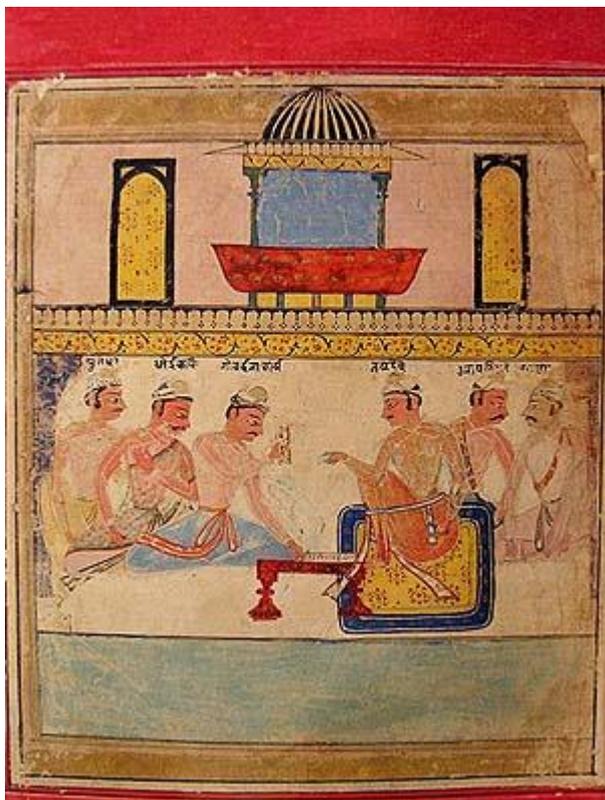


SANSKRIT DEVOTIONAL POETRY -The *Gita Govinda*

Overview *The Gita Govinda* (12th c. CE) is a key text in Indian literary history, one that links Sanskrit with devotionism. Devotional poetry began in Tamil (500-900 CE) before spreading across the subcontinent, first to Kannada (12th c.) and then Marathi, Hindi, Telugu, Oriya, Bengali and Assamese. Despite the overwhelming popularity of this literature in the mother tongue, Sanskrit poetry continued to be written in a variety of genres and by a wide range of writers. There is a significant work, for example, by the 11th-century Kashmir-based poet Bilhana. His 50-stanza poem 'The Love Thief' (*Caurapaccasika*) is a skilful story about a thief's love for a princess. There is also an anthology, probably compiled in the 11th century by a Buddhist writer named Vidyakara, which contains about 200 short poems of love, mostly erotic, which date from about 700-1100 CE. One of the best-known of these anthologised poets is Vallana, who is thought to have lived between 900-1100 CE.

However, by far the most accomplished and significant Sanskrit poem of the post-classical period is the *Gita Govinda* by Jayadeva. Literally the title means 'Song [in praise] of Govinda [Krishna]', but it has been accurately translated as 'Love Song of the Dark Lord [Krishna]' by Barbara Miller in 1977. The relatively short poem is dedicated to Krishna and describes the love between him and the *gopis* (female cow herders), especially one named Radha.

History The *Gita Govinda* is the culmination of centuries of Sanskrit poetry in all its forms—courtly, epic, lyric and erotic. The classical writer Kalidasa and his contemporaries flirted with love themes. The *Bhagavata Purana* (c. 800-1000 CE) codified the love story of Radha and Krishna. Bilhana (11th c.) made love the central theme of his poetry, but it was an incoherent whole. Then, in the 12th century, Jayadeva, a Brahmin living in Bengal, composed what one critic called a 'complete dissertation' on love. In it, Jayadeva transformed the central figure of Krishna. In earlier literature, such as the *Bhagavata Purana*, Krishna is a likable god, but he is admired from a distance, whereas in the *Gita Govinda* he becomes a lyrical figure to be sung to and danced with. With this innovative poem, Jayadeva became famous as one of the five court poets (or 'Five Jewels') of Lakshmanasena (r. 1178-1206), the last Hindu ruler of Bengal before Islamic rule.



(King Lakshmanasena with his Five Jewels [five poets, including Jayadeva], painted in Delhi c. 1475-1500 CE)

This painting suggests that Jayadeva and his poem had become well-known even in the Muslim court of the Delhi Sultanate of the later 15th century. By this time, also, recitations of his poem had been integrated into temple worship in Puri (modern-day Orissa). Curiously, though, the earliest surviving image of the poem itself comes almost a century later, as shown below.



