

KRISHNA THEATRE IN INDIA

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M L VARADAPANDE

'Narayanam Namaskritya'— I bow before thee with deep reverence O Lord Krishna—says great Indian epic Mahabharata in its opening benedictory verse.

The impact of Krishna cult on Indian art, literature and culture is stupendous. Krishna worship includes music, dance, drama which delights him most. Bhasa describes him as Sutradhar, string-holder, of the drama of life that is being enacted in all the three worlds. Bhagavata Purana eulogise him as Natavar, supreme actor, and enjoins the devotees to offer him theatricals on festive occasions. Inscriptions speak of the tradition of enacting plays in the Krishna temples.

The tradition still continues as river Yamuna, on whose bank Krishna performed Ras dance, continues to flow.

All over India plays based on Krishna theme are enacted. Indian classical dance forms take delight in depicting Radha-Krishna love lore. The Ras Leela of Vraj, Ankiya Nat of Assam, Kala of Goa and Maharashtra, Krishna Attam of Kerala, Ras of Manipur, Odissi of Orissa Kathak of Uttar Pradesh are some of the traditional drama and dance forms that depict Krishna lore. Many Krishna plays are there in the repertoire of Kathakali, Yakshagana, Kuchipudi, Tamasha and many other folk and traditional theatrical forms of India. In fact some scholars believe that Indian theatre itself has originated from the cult of Krishna that flourished in Surasena region.

This most colourful theatrical saga full of poetry, dance and music is narrated in the book by eminent scholar Shri M.L. Varadpande in a most attractive manner. In a style picturesque and lucid the author tells us how the dark-hued Krishna danced with milkmaids fair as champak flower on the bank of Yamuna and how the Indian traditional theatre and dance forms recreated this romance on the stage. The spectacular rainbow of delightful romance of Krishna's eventful life as seen on Indian stage is charmingly revealed to the readers through the pages of this profusely illustrated book of infinite charm. It is a sheer joy to read it.

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रासोत्सवः सम्प्रवृत्तो
योगेश्वरेण कृष्णेन
वलयाणां नूपुराणां
सप्रियाणामभूच्चदस्तुमुलो



गोपीमण्डलमण्डितः ॥
लासां मध्ये द्वयोर्द्वयोः ॥
किङ्किणानां च योषिताम् ॥
रासमण्डले ॥ श्रीमद्भागवत ॥



Frontice Pieces : Radha & Krishna, Paharpur





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M L VARADAPANDE



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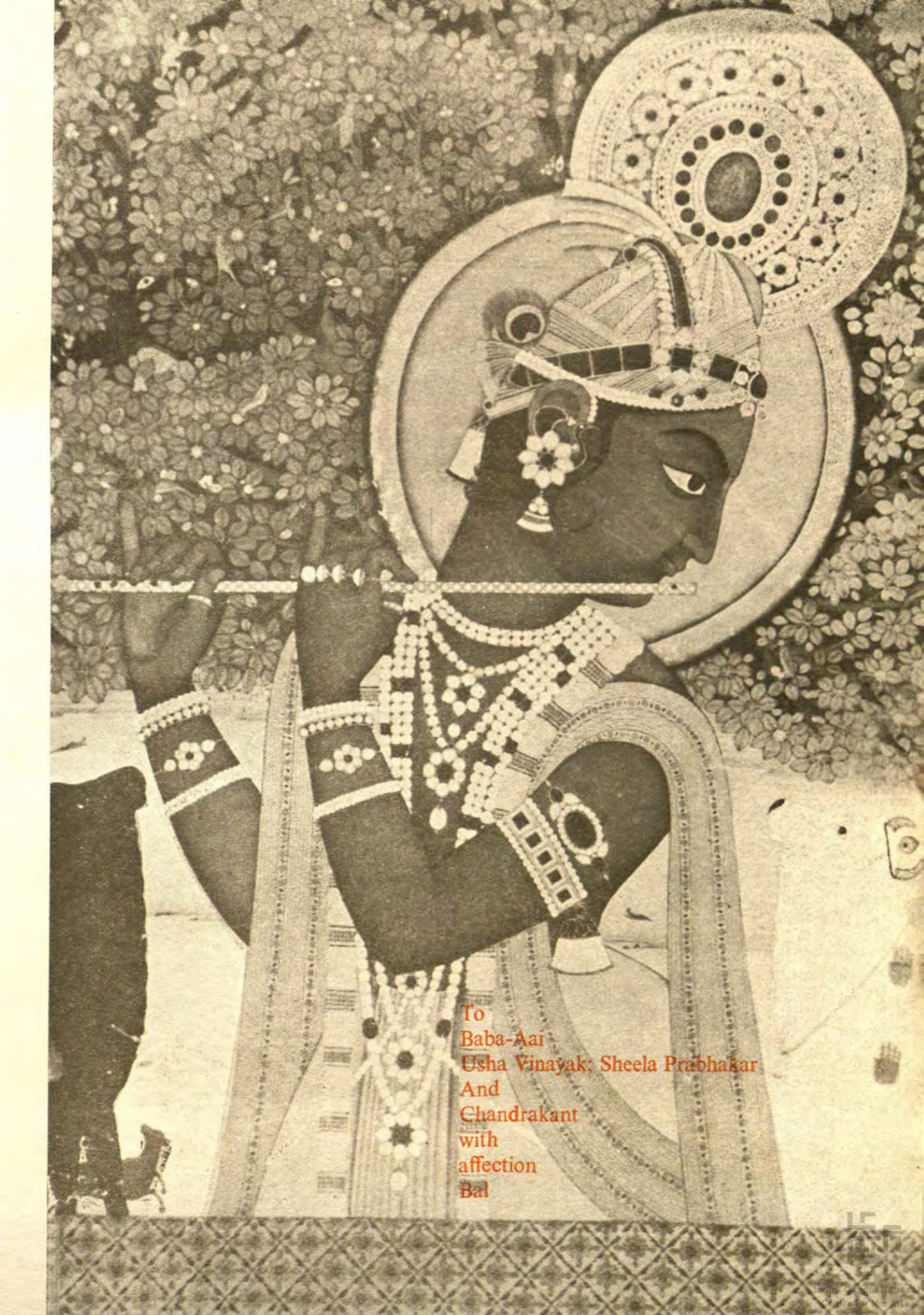
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To
Baba-Aai
Usha Vinayak; Sheela Prabhakar
And
Chandrakant
with
affection
Bal

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NANDI

On one fragrant autumnal full moon night dark-hued Krishna danced with the cowherd girls fair as Champak flowers on the white sands of river Yamuna.

The sweet music of his flute and of the anklet-bells on the joyous dancing feet of the lovely Gopa girls still echoes through enchanting performing arts of the country.

The appeal of ancient Vasudeva-Krishna lore is universal. Amazed by Krishna's all-pervading universal form Arjuna says in the Gita: 'O Lord, you have filled the earth, the heaven, the quarters, the whole cosmos; sun and moon are your eyes.'

He is myth, he is history. He appears with his majestic disk on the coins of Greek king Agathocles. Epics and Puranas sing his ode. Ancient Buddhist and Jain literature speak of him. A Nabab composes opera to celebrate his love for beautiful Radha. A Pavlova enchanted by his Leelas depicts them through a ballet. In real sense he is omnipresent universal self—Vishva Rupa.

Indian theatre takes delight in visualising his lore in all its splendour and magnitude. How does it do this? Please come and see.

Before raising the curtain, as tradition demands, let us sing a benedictory verse, Nandi, to Him in the words of Adi Shankara:



Gunakaram sukhakaram kripakaram kripavaram
Suradwishannikandanam namami Gopanandanam
Navina Gopa nagaram navina keli lampatam
Rasal venugayakam namami kunja nayakam

New Delhi

M.L. Varadpande



मां भ्रमन्तीं जना वीक्ष्य प्रहसन्ति तवाग्रतः ।
न विदन्ति परं मूढा मद्भ्रमात् तुष्यते हरिः ॥
किं ध्यानं किं तपस्त्रिं किं दानं किं च तद्वतम् ।
यास्मिन् कृतेन गोविन्दो दृश्यते भुवि चक्षुषा ॥
ध्यानेन योगिनां नैव लीलया दृश्यते हरिः ।
संस्थितं मद्भ्रमणेमात्र सर्वे पश्यन्तु योगिनः ॥
नृत्यतां गायतां चैव नानावाद्यं प्रकुर्वताम् ।
यथा संतुष्यते देवो न ध्यानाद्यैरिति श्रुतम् ॥

—नर्तकी, जैमिनीयाश्वमेधपर्व

KRISHNA AND HIS CULT



‘*Narayanam Namaskritya*’, ‘I bow before thee Oh Lord Krishna, with deep reverence’, says the great Indian epic, the *Mahabharata*, in its opening benedictory verse. The narrator, Ugrashrava Sauti, further informs his august audience assembled in the deep woods of Nimisha, that the epic written by Maharshi Vedavyasa primarily relates the ancient lore of the divine cowherd. ‘*Bhagavan Vasudevaschya Kirtyatetra Sanatanah*’, ‘What I am narrating here is the eternal saga of Lord Vasudeva-Krishna, which is a sacred and delightful story’, says Sauti in the Adiparva. Krishna is the apex around which the epic is woven. Hence, in addition to calling him *Gopi-Shata-Kelikara*, the well-known twelfth century Belava inscription respectfully refers to him as *Mahabharata Sutradhar*. It is the *Mahabharata* which first gives an elaborate account of Krishna and his ancient cult.

Probably Krishna is as ancient as the great civilization of the Indus valley. Among the tablets excavated at Mohenjodaro, one depicts the *Yamalarjuna Bhanjan Leela* of Krishna which is later mentioned in the *Bhagavata Purana*. Some scholars believe that Krishna, black and bountiful like a rain cloud, was a popular deity of the aboriginals of the ancient land. Maybe that is why the Aryan *Rig Veda* refers to him as *Asura*.

The swift moving Krishna with ten thousand (demons) stood on the Amshumati; by his might Indra caught him snorting (in water); benevolent to man, smote his malicious (band).



I have seen the swift moving (demon) lurking in an inaccessible place in the depths of river Amshumati. I have seen Krishna standing there as (the sun) in the cloud. I appeal to you showerer; conquer him in battle.

Then the swift moving one shining forth assumed his own body by the Amshumati and Indra and Brihaspati and his ally smote the Godless hosts as they drew near.

(VIII.10.3: Wilson)

It is significant to note that the animosity between Krishna and Indra continues in later mythology. But in them Krishna emerges victorious by subduing the lord of heaven on many occasions.

One Rishi Krishna is also mentioned in the *Rig Veda*. He is seen propitiating the Ashvinis by offering them the delightful Soma drink. However the scholars attach more importance to the mention of Devakiputra Krishna, disciple of Ghor Angirasa, in the *Chandogya Upanishada* written about 700 B.C. They link him with the Krishna of the *Mahabharata*.

A very interesting version of the Krishna legend is found in one of the Buddhist Jataka stories written around the same time. In the *Ghat Jataka* he is described as a son of Devagarbha and Upasagar. Here, in no uncertain terms, the identity of Vasudeva and Krishna (Kanha) is established. He is also called Keshava. Episodes like the killing of Kamsa and his two wrestlers Chanur and Mustik and the final destruction of Vasudeva and Vrishni clan are included in the same Jataka though with some difference. It is disclosed in the final chapter that a well-known disciple of Buddha named Sariputta was Vasudeva in his previous birth. Krishna's unique and formidable weapon, the *chakra*, a sharp edged disk, is also mentioned there. In Jain literature Krishna is described as a brother of Neminatha, the twenty-second Tirthankara.

The colourful Krishna lore with a folk base manifested itself in Buddhist, Jain and Brahmanical literatures taking different hues. However, the account of Krishna's life and philosophy, primarily related in the *Mahabharata* and later elaborated upon by the Puranas, particularly by the *Vishnu*, *Harivamsha*, *Bhagavata* and *Brahmavaivarta* Puranas, acquired popularity and formed the base of the Krishna cult.



In the process of pantheistical synthesis Vasudeva-Krishna was identified with the Vedic deities, Vishnu and Narayana, and his cult acquired new dimension and prestige. It is significant to note that in the *Rig Veda* Vishnu is called Gopa, a cowherd. His place is populated with 'many horned swiftly moving cows'. This is, in a way, the *Goloka* of Krishna described by the later Puranas. The *Baudhayana Dharma Sutra* also uses the epithets Govinda and Damodara for Vishnu. In fact very few *suktas* are devoted to Vishnu in the *Rig Veda*. Probably the importance of Vishnu grew after his association with the popular Krishna cult.

There is ample literary, epigraphical and sculptural evidence to indicate the popularity of the Vasudeva-Krishna cult in the country even before the composition of the *Mahabharata*. Temples were constructed in honour of Vasudeva and Sankarshana by their devotees. An inscription of c. 100 B.C., found at Ghosundi near Nagari in Chittorgarh district, refers to a stone wall constructed by a Bhagavata king around a temple of Narayana-Krishna. The Krishna cult is popularly known as the Bhagavata cult. An inscription indicates royal patronage to the Bhagavata religion.

1. (*Karito ayam Radnya Bhagava*)(*te*)*na*
Gajayanena Parashari-putrena Sa-
2. *vartatina Ashvamedha-Ya Jina*
Bhagava(da)bhya Sankarshana-Vasudevabhyam*
3. (*Anihatabhyam Sarveshvara*)*bhyam*
Puja-shila prakaro Narayana-vataka

A Satavahana queen's long inscription in the Naneghat cave near Poona in Maharashtra opens with the adoration to Sankarshana and Vasudeva along with Indra, Prajapati and the deities of four quarters—Yama, Varuna, Kubera and Vasava. It clearly indicates the exalted position Vasudeva had at the time in the Brahmanical pantheon. In the Prakrit folklore of Maharashtra, compiled by the Hala Satavahana, we find beautiful *gathas* depicting the Krishna-Gopi amour.

Even the Greeks in the contemporary India came under the influence of the Krishna cult. It is very interesting to note that the earliest representation of Krishna and Balarama is found on the bronze coins of Greek king Agathocles (c. 180-165 B.C.) who along with his brother Pantaleon ruled from Taxila over quite a large portion of



Indian territory extending up to the eastern Punjab. The diadem wearing Krishna on the coin is holding circular disk-like weapon *chakra* in one hand and conch in another. Balarama is seen carrying his mace and plough. The coins are bilingual—Brahmi and Greek. On the coin of Pantaleon ‘dances an Indian figure, with tight trousers, long ear-rings and a flower in her ear’. She is identified as Lakshmi. Dion’s son Heliodorus, ambassador to the court of Sunga king Kaustiputra Bhagabhadra, erected a tall Garuda pillar at Vidisha in about 126 B.C. in the honour of Vasudeva-Krishna proclaiming himself a follower of the Bhagavata cult. The Brahmi inscription on the pillar reads:

1. (De)va Devas Va(sude)vas Garudadhwaḥ Ayam
2. Karite (Ea) Heliodoreṇa Bhaga-
3. vatena Dias Putrena Takkhasilakena
4. Yonadutena agatena maharajasa
5. Amtalikitasa upa(m)ta
sakasa(m) rano

Text B

1. Trini amutapadani . . . (pta)
anuthitani
2. nayamti svaga(m) damo
chago apramado

Krishna is called here the God of Gods, the supreme deity. The virtues extolled in the inscription are self-control (*damo*), self-denial (*chago*) and watchfulness (*apramado*).

Krishna images were worshipped at many places. Quoting Curtius, Dr D.C. Sircar says that an image of Herakles (i.e. Vasudeva-Krishna) was being carried in front of the Paurava army, as it advanced against the Greeks led by Alexander the Great (*The Cultural Heritage of India*, vol. 4, p. 115). An interesting terracotta plaque showing Vasudeva carrying the infant Krishna over his head across the flooded Yamuna river, belonging to c. first century is housed in the Mathura Museum. A Mora stone inscription of about the same time refers to images of Bhagavata Vrishni Panchaviras—Sankarshana, Vasudeva, Pradyumna, Samba and Aniruddha—which were very beautifully carved in stone. A number of sculptures depicting *Krishna Leela* are to be found in Rajasthan, particularly in the Bikaner and Jodhpur regions. Describing



an interesting *Dan Leela* plaque, Dr R.C. Agrawala states that the milkmaid with whom Krishna is flirting has put on a Greek dress in the form of a double-fringed skirt. He sees the impact of Gandhara art in the depiction of Krishna who is shown as a full-grown man with a prominent moustache. The plaque belongs to the early Gupta period. Torana pillars at Mandor (Jodhpur) depict many *Krishna Leela* scenes. Bas reliefs at the Badami caves dated 578 illustrate in stone several episodes from Krishna's life, from his early childhood to his death. Temples at Halebid, Belur, Deogarh, Khajuraho and many majestic *gopurams* of south Indian temples are adorned with the Krishna saga in its full glory. In the far south, on the turbulent sea-shore of Mahabalipuram, one can see Krishna milking a cow. He is omnipresent in the art, literature and culture of this vast country. You cannot escape his bewitching presence, wherever you go.

Basically, the Vraja area was the centre of the Krishna cult, from where it spread all over the country and even beyond it. Megasthenes, envoy of mighty Greek King Seleucus Nicator to the royal court of Emperor Chandragupta Maurya, exhibits in his work *Indika* the knowledge of the river Yamuna and the city of Mathura, and acknowledges the existence of the flourishing cult of the Indian Herakles, Krishna, in the Surasena region. Under the Gupta kings the Krishna cult received royal patronage and many temples were built in his honour. The Guptas accepted Garuda as their royal insignia and some of them took pride in calling themselves Parama Bhagavata. The Pabhosa cave inscription refers to the makers of the images of Sri Krishna and the milkmaids. Numerous enchanting sculptures in stone and terracotta depicting the divine acts, *divyani karmani*, of Krishna and Balarama (Sankarshana) are found in Bengal at Paharpur. Belonging to c. sixth century, they portray scenes showing Vasudeva carrying Krishna across the Yamuna, the dragging and killing of Kamsa by Krishna, Krishna wrestling with Chanur and Mustik, the abduction of Subhadra, Krishna lifting Govardhana, and similar other episodes. Most interesting and significant is the piece of sculpture showing Radha and Krishna in a beautiful standing pose. This is probably the earliest extant representation of Radha in sculpture.

Because of its immense popular appeal, the Krishna cult started spreading fast and reached distant parts of India, far from its original centre, Vrajabhumi. According to Greek sources, Pandaia, who was the daughter of Herakles-Krishna, was married to the south Indian



king whose kingdom was called Pandya after her. Many south Indian royal families, like the Pandyas, Pallavas, Chalukyas and Kadambas, gave generous patronage to the Bhagavata cult. From the explanation of the word Pandya given by the grammarian Katyayana as 'one sprung from an individual of the clan of the Pandus', and the phonetic similarity of the words Mathura and Madura, a Pandya capital, scholars like Dr Sircar infer that sections of the Vrishni people might have settled in Tamil land. Dr Sircar also refers to the temples of two gods at Madura, Kaveripattinam and other places mentioned in the Tamil classic *Silappadikaram*, one of whom has been described by the poet Kari-Kannan as the dark-complexioned one bearing the wheel, and the other as the fair-complexioned one bearing a flag of the palmyra.

However the credit of giving popular base to the Bhagavata cult goes to the twelve Vaishnava saints, collectively known as Alvars who flourished in the Tamil country between the fifth and ninth centuries. They composed beautiful songs, *Prabandham*, describing the eventful childhood of Krishna including his romance with the Gopa girls. Alvar Andal, who was called Kodai because she was beautiful and delicate like a garland of jasmine flowers, worshipped Lord Ranganatha with *gopi-bhava*. She actually married Ranganatha and according to a legend, as she sat on the serpent bed by the side of the reclining Lord, a glow of divine light emerged from the image and Andal vanished into it, symbolizing the divine union of lovers. In her songs, Nappinnai is described as a favourite Gopi of Krishna who delights him by her *Ras* dance. In one of her songs Andal requests Nappinnai who was sleeping with the Lord throughout the night to free him from the deep bonds of love for a moment as people are waiting to take *darshan* of the deity in the morning. The Alvars involvement with Krishna was deeply emotional, which set the tone of the *bhakti* cult. Great Acharyas like Ranganatha Muni and Yamunacharya (ninth century), Ramanuja (early eleventh century), Madhvacharya (twelfth century), gave sound metaphysical base to the Vaishnava movement in south India.

