The Gita Govinda, a lyrical epic or epical lyric, by Shri Jayadeva, a Sanskrit poet of the last quarter of the twelfth century, is a poem with a unique and far different significance in entire Indian literature, before or after. Not merely a piece of writing, the Gita Govinda was an instrument that completely revolutionised, or rather revitalised, Vaishnavism, which encumbered by inner conflict of different Brahmanical sects and eroded by Islam and Islamic invasions frequently storms, the subcontinent, was heading towards a point of collapse. Instead of metaphysical dogmatism, the Gita Govinda discovered Vaishnavism in love, devotion and absolute submission, the instruments that dispelled duality and led the self to unite with the Supreme Self.

What the Gita Govinda presented was a completely changed perception of Vaishnavism. It neither looked for a divine aura nor for a monarchical frame, which had so far defined its Vaishnava God or even Krishna as one of the Vaishnava incarnations. Jayadeva had seen that Indian kingship, once possessed of divine aura, was unable to sustain against Islamic onslaught and was fast waning. Maybe, he hence thought it better to separate his God from this monarchical frame and let Him be one like masses. This not only humanised Him but also turned an abstract concept into a living reality that one could feel and realise. The Gita Govinda hence wove its theme around Krishna, its hero, who it conceived as a humble cattle-grazing cowherd, very much like others, and enshrined in him Vaishnava Godship. This transformed Vaishnavism into a thing of masses.
Contrary to Puranic position, the Gita Govinda attributes all Vaishnava incarnations to Krishna, not Vishnu. Here Krishna is seen as the prime manifestation of God incarnating in various forms. Each incarnation has a specific role but Krishna hasn't any, not even his crusade against evil forces.

He is realised in love and in his love reveals the supreme good; all fetters break and the loved one unites with him in absolute oneness. In a sense, Gita Govinda is a broad metaphor, which reveals in sensuous love the factum of spiritual unity. Initially, Krishna loves his favoured one, Radha. Later, he makes love with others reaching him. Radha, the favoured one, separated from him, is annoyed for his infidelity but her longing to unite with him is endless. Krishna realises the wrong he did to Radha who has always loved him. Repentant he meets her and the two unite in perpetuity.

Metaphorically, Krishna is the Supreme Self and Radha, the individual. Initially they are one, but in the course of time separated from each other. The individual self's longing to unite with the Supreme Self is incessant. However, they unite only when it pleases the Supreme Self. This sums up Vaishnavism. Anything beyond it is irrelevant. In simultaneity to its deep philosophical meaning and theistic thrust, the Gita Govinda is endowed with a very high level of lyricism and sensuality.
The Gita Govinda’s predecessor, Bhagavata Purana, had also seen Krishna as a cowherd boy, but it was just a phase of his life to terminate after he killed Kansa.

After this phase ended, he was even purified, re-ritualised and properly schooled, all to befit him in his monarchical frame. The cowherd phase did not have its traces ever after. He is not only portrayed as one of Vishnu’s incarnations and with Vishnu-like divine aura but also reveals in him Vishnu’s likeness and cosmic magnification. The Bhagavata Purana, a 'purana' - the holy scripture, was heard with folded hands and bowed to.
The Bhagavata Purana's Krishna commands not only respect for his divinity but slightly maintains a distance from others. The Gita Govinda was a lyric to inhale within, to be sung and danced to.

Jayadeva's Krishna, though the fountainhead of all Vaishnava incarnations, not one of them, is till end a cowherd running after cowherd maidens and himself, always within their reach. Love and love alone is the tie in between and the strength of both, the seeker and the sought.

Jayadeva, the poet who composed Gita Govinda, was one of the five jewels of king Lakshmanasen, the last Hindu ruler of Bengal who ruled from around 1175 A.D. to 1200 A.D. Most scholars consider hence this to be the date of the Gita Govinda, too, though a few of them take it back to around 1050 A. D. The five jewels of Lakshmanasena were his five court poets, Jayadeva, Govardhana, Dhoi, Sharana and Umapatidhara. In the opening section of the Gita Govinda, Jayadeva commends them all, and also Shrutidhara, his other colleague. The National Museum, New Delhi, has a painting in Sultanate style of around 1475-1500 A.D., portraying Jayadeva and these five poets seated around.
This miniature suggests that Jayadeva and his Gita Govinda had gained considerable popularity and had emerged as the painter’s theme by late 15th century itself, though no such early paintings are available now. The earliest reported Gita Govinda paintings are from Mewar from around 1590-1600 A.D.

Kenduli, a Birbhum village in Bengal, has been identified as Jayadeva’s birthplace, though Jayadeva himselfalluded to Utkal as his land. He mentions and pays homage to his father and mother, Bhojadeva and Ramadevi. He also commemorates his wife Padmavati. Each verse of the Gita Govinda is set to a ‘raga’ and ‘tala’, which suggests that Jayadeva had great competence in music.

