

## Radha Krishna: Carnal Love Spiritualized

**Manisha Patil**

Assistant Professor in English  
Gurunanak College of Arts, Science and Commerce, GTB Nagar, Mumbai

Email Id: [manishadnpatil@rediffmail.com](mailto:manishadnpatil@rediffmail.com)

**Abstract:** The moment we say Krishna the other name which immediately comes to our mind is Radha. In fact Radha precedes Krishna in their combined name Radha-Krishna. Radha has become the epitome of Madhura-Bhakti (devotion to God in form of Love). Still very few people know that she is not a historical figure. She is not mentioned at all in *Mahabharata* or *Harivansh* or even *Shrimad Bhagwat Purana* which is the primal source of Hari-Bhakti or Vaishnavism. *Shrimad Bhagwat Purana* refers to only a collective body of Gopies (Milkmaids of Gokul) who become enamored with the charm of Krishna. Then where does Radha come from?

### 1 Introduction

Radha is the creation of a genius poet and devotee of Krishna, Jayadeva. This 11<sup>th</sup> century Bengali Vaishnava who lived near Puri and worshipped Lord Jagannath, concretized Krishna-Bhakti in the fictional character Radha who expresses her longing for Krishna through explicit sexual imagery in his masterpiece *Geet-Govinda*. *Geet-Govinda* was recited and even enacted through dance form in the Jagannath Puri temple. The thousands of pilgrims from various parts of India who visited Puri every year got so enchanted with the idea of God as lover and the beautiful rhythm of *Geet-Govinda* that they carried it back to their native places and within a very short span of mere 100 years emerged the full fledged body of various regional literature, art and dance forms celebrating Radha Krishna love. The Radha Krishna love became so popular that it over-shadowed all other historical and Puranic love/marriage couples including Rukhmini- Krishna which was actually a love marriage. Also sprang up many myths about Radha's life in Gokul and her peculiar relationship with Krishna. According to one such myth she was married as child to a boy named Chandrasen (some call him Abhimanyu also) who was a Vishnu-Bhakt in his previous birth. He did penance to appease Lord Vishnu and as a boon

asked Vishnu's wife to become his wife. Yet another myth tells that Radha was Indra's wife Shachi in her previous life, she fell in love with Vishnu and so asked a boon to become his wife in her next life. All these things attest to immense popularity of Radha Krishna love. But the question is why it became so popular? Why is it appealing to men and women across caste, class, region and even religion alike? The answer lies in the unique Indian ethos.

## 2. **Indian Ethos during the Middle Ages**

Indian society was divided into numerous castes and creeds across the geographical area. Social mingling among members of various castes was strictly prohibited. Only the privileged few (kings and Brahmin males) had the access to education, knowledge of scriptures and various rituals like Yajna to attain salvation. Majority of Indian masses were degraded physically (socio-economic-politically) as well as spiritually. Condition of women was even worse. Subjugated under the heavy burden of patriarchy in the form of arranged child marriage, polygamy and forced widowhood, they had no rights at all. All the women and men other than kings and Brahmins were termed as low-born which was the result of their lowly deeds in the past life. Unfortunately they had neither any proof of their past life nor any tool (like Jnan or Yajna) in the present life whereby they could reverse their lowly condition. Buddhism had flourished in India under similar situation but its Shoonya-vaad and complete renunciation was beyond the reach of ordinary worldly person. Moreover Hindu reactionism in form of Sanatan-Dharma suppressed Buddhism completely. Under such circumstances there was dire need for something which could provide the masses self-esteem and a tool to interrogate Brahmanical hegemony. Bhakti especially Vaishnav-Bhakti served the purpose. Taking its clue from 12<sup>th</sup> *Adhyay* of *Shrimad Bhagavad Geeta*, '*Bhakti-Yoga*' and modeled on the *Dasham Skandh* of *Shrimad Bhagwat Purana* which narrates various playful occupations (Leela) of Krishna in Gokul, Bhakti Movement advocated that one just needs the unconditional love and devotion to God to attain salvation.