The impact of the Krishna cult on Indian art, literature and culture is simply stupendous. From the twelfth century, a large number of *Krishna Kavyas* started emerging in Sanskrit and regional languages, the tone of which was mainly set by Jayadeva's *Gita Govinda*. The *Rasa Panchadhyayi* of *Bhagavata Purana* which describes the amorous sports of Krishna and the Gopis inspired many poets to write lyrics



describing the loves of Krishna. The fourteenth century Maithili poet Vidyapati composed sensuous *padas* in vernacular on the Radha-Krishna theme, infesting it with 'all the arts of love which *Kama Sutra* and *Sahitya Shastra* lay down'. *Madhura-bhava* is reflected in the Bengali lyrics of Chandidasa who follows Vidyapati in describing the divine lovers in the most earthly terms. The fifteenth century poet Surdas introduced the trend in Hindi poetry, though in a more sober tone. The childhood of Krishna became the dominating theme. The folk poets in different parts of the country contributed *Krishna Kavyas* emphasizing *vatsalya* and *sringara rasas*. The *Lavani* songs composed by Maharashtrian folk poets are the best examples of this genre. In Gujarat, Narasi Mehata, who was born in the fifteenth century, depicted the love of Radha and Krishna in his poems which are included in his work *Surata Sangrama*. Mahaprabhu Chaitanya, who is also known as Sri Gauranga, had a profound impact on Krishna poetry though he himself never wrote a line. His senior contemporary, Mahapurusha Shankardeva of Assam, composed beautiful Krishna lyrics full of devotion and set them to enchanting music. In Telugu literature, the *Muvva Gopala* lyrics of Kshetravayya stand out for their poetic excellence. It is difficult to give a list of all the Krishna poets and one has to limit oneself by mentioning trend setters in the field. The movement spread to all parts of the country giving rise to hosts of poets who took immense delight in singing the glory of Krishna, like the early Prakrit poets of the first century.

The Radha-Krishna theme is most popular with different schools of Indian painting, including the Gujarati, Rajasthani, Basauli, Kangra and Mughal. We find many well illustrated *Gita Govinda* manuscripts practically in every part of the country, and especially in Orissa. The artists have imaginatively transformed the delicate sentiments enshrined in the words into meaningful colours and lines, lending them visual dimension. Radha in different *nayika-avasthas* (various psycho-physical states of girl in love) is a recurring theme. The whole atmosphere of Vrajabhumi is delightfully captured in colours. The Kunjavanams on the bank of the Yamuna, the fragrance of their bloom, soft green carpets of grass, a variety of beautiful birds, herds of cows, charming Gopa- and Gopis, subtle shades of *vipralambha* and *sambhoga sringara* that they indulge in, form the texture of these paintings. The paintings are so eloquent that a person with sensitivity could even hear the soft tune of the flute on the lips of Krishna.



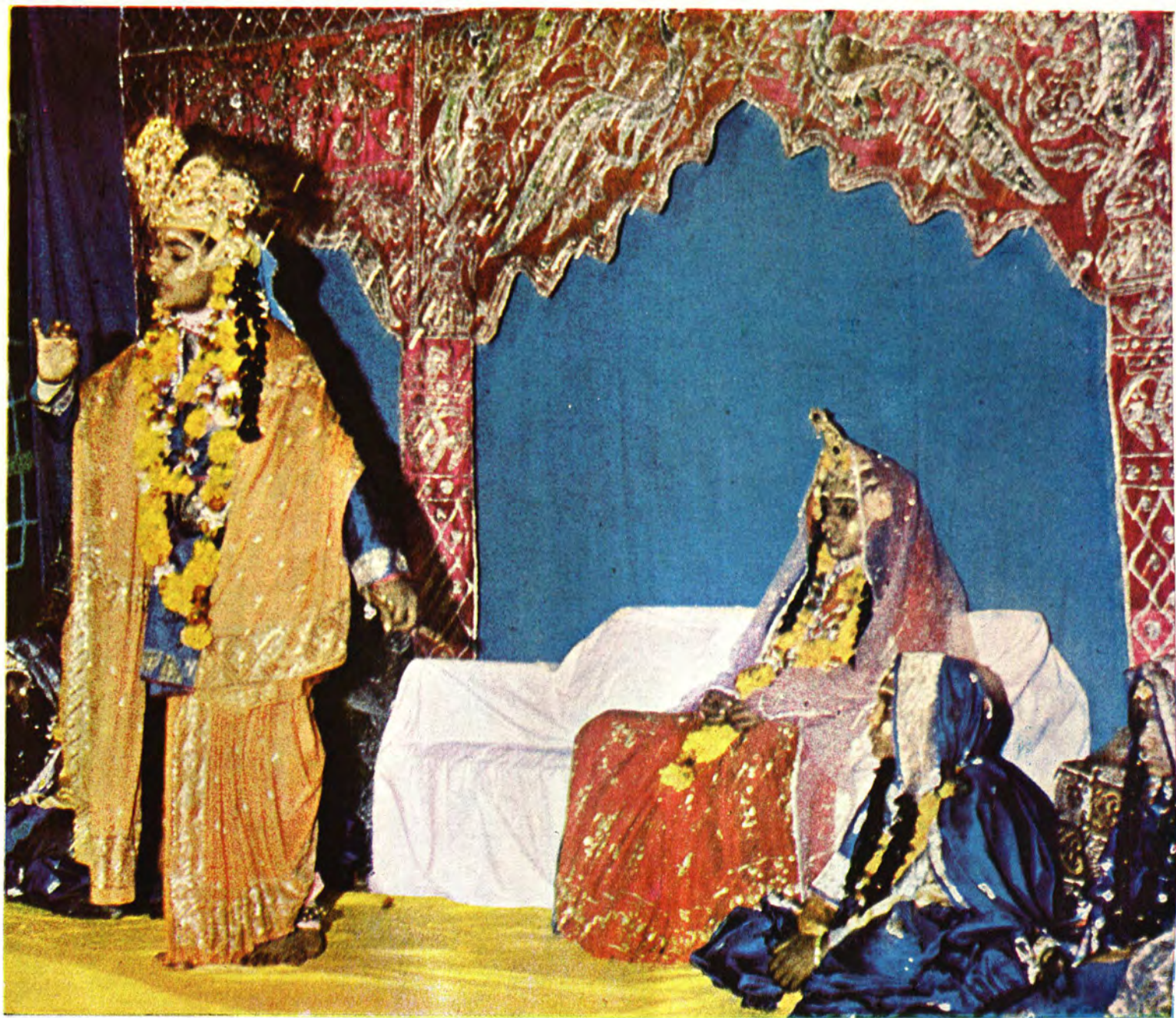
From the ancient Vasudeva-Krishna, Narayaniya, Pancharatra, Chatur Vyuha to the early Pushti Marga, Gaudiya or Radhavallabha sects of the Krishna cult, all subscribe unanimously to the principle of *bhakti* or devotion to the supreme god Krishna and his incarnations. *Bhakti* means deep emotional attachment with the object of worship. The entire gamut of human emotions is involved in this unique spiritual relationship that eludes definition. '*Anirvachaniyam prema-swarupam*', says Narada in his *Bhakti Sutra*. Among many rituals associated with the *bhakti* cult, one is listening to or reciting the stories of Krishna's divine acts. Hence, according to Gargacharya, deep interest in the Bhagavata stories is in itself *bhakti*. This recitation takes different forms, from simple narration to its visual representation through the medium of dance, drama and music. The Krishna cult included theatrical arts as a vital part of its ritual, hence, like painting and literature, it gave great impetus to theatre as well.

In the *Bhagavata Purana*, Krishna specifically expressed his preference for the theatrical arts in no uncertain terms. Time and again he said that devotees should organize dance, drama and musical sessions to appease him. In the Ekadasha Skandha he states:

Shraddhalurme Katham Srunvan Subhadra Lokapavani
Gayannusmaran Karma Janma chabhinayam Muhuh 11.11.22
Majjanmakarmakathanam Mama Parvanumodanam
Gitatandavavaditragosthibhirmadgruhotsava 11.11.36
Upagayan Gunan Nrityan Karmanyabhinayan Mama 11.27.44
Pruthak Satrena Va Mahyam Parvayatramahotsavan
Karayed Gitanrityadyeermaharajavibhutibhih 11.29.11

Enactment of the *Leelas* of Krishna (*Karmanyabhinayan*) on festive occasions, relating his story through dance, music and drama, became an essential part of the Krishna cult. There is an interesting story in the *Jaiminiyashvamedhaparva* emphasizing the importance of theatrical arts in the rituals associated with the Krishna cult. Once, expecting the arrival of Krishna, a troupe of beautiful dancers started performing a dance based on six types of *talas*. Krishna was immensely pleased to see the performance. On his arrival, one of them stopped dancing and started expressing various sentiments through her eyes only. In that pose she looked like a fully blossomed tender creeper with two black bees hovering over it. Delighting Krishna with the music of the flute and the *mridanga* she said:





3. Krishna Speaking about his cult : Radha on throne (Ras Leela)





4. Krishna Lifting mountain Govardhana



*Mam bhramanti jana veeksha prahasanti tavagratah
 Na vidanti param mudha madbhramat tushyate Hari II.19.II
 Dhyanena yoginan naiva lilaya drishyate Harih
 Sansthita madbhramenatra sarve pashantu yoginah II.21.II
 Nrityatam gayatam chaiva nana vadyam prakurvataam
 Yatha santushyate devo na dhyanaadairiti shrutam II.22.II*

‘Oh Lord, people are laughing at me because I am whirling before you but the fools do not know that Hari is pleased with my dance. Let all see, the Hari, who does not appear before Yogis despite their hard penance, is standing before me pleased by my art. The god is more pleased by dance, song and music than by any other mode of worship including *dhyana*—meditation.’

Krishna, pleased by her worship, told her to sing his songs, expressing its meaning through dance: ‘*Padani mama gayanti nrutyasva tu varanane*’. This episode sheds enough light on the importance of dancing and singing in the Krishna cult. How should *bhakti* be shown? ‘*Yatha Vrajagopikanam*’, like the Gopis of Vraja, says Narada. The Gopis delighted Krishna by dancing and singing in the *Ras Mandala*. Even Bharata supports this contention in his *Natyashastra*. He clearly states: ‘The Gods are never so pleased on being worshipped with scents and garlands as they are delighted with the performance of drama.’

Krishna himself was adept in the theatrical arts and has been adorned with the epithet *Natavar*: a great actor. According to Bharata’s *Natyashastra* (c. 200 B.C.), Vishnu-Krishna is associated with the origin of four styles of dramatic representations known as *vrittis*. These *vrittis*—*Bharati*, *Arabhati*, *Sattvati* and *Kaishiki*—originated in the killing of the demons Madhu and Kaitabha, hence, they are called ‘*Devo Leela Samudbhav*’. These *vrittis*, according to Bharata, gave rise to various forms of drama. This tradition directly associates Krishna with the evolution of the Indian theatre. *Natyashastra* also states that ‘*Amrita Manthana*’, based on the theme of churning the ocean for ambrosia, was the first drama ever written. It is interesting to note that it depicts a *Leela* of Vishnu-Krishna in his tortoise incarnation. In a way we can say that the very first Indian play was a Vaishnava or Bhagavata play. The *Harivamsha Purana* describes Krishna as an originator of a dramatic style known as *Chalikya Gandharva*. The



Mahabharata says that Krishna received training in the dramatic arts at the hermitage of his Guru Sandipani. The enchanting music of his flute is part of the Krishna legend. It is natural that dance, drama and music found an important place in the cult of a deity who himself was adept in the theatrical arts.

The Krishna cult gave encouragement to the theatrical arts as it turned out to be the best medium for the propagation of faith among people. While underlining the propriety and importance of the theatrical arts in the context of the Krishna cult, a well-known playwright of the sixteenth century, Shri Rupa Goswami says in his work *Bhakti-Rasamrita Sindhu*, that *kavya* and *natakas* on the Krishna theme nurture the newly sprouted germ of Krishna-Rati in the heart of prospective devotees and gently lead them on the path of devotion. By remembering him, by seeing him represented on the stage and by listening to his words, the rudimentary vision of Krishna-Rati culminates into a full-fledged aesthetic experience that is a source of eternal bliss.

Staging and witnessing Krishna plays is considered a most pious act, leading to emancipation or *moksha*. Tradition considers drama a votive offering to the gods. Bharata says, he who witnesses the dramatic performance will attain the same goal as masters of the Vedic path, performers of sacrifices or givers of gifts. *Trivarga sadhanam natyam*, says the *Vishnu Purana*. A person who attends dramatic performances will attain the *trivargas*—*dharma*, *artha* and *kama*. *Natalakshanaratnakosha* echoes the same sentiment when it says: '*Dharma-disadhanam natyam*'. The Bayana inscription of Chitrlekha solemnly records that by worshipping Vishnu-Krishna you can get everything you desire. And it is significant to note that she worships him by arranging dramatic shows: *preksha*. Her inscription reads:

Good fortune, beauty, kingdom, emancipation and abode in heaven cannot be obtained without worshipping Vishnu.

Having thought of this . . . She, Chitrlekha, the chaste and of esteemed character, caused to be made this temple of Vishnu . . .

The girls who (dancers attached to temple) with armlets, shining necklaces, jewelled anklets and bracelets of gold (and also) with the girdles of gold appear like so many wishing creepers—*Kalpalatas*.



Owing to the temptation of seeing them, the enemy of Madhu does not leave his own image even for a moment nor does he now remember the heavenly damsels like Rambha and others.

They being reflected in his pure cheeks, the smiling [Vishnu] always experiences anger of jealous Laxmi.

A show [*prekshanakam*] given by these ladies whose eyes were like the petals of lotus flower, whose hips were heavy and whose faces were like moon were arranged by her.

This tenth century inscription amply illustrates the importance of the theatrical arts as a part of the rituals performed to appease Vishnu-Krishna. The *Bhagavata Purana* enjoins the devotees to make grants of villages and land to the temples, to enable them to meet the expenditure incurred on rituals including dramatic performances. An inscription of the time of Maharajadhiraj Shri Sarangadeva of Anahilvataka was found at Anavada near Patan. It opens with a stanza from *Gita Govinda*. It states:

(Sri) (Kri)shnapadanam (pu)ja naivedya
prekshanaka nimittam . . .

The word *prekshanaka* again occurs in the twentieth line of the inscription. Like *puja* and *naivedya*, dramatic performances too are considered an integral part of Krishna worship. This attitude of the cult towards the theatrical arts gave rise to different forms of dramas based on the Krishna theme. A literary evidence of a much earlier period points to the tradition of presenting plays in the Krishna temples. According to Vararuchi's *Ubhayabhisarika Bhana*, Madanasena the courtesan presented a musical opera or *sangitaka* at the temple of Krishna. The *Gita* says:

Bhagavato narayanasya bhavane
Madanasenaya madanaradhane sangitake
Yatharasamabhineeyamae . . .

Puri is the great centre of the Krishna cult in Orissa where he is known as Jagannatha. A magnificent temple houses wooden images of Krishna, Balarama and Subhadra. A beautiful *Nata Mandir*—Dancing Hall—is attached to the temple for performing dances and staging



plays to appease Krishna. The late fifteenth century Oriya inscription of Gajapati ruler Prataparudradeva enjoins the temple dancers to perform the *Gita Govinda* regularly. The king orders:

Dancing (*nat*) will be performed at the *bhoga* time of the elder Thakur (Balarama) and Gita Govinda Thakur (Krishna-Jagan-natha). This dancing will be held from the end of evening *dhupa* up to the time of *bada singar* (bed time) *dhupa*.

The batch [of dancing girls] of Bada Thakura, the fixed female dancers of Kapileshvara Thakur, the old batch, the Telangi batch all will learn no other song than the *Gita Govinda*. They will not sing any other song. No other kind of dancing should be performed before the gods.

Besides the dancing there are four Vaishnava singers. They will sing only the *Gita Govinda*. Hearing from them those who are illiterate will learn it and no other song. The superintendent who knowingly allows other songs to be sung or other plays—*nat*—to be performed rebels against Lord Jagannatha.

The inscriptions quoted above indicate the importance of the theatrical arts, and their religious sanctity in the cult of the divine cowherd. The tradition of presenting Krishna dramas in the temple still exists in many parts of the country. It will not be an exaggeration to state that such an ancient and continuous dramatic tradition has no parallel in the history of world theatre.

The Krishna myths have provided excellent subject material to the playwrights all over the country since 400 B.C. His colourful life fascinated the litterateurs. Apart from the divinity attached to him, even as a historical person, Krishna's eventful career is extremely dramatic. A mere cowherd boy rose to a great status in his life and controlled the political scene of his time by the sheer force of his personality. He won wars, he suffered defeats. He was honoured, he was abused. He was called *yogi* and debauch in the same breath. He established kingdoms and also helplessly witnessed the annihilation of his entire clan. The mighty Krishna who related the *Gita* on the battle-field of Kurukshetra was himself a heartbroken man at the end of his career. Born in prison on a dark cloudy night he died a pathetic death in the lonely jungles. No wonder that dramatists were attracted to his complex personality and uneven career that suffered the jolts of fate.



Apart from the *Mahabharata* and its Khil Parva, popularly known as *Harivamsha*, numerous Puranas including *Padma*, *Linga*, *Narada*, *Kurma*, *Vayu*, *Agni*, *Brahma*, *Vishnu* and *Brahmavaivarta*, relate the Krishna story. However, it is the Krishna of *Bhagavata Purana* who is immensely popular among the common folk. The present image of Krishna is shaped by the *Srimad Bhagavata* which is an enormous collection of Krishna myths. It systematizes the tenets of the *bhakti* cult and even provides it a metaphysical base. This Purana takes great delight in the cowherd Krishna and his amorous exploits.

The basic source material for reconstructing the Krishna story is mentioned above. Taking it as a base, a brief sketch of his life and career is given here with particular emphasis on the events which are so often dramatized by the playwrights.

On the stormy midnight of Shravan Vadya Ashtami, Krishna was born to Devaki and Vasudeva of the Yadava-Vrishni clan, as their eighth child, in the dark prison cell of his maternal uncle – King Kamsa of Mathura. As, according to a prophecy, the king was to die at the hands of one of the children of Devaki, he wanted to kill every one of them. He slew seven in a row. Hence Vasudeva took the eighth child to his Gopa friend Nanda by crossing the flooded Yamuna to ensure his safety.

In Gokula, along with his brother Balarama, Krishna grew from strength to strength. All the demons sent by Kamsa to kill him, including Putana, Shakatasur, Bakasur, Vatsasur, Aghasur, Dhenukasur, were destroyed by him. The playful child used to steal milk and butter, and tease the Gopa girls with his pranks. Once his foster mother tied him to a mortar by a rope. As he tried to pass through two Arjuna trees with the mortar on his back they fell down. Thus he liberated two *Yakshas* who had been transformed into trees by a curse. He subdued the cobra Kalia and made him leave Yamuna for ever.

Intercepting young and beautiful Gopa girls on their way to the Mathura market and levying a toll tax in the form of milk and butter was his favourite sport which later poets termed as *Dan Leela*. He once stole the clothes of cowherd girls bathing in the Yamuna river and returned them after much pleading on their part. This episode became famous as the *Vastraharan Leela*.



He angered Indra by inciting the Gopas against worshipping him. When the god of clouds lashed Vraja with heavy rains in retaliation, Krishna lifted the Govardhana hill under which all took shelter. Once Brahma tried to test the divinity of the child by stealing his cows and Gopa friends. Krishna recreated them all by his divine power, thus humbling the mighty Brahma.

On one fragrant full-moon night of Sharad Ritu, Krishna started playing on his flute. So enchanting was its note that all the Gopis ran towards him. They danced and sported with him amorously. Sensing the pride surging in their hearts Krishna disappeared from the scene with one Gopi. Elated by the favour Krishna had shown to her, she requested him to carry her on his shoulders as she was extremely delicate and was tired of walking. Krishna deserted her also. Suffering the pangs of separation the Gopis started weeping and enacting his *Leelas*. Seeing their deep devotion Krishna reappeared and danced *Maharas* with them by individually delighting them with amorous sports of various kinds including kissing, embracing, fondling of breasts and ultimately indulging in water sports. The five chapters describing the *Ras* episode are known as *Rasa Panchadhyayi* which form the base of erotic mysticism inherent in the Krishna cult.

