

## Geeta Govinda - Its Place in History

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Geeta Govinda by Saint Poet Jayadeva is a medieval text of a Dance-Drama in Sanskrit. Though medieval in dating as it was written during the 12<sup>th</sup> Century A.D., yet it was highly modern in terms of its contents and presentation. Jayadeva gifted the character of Radha to Sanskrit literature as up to his period, there was neither a finished model of Radha nor any predecessor or prototype.

Geeta Govinda was written at a time, when the Indian Sub-Continent was subject of external invasion, wars, battles, rise of a number of principalities and multifarious religious ideas. The Arabs had already occupied Sindh for more than two centuries without any organized resistance from any other part of India. Mahammed of Gazni had attacked India and looted and destroyed the Somanath Temple 17 times. None except the local king put up any worthwhile fight. There was no upsurge of nationalism or religious renaissance in India.

It was also a period of rise of regional literatures specific to identities of each cultural region. The general background was one of political unrest and the absence of central political power. The different regions were out to develop and build upon their own literary and artistic traditions, local styles in religious practices and local models in art and sculpture.

The influence of Buddhism though dormant by this time was still quite strong in many parts of India, even though the Saivite reactions had continued to be also quite strong. The revival of Vaishnavism in South was at a nascent stage. Beyond the descriptions of Rasalila of Sri Krishna and the Gopis in Shreemad Bhagavat Vaishnavism did not have much in it to hold on to popular imagination. On the other hand, the Shaiva Literature had detailed descriptions of intense love between Shiva and Parvati. The decadent Buddhism in most parts of India had taken to tantrik practices to hold on to popular imagination, particularly amongst the weaker sections.

Years were spent in prolonged battles between different States of India leading to social indiscipline at home. Compared to Christianity, which had already established itself in Kerala and in parts of the western coast and Islam, which had started making inroads from north east, Hinduism was not a mass based propagative religion. It believed in individualistic relationship with God and that also confined itself to the elites namely, Brahmins, Kshyatriyas and Vaisyas. It was mass worship and community participation in religious rites and festivals that keep a community together. Only massively built temples could be the convergence point for such mass

worship and mass participation. Temples had to be made centres of social and cultural entertainment, so that the society would be held together with religion as the focal point. Massive Building alone would not be sufficient if items and programmes of entertainment is not made a part of the mode of worship. The soldiers of the land based army were to stay for years away from their homes in battles. They were also householders, who needed some entertainment in their Camps either through music, dance or both. Therefore, there was a necessity for literary master-pieces, which could be enacted through music and dance.

Gita Govinda came to fill up this need wonderfully well. Coupled with the Deba Dasi System, it provided top quality entertainment to devotees, who assembled in temples in *poojas*. Performed by Gotipuas (dancing boys in the attire of girls), it also fulfilled needs of providing leisure time entertainment to the fighting armies. Gita Govinda made Vaishnavism more romantic than Shaivism and socially more safe and acceptable than Tantrik Buddhism. Written in Sanskrit, which was easy to understand throughout India and rhythmic and perfectly lyrical to sing, it spread to different regions of India. The first dated manuscript comes from Nepal (1248 A.D.). Geeta Govinda was sung in Vaishnavite Centres of Patan in Gujrat at the end of 13<sup>th</sup> Century. Manank of Gujrat and Rana Kumbha from Rajasthan wrote major commentaries on Gita Govinda. Gita Govinda provided materials in artistic creations to Western and Central Asia. Alongwith Gita Govinda, Radha travelled to temples and art studies of different artists in painting and textiles.

The commentaries of Gita Govinda in Indian languages accompanied by its translations and its imitations are most prolific in Odisha followed by Bengal, Rajasthan, Gujrat and

Karnataka. The emergence of Jagannath Cult and the critical importance of Puri as a centre of pilgrimage had attracted Shree Chaitanya from Bengal. Raya Ramananda was the Governor of Deccan Province of the Utkal empire with headquarters at Rajamahendri and Sri Chaitanya met him there. Shri Chaitanya came to know the inner meaning and philosophy of Gita Govinda from Raya Ramananda and highly appreciated it. The popularity of Gita Govinda in Vaishnavism was then established firmly. Gita Govinda and worship of Radha became central theme to the theology, doctrine and the rituals of the Goudiya Vaishnav followers of Chaitanya and the Vaishnavs of Odisha. The Goswamis took it to Vrindavan.

In some temples, Gita Govinda was sung before the image of Krishna, in some of the temples it was sung before the image of Radha and in many others, it was sung before both. At Puri, where the epic was created, it was sung and performed in dance before the images of Lord Jagannath, Balabhadra and Subhadra.

Whereas some commentaries, such as by the Goswamis, understood the Gita Govinda purely as a theological work, there are others by Rana Kumbha of Rashika Priya Tika, which comprehended and interpreted the work as an Alankar Text dealing with Alankar, Nayak and Nayika Veda. A few other commentaries looked at the text of Gita Govinda as an work of erotica and grouped it with Kama Shastra and Koka Shastra.

The Gita Govinda was taken in performing arts as an work of purely musical excellence dealing with different *ragas, talas and chhandas*. Gita Govinda was also taken as a Dance Drama and it also induced many works of dramatized prose dealing with the theme of love between Radha and Krishna.

