

Historicity of the Visual Imagery of *Gīta-Govinda*

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The historicity of the great poetic work of *Gīta Govinda* by Jayadeva, its origin and development as well as its visual manifestations over the centuries, in various schools of miniature painting, are well known. So also are the translations of its poetic content, in many languages adequately published. This paper turns to its visual representations from earliest times to the late 19th century with a view to investigate, imagine and visually probe into its origin by peeping into its social and cultural milieu, its geographic sphere and surrounding environment of religious, social and political patronage.

In the beginning of the Vaiṣṇava renaissance in Eastern India, poet Jayadeva (c. 12th century) composed these immortal songs of love and devotion (*bhakti*) which were suitably set to *Rāgas* and *Tālas*, musical modes and rhythm respectively, to elevate the emotional stimulus of masses set against the backdrop of heavenly surroundings of the Bindrāvana, the river Jamunā and the undulating pastures with cow herds, *gopīs* and cows and where Kṛṣṇa played his divine *līlās*, (the delightful prangs of love) with his *gopīs*.

While studying the historicity of this great poetic work with textual as well as visual evidences of paintings, manuscripts and inscriptions, we discover that this poetic work had already become known in Gujarat in c.13th century. In the words of Majumdar,¹ “The popularity of *Gīta-Govinda* is discernible in a stone inscription of Sāraṅgadeva dated V.S.1384=C.E. 1291 which records the levying of a revised tax on the inhabitants of Pālanpur, to defray expenses of the *naivedya*, *pūja*, *prekṣaṇīyaka* (offering worship, dramatic performances) etc. to Lord Kṛṣṇa, installed there in an old temple”.

“The invocatory verse in this inscription is the last verse of the canto of the *Gīta-Govinda* styled the *Dāsāvātāra stuti*, and this fact shows that the work composed in the last quarter of the 12th century had already become quasi sacred within a century, within which period it travelled to distant lands from the east coast to the west coast of India.” It is also observed that Gujarat and Rajasthan have been closely associated with the Kṛṣṇa cult through famous pilgrim centers like Prabhāsa Pāṭana and Dwārakā where devotees from all

parts of India congregated, resulting not only the spread of the cult but also its devotional literature. This is one of the reasons why a large number of Jaina secular and Vaiṣṇava manuscripts have been found from this region.

Although it is difficult to speculate as to when exactly the poetic themes began to be translated into visual art by the painters, it appears that this development may have been simultaneous with the spread of Vaiṣṇavism in the middle of the 15th century. It was around this time that the great mystic saints like Chaṇḍidāsa (c.14th century) and Vidyāpati (c. 15th century) gave prominence to the divine love of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa, through their poetic creations dipped in the *bhakti rasa*. Also this is the time when the divine love found its great exponent in Vallabhācārya (V.S. 1535-1620), the founder of the cult of *Śrī Nāthjī*. His followers were the famous *aṣṭachāpa* poets (eight renowned poets of *brajabhāṣa*) who elevated the *bhakti* aspect of the doctrine. Then follows the stream of poets, the principal among them was Keśavadāsa, the author of *Rasikapriyā* and *Kavipriyā*. Other poets and writers followed the trend and *brajabhāṣā* poetry became the main source of inspiration to Rajasthani painters. At this time the Western Indian or Gujarati manuscript style was in vogue. With its rigid formulae and hieratic approach it could hardly cope up with the tender romantic appeal and expressive element of the Vaiṣṇava poetic works. Therefore, a new mode of expression had to be evolved which could combine the Vaiṣṇava devotion on the one hand and its tender lyrical appeal on the other. Therefore “while poetry² with its expansive canvas had its own expedients for the enjoyment of *rasa*, the art of painting circumscribed by the problem of space could only focus attention on a certain *bhāva* or incident. Nevertheless with the help of rich palette imbued with symbological significance and the employment of judicious draughtsmanship the painter created scenes of abiding beauty.”

Thinking in terms of visual imagery of the poetic verses, we realise that there is the first paper manuscript in a *pothī* format (loose leaf folder format) published by Majumdar³ which is in the Western Indian Style of c. 1450 (Fig. 16.1). The illustrations from this manuscript are visually identical with those of the Jaina, *Kalpasūtras*, the *Vasanta vilāsa* scroll of the Freer Gallery, Washington DC painted at Ahmedabad in C.E. 1451 and the folios of the *Bāla Gopāla Stuti* (praises of the child Kṛṣṇa) scattered in different museums of the world. This is one more document which provides evidence of a common provincial mode of painting in Gujarat, which other than the Jaina subjects, is completely ‘Kṛṣṇite’ in theme and character. However, among the documents cited above, the *Gīta-Govinda* in Western Indian style (Fig. 16.3) is the first of its kind. Endowed with the characteristics of linear draughtsmanship, the pointed nose, double chin and the farther protruding eye into space, the illustrations, though devoid of modelling and the third dimension, created an