On the invitation of Kamsa, Krishna went to his capital Mathura to participate in a wrestling bout along with Balarama. There he killed the elephant Kuvalayapid, the wrestlers Chanur and Mustik, and finally slew the tyrant Kamsa himself. He offered the kingdom of Mathura to Kamsa's father Ugrasen.

Angered by the death of Kamsa, his father-in-law, the mighty Jarasandha, attacked Mathura seventeen times. To avoid constant confrontation with the powerful monarch Krishna shifted to Dwaraka. When the beautiful daughter of the Vidarbha king Bhismaka wrote him a letter full of love, Krishna kidnapped and married Rukmini. He later married Satyabhama, the proud and extremely handsome daughter of the Yadava king Satrajit. Once Krishna gave a Parijata flower to Rukmini, which was offered to him by Narada. Satyabhama became angry with Krishna for his preference for his elder wife. Krishna, to please her, defeated Indra and brought the Parijata tree from heaven for her. Many plays have been written on this episode which is described in detail in *Harivamsha*. He later killed the demon Narakasura of Pragjyotishpura and married the sixteen thousand beautiful girls imprisoned by Narakasura.



Krishna's friendship with the Pandavas opened a new chapter in the political history of Northern India. He helped them in difficult times, protected the honour of their wife Draupadi when the Kauravas tried to disrobe her in the court of King Dhritarashtra. Because of his statesmanship and help, the Pandavas could win the war against their cousins. Krishna related the *Gita* to Arjuna, his dearest friend, right on the battlefield. Because of Krishna's clever scheming, Arjuna could marry his charming sister Subhadra.

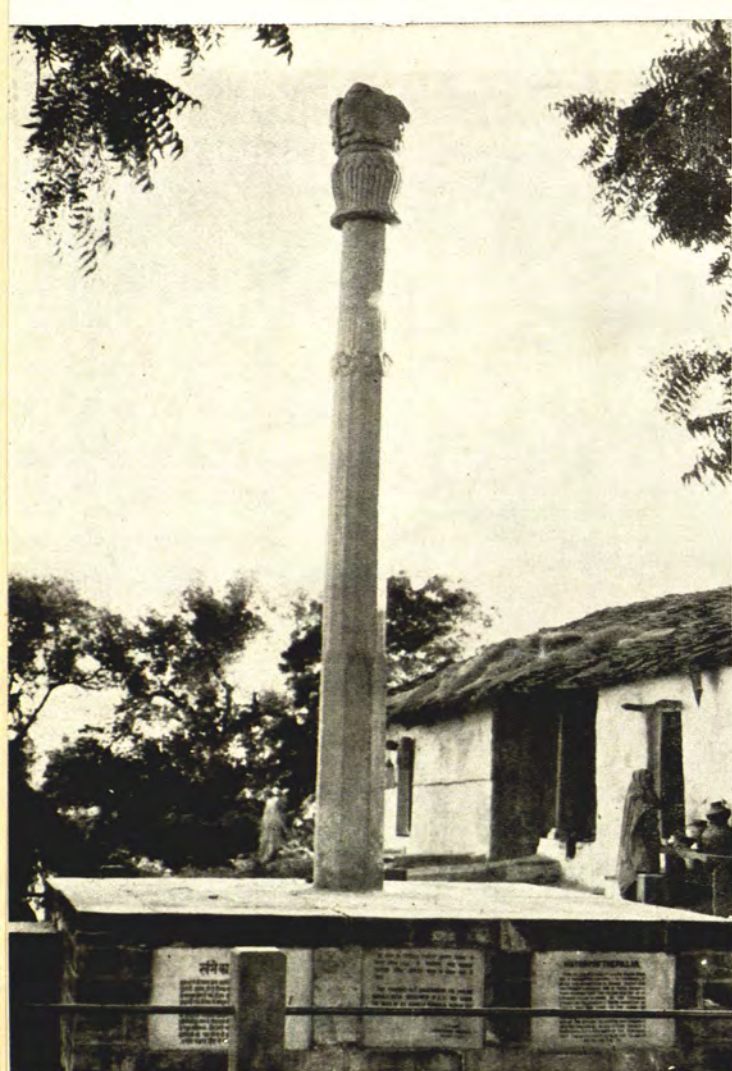
Krishna was very kind to his friends. Sudama, a poor Brahmin lad, studied at the hermitage of Sandipani with Krishna. After many years he went to meet Krishna. Dwarakadhipati Krishna received the poor Brahmin with honour and made him rich with gifts. This touching incident showing the warmth of his heart is related in the *Bhagavata Purana*. Krishna's life is full of such acts of generosity.

The tragic Mahabharata war left behind a trail of death and destruction. The Yadavas also could not escape the curse of fate. They destroyed each other with vehemence and Krishna had to watch the annihilation of his clan helplessly. Saddened by the wanton destruction he started moving about in the forests. Once while he was standing under the *Ashvattha* tree in a *yogic* posture, he was hit by an arrow of a tribal hunter which caused his death.

Through the mass of literature he emerges as the mischievous child, the sportful youth, the mighty warrior, the shrewd politician, the benevolent friend, the ingenious statesman, the erudite philosopher and the liberated *yogi*. He was extremely handsome, with a dark complexion. He is always referred to as *Meghashyam*—black as a rain cloud. In the *Meghaduta*, poet Kalidasa compares a dark cloud sporting a rainbow on its body to Vishnu in Gopa dress, wearing a diadem of colourful peacock feathers. Because of his limitless qualities (*gunadhikya*) and handsome appearance, dramatist Rupa Goswami in his work *Natak Chandrika* places Krishna in the category of *Dhir Lalit Nayaka*. No wonder dramatists adored Krishna and felt elated in describing his enchanting *leelas*—divine sports—in their plays...







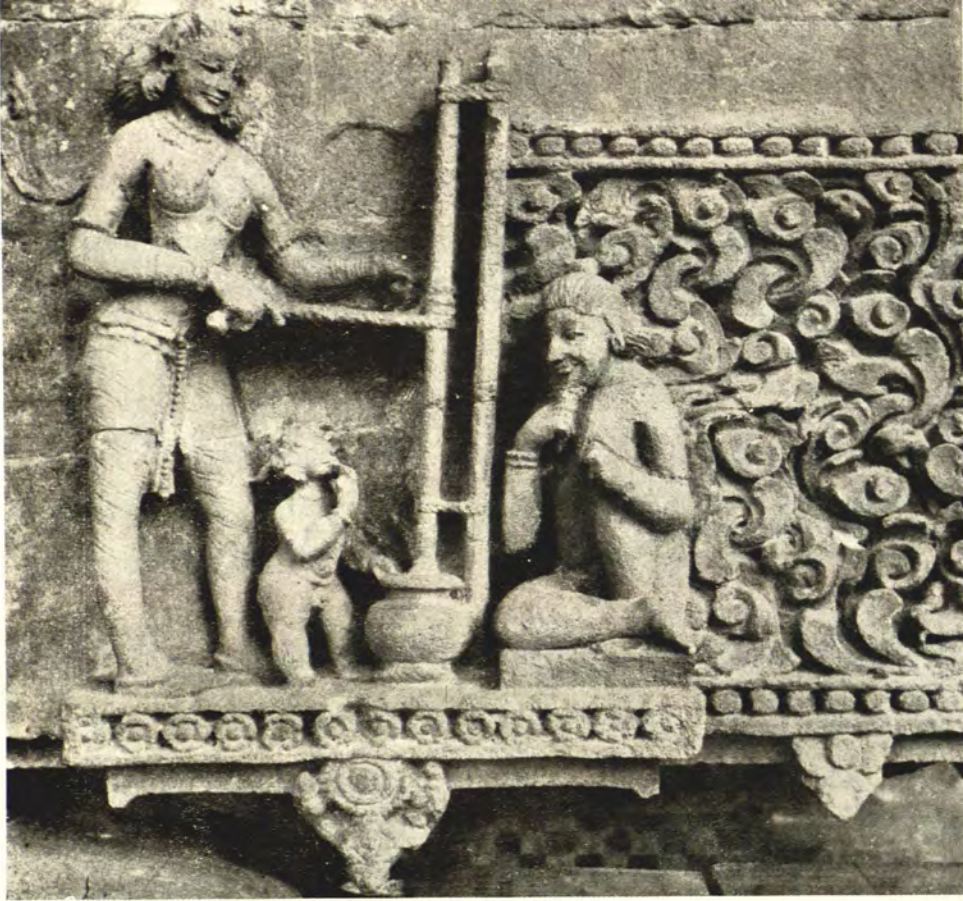
2. Garuda Pillar of Heliodorus

3. Vasudeva crossing Yamuna with Krishna in basket



4. Child Krishna with butterball





5. Krishna eating butter churned by Mother



6. Krishna and Balarama learning wrestling





7. Dan-Leela







← 8. Stealing clothes of Gopis

9. Krishna killing demon Dhenuka



10. Kaliya Mardan

11. Krishna with Rukmini and Bhama



नारायणस्त्रिभुवनैकपरायणो वः
पायादुपायशनयुक्तिकरः सुराणाम् ।
लोकत्रयाविरतनाटकतन्त्रवस्तु-
प्रस्तावना प्रतिसमापनसूत्रधारः ॥
—दूतघटोत्कचम्, भास

EARLY PHASE



Like the Krishna cult, the antiquity of the Krishna theatre goes beyond the Vedas in which the scholars generally try to seek the rudiments of Indian theatre. The theatrical arts including dancing, singing and music, form a part of the cult worship of the anthropomorphic deities of the original habitants of this ancient land. *Yakshas* and their beautiful consorts *Yakshis* were worshipped with flowers, sandal paste, lamps, incense and music. It was the same with Nataraja Shiva and Krishna. This traditional and popular mode of worship modified the character of sacrificial rituals of the Aryans who came later to India. The theatrical element in the Vedas is a result of local folk tradition which believed in appeasing their deities with dance and music. Writing about the origin of the Indian theatre E.P. Horowitz very clearly states:

The oldest Indian dramas, or rather colloquies (*Sanvadas*) were not composed in Sanskrit, but in Prakrit. Indeed originally the Prakrit *Sanvadas* were mysteries too, either Krishna or Shiva acting and dancing the principal part.

Favourite episodes from Govinda's eventful life were the 'Slaying of Kamsa the tyrant' and the 'Binding of the heaven storming titan'. Large crowds came to witness these open-air spectacles. The grand finale, a merry roundelay of the bright-eyed Gopis, proved a special attraction. Rival worshippers flocked in equal number to the wanton bacchanals held in the honour of God Shiva.



Vedic dialogues reflected the afterglow rather than the first morning flush of the rude representation, staged in the vulgar tongue, of Krishna's and Shiva's ancient mysteries.

The Agra district is the holy land of Krishnaism. Shaurseni, the mediaeval speech of the Agra populace, is frequently met with in Sanskrit plays . . .

It is obvious that Horowitz had in mind Patanjali's *Mahabhashya* when he was speaking about the popular episodes of the Krishna theatre—*Kamsa Vadha* and *Bali Bandha*. According to many scholars, the first positive reference to Krishna plays is to be found in *Mahabhashya* composed around 150 B.C. Here three modes of presenting the Krishna story are mentioned—narration by *granthikas*, showing of pictures depicting the episodes, enactment of the episodes on the stage with the help of actors.

The passage in a way eloquently speaks of the three stages of the evolution of the theatre itself. The process of visualization of the story or myth is clearly indicated here. To begin with, the myth was narrated by the story-teller all by himself, maybe by introducing some element of *abhinaya*—acting—to enliven the narration. Then he started using painted pictures to illustrate his narrative in a better way. There is ample evidence to show that the art of narrating stories with the help of pictures was in vogue at the time and was known as *Mankha vidha*. In Bhasa's play *Dutavakyam*, holding a neatly painted picture scroll, the Kaurava prince Duryodhana narrates the episode of the disrobing of Draupadi, wife of the five Pandavas. The art is still very much alive and is practised by the Bhopas of Rajasthan and the Thakars of Maharashtra. The pictures, in due course, were replaced by actors enacting the roles of Krishna, Kamsa and others. The passage also establishes the fact that Krishna plays were in vogue in the second century B.C.

However much earlier evidence showing the existence of the Krishna theatre in all its glory is available to us. Bhasa, the first known dramatist of India, wrote eight plays around 400 B.C. A majority of his plays are dedicated to the Krishna pantheon. He also wrote two full-fledged Krishna plays, *Dutavakyam* and *Balacharitam*, which display the deep influence of the Krishna cult. He respectfully calls Krishna a *sutradhara*, string holder of universal drama of life:



*Lokatrayaviratanatakatantravastu-
Prastavanapratissamapana Sutraddharah
—Dutaghatotkacha*

All the three worlds—*Swarga*, *Mrutyu*, *Patala*—are a stage on which this drama is going on and as a *sutraddhara* controls the play, Narayan-Krishna is managing this show from its beginning to the grand finale. He expresses the same reverence towards Krishna in other benedictory verses as well.

Dutavakyam is a one-act play in which Krishna and Duryodhana are the main characters. To avoid a bloody war and destruction Krishna goes to the Kauravas to negotiate peace as an emissary of the Pandavas. The Kauravas try to capture him but Krishna easily foils their game by calling his weapons which appear one by one in person on the stage. It is a grand spectacle of *veera* (heroic) and *adbhuta* (wondrous) *rasas* in which mighty personalities clash like swords in fierce combat. By the sheer force of his mighty personality Krishna defeats them.

Balacharitam is a delightful play based on the *Bal Leelas*—the childhood acts—of the divine cowherd. Full of songs, dance and music, it may be called the first extant *Krishna Leela* play available to us. The source of many incidents described in the play seems to be oral folk tradition, as the major Vaishnava Puranas like *Harivamsha* and *Bhagavata* are of later origin. The play opens with the birth of Krishna in Mathura on the stormy night and ends with the slaying of the tyrant Kamsa. In between, during the course of five acts, many interesting episodes connected with the life of Krishna are either narrated or enacted on the stage. These include the escape of infant Krishna to Gopagram, the killing of the demons Putana, Pralambha, Dhenuka and Arishtarbha, the suppression of ferocious cobra Kalia, the slaying of Kamsa's mighty wrestlers Chanur and Mustik. These episodes are still popular with the playwrights and performers of the Krishna plays.

The third act gives us a graphic description of the traditional folk dance of the cowherds, *Hallisaka*, precursor of the *Rasa* dance mentioned by the later Puranas. The charming Gopa girls, fair like the golden Champak flower, wearing colourful dresses, dance with Krishna, Balarama and other young Gopas of the Abhir settlement to the accompaniment of musical instruments including the *dindima*. The forests of Vrindavan become alive with their delightful songs and echoes of their



dancing feet. The night becomes fragrant with the flowers in the hair of the girls—Ghosha Sundari, Vanamala, Chandralekha, Mrigakshi. Delighted by the spectacle an old cowherd exclaims spontaneously, 'Ah! well sung, well danced, bravo!'

Bhasa seems to be well acquainted with the different folk dance traditions prevalent at the time. His Krishna specifically asks the participants to perform the *Hallisaka* according to the cowherd tradition—'*Ghoshavasyanuropyam Hallisaka Nrityabandha Upayujyatam!*' The dance seems to have been associated with the Krishna cult. In the *Gatha Saptashati*, a delightful collection of Prakrit couplets by Hala Satavahana, there is a reference to the Krishna-Gopi dance. The *Gatha* says, 'While dancing with Krishna the cheeks of charming Gopa girls became wet with drops of perspiration and in them started floating the reflections of the divine cowherd. A Gopi among the spectators came forward to whisper her appreciation in the ear of a dancer and she enjoyed the pleasure of kissing Krishna [reflected in the perspiration drops] several times.' The *Gathas*, known for their faithful recording of contemporary folk culture, give evidence of the popularity of the Krishna myth and the dance tradition mentioned by Bhasa.

Bhasa's two plays heralded an era of Krishna drama, an echo of which is found in the *Mahabhashya* of Patanjali. Unfortunately, for centuries to come, we do not get any written Krishna play as such, though ample literary evidence exists to indicate the continuity of the tradition.

With the desire to narrate elaborately the story of Krishna and his Vrishni clan as an appendix to the *Mahabharata*, the *Harivamsha Purana* was composed around fourth century A.D. In this work there is a significant description of the enactment of a *Krishna Leela* play by a troupe of beautiful actresses, referred to as *Apsaras*, at the Pindarak Tirtha. It was a charming sea resort where Krishna along with other Yadavas went for picknicking. The play was performed in local costume, language and style.

To the accompaniment of an orchestra and a chorus of singers, they started the performance first with dance, clapping their hands to the beat. After the *Ras*, the *abhinaya* or enactment of the Krishna stories began. Among many other things staged, they showed the slaying of Kamsa, Putana, Dhenukasur and Arishtasur, the lifting of the Govar-





1. Circular Ras Dance





2. Radha and Krishna (Ras Leela)



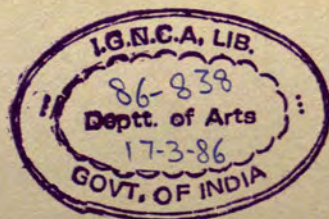
dhana, the suppression of Kalia, the abduction of Subhadra and other prominent episodes in Krishna's life. It was a musical opera enacted on the stage or in the dancing arena—*ranga*, by the regular dramatic troupe. This indicates the existence of a flourishing Krishna theatre in the Gupta era. Use of vernacular language in preference to Sanskrit significantly indicates its popular base and appeal.

Apart from this, the *Harivamsha* describes Krishna as a presiding deity of the *Chalikya Gandharva* style of dramatic representation. While *Ras* is Krishna theatre on the folk level, *Chalikya Gandharva* is its sophisticated, elite version. *Ras* is associated with the cowherd settlements in the Vrindavana forests, while *Chalikya Gandharva* was the elegant theatrical form of the royal Vrishni court of Dwaraka. The former was danced by the simple Gopa girls, and the latter by the dancers at the royal court. However, both were manifestations of the same Krishna theatre. The eighty-ninth chapter of *Harivamsha* describes how *Hallisaka* is performed in the *Chalikya* style. This will help us in understanding the elite aspect of the Krishna theatre.

In the beginning, musical instruments like the veena, flute, mridanga were set to tune. This procedure, according to the *Natyashastra*, is called *Asravana*. Krishna participated by playing on the flute. Then the *Asarita* was performed. According to classical canons this is a prolonged and complicated affair. Avoiding the intricacies we will try to relate its sequence keeping in mind the description in *Harivamsha*.

First a dancer, beautifully attired, enters the stage and scatters the flowers in her hand. If she happens to sing a benedictory verse delineated by gestures, the orchestra remains silent. The song sequence was a contribution of Rambha who is aptly described in the context as *Sabhinayarthatajnya*, skilled in translating the meaning of the song through gestures and acting.

Then enters the group of dancers who perform various dance formations known as *pindibandhas*. In *gulma* they dance collectively, in *srinkhala* they hold hands and form a chain, in *latabandha* arms are put around each other's waists to form a creeper-like spectacle and ultimately they individually exhibit their skill which is called *bhedyaka*. These skilful patterns were supposedly executed by Urvashi, Hema, Misrakeshi, Tilottama, Menaka and other *Apsaras*.



After these formations, songs are sung and dancers translate their meaning into appropriate gestures. *Harivamsha* says that the *Apsaras* then delighted their audience with *geet*, *nrutya* and *abhinaya*. Though it is not specifically mentioned which songs they sang, it is clear from the context that they must have been singing songs based on the Krishna theme. The song and dance relationship is described by the *Natyashastra* in the context of *Asarita*. On the entry of the dancer all drums and stringed instruments go into action. She first represents words of the song through gestures and then through dance. The simple folk dance was turned into a regular dramatic spectacle governed by scores of rules and procedures.