## 3. **Appeal to Women**

As mentioned earlier arranged child marriage, polygamy and forced widowhood had sexually repressed women beyond limit. They were reduced to the position of mere sex objects to be used by men according to their convenience. Women's own sexuality as such was totally

unheard of. Radha Krishna love proved to be a safety valve for women. This divine love spiritualized the carnal love and gave women a chance to verbalize their here-to-forth unspeakable desires. It did many, even contradictory, things simultaneously (like renunciation of the world and celebration of carnal love). Now for the first time women could talk about love and sex which till now was the privilege of only men. Secondly, through Radha they could express their own personal feelings toward love, sex, marriage, husband and lover. In fact now they could think about lover as someone different from their respective husbands and love outside the strict dictates of marriage. It is important to note that for majority of women marriage was like a prison in which they were forced without any way out. They were considered as a property and slave by their husbands. They were also subjugated to physical, psychological and sexual abuse by their husbands and in-laws. Under such circumstances it was difficult for them to consider their husbands as lover. It was all the more difficult, even impossible, to consider some other man as a lover. (Though it may happen at times, one could not speak about it.) Krishna, the divine lover, was an exception. He as lover ruled everyone's heart and as God let everybody desire him. In fact desire for him got the social sanction. As a result, a woman could sublimate her love for another man in the form of Radha Krishna love without the fear of social ostracization. She could talk about her excitement for meeting her lover, her elaborate preparations for it, her anxiety whether he would come to meet her or not, her joy at their meeting and her sorrow at their parting. Her jealousy surfaced lest he loves somebody else more than her. Her fear increased lest someone discovers her love and their secret meeting. Thus one could safely project one's emotions on Radha and glorify one's so-called illegitimate love.

As a couple, Radha Krishna is the antithesis of Seeta Ram. Ram and Seeta are husband and wife and so their relationship is governed by convention rather than passion. Seeta is the ideal dutiful wife who none-the-less is victimized by patriarchy for no fault of her own. Radha on the other hand is the passionate beloved who does not hesitate to transgress all social rules, customs and conventions to meet her lover. The conventional patriarchal morality might have labeled her as an adulteress but her divine love makes her the ideal of selfless devotion and subverts repressive patriarchal ideology.

Radha Krishna's Raas-Leela in Vrindavan is the zenith of Madhura-Bhakti. It can be called a pastoral romance where one can find blissful refuge from the troubles and complications of

ordinary life. Not just Radha but all the Gopis rush to forest at midnight of a full-moon night upon the call from Krishna's melodious flute. They forget their families, responsibilities and all the worries to experience pure bliss. This bliss is beyond joy and sorrow, moral and immoral, life and death. This bliss is beyond self and other as all the Gopis become one with the Lord. There is no jealousy among them, no ego, no lust. Radha is their best representative as *Raasate Dhaavate Iti Radha*. But then suddenly Lord himself disappears and subjects his beloved to the agony of separation (Virah). Separation is the integral part of Radha Krishna love. At the worldly level it suggests the impossibility of fulfillment of such selfless love both within and outside marriage. At the metaphysical level it points to the invisibility of God and need to move from Sagunopasana (worship of idol of God) to Nirgunopasana (worship of invisible God). Thus keeping in lieu with Indian philosophy Radha Krishna love finally motions towards rejection of material world for the divine love.

Moving from myth to history, Meera followed in the footsteps of Radha. Born as a princess and married to prince Bhojraj, the heir apparent of then very powerful kingdom of Mewad, she renounced everything for the love of Krishna. As an infant, Meera became deeply enamored of an iconic doll of Krishna owned by a visiting holy man. She was inconsolable until she possessed it and probably kept it all her life. However the royal family of Chittor did not approve of her piety and devotion as she refused to worship their family deity Eklingji and maintained that she was only truly married to Krishna. Meera's devotion to Krishna was at first a private thing but after a series of losses in her twenties like death of her mother and husband (who had later become her friend and supporter in Krishna-Bhakti) at some moment it overflowed into an ecstasy that led her to dance in the streets of the city. Her brother-in-law, the new ruler of Chittorgarh, was Vikramaaditya, an ill-natured youth who strongly objected to Meera's fame, her mixing with commoners and carelessness of feminine modesty. He also tried to rape her. There were several attempts to poison her. Meera notes down all these things in her poems addressed to her Krishna Sakha and calls upon him to save her. She speaks of a personal relationship with Krishna as her lover, lord and master. The characteristic of her poetry is complete surrender. Her longing for union with Krishna is predominant in her poetry: she wants to be "coloured with the colour of dusk" (the symbolic colour of Krishna). Again the sexual overtone is hard to miss, making some refer to her poetry as 'soft pornography'. Meera's love for Krishna also flaunted the norms of rigid social hierarchy. Folklore tells us of a particular incident where she expressed

