

# Jayadeva's *Gita Govinda* : Architechtonics of Love and Religion in Dance

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Jayadeva, the 12th century saint-poet whose love poem, *Gita Govinda*, an intensely emotional document of separation and reunion of Krishna and Radha, the cosmic lovers, is at once acclaimed as a forceful Vaishnava devotional text and as an ardent love poem – celebrating both 'sacred' and 'profane' love. It is a poem on Krishna, the most human and lovable of the incarnations of Vishnu (with all the shades of commissions and omissions of a human being) and mirrors true love, in all its manifestations. The 'Madhura-bhakti' movement in Vaishnavism had its origins in *Gita Govinda*, which at its best, combines two hitherto disconnected streams of poetic literature in Sanskrit, viz., 'Gita' – the song tradition (the singing tradition) at the performance level. And at the sahitya level 'Govinda' the other word in the title – strikes a fresh note in eulogical poetry which was uptil now retained only with *stotra* literature. The poem captures the various nuances and shades in the love-life of Krishna and Radha in images of rare lyrical and visual beauty. Thus Dr. Sunith Kumar Chatherjee is right when he called Jayadeva 'the last of the ancients and the first of the moderns' in Indo-Aryan literature.

## Jayadeva's life :

We do not have factual data concerning the life of Jayadeva. But we know that he lived in the second half of the 12th century and he was one of the court poets of king Lakshmana-Sena, "the last Hindu King of Bengal". This fact is a well established one seen from the writings of his contemporaries in the court of Lakshmana-Sena. Though patronage of poets as seen in the 15 centuries prior to the time of Jayadeva was on the wane in 12th c., royal patronage in the courts of Bengal, Orissa, Kashmir, Kanauj, etc. was abundant and this was said to have been linked to a renaissance in Sanskrit studies during this period. Great scholars and poets vied with each other for patronage and made their philosophical, religious and literary products as complex and highly eclectic "as the great Hindu temples that marked the style of the period".

*Gita Govinda* speaks of his parents, Bhojadeva and Ramadevi, his friend Parasara and of his wife Padmavathi and some of the contemporary court poets of Lakshmana-Sena. His ancestors hailed from Kanauj, but they settled down in Orissa and his native village was Kendu-bilva, claimed at least by three adjacent states to be situated in their own land! His wife, Padmavathi was herself a great dancer and devotee and was so extolled by her husband that he called himself "Padmavati Charana Charana Chakravarti".

The legends and anecdotes regarding Jayadeva's love life and his spiritual life are aplenty and are popular among the Vaishnava devotees. It was said that when he was writing the song "Smara-garala-khandanam" - in the tenth canto, Jayadeva hesitated to write about Krishna in a manner that would not fit the Lord. Krishna was requesting Radha to place her feet on his head pronouncing that the feet would adorn his head. When he was pondering on it for a long time and couldn't decide, Padmavati, his wife asked him to relax for some time, have his bath and meal and resume writing. Accordingly, Jayadev went out. When he came back to continue the poem, the line was already written down. He enquired whether Padmavathi supplied the poetic line. Astonished, she said that it was Jayadeva himself who came back and completed the song. Both the wife and the husband then realized that the Lord himself came to keep at rest the agitating mind of Jayadeva and both of them were blessed by the Lord.

### *Gita - Govinda*

*Gita-Govinda* is a lyrical poem of great intensity. Its intensity arises from a tension between fleeting dramatic moments, changing psychological moods and conflicting and at times even complementary sentiments of love and suspicion. The poem is written as a 'bunch of songs' (Padavali), popularly called "song-cycles", the lyrical-dramatic songs interspersed with descriptive/narrative poems (slokas), the latter written in the metrical forms seen in the Kavyas.

The lyric contains 24 song-cycles, each song in eight lines (hence *ashtapadi*), 386 verses - all of them grouped into 12 sargas (cantos). Each sarga or canto is given a suggestive title which reflects the context and referential connotation of the theme embedded in the *ashtapadi*. The following table offers a general structural outline of the poem. The title of each of the Sargas, the number of slokas before an *ashtapadi* and after an *ashtapadi* are separated by a + mark. The general intent and special features of the Sargas are also suggested.