**GENERIC CHARACTER OF THE GITA GOVINDA**

The full title of Jayadeva's poem is Gitagovindakavya. In its original sense, the term 'kavyam' meant broadly the 'prabandha kavya', a narrative poem. 'Prabandha-kavya' is arranged, as is the Gita Govinda, into cantos. The thrust of the Gita Govinda is not, however, narrative. Here events do not grow over a passage of time, as they do in a narrative. At the most growth has a mystic perspective. The first verse of the Gita Govinda is the seed out of which grow the sole leading sentiment of the poem. Seeing dark deep clouds gathered in the sky and fear in the eyes of child Krishna, Radha escorts him home. When passing across an arbour on Yamuna’s bank, he makes love with Radha.
In between the period, when he left with Radha and made love with her, the child Krishna grows to such manhood as gives him competence to make love with a far matured woman. It was obviously a mystic magnification, not a growth on the scale of time. Otherwise, too, the poem covers just two days, one of ‘vipralambha’, separation, and other of ‘sambhoga’, union.

Thus, the Gita Govinda hardly has a narrative character. In fact, it is a composition beyond set norms of a genre, whatever, lyric, song, ballad, or poetic drama. Gita Govinda has a lot of dialogue and action, features of a drama; it comprises a series of moods and emotional situations, something of a lyrical ballad; its diction, similes, metaphors, rhymed and metered parts, imaginative fervour and lyrical quality make it a poem; and, with great musical quality, that it is endowed with, added to it, it becomes a song. Breeding a picture on each step, it is like a movie.

Its intense emotional quality makes it a nightingale’s song. Moving the interior, not exterior, it becomes a journey of mind, or emotional being, not body or brain. It breathes like a breeze and bounds like a rivulet. Love is its central theme and, whether monogamous or polygamous, its sanctity is always the same. It pains Radha that Krishna indulges in love with other Gopis. This ‘otherness’ of the Gopis is the cause of misery of Radha, the individual self. It on the contrary delights Krishna, as in him, in the Supreme Self, this ‘otherness’ of Gopis dissolves, merges and gets lost.
Obviously, with such generic width and mindset, Jayadeva could discover the hero of his poem in none else but Krishna. Krishna alone could be his source, theme and character to reveal a drama so mundane and so divine. Wreathed into his poetic diction and dissolved into his imagery, Krishna alone could land on his lips as his song, could sing for him and melt into his kavyam as its spirit and body. Krishna alone could be his ‘Geeta’, song, as he was Arjuna's Gita in the Mahabharata; ‘Katha’ of the Bhagavata Purana; and later, ‘Pada’, a metered composition, of Surdas, mincing and growing to the blind eyes step by step; strength of Mira, wandering along and tinkling incessantly from her ‘ghungharas’, bells; tears of the divine experience welling around the eyes of Chaitanya; ‘Marg’, path, of Vallabha; role-model of Keshava’s Rasikpriya; poets’ verbal transcript and painters’ pictorial transformation; ‘Aradhya’, object of worship, of the folded hands; ‘Nada’, sound of the drum; ‘Tala’, ‘Laya’ and ‘Mudrayen’, beat, rhythm and gestures of the performer; grace of the Ultimate; and stay of the transient. Obviously, whatever Jayadeva sang of him was the source of sensuous delight, but as much spiritually elevating and benedictory.

THE THEME OF THE GITA GOVINDA

The theme of the Gita Govinda is relatively simple. One evening, when Nand was strolling in the forest along with Krishna, Radha and others, dark clouds gathered in the sky. Seeing signs of fear on Krishna’s face, Nand asked Radha to take him home.

The verse is also interpreted to mean that frightened Krishna, not Nand, himself asked Radha to take him home. When on way, in an arbour on Yamuna’s bank, Krishna made love with Radha. This verse, with no apparent link with the rest of the poem, is the seed of the theme. In the rest of the 'Ashtapadi', a verse comprising eight stanzas, though this one has eleven, Jayadeva prays Saraswati and ten Vaishnava incarnations to enable him to compose his poem and extol Hari.
The actual theme reveals in the second part of this Canto. Krishna is out in the forest celebrating the festival of Vasant and dallying with Gopis. Radha, hit by Love-god’s arrows, too, is searching Krishna, her lover, everywhere but fails to find him. Around then, her trusted Sakhi informs her how Krishna is engaged in love with other Gopis. Initially, it hurts Radha and she condemns him for his infidelity but the heat of passion subdues her and forgiving his folly she asks her friend to search him and bring him to her.