The imitations of Gita Govinda in verse are found in all parts of India, but the maximum number of them came from Odisha. As regards the number of imitations, the Gita Govinda is, perhaps, second only to Meghadutam by Mahakabi Kalidas.

The Gita Govinda with illustrations have been found and preserved in Nepal, Gujarat, Delhi, Jeipur, Ahmedabad, Hydrabad, Madurai, Kolkata, Bhubaneswar, Mewar in Rajasthan, Assam, Ashutos Museum in Kolkata, British Museum in London, National Museum of Chandigarh and in Darbhanga in Bihar. It is obvious that starting from the last decade of 12<sup>th</sup> Century Gita Govinda had an unparalleled popularity all over India from Kanya Kumari to Kashmir and from Assam to Gujarat. The original and sub-styles it had evolved in Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Odisha, Bengal and Manipur, make it evident that Gita Govinda singing was universal in Vishnu Temples throughout India, but in Odisha it is also sung even till to-day in Shiva and Shakti Temples. Singing styles of Bhajans and Music are definitely different in different States, but singing style of Gita Govinda corresponding to the dance and dance drama traditions are peculiar only to Odisha and Manipur.

Gita Govinda thus, had an unique role in the development of a whole gamut artistic traditions of India, namely – literature, painting, music, dance, textile design and sculpture. In the evolution of theological doctrines, pictorial styles, music and dance schools, it played a pivotal and unique role.

Eminent Sanskrit Scholars have called Gita Govinda as the last great work in Sanskrit Literature. It is great because it provided a basis of cultural unity of India at a time, when there was fragmentation, rift and unrest. The role it

had played in making Vaishnavism more charming, interesting and absorbing is unique in the history of Indian renaissance. Had Vaishnavism not been made more appealing to the common mass, which started with the Gita Govinda then national unity, perhaps, could not have survived from the onslaught of Tantrik Buddhism, Islam and Christianity and last but not the least 750 years of alien rule.

It is in this historical context that Jayadeva's Gita Govinda has to be appreciated as a great and infallible instrument of national integration through its impact on Bhakti movement at a time when cultural and social fabric of India seemed to be falling apart. It was Jayadeva's Radha and Krishna, which together united the religious factions amongst Hindus all over. It made religion an all absorbing passion and not merely an abstract exercise in intellect. The untouchables and the socially backward classes, which had got attracted towards Buddhism and other propagated religions accepted Vaishnavism as their own religion and continued to be in the mainstream. Mere Vishnu worship and a non romantic Bhakti cult could not perhaps have achieved such a miracle without the intervention of Jayadeva's epic on romance between Radha and Krishna. The great unifying impact of the Bhakti cult which has been felt throughout last nine centuries is strongly felt even to-day in the ISKCON and so many other post renaissance movements.

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## The Philosophy of the Gitagovinda

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God, is the *Chidatma*, and the Absolute Consciousness, whose mysterious existence can be conceived at heart by the acquisition of *Brahmajnana* through vedantic meditation. *Brahmajnana* is the source of wisdom and consciousness. The *Mahayogi* who knows our inner feeling is the Cosmic power or *Brahma* who is also the ultimate Reality. He is also the protector of His creation, the *Dharma*. He is the stainless one, shining in peerless light and appearing in Soul-bewitching wondrous form. He is known as Govinda. The collection of sweet and musical *slokas* dedicated to Him is the *Gitagovinda*.

The scripture *Gitagovinda* of Jayadeva centres round the conjoined love episode of Radha and Krsna. According to Shri Rama Krishna Paramahansa, "As a devotee cannot live without God, so also God cannot live without His devotee. The devotee becomes the sweetness and God its enjoyer. The devotee becomes the lotus and God the bee. It is also the God-head that has become all these in order to enjoy its own Bliss. That is the significance of the episode of Radha and Krsna". According to one school of Vaisnava religion, the supreme God Himself became Radha and Krsna to enjoy the bliss of their mutual union.

At the beginning of the scripture of the *Gitagovinda*, it is described in the very first *sloka*

that due to all-pervading darkness in the dense forest caused by clouds, Krsna, the child, was afraid and so Nanda asked Radha to lead the kid home, but Radha on her way indulged in secret blissful union with Madhava, her beloved, in the groves on the bank of the river Yamuna.

Due to excess of *tama* (darkness) *jiva* forgets God and there is not the slightest trace of yearning in his heart for God-realisation. The creator is at a loss to observe this spiritual degeneration in His creation. Though a part and parcel of the Supreme Self, *Jiva* forgets his inner self coming under the shell of world-bewitching *maya* or illusion which envelops him in complete darkness. The *jiva* can dispel this darkness of ignorance by kindling at heart the spirit of Radha, the pleasing consort of Madhava by spiritual discipline at the dictates of conscience and enjoy the bliss of communion with the Supreme Self on the bank of the river Yamuna at Vrindavana.

Devotion with dedication is the main weapon to cut all the fetters that bind the *Jiva* to worldliness. The sages of the past have recorded eight shackles which obstruct the way to the realisation of God.

"Ghrna, sankha, bhayam, lajja, jugupsa cheti  
panchami,  
Kulam silam cha manam cha astu pasah  
prakrtitah"