Fig.16.1 : Kṛṣṇa dancing with *gopis*, folio of the *Bāla-Gopāla Stuti*, paper, Western Indian style, c. 1450, provenance uncertain



Fig.16.2 : Kāma shooting flowery arrow, folio from the *Gīta-Govinda*, Sultanate, c. 1525-75, Collection – CSMVS, Mumbai

emotional and romantic tableau with limited landscape and suggestive symbolism. Hereafter the subject of *Gīta-Govinda*, not only became more and more popular in Gujarat and Rajasthan, but also reached up to the Hill states of Pahari Schools in the 19th and early 20th centuries. The Pre-Akbari, Akbari and even later examples show a continuity of tradition and symbolism while certain common elements and local variations start creeping in. But the most notable features like the horizontal format, Devanāgarī text on top yellow margin, curling cloud pattern, flowering creepers, stylized and semi-stylized trees, including the palms and juxtaposition of bright colours such as brick red, pink, green and bright yellow and orange become more pronounced in the subsequent centuries. This Pre-Akbari phase with its newly discovered material within a period frame of c., 1525-1575 C.E., presently identified as the Sultanate phase⁴, has produced a number of Hindu as well as Islamic subjects including the epics. Among them the *Gīta-Govinda* and the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* have been the fondest subjects of the painters. The fragmentary set of eleven folios of the *Gīta-Govinda*⁵ (Figs. 16.2, 16.4) of the Prince of Wales Museum, now CSMVS, Mumbai is the finest example.

Due to its seemingly Rajasthani semblance and Gujarati orientation of style, these scholars, in the past, had attributed a Rajasthani provenance to this set⁶. Painted in a subtle romantic manner befitting to its lyrical and delicate theme of the poem, these coloured illustrations provided appropriate setting with stylized trees, bowers with hovering bees and water fronts, rendered in bright hues established a new trend of Rajasthani idiom. Further detailed study of the material culture seen in the paintings that the flora and fauna, the costume types with wide variety of the textile designs, ornaments, furnitures, etc, reveal their Rajasthani character. It may be noted that in subsequent period of 17th and the 18th centuries, we find the continuation of the same characteristic features in the series of *Gīta-Govinda* and the *Rasikapriyā* of Keṣavadāsa profusely painted in Mewar.

Needless to emphasis that the unending Royal patronage of the state and the wealthy Jaina merchants community was a great source of encouragement to the painters for such socio-religious and secular activities. For instance, the poetic work of *Soma Saubhāgya Kāvya*⁷ by some Sundar Suri (c. 15th century) discusses the contemporary social economic, religious and historical events in details with a positive reference to painting on walls depicting scenes from the *Gīta-Govinda*, *Kāma-sūtra*, flowering plants, etc.

Among the notable contributions of Rana Kumbha's reign (C.E. 1433 - 68) are *Sangīta Rāja*,⁸ *Rasikapriyā*, and *Gīta-Govinda* by Jayadeva though being devoid of visual imagery, throws light on the aesthetic possibilities of the poem.