Hallisaka-Ras and *Chalikya*, both the styles associated with the Krishna cult, were simultaneously in vogue in the Gupta period. The greatest dramatist of the era, Kalidasa, describes these as a most pleasing visual offering to the gods—'*Kratu Chakshusham*'. In his play *Malavikagnimitram* the dance teacher Ganadasa says that '*Chalik*' is his '*kulavidya*', that is, an art that is practised in his family by tradition. This goes to show that it was in practice for generations. Scantly clothed in a translucent dress to exhibit her shapely limbs, beautiful Malavika, according to the tenets of *Chalik*, first sings a four line song then translates its meaning first through gestures and then through dance. It is significant to note that another important work of the period, the *Kama Sutra*, mentions '*Hallisaka krida*'.

Dramas staged in the *Chalikya* style are mentioned in *Harivamsha*. Pradyumna, who was adept in it, staged a play, *Rambhabhisar*, according to its tenets, at the Asura capital of Vajrapur. The Yadava dramatic troupe included Pradyumna, Samba, Shur and the actress Manovati.

Descriptions in the Vaishnava *Puranas* point at the continuity of the use of *Ras* in the Krishna cult. *Ras* is composed of two elements—first, a dance of Gopi and Krishna and second, the enactment of his divine acts. In the *Bhagavata Purana*, composed around the eighth century, we get the detailed account of the *Ras* spectacle in which these two elements predominate.

Playwrights continued to write plays on Krishna which find mention in various literary works. The eleventh century treatise on dramaturgy, *Natya Darpana*, written by Ramachandra-Gunachandra quotes from three Krishna plays, *Balikavanchitam*, *Yadavabhyudayam* and *Radha-*



vipralambham. The plays are lost to posterity and very little information about their period, exact theme and the names of composers is available. However they certainly point at the living tradition of Krishna theatre around that time.

Balikavanchitam has been described as a *Vithi* type of drama. A *Vithi* is a one-act play with one or two characters. Different kinds of sentiments are woven in its texture and the hero can be morally any of the three types, Excellent (*uttama*), Medium (*madhyama*) and Bad (*adhama*). *Natya Darpana* quotes a speech of Kamsa in which he boasts that as he is aided by powerful demons like Rishta, Vrisha, Putana, Keshi, he would be able to defeat him? And the reply comes from *Nepathya* (back stage): 'Krishna will kill you and nobody will save you.' In another quotation the *Sutradhara* is shown mentioning Narada. It seems that the word *Balika* in the title of the play refers to Devaki who has deceived Kamsa and smuggled Krishna out to Vrindavana.

Yadavabhyudayam is a play written by Ramachandra himself and its name suggests that it pertains to the rise of Krishna from humble origins. In the concluding *shloka* of the play it is stated that by killing Kamsa, the Magadha king Jarasandha and others, Krishna conquered half of Bharata.

Radhavipralambha has been described as a *Rasakanka*—one-act play based on *Ras* theme—written by the poet Bhejjala, who, according to some scholars, belongs to the tenth century. When a *nayika*—heroine—is separated from the *nayaka*—hero—it is called *vipralambhasringara*. As the title clearly suggests, the play must have depicted the separation of Radha from Krishna and their ultimate union culminating in a *Ras* dance. A verse from the play is quoted in the *Abhinavabharati* also.

Another dramatist of the same period, Sagarnandin, in his work *Natakalakshanaratnakosha*, mentions some plays based on the Krishna theme. *Goshthi* is a type of one-act play where love (*kaishiki*) is the predominant sentiment. Sagarnandin mentions the play *Satyabhama* as its example. The story of *Parijataharana* may have been depicted in the play which is now no longer available. *Hallisaka* is mentioned as a form of drama which is full of music and erotic sentiment, and has one male and eight or nine female characters. *Keliraivataka* is given as the example. The story of Balarama's amorous sports on the mountain



Raivataka and his killing of Dwivida who tried to spoil his fun is recorded in the *Bhagavata Purana*. The play must have been based on this episode. *Revatiparinaya*, another play mentioned by Sagarnandin, may have been based on the story of Balarama's marriage with Revati, daughter of Anarta king Revataka.

Narakavadha Natak and *Narakodharan Dima*, as is evident from the titles, were probably based on the story of Krishna killing Asur king Naraka and marrying the sixteen thousand girls abducted and kept in prison by him. As an example of one-act play *Vithi* Sagarnandin mentions the play *Radha*.

Unfortunately not a single Krishna play mentioned above has survived the ravages of time. Except for two Radha plays all others are generally based on episodes in the *Bhagavata Purana*. Hence we may say that these were written between the eighth to the eleventh centuries. Though not mentioned in the *Bhagavata*, the Radha myth was quite popular during the period. Kavi Bhattanarayan of the eighth century mentions her in his play *Venisamhara*. An ascetic like Adya Shankaracharya takes delight in describing Krishna as *Radhikaraman*, lover of Radha. We may place the Radha plays in the same period.

A very interesting allegorical play by Krishnamisra, written at the end of the eleventh century, deserves special mention in the context of the Krishna theatre. In this play, *Prabodhachandrodayam*, the abstract concepts, sentiments and values appear on the stage as characters. The philosopher turned dramatist describes the triumph of *Vishnu-bhakti* over other prevalent sects and cults. The play indicates the popularity of the Bhagavata cult at the time. The Krishna theatre flourished under these favourable conditions and reached its peak in the twelfth century.

Though the theatrical arts formed the part of rituals associated with the Krishna cult since its inception, historically it was Bhasa who heralded an era of Krishna theatre by writing two beautiful plays around 400 B.C. Later Patanjali speaks about the enactment of the Kamsa Vadha episode connected with Krishna's childhood. *Harivamsha* describes *Krishna Leela* play performed by the troupe of *Apsaras* and also about the *Chalikya Gondharva* whose presiding deity is Krishna. *Vishnu*, *Padma*, *Bhagavata* and other *Vaishnava Puranas* mention delightful *Ras* dance associated with the cult. Chitralekha refers to



the tradition of staging plays in the Vishnu-Krishna temples in her inscription of 10th century while another inscription records the gifts to cover the expenditure incurred on arranging Krishna plays. Works like *Natya Darpana*, *Natakalakshanaratnakosha* give a long list of Krishna plays. Likewise we have traced the history of the evolution of the Krishna theatre up to the end of eleventh century. In the twelfth century emerged a great poet who deeply influenced the tradition of Krishna theatre in India. He was Jayadeva and the *sangitak* he wrote is famous as a song of Govinda—*Gita Govinda*.





12. Radha and Krishna
Indira Gandhi National
Centre for the Arts



13. Hallisaka Dance



14. Ras Dance





वाग्देवताञ्जरितच्चित्रितचित्तसद्भा
पद्मावतीचरणचारणचक्रवर्ती
श्रीवासुदेवरतिकेलिकथासमेतम्
एतं करोति जयदेवकविः प्रबन्धम् ॥
—गीतगोविन्दम्

GITA GOVINDA



In the tradition of Krishna theatre in India Kavi Jayadeva's *Gita Govinda*, a musical opera of unique lyrical beauty and charm, occupies a premier position. The melodious dramatic poetry of the *Gita Govinda* was composed by the poet for the Vaishnavas adept in *Gandharva Kala*—theatrical arts—having deep emotional involvement in the love-mysticism inherent in the cult. Basically, being written for stage performance, it follows a format quite different from the usual style of classical poetic—*Kavya*—literature. The songs eminently suitable for choreography are connected with poetic narration to present a coherent theme. It is evident from the Oriya inscription of King Prataprudradeva mentioned earlier, that four Vaishnava singers used to form a chorus to recite the narrative portion connecting the songs which were expressed in dance by the dancing girls. It is also significant to note that it is the first extant poetic work in which the name of *raga* (musical composition in particular mode) and the *tala* (its rhythmic cycle) of each song are specifically mentioned for the guidance of the performers.

Except for stray references in the poem, we do not know much about the poet who was instrumental in popularizing the genre of dramatic poetry. Son of Bhojadeva and Radhadevi, Jayadeva was born in the early twelfth century in the village of Kindubilva situated between the rivers Prachi and Kusabhadra in Orissa. According to a legend, he married Padmavati who was a temple dancer adept in the theatrical arts. Jayadeva calls himself '*Padmavaticharancharanchakravarti*' which, according to Shankar Misra, means 'the uncrowned king among the *Natyacharyas* who guide the dancing feet of Padmavati'. The charming



temple girl used to dance to Jayadeva's poem, full of delightful rhythm born of musical alliterations, before Lord Jagannatha at Puri.

Though the cult of Krishna reached eastern India much earlier, it got real impetus in Orissa under the generous patronage of the imperial Gangas. The efflorescence of the cult in the region started with Anantavarma Chodagangadeva (1076-1147). He is credited with the construction of the main portion of the magnificent Jagannatha temple at Puri which houses unique wooden images of Krishna, Balarama and Subhadra. The beautiful dancing girls were dedicated to the temple for ritual dancing before Jagannatha-Krishna at different times of the day. The temple itself was embellished with beautiful dancing figures in stone in different alluring poses. The *Gita Govinda*, which was performed before the deity, became so famous that a fifteenth century inscription refers to Jagannatha as the *Gita Govinda Thakur*.

'*Vasudeva Ratikeli Katha*', amorous sports of Radha and Krishna, is the theme of Jayadeva's sweet poetic composition. Though early Prakrit poetry mentions the Radha-Krishna myth, the *Bhagavatapurana*, the Bible of the devotees of Krishna, refrains from mentioning her by name. In the first century, a collection of Prakrit *Gathas* by Hal Satavahana mentions Radha with Krishna:

Krishna, you blow off the dust particles from Radha's eyes
And jealousy ashens the faces of other Gopa girls.

On the excuse of removing the dust particles from her eyes Krishna kisses her lips and the pride of other Gopa girls is hurt by his act. Another beautiful couplet, though it does not directly mention the name of Radha, obliquely suggests an amorous relationship between the Gopis and Krishna:

When Yashoda said that Krishna is just a child as yet,
The young Gopis glanced at Krishna and laughed secretly.

Eighth century Prakrit poets like Vakpati and Swayambhu take delight in describing the charms of the lovely Gopa girl who ruled over the heart of Krishna. Swayambhu tells us how, delighted by the sight of the lovely breasts of Radha, Krishna started dancing joyously in her courtyard. It seems that basically Radha belongs to the popular folklore of the country. Vishnu Sharma in his work *Panchatantra* relates





5. Nayika Radha (Odissi) - Sonal Mansingh





6. Krishna Kissing Radha - Festival of Colours



an interesting folk tale of a deceitful young lad who visits a girl in the guise of Vishnu and seduces her by telling her that she was Radha in her previous birth.

Adya Shankaracharya seems to have been enchanted by the Radha legend which he might have heard during his stay at Puri. He calls Krishna a lover of Radha—*Radhikaraman*, and also one worshipped by her—*Radhikaradhitam*. These two aspects combine in her portrayal in later literature. But Jayadeva's Radha is more of a lover than a devotee and this is in line with her image in Prakrit folk literature. It is interesting to note that it is in eastern India that we find the first representation of Radha and Krishna in sculpture.

Apart from stray references to Radha and Krishna in literary works including an anthology, *Kavindravachanasamucchaya*, we actually know of plays based on the theme written during the eighth to the eleventh centuries. Unfortunately none of the Radha plays which were in vogue prior to the *Gita Govinda* are available to us. However they certainly indicate the popularity of the theme. Though we are not in a position to assess the impact of earlier Radha plays on the *Gita Govinda*, the possibility of their influence cannot altogether be denied.

Though *Harivamsha* and *Bhagavata* frankly describe the loves of Krishna and the Gopa girls, they refrain from mentioning Radha by name. Among the Vaishnava *Puranas* it is mainly the *Brahmavaivarta* which not only gives prominence to the Radha legend but elaborates it. According to some scholars including S. Lakshminarasimha Sastri this *Purana* is the main source of Jayadeva's work and there are indeed points of similarity leading to such a conclusion. The chapter on *Krishna Leela* in *Devi Bhagavata* is also mentioned in the context. In *Brahmavaivarta* Radha is deified but Jayadeva's *nayika* is a simple cowherd girl stricken by the love of a handsome Gopa boy in her settlement. In spirit, Jayadeva is close to the Radha of Prakrit *Gathas* and probably to her portrayal in the earlier musical plays on the theme.

The erotic mysticism associated with the cult of Krishna reflected in the earlier works, finds its most earthy, passionate and lyrical expression in the songs of Jayadeva. He is extremely sensitive to word intonations. His lines vibrate with rhythm and music that match the dancing feet. He is not only a prince among the poets, *Kaviraya*, but also an expert in the theatrical arts—*Nata Sarvabhauma*. He choreographs



his songs to the best advantage of the performer, providing a wide range of dramatic possibilities inherent in the text for stage representation. The complete text can be translated into the dance idiom of any style. The emotive content of the poetry, that is *shringara* (erotic sentiment) in its *sambhoga* (union) and *vipralambha* (separation) aspects, gives ample scope for *abhinaya* (acting) in all its subtle shades. The whole composition is eminently suitable for stage adaptation and this is probably why earlier plays on the theme have gone into oblivion.

The poem is divided into twelve cantos. In all there are twenty-four songs which are connected with narrative *shlokas*. The narrative portion maintains the link of the story, describes the locale in which the particular scene is taking place, informs the audience about the progress of the plot. A chorus of singers takes up the recitation of the narrative portion while songs are enacted on the stage by dancers.

The dance-drama opens with *Nandi*, a benedictory song, which is followed by a couple of verses giving, as is customary, the name of the playwright and the theme of the play. Then comes the majestic *Dashavatar Ashtapadi* describing the ten incarnations of Krishna from Matsya to Kalki. It is significant to note that Jayadeva ascribes these to Krishna instead of Vishnu by saying, *Dashakrutikrute Krishnaya Tubhyam Namah*, though the next song gives the indication of their being one and the same. As implied in the *Chalikya* style, in the beginning a beautiful dancer enters the stage with flowers in her hands and after scattering them delineates the meaning of the songs through dance and acting. Her exit ends the preliminaries, that is *Purvaranga*.

In the first scene, Radha, suffering the pangs of separation, is seen in the company of a *sakhi* or friend who teases her by describing the amorous sports Krishna is engaged in with young and beautiful Gopa girls in the delightful season of spring, fragrant with the cool Malaya breeze. If the words of the *sakhi* asking Radha to see for herself the *Ras* which is being danced just nearby is any indication, at the one end of the stage the Krishna-Gopi performance is actually taking place watched by Radha and her *sakhi* from the other end.

Radha entreats the *sakhi* to arrange her meeting with Krishna by revealing her intense infatuation for the sportful lover. She remembers sweet moments spent in his delightful company:



At that first meeting he entreated bashful me with soft, sweet smile and endearing words on the path of love. The skilful lover I know not when loosened my garments.

When I was lying on the tender grass with his head on my breast, he crushed me in his embrace and drank deep the nectar of my lips.

The flowers in my hair lay scattered, he adorned my bosom with nail marks, my anklet and girdle bells tinkled, seizing my locks he kissed me.

Overcome by sweet fatigue he closed his beautiful lotus eyes and lay close to me.

O *Sakhi*, I remember all those moments fragrant with love. Please bring him to me.

In the second scene Krishna is seen sitting in a bower on the bank of the Yamuna repenting over his folly in neglecting Radha. He soliloquizes his sentiments, rebuking himself. The *sakhi* approaches him and relates the condition of love-stricken Radha. Krishna requests her to bring his beloved to him.

The third scene opens with the *sakhi* taking his message to Radha who is waiting for Krishna. According to the *Natyashastra* Radha is the *Khandita Nayika*, the girl insulted by the deceit of her lover, whose pride is hurt. The *sakhi* tries to persuade her to meet her lover waiting eagerly in a bower and not to delay the meeting. Finding her too weak and depressed to respond, she again goes to Krishna.

In the fourth scene the *sakhi* describes the sad plight of Radha who is awaiting Krishna's arrival. She is described as a *Vasakasajjika Nayika*, a girl who has decorated herself and the trysting place with care and now awaits the arrival of her lover. The *sakhi* says:

Even the rustle of leaves caused by the gentle breeze makes her think you have come. She starts decorating herself with beautiful ornaments and hastens to smoothen the bed of flowers. Thinking the approaching darkness of night to be Krishna himself she starts kissing it. Immersed in your thought



she sometimes cries, sometimes gets excited, sometimes gives out a bashful cry as if deeply kissed by you, and sometimes sits unstirring as if no life is left in her.

In the beginning of the fifth scene we see Radha as a *Vipralabdha* and a *Virahotkanthita Nayika*. In an emotional soliloquy Radha expresses her deep anguish as Krishna fails to appear at the appointed time. She starts feeling that her youth and beauty are of no use. When she sees her *sakhi* entering without Krishna she starts imagining that he must have been enjoying the company of some other beautiful Gopa girl. She imagines all sorts of amorous sports they might have been indulging in. Night passes like that. With the first morning rays Krishna arrives and tries to appease her with sweet words but the angry Radha rejects his advances:

Go Madhava to her who gave you pleasure last night. Your red eyes, lips stained with collyrium, body full of nail marks, are speaking for themselves. How can you deceive the girl who loves you most, oh Keshava? Your heart must be as black as your exterior. Enough of your deceit!

Radha is portrayed here as the *Kalahantarita Nayika*, a girl who quarrels with her lover and then repents over her behaviour. The *sakhi* takes Radha aside and advises her to forget her anger, shed her pride, and unite with her lover. Krishna also tries to appease her with sweet words and Radha cannot resist his charm.

In the sixth scene the *sakhi* asks Radha to follow Krishna to the bower in which he is expecting her. Radha, the *Abhisarika Nayika*, goes to him with her heart full of desire and love. Krishna eagerly receives her and then both of them enjoy the pleasures of love without any inhibition. The whole description of love in union—*sambhoga shringara*—is extremely sensuous and erotic. After the entry of Radha and Krishna in the bower this portion must have been rendered by the chorus of Vaishnava singers. After making love, Radha, delighted by the experience, commands Krishna to dress her. She is now *Swadhina-bhartrika Nayika*, a girl who has full command over her lover. In a delightful song Radha says:

O Krishna, with fragrant musk paint a beautiful design of flowers and leaves on my breasts, round like the *Mangala*



Kalasha (auspicious pitchers) with your hand softer and cooler than sandal paste.

My lovely eyes black like swarming bees act like Cupid's bow that shoots the arrows of love. Put back the collyrium that came off when you kissed them with your tender lips.

And at the end of my deer-like eyes are tender ear-lobes. Fasten pendants there which look like Cupid's net.

Put back in place those curly locks of hair which like swarming bees are covering my lotus-like face.

On my moon-like forehead, bedecked with pearly drops of sweat, put the *tilak* of musk which will look like a black spot on the face of the lovely moon.

Arrange these beautiful flowers in my hair which came off during our love play like peacock's feathers. In my hair they will look like Cupid's colourful flag.

Wrap around my beautiful hips that silken garment, put my ornaments and jewelled girdle with tinkling bells in place. O Krishna, do as I command . . .

With the union of the human soul with the divine one the play comes to an end. Jayadeva permeates *shringara* with *bhakti*, which lends dignity to his otherwise astoundingly sensuous composition. The metaphysics of erotic symbolism in the Krishna cult is explained in detail in the *Bhagavata Purana*. In all the major religions of the world sexual imagery is freely used to describe the blissful union with God. Jayadeva also desires to unfold the inner secrets of the wonderful amorous sports of Krishna: '*Adbhuta Keshava Keli Rahasyam*', which he says is auspicious or *shubha*.

As dramatic poetry, the *Gita Govinda* achieved instant success. A thirteenth century inscription found in Gujarat opens with a verse from the *Gita Govinda*: '*Vedanuddharate Jaganti Vahate . . .*' In the same inscription we are told about a grant made to the Krishna temple to cover the expenditure incurred in staging a *Prekshanaka*, probably the *Gita Govinda* itself. Its fame spread to other parts of the country



and in many temples its recitation became a regular feature. The dance-drama profoundly influenced folk and classical theatrical traditions of the country, particularly in the eastern region.