Radha’s Sakhi goes to Krishna, describes to him Radha’s sad plight, her love for him and implores him to go with her and have love with Radha. Krishna declines but asks her to bring Radha to his bower and indulges again into his love-game with other Gopis. Sakhi goes back to Radha. At first, Krishna’s attitude infuriates her but then renewed shots of Love-god’s arrows and Sakhi’s persuasive words compel her to agree. However, weakened by the fever of love and day’s long wandering the feeble Radha tumbles down the moment she attempts to walk. The compassionate Sakhi again goes to Krishna but only to have the same cool response. The whole night Krishna keeps dancing and making love with Gopis. In the morning the red-eyed Krishna encounters Radha who chides him for his infidelity and pitiless attitude. By now, Krishna had realised his folly and felt repentant. The Love-god, too, had renewed his offensive on him. He conciliates Radha and retires with her into the forest.

In an arbour, wreathed with garlands of flowers, on the bed of Kadamba leaves, they make love, and in the love-war passes the whole night. Radha, as if avenging his neglect of her, was often on offensive riding over him. Costumes had deserted her body, ornaments had fallen and hair dishevelled. In the morning, she commands him to re-arrange her ornaments and comb with his fingers her dishevelled hair, and the enslaved Hari, who defeated Madhu, the mighty demon,
but himself defeated by Radha’s love, complies.

GITA GOVINDA: A SINGER’S PLEASURE BUT A PAINTER’S PROBLEM

Krishna’s mundane ‘Lila’ and Jayadeva’s unique way of presenting it turned, in his lifetime itself, into the theme of ‘Yatra’, itinerancy, which itinerant performers, while moving from village to village, sang and staged by it His ‘Lila’. Stagecraft was then a live-tradition and Gita Govinda was found to suit it best. The bands of these singers could sing it to the prescribed ‘Raga’, ‘Tala’ and ‘Laya’, produce body gestures, assume various forms and enact the ‘Lila’. Jayadeva’s epical expansion of a relatively simple theme and musical stretch of each verbal phrase were not much of a challenge to the stage art.
However, it was not so for a painter who sought to transform them into the art of canvas; and more so when his canvas was a piece of simple palm-leaf or tree-bark. A palm-leaf could reproduce anatomical figures and even their gestures, but it could not have such variety of colours, their tonal depth and iconographic precision, which were essential for revealing a ‘bhava’, emotion, something that was the very spirit of the Gita Govinda.

In India, palm-leaf as the medium of painting preceded paper and the Gita Govinda, too, might have been its theme, as it continues till date. But, epical expansion of Gita Govinda's theme transformed into the vocabulary of colours, and its verbal phrase, into a pictorial phrase, only after the paper emerged as the new medium of painting. Now its every verbal phrase gave forth a picture, and its epical expansion, long series of its visual representations. As a result, some of the sets of the Gita Govinda paintings run into a greater number of folios than do those illustrating epics like the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, though as compared to them, the Gita Govinda has neither that long chain of events nor that variety of situations.

**TEXT-IMAGE RELATION: A NEW DIMENSION OF INDIAN PAINTING**

The Gita Govinda was not a text which formal non-contextual imagery, such as was used in prior illustrative paintings, could illustrate. It required an image which revealed not only the contents of the text but also its sentiment, mood, situation, all shades of an emotion, anguish, anger, passionate yearnings, pathos and pleasure, as also its music, pastoral setting and spiritual ambience, and all in a chain, repeating the same imagery but discovering each time a different shade. The Gita Govinda paintings are the earliest illustrative paintings that seek to determine the character of image in relation to the text and emphasise the significance of text-image relationship, which provided to all subsequent illustrative paintings the basis for determining the character of their image.

The Gita Govinda paintings also pioneered the multiplicity of pictorial expressions of a single image, or a couple of them, and discovered in each farther and farther delight. As a matter of fact, no other text has inspired such multiple pictorial expressions, as has done Gita Govinda. The Gita Govinda paintings emerged as a new thing in each period, each region, under each patron and each traditional frame. Change in the taste of patronage might be seen revealing in the Gita Govinda paintings with mirror-image clarity.
Thus, Gita Govinda, despite that it presented many challenges to painters, was one of their most cherished themes all over and always, from the far west in Gujarat to the far east in Assam, and in Himalayan hills, Orissa, Bengal, Rajasthan and Central India. The illustrator was required to discover a pictorial imagery, which by its parallelism matched the verbal imagery, its similes and metaphors. He was required to treat the entire text, like a musician who took a particular phrase, expanded it into the time according to a ‘Raga’, classical mode of singing, and then returned to repetitive verse forming the ‘Sama’, the point where separate rhythms of the metrical cycle coincided. The illustrator of the Gita Govinda acted in a similar way. He identified such verbal phrase, which he could expand into an image and then more phrases and more images creating a cyclic chain of them. This gave to the Gita Govinda paintings their pictorial stretch, magnification and numeric width. 