It is well known that there was a great painting activity at the court of

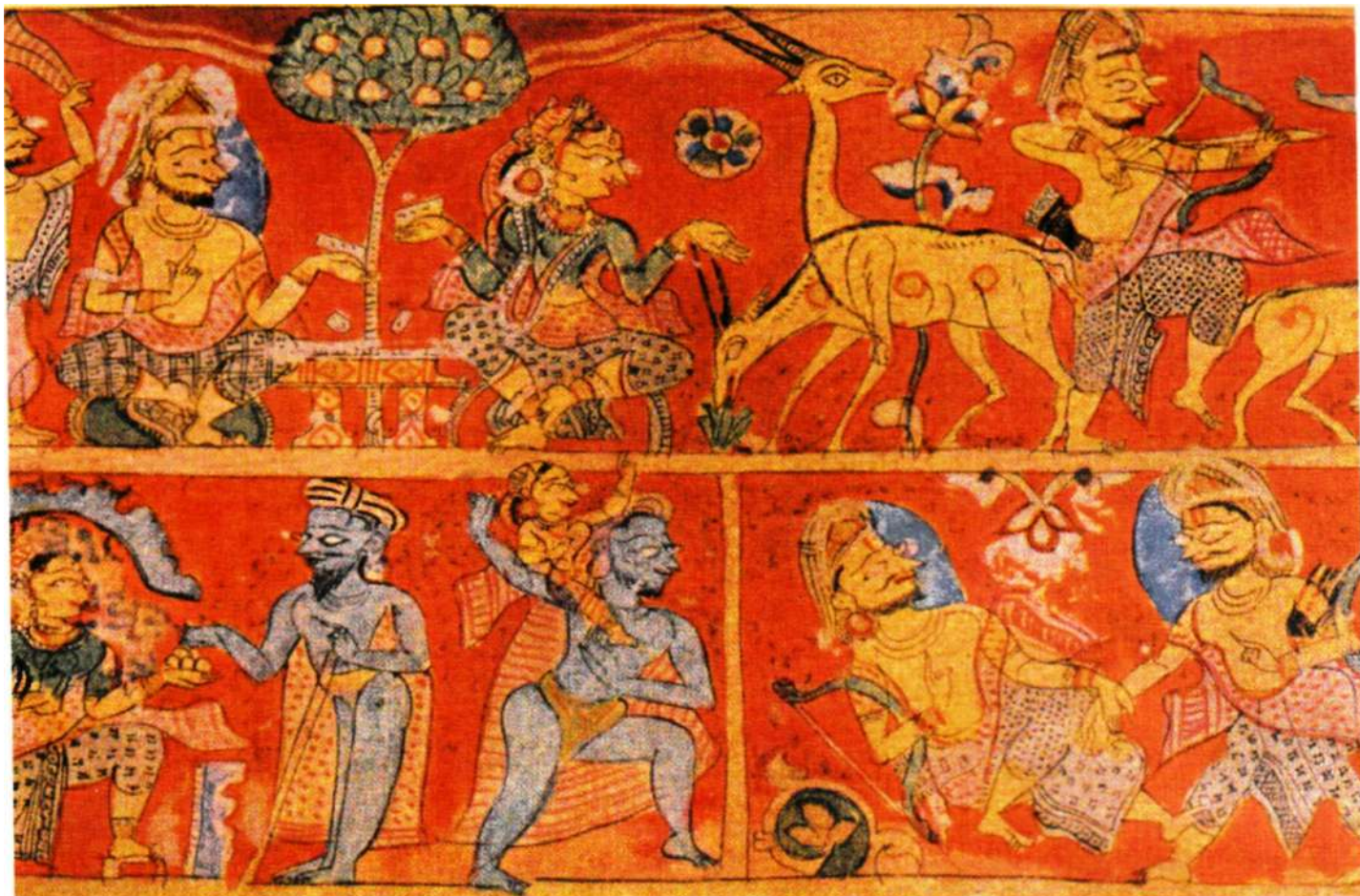


Fig.16.3 : Abduction of Sītā, an incident from *Rāmāyaṇa*, in *Bāla-Gopāla Stuti* style, Western India, c. 1450, provenance uncertain



Fig.16.4 : Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa conversing, folio from the *Gīta-Govinda*, Sultanate/Mewar, c. 1475, Collection – National Museum, New Delhi

Akbar (1556 - 1601) which produced a number of important manuscripts. The tempo of this art activity continued during Jahangir's reign but in a different manner. By then the court style had laid sufficient influence on all prevailing styles of painting in a greater or lesser extent. But at the same time, there also appeared an unsophisticated idiom of somewhat inferior or perfunctory drawing and painting.

This group includes at least three such manuscripts, namely, the Matar *Saṅgrahaṇī Sūtra* of C.E. 1583⁹, the *Uttarādhyāyana Sūtra* of Baroda Museum, dated 1591 and the Lahore¹⁰ *Bhāgavata Daśama Skandha* (unpublished) from Maharaja Sawai Man Singh Museum, Jaipur and some folios from an incomplete manuscript of *Gīta-Govinda* from the same museum. (Figs. 16.7, 16.8). Among these examples the Matar manuscript has a folio mentioning the name of *Citārā Govinda* s/o Nārada¹¹ obviously worked in the Akbar-Jahangir studio before attempting to indulge in to Jaina manuscripts. This group positively exhibits a mixed Gujarati and Mughal trait apart from having a Jainesque orientation. Another manuscript of N.C. Mehta *Gīta-Govinda*¹² (Figs. 16.5, 16.6) from Ahmedabad which falls within the above group deserves attention. This series has Sanskrit *śloka*s written on the top margin enclosed with a red border around. The format of the folio has become horizontal and larger than the rest of the paintings of this group. Though the total number of folios present are 143 approximately, it is presumed that there may have been at least 150 folios. Stylistically this manuscript appears to have been done by two or three hands. The early part of the MS. shows complete Jaina orientation in composition, grouping and costume types with predominance of brick red and linear workmanship, except that the artist has eliminated the 'farther eye'. The middle group displays freedom of landscape, the Akbari costume of *cakādāra jāmā* etc. and the third group of pictures clearly shows its evolution going towards early Rajasthani schools, with female figures wearing *ghāghrā-colī* and *oḍhnī*. The whole transition from late Akbar to early Jahangir period, i.e. from 1595 to 1600, is clearly visible in the pictorial elements of this series. However, this work is one of its kind and unique in the world but at times some illustrations tend to become repeatative in form, composition and landscape. A holistic analysis of the characteristic features of this set indicates a positive link in the origin and development of Rajasthani painting.

