



## "Delighting in the Delightful : The Aesthetics of Gita Govinda and Odissi Dance"

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Gita Govinda to me, is the culmination of the concentrated spiritual aspiration of a nation; of the masses of people who had no direct access to nor understanding of the highly philosophical ancient Hindu religious-spiritual texts like the Vedas, the Upanishads or even the Bhagavad Gita. Its appeal, as surely the poet Jayadeva meant it to be, was to the emotion, to the Bhava, the devotional fervour which can circumvent the rigours of formal education to reach the highest human goal: the realisation of the Oneness of the Supreme Godhead and his Creation. The *Gita Govinda*, in as much as it was written by Jayadeva, is yet the cultural self-expression of a people restless and seeking a simple yet effective path of self realisation.

The word culture has been comprehensively defined by the Seer- poet and Yogi Sri Aurobindo as “ the expression of a consciousness of life which formulates itself in three aspects.”

1. There is a side of thought, of ideal, of upward will and the soul’s aspiration (expressed in its philosophy & religion).
2. There is a side of creative self-expression and appreciative aesthesis, intelligence and imagination (expressed in art, poetry and literature).

3. There is a side of practical and outward formulation (seen in its society, politics and behaviour).

While the first derives from analytical intellect and thought, and the last from a spontaneous social tendency of a community developed over the years, it is the second aspect, dealing with creativity in art and literature, that has its source in the love of beauty, the purely aesthetic, manifested by a combination of intelligence, imagination and inspiration. Its appeal is as much to the senses as to the emotion and sensibilities.

The Gita Govinda describes the chief among all emotions, “Love”; hence its common and widespread appeal throughout the nation, paralleled only by the philosophical text of the Bhagavad Gita. “Rasa”, the flavour of a pervading emotion or “Bhava”, is at the heart of the Gita Govinda. But what we are discussing here is the relationship of Gita Govinda to Odissi Dance. As I see it, the two most beautiful art forms that have withstood the test of time in Odisha are dance and sculpture. Which form predates which is debatable only through intense scholarly pursuit? For us it suffices to say that for centuries they have mutually, both ‘complemented’ and ‘complimented’ each other. The supremely artistic



and emotive creation of the *Gita Govinda*, in the 12<sup>th</sup> Century formed the perfect third apex of the “Prism” that absorbed and reflected the Divine essence, creating a myriad-coloured spectrum of the rainbow.

The Western mind, unacquainted with the workings of the religious-spiritual ethos of India, has often criticised or smiled with contemptuous tolerance at the obsession with the erotic in Indian art. In extreme cases Indian art has been accused of gross vulgarity, especially in the overtly erotic temple sculptures. Sadly enough even some Indian critics conform to this view in their over-enthusiasm to not appear hypocritical. Viewed from such priggish sensibilities the *Gita Govinda* would fall under similar standards of the so-called profane and the vulgar. Happily things have changed in recent times and such flawed views have been refuted through research and reasoning, ironically by Western scholars again; known for their pursuit of knowledge and truth.

However, this jaundiced perception may be attributed to the highly puritanical philosophy of Christianity, which marks a clear distinction between the spiritual and the mundane and lays down celibacy as a precondition for the pursuit of the spirit. Whereas Hinduism or the Sanatana Dhrama embraces the mundane and earthly as part of reality that need not be ignored nor repudiated, but rather raised to the level of the Divine, until it becomes redundant in the final transformation of human love into its ultimate consummation in Divine love.

As Barbara Stoller-Miller points out: “The Sanskrit poets came to realise the unique power and the aesthetic potential of sexual passion (*rati-bhava*) in its aspects of pain and pleasure. The erotic mood that emerges from passion was expressed in the antithetical modes of separation

and consummation. To experience this mood in the interplay of its two modes was considered the highest of aesthetic joy. Jayadeva created the religiously potent atmosphere of the *Gita Govinda* by exploring the poignant mood of separation within the broader play of the divine passion in consummation.”

What made Odissi Dance the perfect vehicle for expression and propagation of the *Gita Govinda* was the pervasiveness of the Vaishnavite cult which was sweepingly over-riding its predecessors- Buddhism, Tantrism and Shaivism prevalent at the time. Unlike the awe-inspiring austerity of Buddhism and Shaivism, the cult of Krishna, the incarnation of Vishnu, a cowherd prince engaged in romantic dalliance with village maidens, was more endearing, more readily acceptable.

The eroticism of temple sculptures and the *Gita Govinda*, through its physical and emotional rendering in dance by Devadasis (female servitors assigned to temples) in ritualistic practices dedicated to Lord Jagannath, dispelled any lingering doubts and raised art to its true spiritual level. The fluidity of movements, the devotional aspect of temple rituals, and the emotional intensity of human love and Divine love represented through Radha & Krishna in the *Gita Govinda*, gave a final sanction to the ascension of the aesthetic into the sublimely spiritual. This was the whole intent and purport of the *Gita Govinda*. The intensity of human passion, (when performed) through Odissi dance, became synonymous with spiritual intensity.

I quote from Barbara Stoller-Miller: “Passion is made palpable through sensuous descriptions of movements and physical forms. Seasonal changes in Nature and bodily signs of inner feelings are coloured richly to create a dense



atmosphere of passion.” She further states that “The theorists dictated that the gestures exposing a character’s mental states must be subtle, expressive enough to arouse a sensitive audience but never so crudely detailed that they simulate wanton desire. In the Gita Govinda this restraint functions to make potentially pornographic subject matter the material of aesthetic and religious experience.” How strictly the legendary Dance *gurus* have adhered to this subtlety of expression is evident from their choreography of the songs from the “Gita Govinda”.

While Odissi has seen a transition from the temple to the stage in modern times, the onus of not compromising its spiritual essence rests on the shoulders of the artists. To my mind one artist who has succeeded eminently in carrying this burden with élan, and in paving the way for others, is none other than Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra. Anyone who has seen him perform one of the most erotic pieces of Gita Govinda - “Kuru Yadu Nandana”, cannot but agree with me.

Sri Aurobindo writes: “The first and lowest use of art is the purely aesthetic, the second is the intellect or educative, the third and the highest the spiritual.” However, while saying this he does not undermine the value of aesthetics in humanity. In fact he relates Aristotle’s idea on art as ‘a means for the purification of feelings,

passions and emotions’ with the justification of the aesthetic side of art. He says, “The beautiful and the good are held by many thinkers to be the same”. We can draw here a parallel with the famous lines by John Keats “Beauty is truth, truth beauty - that is all ye know on earth and all ye need to know”.

To quote Sri Aurobindo again: “According to our philosophy the whole world came out of “Ananda” and returns into Ananda, and the triple term in which Ananda may be stated is Joy, Love, Beauty. To see divine beauty in the whole world, man, life, nature, to love that (which) we have seen and to have pure unalloyed bliss in that love and that beauty, is the appointed road by which mankind as a race must climb to God.” It is this pure unalloyed love, beauty and bliss that the Gita Govinda achieves and that all dance exponents must assay to achieve through their performance, both for themselves and for the audience.

The pleasure of the senses must be replaced by the “Akhanda Rasa”, undifferentiated and unabridged delight in the delightfulness of things”- says Sri Aurobindo. Undoubtedly the “Gita Govinda”, in its renderings in music and dance has been eminently successful in delighting us with this delight, arousing in us the “Akhanda Rasa”.