrndavana. For now, it is relatively safe to say that Jayadeva resided and wrote in eastern India during the latter half of the twelfth century (Miller 4).

Despite the difference in opinion of Jayadeva's origin, all accounts that sanctify Jayadeva's life reveal that he was born into a Brahman family and that he became a gifted student of Sanskrit and a skilled poet. In spite of this, he abandoned scholarship at a young age and assumed an ascetic life, devoting himself entirely to God. As a wandering

poet and mendicant, he would not rest underneath the same tree for more than a night for fear that attachment to the place would breach his vow of asceticism (Miller 3).

His life of renunciation and denial came to an end when a Brahman in Puri (in Orissa along the eastern coast of India) claimed that the god Jagannatha, “Lord of the World” [Jagannatha is considered to be a form of *Visnu*, although some scholars maintain that Jagannatha was Buddha (also considered by Hindus to be the 9th avatara or incarnation of *Visnu*). Others assert that he is really Krsna, the 8th of *Visnu*’s avataras. For a more detailed analysis of Jagannatha see, Raya (1998)] himself had ordained the marriage of Jayadeva to the Brahman’s daughter. The Brahman’s daughter was Padmavati, a young girl who was dedicated as a *devadasi* (religious dancing girl who gave praise to the gods and shared the tales of their greatness through dance for devotees) in the temple. Jayadeva agreed to the marriage. Padmavati served her husband and he shared her devotion to Jagannatha. As Jayadeva composed, Padmavati would dance -- whence came the inspiration for the *Gitagovinda* (Kaminsky 25).

While composing the *Gitagovinda*, Jayadeva envisioned the climax of Krsna’s supplication to Radha as a command for Radha to place her foot on Krsna’s head in a symbolic gesture of victory. But the poet was reluctant to complete the couplet, in respect to Krsna, which would place Radha in a position superior to that of Krsna, as well as commit an ancient taboo of touching anyone with the foot --a symbol of spiritual pollution (*juta*). Leaving the poem incomplete, Jayadeva went to bathe in a river and, as the story goes, in his absence Krsna appeared in his guise to complete the couplet; Krsna then ate the food Padmavati had prepared for Jayadeva and left. When Jayadeva returned, he realized that he had received divine affirmation in exalting Krsna’s loving relation to Radha.

The *Gitagovinda*, deceptively simple in its exterior beauty, that is, in its exotic and sensual crust, has an abundance of meaning embedded in structurally complex forms. It is expressed as a sequence of songs interspersed with recitative portions in cadenced forms of classical *kavya* verses (classical Sanskrit verse) (Miller 7). There are twelve main parts which can be referred to as cantos, divisions of a long poem. The Sanskrit term for this is *sargah* and will be used from this point on. Within each *sargah* are short narratives and songs, and each song has a particular *tala* and *raga* associated with it. *Talas* are rhythmic cycles which lie beneath the structure of an Indian musical piece and a *raga* is a melodic form that evokes a particular mood, most of which are selected for specific times of day, year, weather conditions, emotional states. These states of emotion are known as *rasa* (Kaminsky 46-47).

Several types of Indian dance and vocal music tell the legends of Radha and Krsna through these musical modes and rhythmic cycles. As it has been generally acknowledged that Jayadeva was inspired by the religious dancing of his wife, this is a likely explanation for the melodic structure of the *Gitagovinda* (Kaminsky 47).

While dramatizing the amours of Krsna and Radha on the surface, the *Gitagovinda* simultaneously conveys the deep ethos of devotion of the individual soul, its yearning for God realization and finally achieving the consummation in service of God. Or again: outwardly it describes the love, separation, longing and union of Radha and Krsna, the cosmic duo, in the mystical forest, *Vrindavan*, along the bank of river Yamuna. But metaphysically it expresses the pining of the individual soul (*jivatma*) for the mystical union with the divine soul (*paramatma*). Indeed, in the words of one scholar: “through the thrilling love episode of Radha and Krsna, the poet Jayadeva takes us stage

by stage to the highest pitch of God consciousness and God realization” (Tripathy 5).

Indeed, while the poem’s subject is the estrangement of Radha and Krsna caused by Krsna’s dalliances with the other *gopies* (cowherd girl), Radha’s anguish at Krsna’s abandonment, and the rapture which attends their final reunion, the poem reverts repeatedly to devotion of Krsna as God:

If in recalling Krsna to mind there is flavour
Or if there is interest in loves art
Then to this necklace of words--sweetness, tenderness,
Brightness--
The words of Jayadeva, listen (Miller 69).

In fact, Jayadeva’s objective is inducing “recollection of Krsna in the minds of the good” (Archer 65) and inserts a vivid description of the Indian forest in springtime exclusively, he says, in order once again to stir up remembrance Krsna. When, at last, the poem has come elatedly to a close, Jayadeva again insists the reader to adore and venerate Krsna and “place him forever in their hearts, Krsna the source of all merit” (Archer 65).

The story of the *Gitagovinda* may be briefly told. The poem opens with a description of the occasion when Radha and Krsna first join in love together:

“Clouds thicken the sky.
Tamala trees darken the forest.
The night frightens him.
Radha, you take him home!”
They leave at Nanda’s order,
Passing trees in thickets on the way,
Until secret passions of Radha and Madhava [the epithet of Krsna which also means “honey like” and “vernal”]
Triumph on the Jumna riverbank (Miller 69).

In this way the love of Radha and Krsna arises -- the love which is to govern their hearts with ever growing fervour. Next, the reader, or the devotee, is captivated by Krsna and Radha’s surroundings: the trees are lush and thick with leaves, and flowering creepers are

intertwined within their branches--symbolic of the lovers' embrace. Spring is fully aroused, the birds are lively, love is ripe in the air. The couple are dressed in splendid colours of gold, red, and yellow and they are draped in gold and pearls.