Text of the Gita Govinda little revealed tangible features of the image, which further enhanced illustrator’s difficulty. The illustrator was required to discover every time his own image and represent his own pictorial version of it. Depiction of bodily gestures was not a problem to a painter; but, to convert a gesture into a ‘Hava’, demeanour, which adequately revealed a ‘Bhava’, emotion, required great artistic skill. Narration or continuous flow of the verbal phrase could be matched with an alike flow of imagery, but the pictorial presentation of the text and its pictorial interpretation were two different things, especially when the text was pregnant with multiple shades of meaning, as was the Gita Govinda. The meaning in the Gita Govinda moved in parallel on sensuous and spiritual planes requiring the artist to discover a set of imagery, a pictorial idiom, which revealed the inherent unity of the apparent duality, the oneness of Krishna, the Supreme Self, and the otherness of Radha, the individual self. And painters, illustrating Gita Govinda, not only commendably did it but also discovered the technique, which enabled the subsequent Indian miniature painting to reveal in colours a multi-layered meaning such as revealed a text.
DIFFERENT SETS OF GITA GOVINDA IMAGERY

For a better understanding of stylistic variations of imagery in different sets of the Gita Govinda paintings, a preview of some major iconographic traditions of Krishna’s image would be helpful. Early Indian texts see Krishna in three forms, ‘Aradhya-rupa’, ‘Vishwa-rupa’ and ‘Saumya-rupa’, that is, his votive, cosmic and aesthetic images. ‘Saumya’ is also known as ‘Lalita’ or ‘Lila-rupa’. In texts, his ‘Vishwa-rupa’ is not a rarity, in visual arts, it is.

His major shrines and art forms have either his ‘Aradhya-rupa’ or his ‘Lila-rupa’. Perhaps with the only exception of the Puri shrine, his shrines in Gujarat, entire Rajasthan and other places enshrine his ‘Lila-rupa’. 
In Rajasthan, his images abound in great stately splendour, the character of the land. The overall style of Rajasthani painting tends to have rigorously rendered minute details. This stately splendour, inclining towards sensualism, and minuteness of details define the image or rather the overall character of the Rajasthani Gita Govinda paintings. It has used repetitive imagery in a single folio not so much for revealing the passage of time or narrative thrust as in quest of continuously repeating the same sensuous image over and again. Arbours in Mewar Gita Govinda paintings are adorned like a palace-garden pavilion prepared specially for a royal couple.

The Himalayan Hills have been broadly a Shaivite or Shakt belt and most of its shrines are devoted to the forms of Shiva or Devi. However, the art of the region had an intimate and intrinsic kind of relationship with Krishna. The Pahari painter saw in him a village lad roaming around his neighbourhood, and in Radha, coy village lass. The Pahari painter was little interested in his divinity. He was interested instead in his youthful acts of love and as the one around whom he could more befittingly portray his pastoral setting, the distinction of his land. This character of Pahari painting determines as much its image in the Gita Govinda paintings. Here as fresh is the face of nature as naive is the charm of human face. The worlds of man and nature intermingle and comprise an integral whole. The Pahari artist has discovered the sensuous image of the Gita Govinda in enchanting aesthetic beauty and overall pastoral charm rather than in an act of sensualism.

Orissa, on the contrary, enshrined Krishna’s ‘Aradhya-rupa’ at its supreme Vaishnava shrine at Puri. Orissa imagery seems to have evolved out of some early folk worship cult. His image is flanked by the images of his brother Balarama and sister Subhadra.
The group seems to represent the foremost of the Vrashnis. Early scriptures contain references of Vrashnis, the clan to which Krishna belonged, as worshipping their heroes. Three defaced Kushana sculptures from Mathura and a few subsequent terracottas have similar three figures, two male and one female, identified as Krishna, Balarama and Ekananga, the daughter of Yashoda, their sister.

In Oriya tradition, Subhadra seems to have replaced Ekananga. Later, Krishna emerged in Orissa as Jagannatha, the lord of the creation, far above one of the incarnations of Vishnu. The source of such elevation of Krishna in Orissa is not known; but, interestingly, this is also the perception of the Gita Govinda. The eleventh verse of the first 'Ashtapadi', in Canto one, summarises the ten Vaishnava incarnations as those of Krishna, not Vishnu. Like the Oriya tradition, this 'Ashtapadi', too, does not include Krishna in ten Vaishnava incarnations. They both perceive these ten incarnations as the incarnations of Krishna, not Vishnu. Let scholars determine whether Jayadeva borrowed this perception from his land, Utkal, or the land from her son. Despite such elevation, Krishna's imagery retained its prior Vrashni character. The images of Vrashni-Trio, carved out of ordinary Neem wood by local carpenters, with no stately splendour around, still enshrine the Puri shrine. They have also retained their votive form.

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This article by Prof. P.C. Jain and Dr Daljeet.

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