The Romance of Radha: A Journey With Jayadeva

O. Somasundaram¹ and Vijaya Raghavan²

Abstract
The legend of Radha, the gopi of ancient Vrindavan, with Lord Krishna is a favorite topic amongst his devotees. 12th-century poet Jayadeva’s description in Sanskrit Gita Govinda is a masterpiece and very popular in various parts of the subcontinent. Some aspects are touched upon here.

Keywords
Jayadeva, Gita Govinda, Krishna, Radha

Introduction
The intimate relationship between Radha and Lord Krishna is unique and popular with religious and not-so-religious people of the Indian subcontinent.¹-³ Without entering into the controversy whether she is an ordinary gopi like other gopis who have sensuous relation with the adolescent Krishna in Vrindavan on the banks of Yamuna, we would discuss the relationship between them as depicted in Jayadeva’s Gita Govinda.

It is remarkable that Radha’s entry into the Vaishnavite mythology was only by circa 10th century CE. Some scholars feel she is a modification of the famous Tamil character Nappinnai of the famous Tamil female Alwar, Andal. In her religious pieces of work, Thiruppavai and Thiruvaimozhi, Nappinnai is depicted as the wife of Lord Krishna who won her hand by subduing seven bulls. She stays with Lord Krishna as dutiful daughter-in-law of Nandagopan. With the prudence and modesty of the women of that age, the details of the married life are not gone into detail unlike the poet Jayadeva of Gita Govinda.

Though the word Radha, meaning prosperity or success, occurs in early Sanskrit literature, the word Radha depicting a person occurs only in the puranic literature of later times. The 10th part of the Bhagavata Puranam refers to the rasa leelas of Lord Krishna with the gopis with special reference to Radha. Rasa is a sort of circular dance in which the hands of the dancers, men and women, are joined together. Krishna was in the habit of enjoying this dance with the young gopis of Vrindavan, who loved him passionately. All agree as to the general character of the affair—the scene, the time and season, the drawing of the women with sweet music of the ecstatic flute, the dance, the amorous feelings of the women for Krishna, and their expression in various ways. Subsequently, the popularity of Radha increased exponentially owing to the leaders of the Vaishnava Bhakti movement such as Haridas and Bilwamangal (in Tamil Nadu, in the 1930s and subsequent years, the famous Tamil actor-singer M.K. Thyagaraja Bhagavathar crazed the country with his songs of Haridas and Bilwamangal).

The Radha-Krishna legend reaches the acme in the 12th century by Sanskrit poet Jayadeva. This lyric poet belonged to Bengal/Odisha and was patronized by the local king, who himself was a poet. It is probable that some of the interpolations are by the King himself, a connoisseur of shringara rasa. It is to be noted that Padmavati, the wife of the poet, was a talented dancer, who played to the tune of his songs. The popularity of Gita Govinda increased and the recitation of it was introduced as one of the rituals at the famous Jagannath Temple of Puri. The fame of Gita Govinda exploded in all parts of India and was recited in most of the

¹ Department of Psychiatry, Madras Medical College, Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India
² Schizophrenia Research Foundation, Anna Nagar West Extension, Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India
Corresponding author:
O. Somasundaram, Thanigai Illam, 23rd Cross, Besant Nagar, Chennai 600090, Tamil Nadu, India.
Email: somasundaramo@hotmail.com

Creative Commons Non Commercial CC BY-NC: This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 License (http://www.creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/) which permits non-Commercial use, reproduction and distribution of the work without further permission provided the original work is attributed as specified on the SAGE and Open Access pages (https://us.sagepub.com/en-us/nam/open-access-at-sage).
Krishna temples. Dances were performed at these temples and the music concerts included the songs of *Gita Govinda* regularly. The sculptures and paintings depicted erotic scenes from *Gita Govinda*. It is needless to say that the present-day social media still explores *Gita Govinda*.

The following are the excerpts from some of the 12 sargas (parts) of *Gita Govinda*. In Sargam 1: Astapadi 3, Radha’s maid friend describes the erotic relations Krishna is having with the various gopis on the river bank. They allude directly to the sexual relations and very many indirect references such as the bees extracting honey from flowers and vines entwining the trees and producing flowers. This chapter kindles the sexual jealousy and frustrations (*viraga thapam*) of Radha.

In Sargam 2: Astapadi 5, Radha describes her own feelings after witnessing exotic relations between other gopis and Krishna and her longing for the same and to the exclusion of relation with other gopis. Her jealousy and yearnings are evident here. In Sargam 2: Astapadi 6, Radha describes the intimate fondling between them leading to the final stages of sexual union and exhaustion. These intimate relations happen on the bed of tender ferns in Vrindavan on the banks of Yamuna.

In Sargam 3: Astapadi 7, Krishna describes his guilty feelings in abandoning Radha in favor of other gopis. In the next few sargas, the mutual feelings of their separation, depression, and despair are vividly described.

In Sargam 12, Astapadi 23, the sexual excitement and the arousal of the female sexuality is explicitly and openly described. The invitation to the male companion to the exploitation of the foreplay with reference to sadomasochial aspects of the biting, scratching, disrobing, etc., are described minutely ending in the sexual union and exhaustion. In the next Astapadi, Krishna comes into terms with the exhausted Radha and the drama ends.

**Conclusion**

Probably, in no other Sanskrit literature, so much importance is given to *shringara rasa* as in *Gita Govinda*; the patron kings liked it and audience enjoyed it; why should we object?

The religiously and the spiritually minded consider this work as the union of *jeevatma* (individual soul) with the *paramatma* (soul of the cosmos) and overlook the physical aspects. Let us agree with them. In Babasaheb Ambedkar’s view, Krishna is a riddle: Krishna abandons his lawfully wedded wife Rukmini and seduces Radha, the wife of another man, and lives with her in sin, without remorse. Is it a too radical view?

**Acknowledgments**

This work was supported by India-US Fogarty Training in Chronic Non-Communicable Disorders & Diseases Across Lifespan Grant # 1D43TW009120 (Raghavan, Fellow; LB Cottler, PI).

**Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

**Funding**

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

**References**

1. Miller BS, ed. *Gītagovinda of Jayadeva: Love Song of the Dark Lord*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass; 1984.
2. Ramasamy IS. *Jayadevarian Astapadi: Geeta Govindam*. Chennai: Kizhakkku Pathippagam; 2007.
3. Ambedkar BR. *Riddles in Hinduism*. New Delhi: Samyak Prakashan; 2017.