Krsna is the eighth *avatara* (incarnation) of *Visnu*, and the first *sargah* continues with the heart touching, vivid and melodious account of the ten incarnations based on the evolutionary process of the creation and development of the animal world, each of which "came to the rescue" in various ways. According to the *Srimad Bhagavad Gita*, when virtue subsides and vice prevails, God manifests himself to establish righteousness [It is on this that the theory of incarnations of God is based, see Tripathy 5-9].

The poem then leaps a period of time and when the drama opens, a crisis has occurred. Radha, after long enjoying Krsna's passionate embraces, finds herself abruptly abandoned. Radha's friend, *sakhi*, tells her of Krsna's amorous play with the other *gopies*, his feet stroked by one of them, his head cushioned on the bosom of another whose "heaving breasts are tenderly outspread to pillow it" (Miller 76). One beautiful damsel murmurs sweet words of praise into his ear, others care for him tenderly. He himself embraces one of them, kisses another and fondles a third (Archer 93).

As Radha broods on his behaviour, she is filled with bitter sadness; Radha's yearning and lamenting in a faltering voice choked by heavy tears made even the water birds weep sorrowfully (Miller 1975: 659-665). Yet her love for Krsna is so strong she cannot bring herself to blame him. Radha's pain of separation (*viraha*) from Krsna draws her interest away from worldly concerns and leads to meditation on Krsna which is the essence of *bhakti* that leads to the attainment of spiritual union with Krsna who is the quintessence of divinity (Siegel 66). It is Radha's intuitive, unfaltering, all-inclusive dedication to union with Krsna which serves as a paradigm for many followers of *bhakti*.

In this sense, one scholar has commented: “the pain of separation from the divine is in itself a source for joy as it encourages, or forces, one to meditate on the qualities with which one longs to unite” (Kaminsky 27).

As Radha sits longing for him in misery, Krsna suddenly repents, is filled with remorse and abruptly goes in quest of her. He does not know, however, where to find her and as he wanders he expresses his grief. The third *Sargah* reveals Krsna as he searches for Radha and laments:

She saw me surrounded in the crowd of women
And went away
I was too ashamed,
Too afraid to stop her.
 Damn me! My wanton ways
 Made her leave in anger (Miller 82).

Seated alone in his arbor of love, Krsna dwells on the thought of his devotee, Radha, and presently Sakhi comes to him to assure him of her passionate love for him. Without him she cannot bear to live, for every moment is filled with suffering and misery. Surely he, the source of love, will respond to her need.

It is well into the evening, the crescent moon in the sky. It looks as if Krsna will spend the night alone in misery. It is said that because of her ego, the Lord, Krsna was kept away. Due to Radha’s jealousy, or impure thoughts, Krsna, as the divine, is unable to reach her (Greenlees *xvi*). The idea here is that without ego, one is released to accept god’s grace.

Then, well into the darkness of the night, Sakhi finally convinces Radha to overcome her jealousy and pride which have been keeping her apart from her beloved. The scene is exceedingly dark, but the rushing Yamuna river coming from between the feminine curves of the undulating hills can be seen. Sakhi coaxes Radha to enter the

bower of Krsna who sits in anticipation. In this way, Sakhi is like the guru who is responsible for uniting the human soul with the Divine (Kuppuswamy 41):

Loosen your clothes, until your belt, open your loins!
Radha, your gift of delight is like treasure in a bed of vines.
In woods on the wind-swept Jumna bank,
Krsna waits in wildflower garlands (Miller 93).

Krsna is splendid in his brilliance. His gold and pearl jewellery, white floral garland, and the white of his eyes brighten the darkness and provoke Radha to come to him. Now, Radha becoming less timid raises her eyes to meet those of Krsna. One can get a sense of an impending passionate unite.

The subsequent stanzas of the poem then reveal a reversal of devotion. Krsna asks Radha to place her feet on his head and declares his devotion to her. God is expressing his dedication to the human soul. Or as later Vaisnava texts have revealed, Radha is actually a goddess sprung from Krsna's divineness (Kaminsky 49).

To the delight of the reader, or devotee, the lonely night ends with the ecstatic reunion (*samyoga*) of the lovers. The entire twelfth *sargah* offers the reader the full flavour of the ecstatic reunion of Radha and Krsna:

When her friend had gone
Smiles spread on Radha's lips
While love's deep fantasies
Struggled with her modesty
Seeing the mood in Radha's heart,
Hari spoke to his love;
Her eyes were fixed
On his bed of buds and tender shoots (Miller 122).

Jayadeva continues:

[Radha's] beautiful loins are a deep cavern to take the thrusts of love--
Cover them with jewelled girdles, clothes, and ornaments, Krsna! (Miller 124).

Finally Radha, the individual soul (*jivatma*), has achieved union with Krsna, the divine

soul (*paramatma*). Then with a final remembrance of Krsna as God and celebration of the song itself -- its words “sweeter than sugar, like loves own glorious flavour” -- the poem ends.

The dramaturgy and the poetics in the *Gitagovinda* have been skilfully crafted to touch the innermost core of the disciple and inspire the noblest of emotions. For this reason it is a literary legacy of India. Its spiritual essence, mystical imports, erotic undertones, sensory imagery and lyrical fluidity have perplexed critics, bewildered scholars, mystified saints, enthralled lovers, enlightened devotees and engaged people at large emotionally and sentimentally. Jayadeva, through his mystical love songs, has brought to light the strong desire of individuals for communion with divinity, and this mysticism has created extensive philosophical and metaphysical connotations that have had a profound influence on the religious outlook and spiritual psyche of devotees.

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<http://www.geetagovinda.org/Jayadev.html>

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