After Jayadeva, two great poets of the region, Vidyapati and Chandidas, wrote in vernacular many charming lyrics on the Radha-Krishna theme. They closely followed the erotic mysticism of the Krishna cult which is reflected in their sweet songs written in a dramatic vein. Chandidas wrote in Bengali *Shrikrishna Kirtan*, a poetic composition narrating the exploits of Krishna in a series of delightful songs. Radha, Krishna and Barai are the main characters of the *Kirtan*. Explaining the semi-dramatic style of its narration, Hemendra Nath Das Gupta writes: 'In *Krishna Kirtan* some relationship was fancifully attributed between the two parties that might consist of two, three or four persons, as between Krishna and Radha, or with Barai i.e. lady who brought about the union between Shri Radha and Krishna as in mythology Narada often effected union between devotee and his god. In *Krishna Kirtan* interrogations, replies, retorts were like Jhumar of the present time.' This reminds us of the passage in *Mahabhashya* in which *Granthikas* narrating the *Kamsa Vadha* story divide themselves into two groups—*Krishna bhaktas* and *Kamsa bhaktas*. This is done to enliven the narration by introducing some dramatic element in it. Though the *Krishna Kirtan* of Chandidas could not achieve full dramatic status, it certainly contributed towards the emergence of *Krishna Jatra*, a premier folk theatre form of Bengal.

With the advent of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu (1485-1533) the Krishna theatre in the region got an added impetus. Dance, drama, music formed an important part of the Vaishnavism he preached. According to his biographers, he himself was deeply influenced by the *Gita Govinda*. The *Chaitanya Bhagavata* of Shri Brindavan Das elaborately describes a dramatic performance in which the Mahaprabhu himself enacted the role of Rukmini, chief queen of Krishna. He danced expertly delineating the meaning of the songs sung by the devotees through his charming *abhinaya*. The performance was given around 1507 by Chaitanya and his associates at the house of one Chandra Shekhar prior to his taking *sanyasa*. The play had characters like Barai, Narada, Kotwal, who appeared on the stage in proper make-up. The show continued through the night before a delighted audience.



Another Bengali biography, *Chaitanya Charitamrita*, written by Kaviraj Krishnadas, not only speaks about the keen interest Chaitanya took in theatrical activities associated with the cult, but also about his actual enactment or theatrical imitation of the *Ras Leela* at Puri while dancing and singing in a trance:

*Kabhu premaveshe karen gan kirtan
kabhu bhavaveshe rasleelanukaran.*

The Krishna cult and even the Krishna theatre in the region appeared on the scene much earlier than Chaitanya. However they certainly owe their efflorescence to him, hence some scholars even attribute the origin of the folk based *Krishna Jatra* to the Mahaprabhu. Chaitanya may have improved upon the *Krishna Kirtan* tradition theatrically as is evident from the stage performance given by him at Chandra Shekhar's house. Operatic in form, the *Krishna Jatra* relates the Krishna story on the stage through a string of songs with little scope for improvised dialogues by the actors. Its format is very close to the theatrical rendering of the *Gita Govinda*, and like the latter, the Radha-Krishna theme is most prominent in it. In a way the *Krishna Jatra* is a folk version of the *Gita Govinda*. Even if we concede that Jayadeva drew inspiration from contemporary folk theatre while composing the *Gita Govinda*, after its emergence the *Jatra* came under its sway. And indeed Krishna devotees like Chandidas and Chaitanya helped the process as they were deeply influenced by Jayadeva's work.

It is interesting to note that through Chaitanya missionaries the Radha-Krishna cult reached the tribal region of Jharkhanda also and permeated their culture. Songs composed by the tribal poets on the theme were expressed in dance on festive occasions. About the Bhumij tribe of Barabhum Paragana Surajit Sinha in his essay in the book *Krishna: Myths, Rites and Attitudes* writes:

The Bhumij master of the concubine (who are quite often also dancing girls or nauchni) usually learns to become an expert dancer, or rasik, in typical nauchni dances. Besides learning to dance with appropriate gestures, the nauchni also learns the typical nauchni saila jhumar songs, whose themes are always the celestial love of Radha and Krishna—quite often the lamentations and intensive love cravings of Radha. While dancing the rasik plays the role of Krishna while the girl that



of Radha. Both the audience and the performers become completely enraptured as the performance goes on throughout the night.

This is a very enchanting tribal version of the Krishna theatre as envisaged by Jayadeva. How much the tribal *Vasakasajjika Nayika* resembles Jayadeva's sophisticated heroine:

Look, the night is over—
 Why hasn't my beloved come?
 I have decorated my garden
 Waiting to welcome Shyam
 I have spread my bed with flowers morning to evening . . .

Since Jayadeva's time, Puri became one of the premier centres of the Krishna theatre and the tradition of classical dance-drama flourished there under the patronage of local rulers. King Anantvarma Chodagangadeva not only started the construction of the Jagannatha temple but consecrated *Maharis* (dancing girls) in the service of the Lord. The *Maharis* must have found the *Gita Govinda* an ideal composition, full of *shringara* and *bhakti*, for dancing out before the colourful images of Krishna, Balarama and Subhadra.

Soon many similar compositions on the Krishna theme appeared on the scene, including the *Abhinava Gita Govindam* of Gajapati ruler King Purosottama Deva. However Ramananda Raya's musical opera, *Jagannatha Ballava Natakam*, written in the early sixteenth century, became quite popular. Written on the lines of the *Gita Govinda*, Ramananda Raya describes the love of Radha and Krishna in his play. Ramananda was a close associate of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu and a master of the theatrical arts. With the help of the *Maharis* of the Jagannatha temple, he staged the *Gita Govinda* as well. He taught the dancing girls to express the *satwika* and *sanchari bhavas* inherent in the song through their eyes. His own play was staged several times at the Jagannatha temple by the *Maharis* trained by him for the purpose.

Shri Dharendra Nath Patnaik gives an elaborate list of Krishna plays written in the imitation of Jayadeva's work up to the end of the eighteenth century. Jayadeva Acharya's *Piyusha Lahari Natika*, Satanjiva Misra's *Mudita Madhavam*, Yatindra Raghunatha Puri's *Mukunda Vilasam*, Kavi Bhushan Govinda's *Samrudha Madhaba Natakam* are



prominent among them. Though they certainly contributed to the continuity of the Krishna theatre in the region, nobody could reach the literary and theatrical excellence and also the popular appeal of Jayadeva's work. Even today the *Gita Govinda* is immensely popular and is presented in the classical dance style of Orissa to the receptive audience all over the world.



॥ इह ॥ अधरधरनहरिकेयरतः आठदीव्यटजोतिः ॥ हरिनवायकीभांयुरीः इदधनुषछविहोतः ॥



16. Flute-playing Krishna with Gopis around



गुंडकीरीगोलागीयते मालयतिगुणग्रामं चामंत्रमादयिनेहनेवह
 निचपरितोषं रोषं विमृचति दूरतः युवनिषु वलतु कृषिहमेविहा
 रिणिमाविना पुनरदिमनो वामं कामं करोति करोमि किं ॥ १५ ॥ निवृत्त
 निकुंजगृहं भयं निशि रहसि निलीय संतं च कित विलोकिन सक
 ल दिशरतिरत्र सिवमेन हसंतं सखि हे के शिमथन मुदारे रमय मया
 सह मद नमोऽयं जावतया सविकारं कुरु वपदमिदम् ॥



17. 'Sakhi, bring Krishna to me!' Lovelorn Radha's request to friend



नमति नवानवलाकवलायवनेषु किमत्र विचित्रं ॥ अथ यतिपू
 तनिकैतववधुवधनिर्दयशालचरित्रं ॥ याहिमाधवः ॥ ७ ॥
 श्रीजमदेवभक्तितरतिवंचितखंडितसुवतिविलापः ॥ मृगयुव
 सुधामधुरविबुधावदतापिसुखंदुरवापः ॥ याहिमाधवः ॥ ८ ॥



18. 'Go! Krishna, leave me alone!' Radha—Khandita Nayika





19. Sakhi mediates for lovers' reconciliation

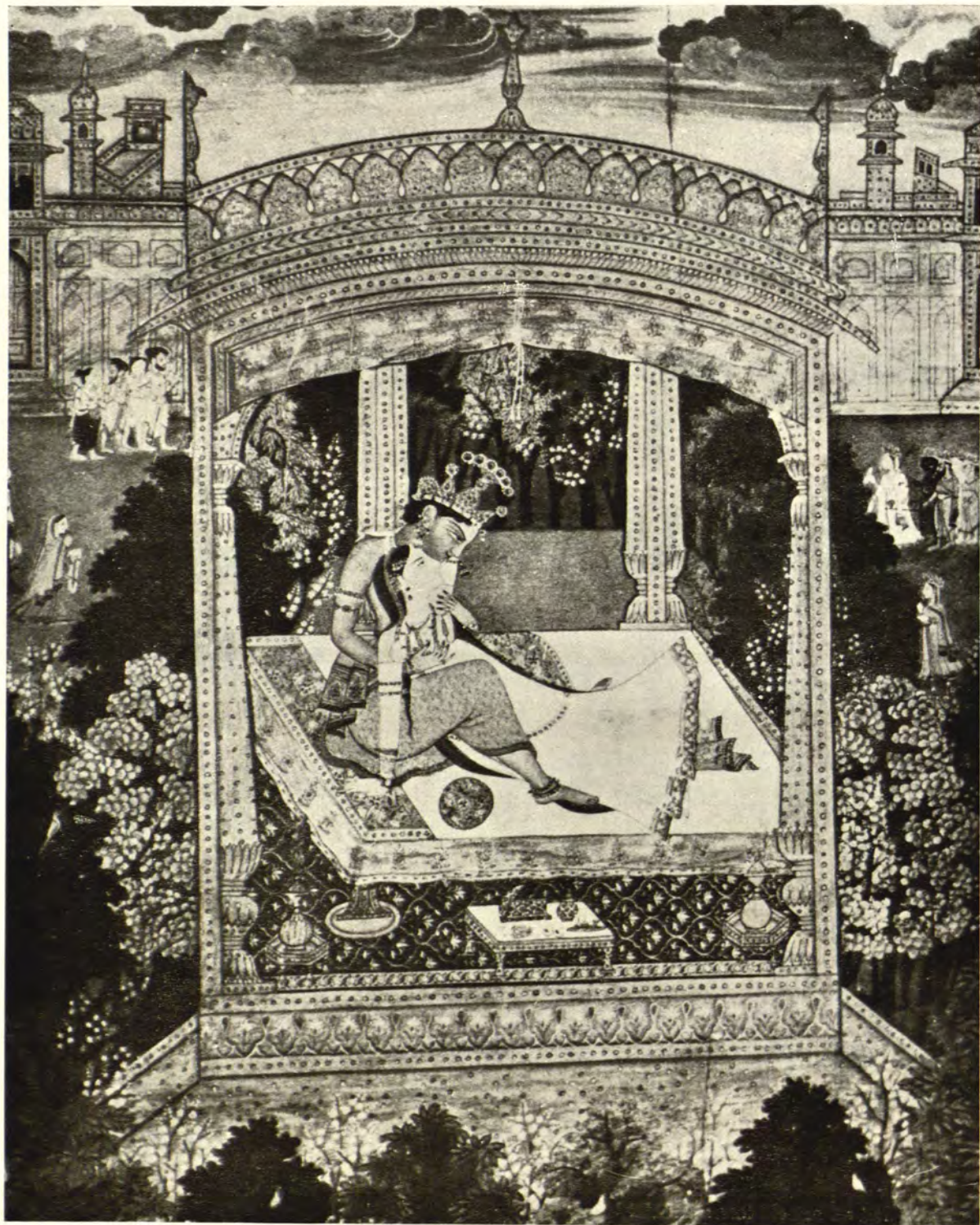
20. Sakhi leads Radha to Krishna



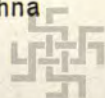


21. Bashful Radha with Krishna in bowe





22. Union of Radha and Krishna



अलसनिमीलितलोचनयाधुलकावलिललि
 एकपोलाश्रमजलसिक्तकलेवरयावरमदन।
 मदादतिलोलाहे

हतपरिरंजनरुचि
 नयापरिरंजनरुचि
 धरपाने।

विश्रयशयननिवेशितयाविश्र
 मुरसिममैवशायाने॥४



23. Lovers rejoice





24. Krishna setting Radha's hair dishevelled in love-play



रासोत्सवः सम्प्रवृत्तो गोपीमण्डलमण्डितः
योगेश्वरेण कुण्ठेन तासां मध्ये द्वयोर्द्वयोः
तत्रातिशुभे ताभिर्भगवान् देवक्यमुतः
मध्ये मणानां हेमानां महामरकतो यथा

— श्रीभागवत

RAS LEELA



The *Ras* is a dance performed by sportful Krishna with young and beautiful Gopa girls on the bank of river Yamuna on one fragrant autumnal full-moon night. In the Krishna cult, this mystic dance has a special ritualistic significance. *Leela* means the various deeds of the divine cowherd which includes *Ras*. Through the ages the tradition of enacting *Ras* and other *Leelas* of the Lord has remained alive in Vrajbhumi.

It is in Bhasa's play *Balacharita*, written four centuries before the birth of Christ, we find the first significant mention of this dance of the cowherd community and the mode of its theatrical enactment. Bhasa describes how, along with other young boys, Krishna and Balarama danced joyously with colourfully attired Gopa girls fair as the golden champak flowers. While dancing they all sang songs to the accompaniment of various musical instruments and the boys shouted in joy like roaring bulls. In the play this dance is described as *Hallisaka*. The enactment of this dance occurs in Act Three:

Sankarshana : Damak! Have all Gopa boys come?

Damak : Yes, my Lord, all have come well prepared.

Damodar : Ghoshasundari, Vanamale, Chandralekhe, Mrigakshi, O ye girls, let us perform the *Hallisaka* dance as it is danced in this cowherd settlements of ours!

All : As you desire, O Lord.

Sankarshana : Damak! Meghanad! Start playing on the drums.



Both : Yes, my Lord.
 Old Gopa : (seeing their dance) Ah! Well sung! Well danced!
 I would have also participated but my age has
 tired me.

This shows that the *Hallisaka* of the cowherds was a traditional dance developed in their settlements in a particular style. This is the first theatrical enactment of the *Ras* dance that we know of. In *Gatha Sapta-shati* of Hal Satavahana the dance of Krishna and the Gopis is described and we cannot rule out the possibility of its enactment also. A most interesting and graphic description of the enactment of the *Ras* dance occurs in the famous second century Tamil epic *Silappadikaram*, a story of an anklet, under the name *Acciyar Kuravai*, which means the dance of cowherd girls. An elderly milkmaid who arranges the dance to ward off evil says that it is one of the *Leelas* performed by Mayavan and his elder brother Balarama in the cowherd settlements of Gokula.

The woman selects seven beautiful girls to participate in the dance. Three of them are chosen to act as Mayavan, Balarama and the beautiful Pinnai with long lance-like eyes. Mayavan is Krishna and Pinnai a Tamil counterpart of Radha whom Krishna loves most. Singing beautiful lyrics they dance in a circle and sing in praise of Mayavan and Pinnai:

How can we describe the form of Mayavan who hid the clothes of slender-waisted Pinnai whose figure is bent to the point of breaking?

How can we describe the face of the handsome lady who is visibly touched by the regretful look of him who hid her clothes?

How can we describe the perfection of her who stole the heart of Mayavan who deceives all in the water-sports of Yamuna?

How can we describe the form of him who stole away the charm and bangles of her who has captivated him?

How can we describe the face of the lady who hid it in her hands when she lost her clothes and bangles?



How can we describe the beauty of him who is pained by the distress of her who hides her face in her hands?

Bhasa belongs to north India, Hal hails from Maharashtra while the author of *Silappadikaram* is from the distant south. It seems that with the migration of the Abhir community the *Ras* theatre gradually reached the southern regions of the country. *Balacharita* is a full-fledged Krishna play but some of the *Gathas* and also the passages of the Tamil epic too refer to various divine sports of Lord Krishna. The possibility of their enactment cannot be ruled out. In fact *Silappadikaram* mentions dances based on the Krishna theme:

The Alliyam is a dance performed by the dark hued Vishnu-Krishna after disposing of the treacherous devices of Kamsa.

The Mallu is a dance performed by the same deity after the destruction of Asura Bana.

The Kutam (pot-dance) is exhibited by Vishnu of the world-measuring stride after walking through the streets of Banasura's extensive city.

This goes to show that long before the advent of the Vaishnava *Puranas*, the tradition of Krishna theatre in its *Ras* and *Leela* aspects was already existent. In fact, what we see in the later *Puranas* is a rather colourful and elaborate reflection of earlier theatrical tradition. It is significant to note that what we come across in the *Balacharita* or *Silappadikaram* is not just a poetic description of Krishna's deeds but the actual enactment of these deeds including *Ras* dance by the actors.

The *Puranas* also played an important role in the evolution of *Ras Leela* theatre in general. Among the *Puranas* describing the *Ras* episode, *Vishnu*, *Harivamsha*, *Bhagavata* and *Brahmavaivarta* are prominent. As we have seen earlier, *Harivamsha* not only describes the *Ras* episode but also gives a detailed account of a *Ras Leela* performance by an all-woman dramatic troupe headed by Panchachuda. Many *Ras* plays are nothing but basically a simple dramatization of *Ras Panchadhyayi*, the five chapters describing the *Ras* episode in the *Bhagavata Purana*. The Vraja tradition of *Ras Leela* has borrowed many features from the descriptions in the *Brahmavaivarta Purana*. According to Bhasa, Krishna, Balarama and other Gopas participated in the dance. *Silappa-*



dikaram eliminated the Gopas and the *Puranas* left Krishna alone in the arena with other Gopis. This is probably done by the authors of the *Puranas* to show that the Gopis love Krishna and Krishna alone. Under their influence the Krishna theatre also accepted this premise.

The influence of this Puranic concept on the dramatic works is quite evident. *Natya Darpana* defines *Hallisaka* as a group dance of women in a circle, with only one male *nayaka* like Krishna among the dancing Gopis—‘*Gopastrinamiva Murarih*’. Sagarnandi in his *Natakalakshana-ratnakosha* describes *Hallisaka* as ‘*Ekapurusha Pradhan*’, that is, dominated by one man who dances with seven to nine women. *Sahitya Darpana* gives a similar definition. Nilakantha, commentator of *Harivamsha*, after stating that *Ras* and *Hallisaka* is one and the same, says that it is a dance in which one man and many women participate—‘*Ekasya purusho bahubhih sribhih kridanam*’.

H.H. Wilson has analysed the *Ras* compositions given by the different *Puranas*. He says: ‘In *Vishnu Purana* Krishna in order to form a circle takes each damsel by hand and leads her to the place, then he quits her; but the effect of the contact is such that it deprives her of her power of perception and she contentedly takes the hand of the female neighbour thinking it to be Krishna’s. *Bhagavata* is bolder and asserts that Krishna multiplied himself and actually stood between each of the damsels. *Harivamsha* imitates the same. In the *Brahmavai-varta* he is to be contemplated in the centre of the *Ras Mandala* in association with his favourite Radha, but the *Mandala* described in that work is not a ring of dancers but a circle of definite place in Vrindavan.’

In *Ras* paintings mostly Krishna and Radha are shown in the centre of a circle composed of multiples of Krishna and the Gopis. Except for a few theatrical forms which present above-mentioned *Ras* scheme, one Krishna is shown dancing with several Gopis. He dances separately with all the Gopis, implying that he multiplies himself to dance with all of them simultaneously. This is more convenient to present theatrically.

To understand the influence of the *Bhagavata Purana* on the Krishna theatre a description of the five *Ras* chapters of the book is given here in greater detail.



With the desire to sport with the Gopis, on a full-moon night of *Sharada Ritu*, Krishna started playing sweetly on his flute. Enchanted by the melodious music the Gopis came running to him. On their arrival, the mischievous Krishna innocently advised them not to move in the dense Vraja forests at night and to return immediately. With eyes filled with tears the Gopis prayed to him to accept their love and devotion. Moved by their words Krishna started dancing and sporting with them amorously. They all started singing delightful songs. On receiving Krishna's favours they started feeling immensely proud. Sensing it Krishna disappeared from the scene.