(the earliest image of the *Gita Govinda*, with Krishna, left, speaking to Radha. Mewar, c. 1590)

By the sixteenth century, the *Gita Govinda* had inspired the poet Caitanya, who then spread its religious message (a particular form of Krishna/Vishnu worship) to Bengal, where it has remained popular ever since. By that date also, many of the songs from the poem had been incorporated into the *Guru Granth Sahib*, the sacred text of Sikhism.

Cultural significance The *Gita Govinda* has had an enormous influence on Indian, mainly north Indian, culture. First, as a poem, it has inspired centuries of poets, in many languages all over the subcontinent, to compose verses that also celebrate the love of Krishna and Radha. It is thus the fountainhead of a literary movement that continues to evolve today. More than just a piece of literature, however, Jayadeva's 12th-century work also began the vehicle for revitalising a specific school of Hinduism known as Srivaishnavism, which began with the Tamil devotional poets in the 6th to 9th century CE. Srivaishnavism takes its name from *sri* (Lakshmi, consort of Vishnu, represented in the poem by Radha) + *vaishna* ('concerning Vishnu', or Krishna). As set out by scholars in Tamil and later other languages, this brand of Hindu philosophy holds that the worshipper and god are separate but can merge together. This is the burden of the poem: Krishna and Radha are separate but are blended in the end by love. The *Gita Govinda* also proposed a radical reconceptualization of Vishnu. While mainstream tradition held that Krishna was only one of Vishnu's ten avatars, in Jayadeva's poem Krishna is the source of everything, all realities and all avatars. Although the poem was composed in Sanskrit, which few people understood at that time, it reached the masses through its songs and the dances it described, which were performed in festivals and depicted in painting. It is arguable that no other Indian text has inspired more painted images than the *Gita Govinda*. From Gujarat in the far west to Assam in the far east, painters have illustrated manuscripts and paper with images of the scenes described in the poem.

Poet Jayadeva was probably born in a Brahmin family toward the end of the 12th century. Various places have been suggested for his birthplace, in Bengal, Orissa and the Ganges valley. What seems certain is that he received instruction in Sanskrit but rejected the life of a scholar and began to wander as a mendicant. It is also apparent that he spent some time in Puri (in modern-day Orissa), where he came under the influence of a cult devoted to the worship of Krishna. Little else is known of his life or birth, but the poem made him famous. Today, in the temple of Puri, his songs are still performed in an annual festival.

Poem

Story The poem does not have a strong narrative line, only a series of loosely connected scenes about the love of Krishna for Radha and the other female cow herders. In the opening verse, as storm clouds gather overhead, the child Krishna is afraid and Radha takes him home. By the time they reach an arbour, a few stanzas later, however, Krishna has become a man, and they make love in that secluded place. This is the seed out of which the poem grows, and it sets the tone of mystery and of collapsed time.

Next the poet prays to all Vishnu's incarnation, asking for inspiration to compose his work. The rest of the poem unfolds in twelve chapters, over the space of two days: one day is dedicated to the lovers' 'separation' and one day to their 'union.' On the first day, Radha, who has been struck by arrows from the Love God, loses Krishna and is distraught. Her friend tells her that Krishna is frolicking with the other female cow herders. The friend then attempts to persuade Krishna to return to Radha by describing her torment. There is much too-ing and fro-ing, confessions, sorrow and love-making with the gopis, before Krishna returns to Radha on the second day. Then they spend a night in rapturous love. In the morning, Radha asks him to comb her dishevelled hair and rearrange her loosened ornaments. Krishna, overcome by his love for her, complies. The point is made that Krishna, who had defeated a mighty demon named Madhu ('Pleasure'), has been vanquished by his love for this simple girl. Most important, the union of lovers is understood as the merger of the worshipper with god (Krishna, in this case).

Structure The structure of the poem is deceptively simple. It is arranged in twelve sections, each of which expresses a phase of Krishna's relationship with Radha. He is 'exuberant', 'tender', 'audacious', 'joyful' and so on. Each of the twelve sections contains verses interspersed with songs; in total, there are 72 verses and 24 songs. Both verses and songs make ample use of dialogue, mostly between 'the friend' and Krishna or Radha.

Themes The dominant theme of the poem, as announced in its title, is love. The physical love of Krishna for Radha is an extended metaphor of the spiritual love of the soul for god. All of the drama between a pair of human lovers—the doubts, betrayal, anguish and the final ecstasy—has its counterparts in the struggle of the soul to realise the true nature of divinity. That true nature is also love. Another major theme of the poem is 'play', or *lila*. Much description is given over to the games and frolicking that Krishna has with the cow herders. *Lila* is understood as the creative energy of the world, the power that god uses to create our lives, with all its joys and sorrows. Since that energy is a manifestation of spiritual power, we should embrace love rather than reject it as carnal desire. We should sing and dance and thereby draw closer to god, just as Krishna did. It is this exuberance, this overlapping of pleasure with spirituality, that animates the poem.