her desire to engage in a discussion about spiritual matters with Rupa Goswami, a direct disciple of Chaitanya Mahaprahu and one of the foremost saints of Vrindavan that time who, being a renunciate celibate, refused to meet a woman. Meera replied that the only true man (Purusha) in this universe is Lord Krishna, thus claiming the equality of men and women at a time when women were considered even spiritually inferior to men.

#### 4. **Appeal to Men**

Given such a subversive nature of Radha's love for Krishna, it is surprising that the patriarchy allowed it to flourish to such a great extent. However it does not remain a surprise but becomes obvious when we realize that just as women identified with Radha, men identified with Krishna. Krishna's polygamy fell well within the bounds of patriarchy and many men especially kings encouraged the depiction of their own love affair as that of Radha Krishna. The two most prominent examples are King Sawant Singh of Kishangarh and Nawab Wajid Ali Shah of Avadh. It was Sawant Singh who patronized distinguished style of Rajput miniature painting which later became famous as Kishangarh painting. These paintings portray various amorous sports of Radha Krishna in the royal palace instead of Vrindavan. Radha in these paintings is modeled on Sawant Singh's beloved courtesan Bani Thani. Similarly Wajid Ali Shah was the patron of Lucknow style of Kathak dance and Thumri style of semi-classical music. He employed Radha Krishna love in both these forms to his own amorous affairs with his concubines and also referred to himself as Rasiya.

#### 5. **Gender Conflict**

So we see that Radha Krishna love was a sort of meeting ground of two conflicting ideologies based on gender and sex. This gender conflict became prominent at a later date when issue of morality arose in the context of gender. Muddu Palani, 17<sup>th</sup> century courtesan from Tanjore court of king Pratapasimha Bhonsale, proficient in both Sanskrit and Telugu and very gifted poet composed *Radhika-Santvanam*—also known as *Eladeviya*—dealing with the loves and longings of Radha and Krishna from a completely female perspective using explicit sexual imagery. It caused uproar in conservative patriarchal society not for its depiction of sex but for its emphasis on female sexuality and that too coming from a female writer. To add salt to the wound, in its introduction Muddu Palani had proudly acknowledged her literary debt to her

equally learned mother and grandmother who were also courtesans. Obviously this female erotica was banned.

When Bangaluru Nagaratnamma, a distinguished Carnatic Musician and Bharatanatyam dancer, resurrected and got reprinted *Radhika-Santvanam* in the 19<sup>th</sup> century again there was uproar and ban followed by yet another ban in 1930s when abolition of Devadasi custom was introduced. During British era this suppression of *Radhika-Santvanam* had yet another angle of colonial and anti-colonial masculinities coming together to curb the voice of indigenous women, discussed in detail by Leela Gandhi in her book, *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction*.

## 6. Conclusion

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century with the wider access to women to education and socio-political-economic institutions, loosening of sexual constrains (though we see the backlash in form of recent honour killings) plus overall decline of truly spiritual yearning, Radha Krishna love has receded back to make way for other secular love stories. Yet tragedies like model Viveka Babajee or Jiya Khan remind us that we are yet to find a better model of female love and sexuality who is deeply attached and yet completely autonomous than Radha.

## 7. References

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[http://www.copperwiki.org/index.php/Kishangarh Paintings](http://www.copperwiki.org/index.php/Kishangarh_Paintings)