The repentant Gopis, suffering the pangs of separation, started to search for him. Deeply moved by his memories they started imitating and enacting various *Leelas* performed by him. One Gopi became Krishna and another Balarama. Some of them assumed the roles of cowherd boys. Then they enacted *Leelas* like *Putana Vadha*, *Shakata*, *Trinavarta* and *Baka Vadha*, the lifting of the Govardhana and *Kalia Mardana*. While moving in the forest they came across the foot-prints of Krishna along with those of a Gopa girl. After some time they found the girl herself forsaken by the Lord as she tried to climb over his shoulder in her pride. Now all their pride gone they humbly prayed to Krishna to reappear and save them from their suffering. Taking pity on them the Lord appeared before them and consoled them with sweet words.

In the joy of reunion, they started dancing with him the *Maharas* on the soft sands of the Yamuna. By his divine power Krishna multiplied himself and appeased every Gopi of the *Ras* circle. The fair Gopa girls with the dark Krishna started looking like luminous lightning against the background of black cloud. While dancing, they started singing songs. After the dance was over they all entered the Yamuna waters and indulged in water-sports of different kinds. Lord Krishna sported with the Gopis, fulfilling their desire to be with him.

Based on the *Bhagavata Purana* a *Maharas Leela* is enacted by the *Rasdharis* of the Vraja region. They introduce several actors guised as Krishna to appear between each pair of Gopis standing in a circular formation. Mahapurusha Shankardeva of Assam has also written a play, *Keli Gopal Nat*, dramatizing the *Ras* description of the *Bhagavata Purana*. Some prominent Vaishnava monasteries of Assam perform *Ras* dances taking inspiration from the same work. The *Ras* theatre



of Manipur is also based on the *Bhagavata*. After the *Bhagavata Purana* appeared on the scene playwrights turned to it mainly for picking up themes for their Krishna plays.

As Puranic and other evidences indicate, the Vraja region is not only the oldest centre of the Krishna cult but also the place of origin of the Krishna theatre. In fact, theatrical activities being inherent in the Krishna cult, one presupposes their existence. However, due to uncertain political conditions caused by the invasion of north India by the Muslims, the Krishna cult and along with it its theatrical activities suffered a serious setback. In the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, efforts were made to revive both, and the present tradition of *Ras Leela* theatre flourishing in the Vraja region owes its origin to these efforts of Vaishnava Bhagavatas.

The cultural life of the Vraja region was deeply influenced by the Gaudiya Goswamis belonging to Chaitanya cult. Rupa, Sanatana and Gopal Bhatta who settled in Vrindavana in early 16th century were prominent among them. Rupa Goswami wrote three Sanskrit plays named *Dankelikaumudi*, *Vidagdha Madhav* and *Lalit Madhav*. The internal evidence of the plays indicates that these were performed in the Vraja region. *Lalit Madhav* was performed at the east of Madhavi-Madhav temple which is situated on the banks of Radhakunda near Govardhana. *Vidagdha Madhav* was performed at Keshi Tirtha in Vrindavana. It is also significant to note that Gopal Bhatta who built a famous temple of Radha-Ramana at Vrindavana did not fail to construct a circular *Ras Mandal* just in front of it. However the plays of Rupa Goswami mostly follow the classical Sanskrit theatrical style while *Ras Leela* theatre of Vraja is basically folk in character.

There is a lot of controversy as to whom should go the credit of reviving the Krishna theatre in the region. Many names are mentioned in the context, including those of Swami Haridas who was a great musician and the Guru of Tansen, Hita Harivamsha the founder of the Radhavallabha cult and Narayan Bhatta who is supposed to be an incarnation of Narada. It is generally believed that it was Swami Haridas who set the *Krishna Leela* songs to music. Inspired by it, Hita Harivamsha constructed the first *Ras Mandal*, a circular stage, and organized the musical renderings of *Ras* songs with dancing. Narayan Bhatta with the help of a court dancer named Vallabha choreographed the performance and gave it a dramatic form by adding *Leela* plays.



Abul Fazl in his work *Ain-i-Akbari* refers to these early pioneers of *Ras* theatre as *Kirtaniyas*. He states: 'The Kirtaniyas are the Brahmans whose instruments are such as were in use among the ancients. They dress up smooth faced boys as women and make them perform, singing the praise of Krishna and reciting his acts' If the observation of Abul Fazl is any indication of the state of *Ras* theatre at the end of the sixteenth century, we may assume that it was mainly confined to the presentation of *Ras* dances by a group of boys made up as Gopa girls. But tradition asserts that not only *Ras* but the enactment of the *Leelas* was also introduced on the *Ras* stage of Vraja in the middle of the sixteenth century. There is overwhelming evidence in its support.

From the very beginning we find the deep influence of *Brahmavaivarta Purana* on the *Ras Leela* theatre of the Vraja region. The concept of a circular stage with a throne in it for Krishna and Radha comes from the *Brahmavaivarta*. It says that the open-air *Ras* stage was situated on the bank of a beautiful lake—*Kridasarovara*—in the Vrindavana forests. Being circular in shape it was called *Ras Mandalam*: '*Vartulakaram Tatraiva Ras Mandalam*'. The circular dance floor was spacious '*Suvistarna*', of equal level all over '*Susama*', and soft '*Susnigdham*'. It was decorated with green mango leaves, garlands of jasmine, coconuts and banana plants. *Mangala Ghatas*, auspicious pitchers full of water, were kept at appropriate places. There was also a jewel studded throne for Radha and Krishna, the presiding deities of *Ras*.

It is significant to note that in no other earlier Vaishnava *Purana* the description of such a dance floor occurs. *Ras*, according to *Harivamsha*, was held at a convenient open space in the Vrindavana forests. *Bhagavata* states that it was performed on the white sands of the Yamuna. The term *Ras Mandal* here refers to a circular dance formation and not to the circular dance floor. The well-constructed round dance floor is a valuable contribution to the *Ras* theatre. At many places in Vrindavana we can see such circular *Ras Mandals* today, where *Ras* plays are still performed.

According to local tradition it was Hita Harivamsha Goswami who constructed the earliest extant *Ras Mandal* near Govind Ghat in the year 1543. It underwent many subsequent changes and renovations, while managing to retain some of its original features. This *Ras Mandal* with a high plinth has a spacious dance floor with a throne on it. It is



supplied with a concrete roof supported by strong pillars. The whole structure is attached to a small Radha temple. It was again the *Brahmavaivarta Purana* which emphasized the importance of Radha as *Raseshvari*, the presiding deity of *Ras*.

However, it is interesting to note that at least half a century earlier, a *Ras* theatre was constructed much according to the specifications of the *Brahmavaivarta Purana* by Raja Mansingh Tomar of Gwalior who is compared with Krishna in an inscription. The Tomar king was a great patron of art and music. He constructed a unique amphitheatre at Barai which is locally known as *Racch*. Writing about it in his *Gazetteer of the Gwalior State*, Captain Luard observes: 'There is an old theatre known as *Ras Lilagriha* with traces of ruined rooms built around a circular open ground lined at intervals with lamp-posts surmounted with small cupolas resembling in style the cupolas of Man Mandir in Gwalior Fort.' The name by which it is known makes it quite obvious that the theatre was used for the *Ras* performances.

It is significant to note that a cowherd Gujjar beauty, Mriganayana, of the village Rai Pithor which is just a couple of miles from Barai, was the beloved of the king. Krishna being the deity of the cowherd community, *Ras* was their most favourite dance. Mriganayana, herself adept in the arts of dance and music, might have initiated Raja Man into the mysteries of *Ras* which she must have learnt in her cowherd village.

The amphitheatre, now in ruins, is situated on the banks of the now dry lake, *Kridasarovara*. It is provided with a spacious open-air round dance floor with a stone pillar in its centre. On its periphery stand eight leaning towers and four platforms with cupolas. After an open space there is a circular bastioned fortification with three entrances. The inner side of the fortification is lined with rooms which were used by the performers and the royal retinue.

It seems that away from the areas under effective control of Muslim invaders lingered vestiges of the ancient *Ras* tradition. Historian Hariharnivas Dwivedi points out that Swami Haridas, who is connected with the revival of the *Ras Leela* tradition in Vrindavana, hailed from Antri which is not very far from the Barai amphitheatre. He might have brought with him the impressions of *Ras* performances in the Gwalior region to Vrindavana.



The process of the revival of the *Ras Leela* theatre in Vraja must have initially started with the singing of *Ras* and *Leela* songs in the temples. Later, as observed in the *Ain-i-Akbari*, young boys made up as Gopis might have been introduced in the *Katha-Kirtan* to take up dancing and singing of *Ras* songs. Subsequently the dramatization of Krishna myths might have been added to it. That is why the *Ras Leela* performance opens with the *Ras* dance which is followed by *Leelanu-karan* which is a dramatized version of *Krishna Leela*. The *Kirtaniya* or *Swamiji* who used to relate the Krishna story, after the introduction of dramatic element in it, receded to the background and became the *Sutradhara* and the head of the chorus. It is he who presented the Krishna story on the stage with the help of actors.

There is a mass of literature on the Krishna theme in Vraja-boli. The fifteenth and sixteenth century poets of the region composed several verses depicting various *Leelas* of the divine cowherd including his most famous *Ras Leela*. The most prominent among them is Surdas who was born in the last quarter of the fifteenth century. The sweet songs – *padas* – of Surdas are full of *madhurya* and *vatsalya bhava*. According to tradition he was initiated into the mysteries of *Krishna Leela* by Srimad Vallabhacharya. His *padas* are eminently suited for the stage because of their dramatic quality. Many of them are on the Radha-Krishna theme, and are in semi-dialogue form, providing actors ample scope for their stage rendering:

Buzata shyam kauna tuma gori
Kaha rahati, kaki hai beti, dekhi nahi kahu Braja khorī
Kahe ko hama Braja tana avati, khlat rahahi apani pauri
Sunata rahat sravanani Nanda-dhota, karat phirat makhan
chori
Tumhari kaha chori hama lehe, khelan chalo sanga mili jori
Surdas Prabhu rasik shiromani, batani bhurai Radhika bhorī!

Once Krishna came out of his house to play in the lanes of Vraja, he suddenly saw the large-eyed Radha. Struck by her beauty he asked her:

Krishna : Who are you, O fair one?
 Where do ye live? Whose daughter are you?
 How is it that I never saw you before in the Vraja lanes?



Radha : Why should I come to the Vraja lanes? I play at my own home!

But it certainly reached my ears that the naughty son of Nanda

Moves about stealing butter and curd.

Krishna : But I stole nothing from you, O fair one
Come let us play together!

Says Surdas with words sweet
Krishna seduced an innocent girl.

Many other poets wrote in the vein of Surdas enriching the *Vraja-boli* literature. The *Rasdharis* usually select *padas* from this vast literature and prepare a 'text' for theatrical rendering. They arrange these *padas* into a story sequence and compose plays depicting different *Leelas*.

Some nineteenth century British writers have described the *Ras Leela* theatre of the northern region in detail, which gives us a fairly good idea of the *Ras* performances of the time. Captain Thomas Deur Broughton, who attended the Janmastami festival at the Sindhia camp in the year 1809, has left a graphic record of the event which is included in his book *Letters from a Maratha Camp during the Year 1809*. In a letter dated 8 September he writes:

The tent in which we were received was about one hundred and fifty feet long, divided lengthwise into three compartments by a double row of posts ornamented with coloured paper, and to each of which was affixed a score of candles. At the further end was a stage raised about two feet from the ground and made to represent like a kind of Gothic hall, with pillars and arches highly painted and gilded. This is called Sungasun or throne in the centre of which was placed Phool Dhol . . . in which lay the image of Bal Govind . . . The centre space of the tent was left open for the dancers and those on either side filled up to the level of the stage . . . Candles were lighted . . . After one or two sets of Nauch girls had performed, the Rahu-d'harees who were seated at the upper end of the tent on a kind of raised sofa . . . came forward. They were boys, always Brahmuns who are educated at Muttra for this purpose. Parties of them travel about at this season, to perform at different Hindoo courts in India; that now in the camp consists



of four besides musicians . . . The eldest represented Kunya, the youngest his beloved Radha and the other two her youthful companions. The performance was a kind of ballet, descriptive of sports of this amorous and inconstant but interesting deity with Gopees during which they sang stanzas . . . in the language of Brij.

I have procured the copies of some of the songs performed . . . The first is supposed to be a dialogue between Kunya and one of the Gopees who returned to him, after a former visit, sooner than he expected. The second contains a description of the effect caused in the bosoms of the Muttra maids by the sound of the pipe of their darling shepherd and a dialogue between them and Jasooda in consequence of their interview with him in the groves of Madhuban.

After this Captain Broughton gives a fine translation of the dialogue that transpired between Krishna and a Gopi:

- Kunya* : Again my fair one! — hast thou purchased me? . . .
Gopee : Think'st thou uncalled I boldly came?—
 Ah, see!—
 The gathering clouds, dear youth, invite to love.
Kunya : How could a frame so soft, such dangers prove?
 While e'en thy pretty self was lost in the night,
 How see thy way?
Gopee : The lightning gleamed so bright!
Kunya : O'er broken roads, through mire and tangling thorn,
 Thy tender limbs must ache, thy feet be torn?
Gopee : Steps light and firm will weariest way overcome.
Kunya : Yet dark's the night; and thou wert all alone.
Gopee : No my soul's Lord! for love was with me still
 Pointed my path and warded every ill!

KUBIT

The pipe is heard of Nundh's sweet boy;
 The Goalins hearts beat high with joy:
 To the cool woods in crowds they speed;
 Nor danger fear, nor toil they heed:
 And if by chance the youth they spy,
 Away go prudence, modesty:



They gaze, by his bright beauties burned,
 And swoon,—their pails are overturned!
 Jasooda!—listen to our prayer;
 Thy son's audacious frolics hear!
 To Brindavan we went our way—
 He seized our arms, and bade us stay . . .
 Lady! our cheeks with shame were red;
 Like modest girls away we fled . . .
 In vain we have milked, in vain we have churned
 For he—our pails has overturned . . .

Commenting upon the performance Captain Broughton further states: 'Both the dancing and the singing of the Rahu-d'harees was far superior to that of common performers, their attitudes were exceedingly graceful and their voices were never raised beyond the natural pitch. The dresses were appropriate and elegant, specially that of Kunya who wore a brilliant sun upon his head, and a quantity of superb jewels around his neck and breasts; all of which, as well as the dresses of the other boys, were furnished from the wardrobe of Muha Raj.'

The author also refers to *Jhanki* that is a dramatic scene freezed in time, a tableau, by the boys performing the *Ras* play: 'After the dances were over, they exhibited in group representations of the most celebrated statues of Krishna and his relatives, with an accuracy and steadiness quite surprising in such children.'

Colonel James Tod in his *Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan* not only describes the *Ras* performance but also tries to explain its metaphysics: 'In the mystic dance, the Rasmandel, yet imitated on the annual festival sacred to sun god Heri, He is represented with a radiant crown in dancing attitude playing on a flute to the nymphs encircling him . . . each holding a musical instrument. These nymphs are called no-ragini, from Raga, a mode of song over which each presides, and no-rasa, or nine passions excited by powers of harmony. On the festival of the Jenum, or "birth-day", there is a scenic representation of Kaniya and Gopies when are rehearsed in mellifluous accents of ionic land of Vajj, the songs of Jydeva, as addressed by Kuniya to Radha and her companions.'

It is significant to note the mention of Jayadeva's songs in the



context of *Ras Leela* by Tod. In the second half of the nineteenth century, F.S. Growse wrote his oft quoted work, *Mathura: A District Memoir*, in which he has mentioned the art of *Rasdharis*. He mentions the tradition of staging Krishna plays at the specific places associated with the particular incidents described in the plays. The performers change the locale according to the scene described. Growse states:

As the anniversary of Krishna's birth is kept in the month of Bhadon . . . a series of Melas is held at different woods where the *Ras Leela* is celebrated. This is an unwritten religious drama which represents most popular incidents of the life of Krishna and thus corresponds very closely with miracle plays of mediaeval Christendom. The arrangement of the performance forms the recognized occupation of a class of Brahmins residing chiefly in the villages of Karhla and Pisaya who are called *Rasdharis* and have no other profession or means of livelihood. The complete series of representations extended over a month or more, each scene being acted on the very spot with which the original event is traditionally connected. The marriage scene, as performed at Sanket, is the only one that I have had the fortune to witness—with a garden terrace as a stage, a grey stone temple at the background, the bright moon overhead and an occasional flambeau that shot a flickering gleam over the central tableau framed in its deep border of intent and sympathizing faces, the spectacle was a pretty one and was marked by a total absence of anything even verging upon indecorum . . . The local Gosain organises all the arrangements through one of the *Rasdharis* who collects the troupe (or *Mandali* as it is called) of singers and musicians, and himself takes the chief part in the performance while the children who impersonate Radha and Krishna act only in dumb show.

The passages quoted above give a clear idea of *Ras Leela* in the nineteenth century with its variations.

Dramatic representation of the Krishna theme took different forms in the Vraja region. For instance on the morning of the Gopashtami day two boys are attired as Krishna and Balarama at the Nanda temple of Nandgaon. They move in the village from house to house taking the milk and butter offered to them. A party of singers accompany them singing songs. When they return in the evening, a woman acting as their mother Yashoda receives them and performs *Aarati*. On the



day after Janmashtami an interesting festival called Nandotsava is celebrated in the temples of Vraja with the same dramatic flourish. Two persons in the dress of Nanda and Yashoda sit by the side of a cradle in which an idol of Krishna is kept. People acting as Gopas dance joyously in the temple premises singing songs expressing their happiness over the birth of Krishna. The most colourful of Indian festivals, *Holi*, is also celebrated in the region with the presentation of semi-dramatic spectacles based on the Krishna theme.

There is a class of story tellers known as *Kathaks* who relate Krishna stories in the temple halls with appropriate *abhinaya*. Sitting on the floor they sing songs translating their meaning into beautiful gestures. On festive occasions a tableau depicting an episode from the Krishna story is presented in the temple with the help of painted scenes or live actors.

However the *Ras Leela* theatre remains the most popular and effective medium of visualising the Krishna lore because it has incorporated in its fold elements from various dramatic presentations. Interwoven in its rich fabric we find practically everything from the mobile art of *Kathak* to the grandeur of a static tableau. During the four hundred years of its existence many changes took place in the style of its presentation, but it has still retained intact most of its original features.

Vana Jatra is a unique variant of *Ras* theatre. The sixteenth century Vaishnava saints, particularly of the Chaitanya sect, virtually reestablished Krishna myth in Vraja region by giving it a concrete geography. They rediscovered various places connected with the Krishna lore. The Krishna myth was thus established geographically in the region with great imagination and poetic vision. The *Chaitanya Charitamrita* describes how Mahaprabhu rediscovered the beautiful pond where Radha and Krishna used to indulge in water-sports. The process continued. It was decided that Nandgaon, a small village in Vraja region, was the place where Krishna lived with Nandagopa. The nearby village of Barasana as a place where the beautiful Gopa girl Radha used to stay. They named the narrow lane passing through nearby hillocks as Sankari Khor and it was established that here naughty Krishna used to waylay Gopa girls proceeding to Mathura market. They indicated a place 'Sanket' where the two lovers used to meet secretly. Narayana Bhatta wrote a manual *Braj Bhakti Vilasa*



giving detailed description of various places in the Vraja region supposed to be connected with the Krishna myth.

After Janmashtami celebrations the devotees of Lord Krishna make pilgrimage covering more than hundred miles to the sites in the Vraja region associated with Krishna legend. A group of *Ras* actors accompany them and enact scenes from the divine cowherd's life, said to have taken place at those very sites thousands of years ago. For instance, at Chandrasar *Maharas Leela* is performed, at Sankari Khor *Dan Leela* is enacted, while at Mathura *Kamsa Vadha Leela* is staged. A definite programme of about eight days is already planned by the organisers. This form of processional celebrations of Vraja region is unique to India.

Today the *Ras* stage is broadly divided into two parts—a raised platform on which a throne is placed and a spacious portion before it. Two persons hold a curtain hiding the throne from the sight of the audience. The *Swami*, that is the *Sutradhar*, along with his orchestra and chorus, sits in front of the curtain. He then starts singing *Mangalacharan* songs, invoking various deities. Meanwhile Radha and Krishna occupy the throne while a few *sakhis* stand by their sides. Then with a dramatic flourish the curtain is removed and a beautiful tableau is revealed. After bowing before *Yugul Sarakar*, or the divine couple, the *Swami* starts singing songs in praise of the deity.