The beginning of seventeenth century witnessed a bloom of Mewar painting under the reign of Rana Jagat Singh (1628 - 52) at Udaipur. He patronized art, architecture and literature and brought the art of the miniature painting on the zenith of excellence. The greatest achievement of his time is the writing and illustrating the volumes of *Ārṣa Rāmāyaṇa*¹³ by two of his master painters namely, Sahabdin and Manohar under whom the *Rāgamālās*, *Rasikapriyā*, *Kavipriyā* by Keśavadāsa and the *Gīta-Govinda* by Jayadeva were produced. The folios of which are now scattered all over the world. This material, painted in bright



Fig.16.5 : Gopis in search of Kṛṣṇa, folio from N.C. Mehta *Gita-Govinda*, c. 1600, Collection – L.D. Museum, Ahmedabad



Fig.16.6 : Folio from N.C. Mehta *Gita-Govinda*, same as Fig. 16.5



Fig.16.7 : Folio from the series of *Gita-Govinda*, Western Indian style, c. 1600, Maharaja Savai Man Singh II Museum, Jaipur



Fig.16.8 : Detail from the same series



Fig.16.9 : Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa in grove, from a series of *Gīta-Govinda* dated 1719, painted by Rupajita Collection – Pratāp Saṅgrahālaya, Udaipur



Fig.16.10 : Detail from the same series



Fig.16.11 : *Sakti* meeting Kṛṣṇa, folio from the *Gīta-Govinda*, Basohli, c. 1730-40, Collection – CSMVS, Mumbai

colours with predominance of orange, red, olive green and bright yellow with attractive stylization of landscape and bold ethnic types wearing patterned costumes created a special niche for themselves in the gamut of Rajasthani painting.

The tradition so conceived, nurtured and patronized later, produced at least one *Gīta-Govinda* series¹⁴ in the early 18th century during Rana Sangram Singh's reign (1710 - 34) now at the State Museum, Udaipur. It is called a series and not a manuscript, because the *ślokas* are written on the top margin and not in the form of text which is usually written on the reverse of the folio. The nomenclature¹⁵ of *citrāvalī* was adopted by V.S. Agrawala for such series. Painted in larger horizontal format the paintings are more elaborate, luxurious and bright. There is a variety of trees, flowering plants and bushes. The artist uses different types of bowers, platforms, and locations near the water fronts as per the requirements of the poem. Each folio is a story of continuous narration, both visually or symbolically. The figures of Rādhā, Kṛṣṇa move as in cartoon animation more than once in the composition. Incidents are divided either by trees in the centre or by undulating grounds. On the whole the illustrations do justice to the content of the poem and make them aesthetically beautiful. This series is painted by one Rupajit in C.E. 1719¹⁶, now preserved at Govt. Museum, Udaipur (Figs. 16.9, 16.10).

In the long journey of its chronological development, the theme of *Gīta-Govinda* has travelled from the fifteenth to almost the 20th century. Towards the end its manifestations spread in Bengal, Orissa more than anywhere else. Kapila Vatsyayana's¹⁷ monumental project of publishing almost all versions of the *Gīta Govinda* could have brought out substantial material for study. But unfortunately, it remained incomplete.

The aesthetic development of the subject could not be completed without commenting on its lyrical, soft and tender love of the divine couple, that one observes in the Kangra paintings of the late 18th century. In the beginning of Pahari paintings¹⁸ one is stuck with the bold, iconic, frank and symbolic style of Basohli painting (Fig. 16.11). But, surprisingly enough, the soft, tender, graceful and rhythmic *Gīta-Govinda* of artist Nainsukh, in Kangra brought a delight to the eyes. Nainsukh's interpretations of love, depicted in this world famous style is second to none in the world which did more than justice to *Gīta-Govinda* theme than any other School of Indian painting.

References and Notes

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