## Nartanam

Canto (Sarga) No. & Name of the Canto	No. of Slokas	No. of Ashtapadis & First Lines	Substance of the Canto	Special Features
Prathma Sarga <b>Samoda Damodara :</b> "Damodara- the joyful"	4 + 1 + 2 + 3 + 3 = 13	4 "Pralaya Payodhi Jale" "Srita Kamala Kucha Kundala" "Lalita Lavanya Lata" "Chandana Charchita"	An episode in the love- story of Radha & Krishna in Vrindavan	Mostly lyrical. Excellent descriptions of Nature. The background of the entire poem is given
Dwiteeya Sarga <b>Aklesa Kesava :</b> "Kesava - the sorrowless"	1 + 1 + 3 = 5	2 "Sanchara Dharasudha" "Nibharita Nikunjagriham"	Radha feels jealous & sad at Krishna's love sport with Gopis. Makes a compliant to an intimate friend, simply called Sakhi	Radha reminisces her joyous moments with Krishna
Triteeya Sarga <b>Mugdha Madhusudhana:</b> "Madhusudhana-the Enamoured"	2 + 6 = 8	1 "Ma Miyam Chalita"	Krishna's repentance for neglecting Radha, his inward realization of love for Radha	Beautiful, erotic descriptions by Krishna of the intimate love play between himself and Radha
Caturdha Sarga <b>Snigdha Madhusudana:</b> "Madhusudhana - the poignant"	1 + 1 + 5 = 7	2 "Nindati Chandana" "Sthanavihita Mapihara Mudaram"	The Sakhi comes to Krishna and narrates Radha's suffering due to Viraha. Her condition has been described in two of the most beautiful songs.	After the initial exposition, the theme of Viraha is introduced.

<i>Canto (Sarga) No. &amp; Name of the Canto</i>	<i>No. of Stokas</i>	<i>No. of Ashtapadis &amp; First Lines</i>	<i>Substance of the Canto</i>	<i>Special Features</i>
Panchama Sarga Sakanaksha- Pundarikaksha : "Pundarika-the Desirous"	1 + 1 + 6 = 8	2 "Vahati Malaya Sameere" "Rati Sukha Sare"	Krishna's reaction to the Sakhi's narration. He asks her to go and bring Radha to the bower. The Sakhi goes back to her friend to fetch her.	Exquisite songs depicting Krishna's condition without Radha
Shashtha Sarga Dhrista-Vaikuntha : "Vaikuntha - the Aggressive"	1 + 3 = 4	1 "Pasyati Disi Disi Rahasi Bhavantam"	The Sakhi finds Radha too weak even to reach the bower due to her separation. Krishna has not come.	Sakhi goes back & narrates Radha's condition and requests Krishna to come.
Saptama Sarga Nagara Narayana: "Narayana - the Gallant"	2 + 2 + 1 + 1 + 1 + 4 = 11	4 "Kathita Samayepi" "Smara Samarochita" "Samudita Madane" "Anila Tarala Kuvayaya"	Radha's suspicion deepens when the Sakhi returns without Krishna. Radha imagines Krishna's love play with other Gopis.	Radha scolds the breeze, the god of love and the river Yamuna who are causing her loveliness more miserable.
Ashtama Sarga Vilaksha - Lakshmiapati : "Lakshmiapati - the Bewildered"	1 + 2 = 3	1 "Rajani Janita Gurujaraga Kashayita"	Krishna has not come even at dawn. Radha was angry when Krishna comes. She flares up and asks him to go back to the other women.	Radha spends a sleepless night. Krishna comes and places himself at Radha's feet.

<i>Canto (Sarga) No. &amp; Name of the Canto</i>	<i>No. of Slokas</i>	<i>No. of Ashtapadis &amp; First Lines</i>	<i>Substance of the Canto</i>	<i>Special Features</i>
Navama Sarga <b>Mughda-Mukunda:</b> "Mukunda - the Enchanting"	1 + 2 = 3	1 "Hari rabhi sarati"	Radha is slowly softening and the Sakhi also entreats her to be soft to Krishna.	The Sakhi's role as the adviser emphasized again
Dasama Sarga <b>Chatura</b> <b>Chaturbhuj:</b> "Chaturbhuj - the Playful"	1 + 7 = 8	1 "Vadasi Yadi Kinchidapi"	It is now evening. Radha's anger appeased. Krishna praises her and reminds her of the joys they had together.	In the famous song, Krishna wants to paint her lovely feet with lac-dye. The touch of her feet would work as an antidote for his passion.
Ekadasa Sarga <b>Saananda</b> <b>Daamodara:</b> "Daamodara - the Joyous"	1 + 3 + 2 + 5 = 11	3 "Virachita Chatu Vachana" "Manjuta Kunjatata Kesi" "Radha Vadana Vilokana"	Radha's companions advise her to concede Krishna's entreaties. She obliges. Both Krishna & Radha go into the bower.	Description of two young lovers intimately drawn to each other. Beautiful verse, describing the love-lorn couple's happiness.
Dwadasa Sarga <b>Sapreeta</b> <b>Peetaambara:</b> "Pitambara - the Pleased"	2 + 8 + 5 = 15	2 "Kisalaya Sayana tale" "Nayana Kuranga Taranga"	Beautiful songs. Real climax of eroticism. Intimate scenes of love play described.	Full of sensuous imagery. Erotic. But devotees regard these as greatly spiritual.