Then the *sakhis*, carrying brass plates with earthen lamps, perform *aarati* and shower flowers on Radha and Krishna on the throne. After they have been worshipped, one of the *sakhis*, with great humility, requests Krishna to come to the dancing arena. Krishna stands before Radha and says: 'O fair one, this being the time for *Ras*, please join me. Let us dance together.' Radha gets up from the throne and expresses her willingness through a song.

Then the *Ras* proper begins. Krishna, Radha and the *sakhis* dance in a circle. Then all of them dance individually, showing their skill. Krishna performs a very interesting dance: kneeling on the ground, he whirls around. Radha and Krishna then sing a duet and tease each other, during which Krishna occasionally rearranges with loving care Radha's garland and ornaments. Together they strike beautiful poses. Every time they do so, the scene freezes for a few moments. After the dancing is over they go back to the throne and the *sakhis* also move



to their original position. With this the *Ras* part of *Ras Leela* comes to an end.

After *Ras* is over, one of the various *Leelas* of Krishna is enacted on the stage. Actors taking the cue from the *Swami* sing and improvise dialogues. A character called Manasukha is introduced to create humour. There is a lot of singing and dancing in the humorous episode as well. *Dan Leela*, *Makhan Chori Leela*, *Sudama Leela*, *Kalia Mardan Leela*, *Chandravali Leela*, are some of the popular *Leelas* that are enacted on the *Ras* stage. The majority of *Leelas* picked up for dramatization are from the early life of Krishna in Vrindavana and Gokul. *Veera*, *shringara* and *vatsalya bhavas* predominate the scene. Though generally the *Bhagavata Purana* is the source of these plays, the creative imagination of the *Rasdharis* never remains confined to it alone. They also take the help of local folk tales. For instance, in *Maniharin Leela*, Krishna disguised as a bangle-seller encounters Radha. With his clever talk he persuades her to purchase the bangles. When he holds her hand she immediately knows whose touch it is and his identity is disclosed. Likewise he teases Radha and other Gopa girls in the disguise of a fortune-teller, a flower-seller, and a woman selling birds. These *Leelas*, not to be found in any *Purana*, obviously reflect the rural way of life.

Very young boys enact these plays. They also play the female roles. After their make-up is complete, they are called *swarup* and treated as if they are the deities themselves. They are offered delicious food — *bhog* — in the make-up room and are carried on people's shoulders to the venue of the performance. All care is taken to preserve the decorum and sanctity of the performance.

Night after night the *Leelas* are presented, unfolding the colourful life of Krishna in Vrajbhumi and whatever may be the play, it opens with a *Ras* performance. The audience, with hearts full of devotion, watch the *Leela* plays in the hope of salvation.

One of the popular *Leela* plays which the *Rasdharis* stage is *Sri Kevat Leela* or *Nauka Vihar Leela*. *Kevat* means the boatman. Once, the Gopis on their way back home from the Mathura bazaars got stranded on the banks of the Yamuna as no boatman was around to ferry them across. Krishna, the dark lover of the Gopis, appeared before them in *Kevat's* guise and took advantage of their discomfiture.



After sporting with them for some time he disclosed his identity to the beautiful Radha who blushed with delight.

It is interesting to note that none of the Vaishnava *Puranas*, including the *Bhagavata*, mention this story. It was probably invented by the *Rasdharis* as a direct outcome of their social environment and experiences. Below is a free and abridged translation of a *Kevat Leela* play from the collection of the well known Vraja singer Shrihari-vallabhaji Kirtania:

Sri Kevat Leela

Samaji : (*Benedictory Verse*): O Radhe, soul and delight of Krishna, bless me with your divine grace. When, O beautiful one, will ye place your delicate lotus feet on the head of this humble devotee? O mother, take me across this *Bhavasagar*, ocean of life, in the boat of your mercy!

The Gopa girls with Radha are seen standing on the bank of the river Yamuna waiting impatiently for the boatman to arrive.

Sakhi : (*Song*)

The sun is setting, far is my destination
Darkness is descending on the earth.
Have mercy, send us a boatman
If we are late, O God, the in-laws will abuse us!

Radha : Dear *Sakhi*, climb over that hill and see if you can find a boatman.

Samaji : (*Song*)

The Gopa girl climbed over the hill
And lo! she beheld a boat coming.
She waved at the boat, beckoned it
And towards the bank the boatman started rowing!

Sakhi : I can see a boat coming, and the boatman . . . ah friend, he is extremely beautiful.



(Song)

Delicate in limbs, dark like a cloud,
While rowing the boat, he is singing aloud.

Radha : Then *Sakhi*, call him to help us across the river.

Sakhi : *Kevat*, O *Kevat*!

Boatman : (Song)

The path of love is difficult,
It is full of dangers,
You will be waylaid.
Never trust a stranger,
Protect thyself,
Thieves are around
They will steal everything
Without making any sound!

Sakhi : O boatman, hurry! Bring your boat to us.

Boatman : No, never will I bring my boat near you.

(Song)

You are heavy and my canoe is frail
With you how would it sail?
Heavy are your hips, heavy the bosoms
You look like a creeper, bent with blossoms
Like your waist under the weight of milk pots.
My boat will start to sway
How much time it will take to sink?
No girls, no, it is better to go away!
And girls, it is a matter of worry
You are heavily laden with jewellery!

Sakhi : (Song)

Worry ye not on that count,
We will give you the jewellery.



Across the river take us, O boatman,
Dusk is falling, we are in a hurry!

Boatman : (Song)

Ah then this entire boat is yours
And I am only a humble rower.
But, O kind women, I am hungry,
Do me ye some favour.

Sakhi : Certainly, O boatman. We have lots of food with us.
Have it all if you so desire, but take us across
the river.

Boatman : That's good, that's good!

Samaji : (Song)

And he anchored the boat in shallow waters.
Dazed by his beauty the girls started to chatter!

Sakhi : What is your name, O boatman, where do you come
from?

Boatman : (Song)

Humble is my abode,
My name is Rasika.
Let me wash your feet and
I will attain *moksha*.
I am only a *Dhivar*—boatman of low caste—and
you are pious *Gopikas* from *Vraja*.
Let me wash your feet and gather that sacred water
to drink. That will liberate me from the cycle of
death and birth, O girls!

Sakhi : Radha dear, get your feet washed by the boatman.

Radha : No, friend, I will not.

Boatman : If you will not let me cross the *Bhavasagar* (ocean



of life) by taking the holy water from your feet,
I will not take you across the Yamuna.

Sakhi : (Song)

Do not think so much, my friend,
Let your feet be washed.
The wise fool the world
when necessary, by behaving sweetly.

Radha : All right. Tell him to wash my feet!

Sakhi : O boatman, wash her feet.

Boatman : (Song)

Touching these feet, with delight I would swoon.
Soft, fragrant, delicate, beautiful like the moon.
Around her fair, lovely ankles are strings of bells.
When she walks in musical grace my poor heart
melts.

Sakhi : Now you have washed her feet. Take us across the
river.

Boatman : All right, but you know my boat is frail, I will take
each of you one after the other to the shore across.

Sakhi : No, no! No one will sit alone with you in the boat.
You are young and we are beautiful. What will
people say if they see us sailing alone with you?

Boatman : How would you like to come then? In pairs?

Sakhi : We will all sail together.

Boatman : As you please. But if you get drowned, don't
blame me. And one thing more, Radhe,



(Song)

Remove quickly your garments blue,
Or taking you for a cloud
The wind will try to whisk you away,
And my poor boat will sway around!

Sakhi : O boatman, we will all wear white clothes if you so desire, but what about you who is himself dark like a cloud? Why don't you bathe in the curd and milk from our pots. You may then start looking a bit fairer.

Samaji : (Song)

The girls entered the water but turned away
From fear of getting their clothes wet.
Smiling he lifted them one by one
And put the fair ones in his boat.

Boatman : (Song)

Give me all the milk,
Let me eat some curd.
It will give me strength
To speed the boat like a bird.

Sakhi : Here, take the milk and the curd.

Krishna devours all the milk and curd.

Sakhi : O God! Friends, is he a boatman or the *Giriraj* himself?
He has devoured everything.

Boatman : Should I stop eating?

Sakhi : But what have you left to eat now?

Boatman : You see, I work throughout the day with oars so I get hungry.



Sakhi : Now that you have had your fill, start rowing the boat.

Boatman : You have given me too much to eat. Now I feel sleepy. Now you, good girl, be my pillow and you massage my feet and you take up the oars and start rowing. I am going to sleep.

Sakhi : Why did you eat so much, O boatman?

Boatman : It was not my fault, *Sakhi*. You went on feeding me and I went on eating. Why blame me?

Sakhi : It is all our fault, but now please start the boat.

Boatman : Your pots are too heavy for this frail boat. Throw them all in the Yamuna waters.

Samaji : (Song)

He ate all the *makhan*, drank the sweet milk,
And made the poor Gopis throw all the pots in the
Yamuna.

Boatman : (Song)

Be careful girls, sit tight.
I am loosening the knot.
The moment it is untied,
The boat will move fast.
Hail, O Mother Yamuna!

Samaji : (Song)

The boatman untied the rope,
It started moving.
Lost in Radha's beauty
He forgot to use the oars.



Radha : (Song)

Sakhi, see how he is gazing at my beauty,
The naughty boatman!
Like the moon is he,
Before him the god of love pales.
But how he gazes at me
As he sails!

Sakhi : O boatman! Are you rowing the boat or feasting
your eyes on the beauty of my friend?

Boatman : (Song)

So lovely is she, I know not how to restrain my eyes.
She shines like a beautiful star in the skies.
Now tell me how can I do two things at a time,
Rowing the boat and looking at this friend of thine?

Samaji : (Song)

The boatman rowed the boat in mid Yamuna.
Suddenly the boat started rocking.
Shaking with fear,
The Gopis started praying.

Sakhi : O boatman! Will the boat sink?

Boatman : (Song)

Heavy are your ornaments and clothes.
That is why the boat is rocking.
Hurry, throw them in the Yamuna
Before we start sinking!

Sakhi : Have you no shame?
Are you not afraid of Kamsa, our king?

Boatman : Kamsa will not come here in the middle of the
river to save any of you if the boat sinks. Quick!
Throw your clothes and ornaments in the water.



Sakhi : So be it!

Samaji : (Song)

They took off their clothes,
Removed the ornaments,
Threw everything in the water,
Hoping that he would relent.

Sakhi : We have done what you wanted us to do. Why are you not rowing the boat now?

Boatman : It is no use. The boat is sure to sink. It is heading towards a whirlpool.

Sakhi : O my god!

Boatman : Still you can be saved if you do what I ask you to do.

Sakhi : Tell us quickly.

Boatman : In the *Damaru Tantra* there is a magic formula. If you recite it the boat will not sink.

Sakhi : (Song)

Every time he takes a new stance
See how he makes us dance to his tune!

Boatman : (Song)

Come to me one at a time and
Learn the *mantra* by heart.
Then see the miracle happen.
The boat towards the shore will dart!

Sakhi : All right. Recite the magic formula.

Boatman : I will start with your lovely friend.



Sakhi : (Song)

Go *Kishori* to him,
Save us from harm.
Learn by heart
The *Damaru Tantra's* charm.

Boatman : (Song)

If you will not learn the *mantra*
O proud girl,
I swear by the *Yamuna*,
The boat will surely enter the whirlpool.

Radha : Here I am. Teach me the *mantra*.

Boatman : (In her ear) Say 'I love you'!

Radha : What?

Boatman : (In her ear) Darling *Kishori*, O beautiful one, though
I am a boatman to the others, for you I am your
eternal lover, *Krishna*.

Radha : (Song)

Fear ye not, *Sakhi*,
Do not worry about the *mantra*.
As long as *Krishna* is our boatman,
We will not sink.

Samaji : Just as *Krishna* took the *Gopis* across the *Yamuna*,
let him, the dark lover of *Radha*, take us across
the ocean of life.

Bolo Sri Vrindavana Bihari Lal ki jai
Bolo Sri Kishoriji ki jai!