The poem's songs have also stimulated various traditions of music, involving vocal and instrumental elements. Jayadeva's 24 songs are sung in temples, concert halls and homes. Not stopping there, the poem's story of Radha and Krishna has become the central story in the repertoire of almost all India's classical dance traditions, especially those in eastern India, such as Odissi and Manipuri dance.

The depth and width these influences—stretching from poetry, song, music and dance—is unparalleled in Indian literature. No other single text has shaped Indian artistic traditions in this way. Finally, the poem has had its impact on Western poetry and literature, too. In 1792, in Calcutta, the English colonial scholar William Jones published the first translation in a European language, swiftly followed by one in German and then Latin. It is now available in almost all major languages of the world.



(statue of Jayadeva at Akhandaleswara temple, Orissa, c. 14th c. CE)



(temple sculpture of Krishna, left, playing flute, and Radha, Halebid, 13th c. CE)

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(scene from the *Gita Govinda*, with Krishna (far right), Radha and her friend, Basohli, c. 1730)



(Krishna, left with flute, and Radha, in a performance of Manipuri dance)

Verses in Translation

1. The first verse of the *Gita Govinda*, translated by Barbara Miller, 1979

'The sky is encompassed by clouds.
With the hue of Tamala trees
darksome appear the sites of woods.
This dear child Krishna
feels very timid at night.
O Radha! You therefore please
accompany him to reach home all right.'

Thus urged by the words of King Nanda,
stepped ahead both Radha and Krishna
towards the tree of bowers on the way.
Glory to their plays of love, secret and gay,
on the bank of river Yamuna.

This opening verse sets the scene by invoking the very familiar motif of a sky darkened by rain clouds, which in Indian literary tradition is associated with passionate and often illicit love. Krishna is a child, perhaps a baby, but by the end of this short verse he has magically become a young man and Radha's lover.

2 & 3. Verses from the *Gita Govinda*, spoken by the 'friend' to Krishna, translated by Barbara Miller, 1979

'O Krishna!
In the days by-gone,
she was unable to endure your separation,
by the grief caused by closing of eyes,
and now how can she tolerate having sighs
the long estrangement,
looking at the branch of mango tree
having blossoms at the top? '

[...]

'O Krishna! Owing to pangs of separation,
for Radha, her home seems to be a forest.
The group of her dear maiden-friends
appears as a trapping net.
With heavy sighs, the heat of separation
turns to be a vast forest-conflagration.
It is a matter of severe woe
that because of your separation,
Oh, how she appears as a doe,
and Love-god Cupid for her,
has become Yama, the Lord of Death,
displaying the activities of a fierce tiger.'

The first half of the poem is dominated by 'separation', as illustrated by the pair of verses above. In the first poem, Radha is in anguish, her thwarted passion inflamed by the signs of natural growth around her. In the second verse, Radha's pain is described by the extended metaphor of her as a doe in the forest. She is trapped, she is overheated and she is threatened by a tiger.

4. Verse from the *Gita Govinda*, spoken by the 'friend' to Krishna, translated by Barbara Miller, 1979

Oh, Krishna! You are her sole refuge.
Radha pines in the trysting place.
In every direction, she sees only you who so expertly drink the sweet honey of her lips.

Glancing repeatedly upon her ornaments, she thinks, 'I am Krishna, the adversary of the demon Madhu.'

In this verse, Jayadeva depicts Radha as love-mad. Her anxiety is so overwhelming that she becomes unbalanced and begins to think that she is Krishna. This identification with the beloved by the lover is, of course, a metaphor for the merger of the soul with god.

5. Verse from the *Gita Govinda*, spoken by Krishna to Radha, translated by Barbara Miller, 1979

'My beloved, relieve me of Cupid's poison
by decorating my head
with the fresh buds of your feet.'

This is perhaps the most famous verse in the entire poem. Spoken by Krishna at the end of the poem, it illustrates his submission to her. He is saying, 'I will let you put your feet on my head as a sign that I submit completely to your love.' Her love is the all-conquering energy, which derives from god and which creates and sustains life. The message seems to be that one can only know god through love. And, yet, only after a person has loved god, is he or she free from passion.

Reading

Barbara Miller (trans.), *Love Song of the Dark Lord*, 1979

Lee Seigel (trans), *Gita Govinda: Love Songs of Radha and Krishna*, 2009