The erotic nature of the poem attracted severe critics especially that part depicting the physicality of love. It is true that the poem is highly sensual, also sexual at some places. Sanskrit literature contains enough specimens of such unbounded eroticism (in *Amaruka Kavya* etc.) and, in regional Prakrits, such a tradition had been strong. *Gita Govinda* which combines these traditions and in the Vaishnava tradition validates such love. In fact, such a validation has been consecrated as 'sacred' as it is in this poem. This is devotion at its intense point. The people involved in this amorous tryst are by themselves unique personalities as depicted in the poem. Radha is earthly and celestial at the same time. She is luminous, iridescent and trance-dazzled. As Radha goes through all the states of a Virahini heroine, so is Krishna as the hero. The whole song of the *Gita Govinda* is pervaded by that supreme creative feeling which divides reality into two illusive forms of male and female, and makes them dance like two flames of life before they find completeness in each other. It was mentioned that the poem contains an oblique suggestion that Jayadeva realized this completeness in the God after he found such a one in his own life. The suggestion further deepens if we see that Jayadeva is yet another epithet of Krishna, which highlights the fact that Jayadeva's 'Song of the God' is also a song about himself – about the human self.

#### **The influence of Jayadeva's *Gita Govinda* :**

Jayadeva and his inimitable highly lyrical poem at once highly religious, and intensely sensual, at once musical and highly evocative, a poem to be read, sung and danced was soon famous and poets desirous of treating erotic love – an important sentiment at least in the middle ages – and especially in the new vernaculars – found *Gita Govinda* an ideal poetic work worth emulating. Sri Krishna Kirtana of Chandidas, *Vasanta Vilasa* of an early Gujarati poet Muni Sri Jina Vijay ji, *Rasika Priya* of Rana Kumbha, *Sri Krishna Karnamrita*, Narayana Teertha's *Krishna Leela Tarangini* – all of them owe their poetic tradition to *Gita Govinda*. Neither did the regional languages lag behind. The 'Pada' literature in Bengal including Chaitanaya's songs in *Madhura Bhakti*, Kshetravya's 'Padams', mostly rearing towards the erotic – all of them belong to the same category of lyrical – religious – erotic poetry singing of divine love through devotional human love. Jayadeva seems to be the first Indian poet who has brought into harmony the hitherto divided planes of human experience, at least in literature – the personal and the impersonal; the homely and the divine – and thereby struck a new chord of nearness and familiarity of human life in poetic expression.

The structure of the verses and the songs is the subject of much critical thought and analysis. Broadly speaking, the poem is divided into two types of *Chandas* or metre. The Sanskrit verses which form the initial descriptive and narrative modes are in syllabic metres (*akshara chandas* or *akshara vr̥tta*) and the songs (*ashtapadis*) themselves are in '*tala chandas*' or moric metres. A few verses are in the '*Arya*' *chandas* ( a moric metre) used in Sanskrit poetry intended for singing.

The structure of the songs itself is intricate. Each song contains three formal units. The first one is the *Dhr̥uva pada* (translated as 'refrain' since it is repeated after each couplet). This supplies the context for the descriptive details that occur in the couplets that follow. Then the varying unit in each song is the '*Pada*' a stanza with a series of rhymed couplets. *Gita Govinda* is made up of several such stanzas (that is why it is *padavali*, a term that Jayadeva introduces in *Gita Govinda*). Since the stanzas are usually eight in number, the songs are referred to as *ashtapadi*. There are a couple of deviations to this general rule where some songs might contain more than eight couplets.

The third and final unit is the *Bhanita*, the last *pada* in each song. Each *bhanita* contains the signature of the poet Jayadeva. This song comments upon and thematic variance and ends in relating the aesthetic and emotional perceptions of the *pada*.

The entire rhythmical structure of the *ashtapadis* depends upon the moric structure, though the preceding stanzas which provide the context and the motivation, written in syllabic metre are equally important. In fact, the stanzas



Photo : Sangeet Natak Akademi

Balasaraswati enacting a sequence from  
*Gita-Govinda*

supply the contextual perspective and formulates the necessary backdrop for the song that follows. The post – *ashtapadi* stanzas are often used to summarize the mood and wind up the word-pictures and contain stanzas praising the Lord.

*Gita Govinda* is a unique poem which combines the literary, the musical and the dance texts into one. The various layers of meaning, denoting the erotic, the aesthetic and the spiritual, have now been fully accepted and enjoyed. The alliterations, end-rhymes and *alankaras* – are all suggestive of a fully blossomed poetic text. Jayadeva is aptly placed in the company of Asvaghosha, Kalidasa and Sri Harsha in the Sanskrit poetic tradition. Critics have drawn our attention to the alliterative combinations of consonants and vowels in the songs which reinforce the metres and the sensuous imagery of the songs. Very few texts in Sanskrit literary tradition in which sense and sound are as complementary to each other as it is in *Gita Govinda*.

The text of *Gita Govinda* also provides ragas and talas to each one of the songs and ragas to the preceding and following slokas.. The twenty four songs were composed in 12 ragas and five talas. But since the modes of singing have changed since the days of Jayadeva, both in Northern India and Southern India, the *ashtapadis* are assigned ragas according to latter day *sampradaya*.

The musical variety in *Gita Govinda* with its combination of lyrical and dramatic elements elevates it to be the first audio-visual poetic text of rare sensitivity and beauty. The *padas* lent themselves to a wide variety of musical rendering. Especially noteworthy is the strong ‘bhajan sampradaya’ – how the songs are sung in groups as devotional music - in South India in general, and Andhra in particular, where the *Asthapadis* form a formidable section of the bhajan concerts along with Narayana Teertha’s *tarangams*, Ramada’s *keertanas* and other well-known Telugu *pada-kartas*.

### Gita – Govinda and the Dance tradition

The poem, metrical and rhythmic in composition, is a text intended for singing and dancing. The ragas for the poems and the ragas and talas for the songs (*ashtapadis*) demand such a connotation. Besides, Jayadeva’s own text speaks of the poem being sung and danced to. The line “Padmavati Charana Charana Chakravarti” in the poem has a two layered meaning : ‘Jayadeva’ referring both to the Lord and to himself, the poet. Similarly, Padmavati is Lord’s consort as well as Jayadeva’s wife. That the dancing feet adorns the head of the preceptor is



Darshana Jhaveri as Radha in a sequence from *Gita-Govinda*

Jayadeva's master-stroke of imagistic suggestivity. Later day texts and inscriptions have endorsed the popular stories that Padmavati danced to Jayadeva's singing of the ashta-padis.

That the poem lends itself to several moving images of dramatic sequences can be seen throughout the song itself. The song, though being narrative and descriptive, contains several lyrical and dramatic elements. This combination of narrative and dramatic elements is a common strategy adopted by writers of folk theatre, in which the narrative parts are in *akshara vritta* and the songs in *talavritta*, thereby making it 'a model play for the common audience'. Some scholars from Andhra have recognized that *Gita Govinda* has constructional similarities with Yakshaganas in which the narrative, and interpretative parts are recited, and the songs sung and presented through *satvika* and *angika*, the sakhī playing the role of an intermediary – the 'other character' – with a strong expressive and emotional graph of *sringara* delineation.

Lastly, one would only wonder to see the intricate nuances of thought processes Jayadeva has incorporated in the poem by wielding the various phases of Viraha, only to culminate in the physical union, of the Lord and his consort.

As SC Mukharji and several others pointed out the ashtapadis are introduced by verses setting out the situation which introduces the context followed by prayers addressed to Krishna. There is no dialogue as such, and the three characters are engaged in a kind of lyrical monologue. But the dramatic element is contained in the varied mood changing dramatic monologues themselves.

The song, popular both in the temple musical traditions and the dance traditions of almost all the classical dance styles of India, is a veritable treasure-house of "padabhinaya", in which intense emotions are expressed mostly through *sattvika* and *hasta abhinayas*. All the different types of Nayikas and their several *avastha bhedas* find their appropriate textual base in *Gita Govinda*. One can take each ashta padi and write an *aata kramam* (performance modules), for each song so rich in meaning, so intense in emotion and so diverse in structure.

Thus the song initiates a new tradition of visual poetic rendering of a series of moving images of love, written in mellifluous musicality and with the grace and diligence of a painter's brush. *Gita Govinda* blazed a new trail in the sphere of dance since it is rich in its delineation of quickly changing moods of two love-lorn beings and the charm and tension are elevated to a cosmic level since the beings are not ordinary mortals, but the very divine Lord and his beloved, Radha.