25. Radha and Krishna—Presiding deities of Ras





26. Ras Dance, Vanshivat, Vrindavan



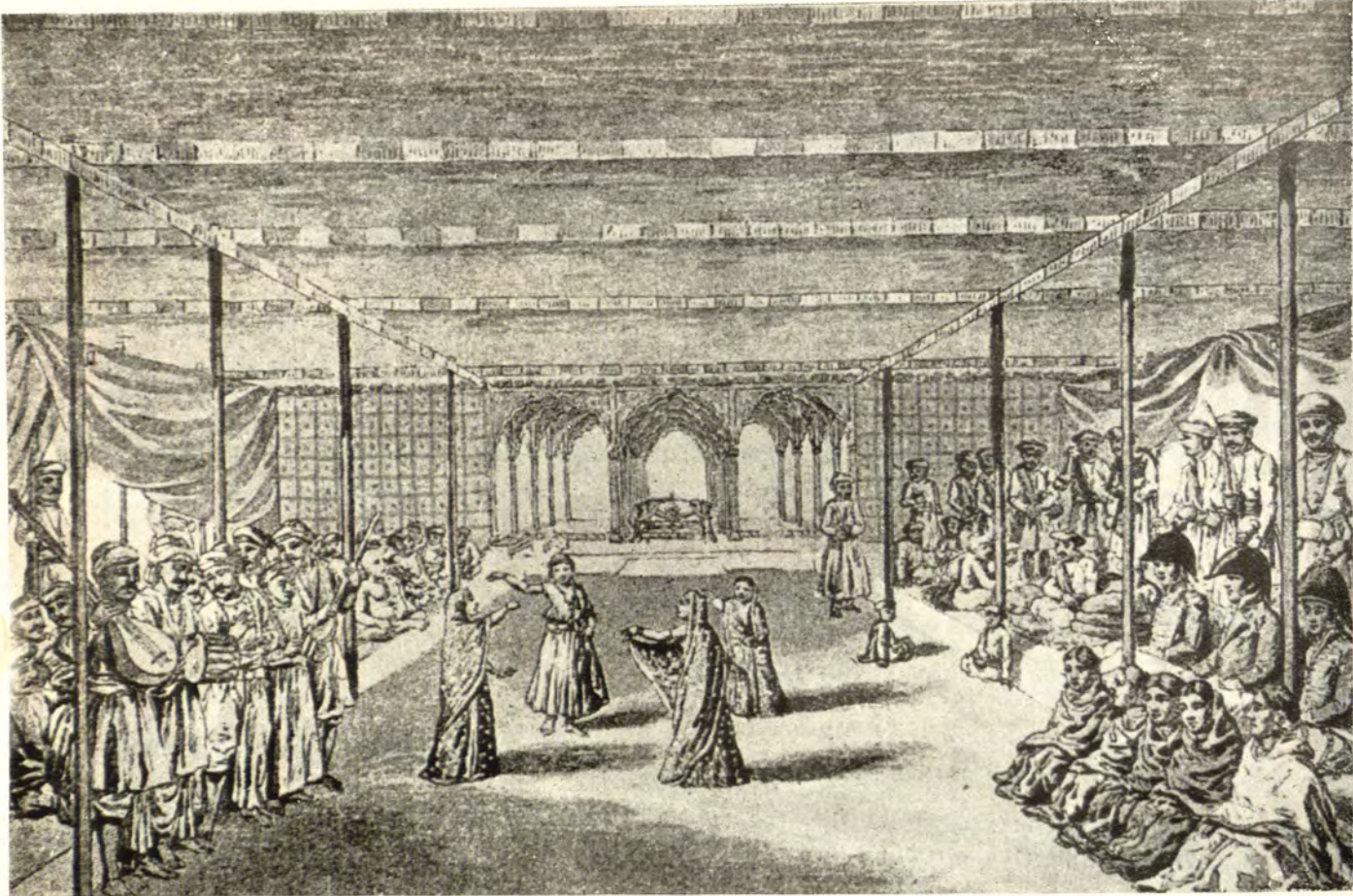


27. Murali Leela, Radha playing on Krishna's flute



28. Ras Mandal at Vrindavan



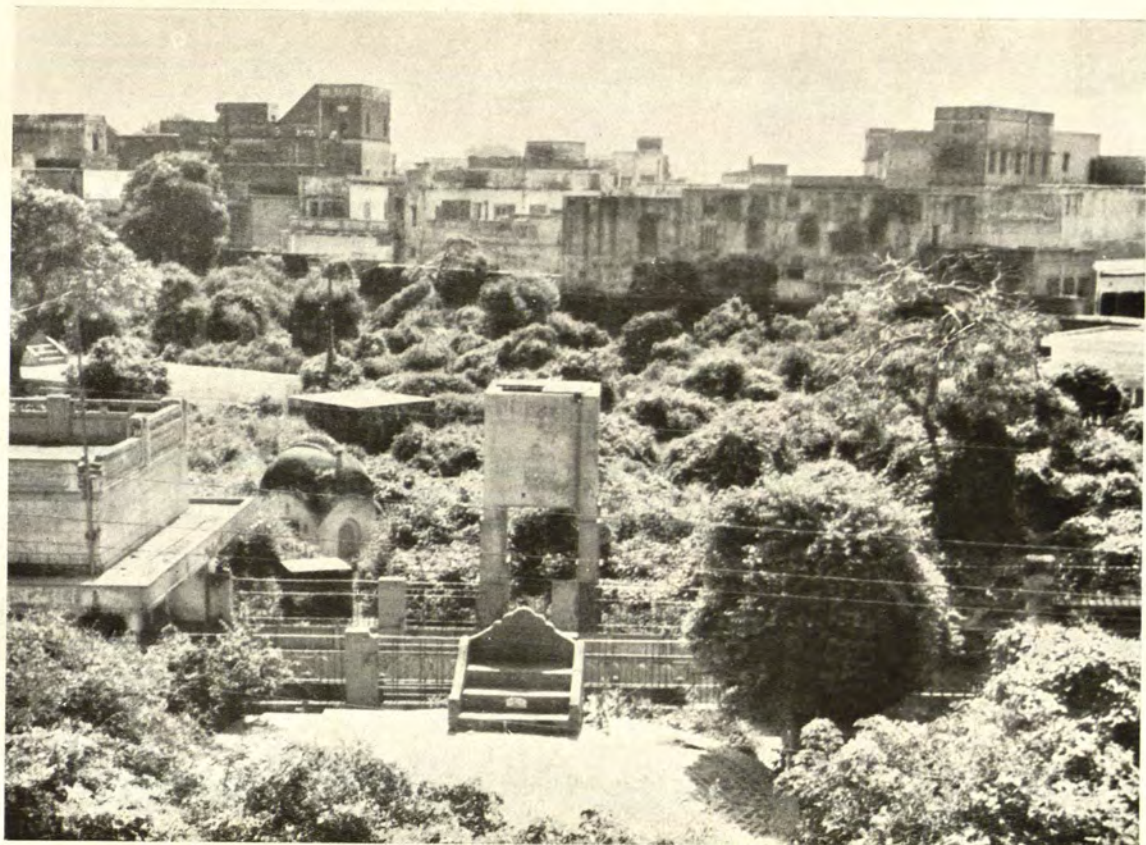


29. Ras Performance in Maratha Camp

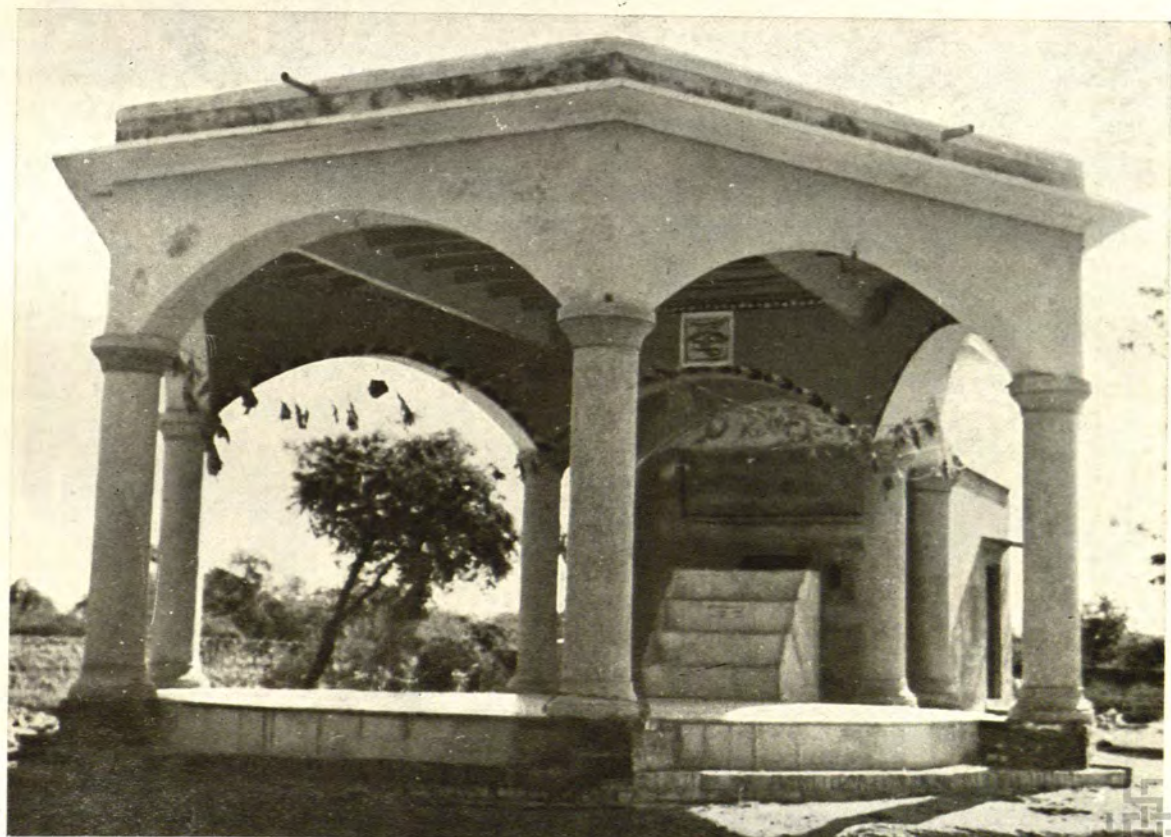


30. Nauka Leela or Kevat Leela





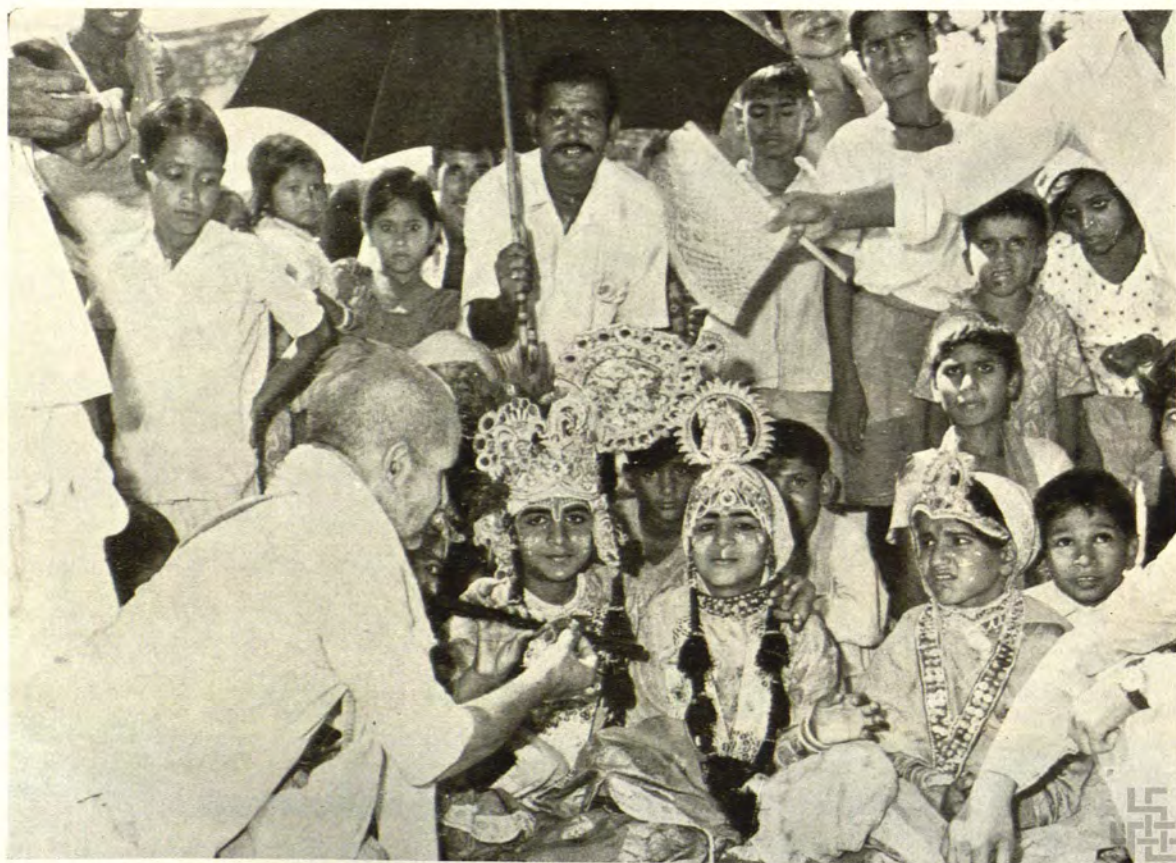
31. Ras Mandal at Nidhiban, Vrindavan



32. Renovated Ras Mandal at Karhla



33. Hill-side Ras Mandal near Uchagaon

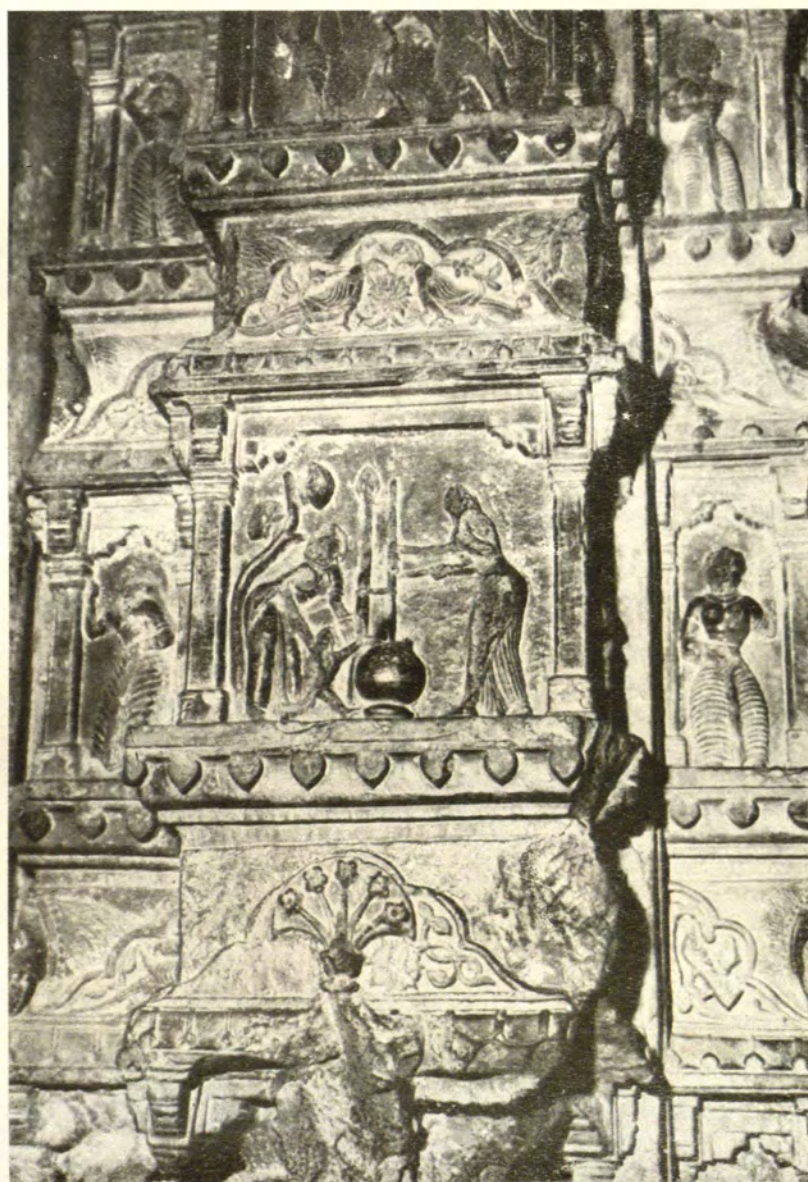


34. Feeding Swarups, Sankari Khor Mela, Barasana

35. Swarups visiting
houses of devotees to
eat curd and milk



36. Ras Leela scenes,
Govindji Temple,
Vrindavan





37. Kusum Sarovar

38. Yamuna at Vrindavan



मेघश्यामलमूर्तिमायतमहाबहुं महोरःस्थल-
मारक्तायत कंजलोचनयुगं पीताम्बरं सुन्दरम्
मुक्ताहारक हेमहारवलयालंकार कान्तिद्युतिम्
कृष्णं शारद-सान्द्रचन्द्रसदृशं हृत्पंकजेऽहं भजे

—कालिदमन यात्रा, शंकरदेव



ANKIA NAT



Indira Gandhi National
Centre for the Arts

The Krishna drama that originated in the wake of the neo-Vaishnavite movement in the sixteenth century in Assam, is known as Ankia Nat. The operatic one-act play depicting the Krishna legend in all its splendour is structurally a beautiful synthesis of classical and folk theatre traditions of the region. Mahapurusha Shankardeva, the great Assamese Vaishnava saint, and later his followers, wrote lyrical Krishna plays in the vernacular, mixed with Vrajaboli. These plays are staged even today with great devotion, in the prayer halls or *Namghars* of the Vaishnava monasteries.

Pragjyotishpur, that is, ancient Assam, is associated with the Krishna legend in many ways. It is at the request of Indra and other deities that Krishna slayed Narakasura, the tyrannical tribal king of Pragjyotishpur and freed sixteen thousand beautiful princesses who had been kept in captivity. Krishna later married these girls at their request. Charming Usha, daughter of King Banasura of Shonitpur, now Tezpur, was married to Krishna's grandson Aniruddha. The Assamese princess, adept at music and dancing, taught these arts to the women of Dwaraka, the Yadava capital in Gujarat. She is considered to be the originator of the present Garba dance of the region. The Garba dances reflect the influence of Shakta and Vaishnava cults. Many Krishna songs known as Garbi are sung by these dancers.

Before the advent of Shankardeva (1449-1568) the Tantrik Shakta cult was predominant in Assam with Kamakhya as the presiding deity. However, we find stray references indicating the existence of the Vasudeva cult as well in the region. The sixth century Baraganga rock



inscription refers to King Mahabhuti Varman as a Parama Bhagavata, a great devotee of Vishnu. It is significant to note that the tenth century Tantra work *Kalika Purana* opens with benediction to Hari and includes the description of rituals prescribed for the worship of the deities of the Vaishnava pantheon including Vishnu and Vasudeva. Even Kali presiding deity of Shakta cult and consort of Shiva is described as *Vishnu Maya*, a manifestation of the divine power of Vishnu. Hemadri goes to an extent of calling it an original Bhagavata Purana: 'Yadidam Kalikakhyam Cha Mulam Bhagavatam Shrutam', so pronounced is the influence of Vaishnavism on the *Kalika Purana*. The *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, two major Vaishnava epics, were translated into Assamese in the fourteenth century. The Hayagriva Madhava temple situated on the Manikuta hills at Hajo is one of the most ancient Vaishnava Pithas—centres—in Kamarupa which is mentioned in the *Kalika Purana*. Dancing girls—*Natis*—were attached to this temple to propitiate the Madhava with dance and music.

It is evident from the *Kalika Purana* that the pre-Shankardeva Vaishnavism was almost *tantrik* in nature. Shankardeva preached the Krishna Bhakti cult based on the *Bhagavata Purana* which was quite different from the earlier form of tantra based Vaishnavism. In drama he found a most convenient medium for propagating the new faith among the masses.

Shankardeva seems to have been influenced by the earlier Krishna theatre that flourished particularly in the Utkala and Mithila regions. Puri was a great centre of Vaishnava theatre in eastern India. Apart from the *Gita Govinda*, plays like *Parijata Harana Nataka* by Gopinath Sandhi Baharik, *Prabhavati* and *Parijat Haranam* by Kavichandraraya Divakar Misra were being performed in the Jagannatha temple on festive occasions. He must have seen these performances during his one year's sojourn at Puri around 1490.

The influence of Vrajaboli reached Assam through Mithila which was also a great cultural centre. The earliest extant Krishna play of the region is *Parijat Haran* or *Navaparijat Mangal* by Umapati Upadhyaya who flourished in the court of Hindupati Harihardeva who is described as the tenth incarnation of Vishnu. Written in the thirteenth century, this Sanskrit play contains melodious Maithili lyrics which are sung and danced to by characters like Rukmini and Bhama. Vidyapati's sweet Krishna songs inspired Shankardeva to write his Bhatimas and Ankia songs in Vrajaboli.



Assam has a rich tradition of the theatrical arts. It is evident from the *Kalika Purana* that the temples would be reverberating with dance and music. *Natis* were attached to Shaiva and Vaishnava temples in the region. The tradition of temple dancers in Assam goes back to the ninth century. Another old tradition is the erotic Bihu dance which was associated with the fertility cult. *Oja Pali*, a semi-dramatic form of narrating mythical stories through dance and song, was prevalent in the region. Originally associated with the worship of the serpent goddess Manasa, it later picked up Vaishnava myths for enactment. *Vyah-gowa Oja Pali* is probably the earliest rudimentary form of Vaishnava theatre in Assam. Oja, who narrates the story through dance and *Abhinaya*, is the leader of a chorus of four or five singer-dancers known as Palis. The right hand man of Oja is called Daina Pali with whom he enters into conversation and interesting dialogues ensue. The Shankaria Krishna theatre retained many features of this semi-dramatic form. Oja was transformed into the *Sutradhar* and his associate Daina Pali became Sangi. The Pali chorus turned into the Gayan Bayan group, or the group of singers and musicians. With the synthesis of Sanskrit classical and local folk theatrical traditions, Shankardeva created Ankia theatre to narrate the story of Krishna.

His first play, *Chinha Yatra*, which scholars describe as 'dramatic representation with paintings', is not available. Out of his six available plays, one is written on the *Sita Swayamvara* story. The other five one-act plays—*Patni Prasad Nata*, *Kali Damana Yatra*, *Keli Gopal Nataka*, *Rukmini Harana Nata* and *Prijat Harana Nata*—are based on the Krishna theme. These operatic plays heralded an era of Krishna theatre in Assam.

Patni Prasad is based on a Bhagavata story in which vain Brahmins, proud of their Vedic learning, refuse to acknowledge the cowherd Krishna. The play depicts the Krishna *bhakti* of the simple-hearted Brahmin women and the ultimate realization on the part of the Brahmins about the futility of their learning. The play stresses the importance of Krishna *bhakti* over other forms of ritualistic religious practices. *Kali Damana Yatra* depicts the story of how Krishna subdued the poisonous cobra Kalia and how he swallowed the great fire that broke out in the Vrindavana woods. The play suggests that Krishna protects those who have faith in him.

Keli Gopal Nataka is a lyrical play full of songs, dances and music



based on the *Ras Panchadhyayi* of the *Bhagavata Purana*. In the play we hear a faint echo of the *Gita Govinda*. Jayadeva's composition was quite popular in Assam at the time. We know of a commentary on the *Gita Govinda* written by Chilaraya, brother of Koc king Naranarayan who extended his patronage to Shankardeva. The play ends with a song invoking the ten incarnations of Krishna. It is significant to note that Jayadeva starts his opera with the *Dashavatara Ashtapadi*. The play inspired many later writers to write on the *Ras* theme. In many Satras (Vaishnava monasteries), *Ras* dances are still performed in the style evolved by Shankardeva. Many lyrics in the play describe the dalliance of Krishna with the Gopa girls. Though the name of Radha occurs in the play, some scholars consider it to be a later interpolation. They argue that as Radha is not mentioned in the *Bhagavata Purana*, she has no place in the Shankaria theology which strictly follows it. But in the same play, Shankardeva is seen introducing the sub-plot of Shankhachuda Yaksha who interferes in the *Ras* dance. This Yaksha too is not mentioned in the *Bhagavata* in the context of the *Ras* dance.

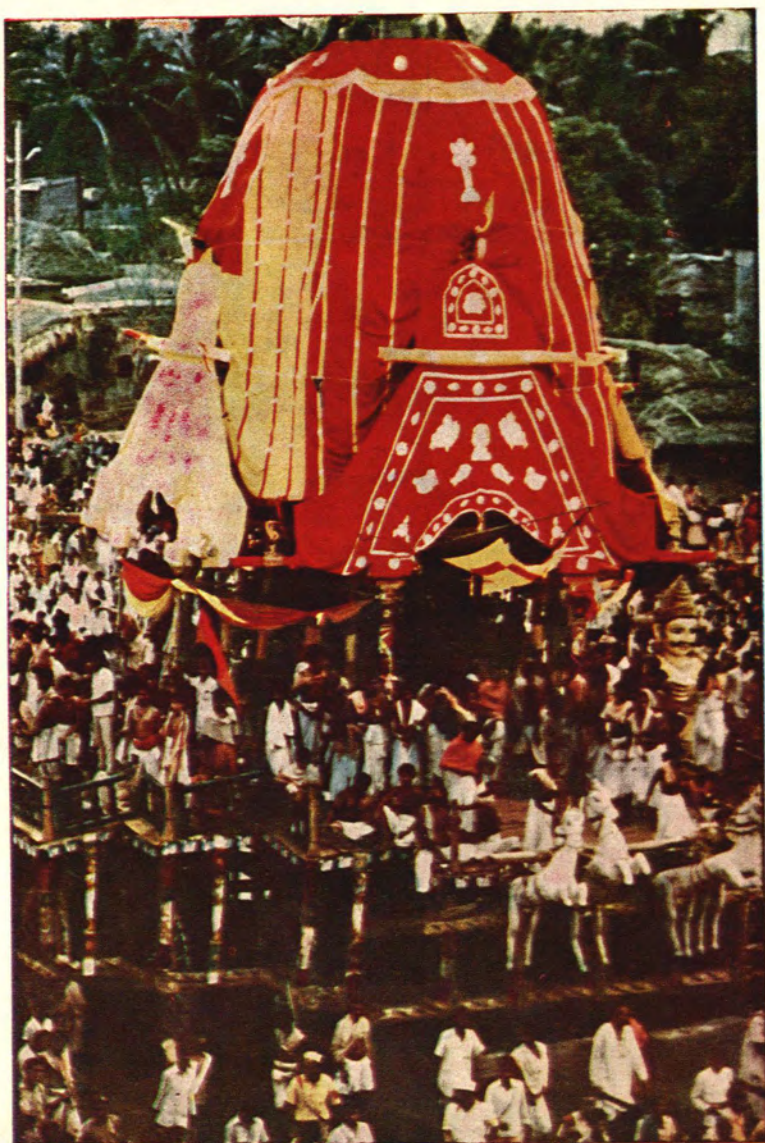
The three plays mentioned above are based on Krishna's life in Vraja. In the next two plays episodes from the later life of Krishna are chosen for dramatization. *Rukmini Harana Nataka* depicts the story of Krishna's marriage with the Vidarbha princess Rukmini. The love and devotion of the heroine for her divine lover are very well depicted through a series of melodious songs. In a humorous scene, old Brahma while performing the marriage of Krishna, is shown fainting at the sight of the dazzling beauty of Rukmini. Narada brings him back to his senses.

Parijat Harana Nataka is also a very interesting play based on the ever popular story of the *Mana* or hurt pride of Satyabhama, the young and beautiful consort of Krishna. The stress is not on the jealous quarrels of Bhama and Rukmini, but on the defeat of Narakasura and later of Indra at the hands of Krishna. In a similar earlier play by Umapati, the fight between Indra and Krishna is only described by Narada. But in Shankardeva's play it actually takes place on the stage. In the end of Umapati's play, Bhama and Subhadra give away Krishna and Arjuna as gifts to Narada under the Parijata tree and later purchase them back by giving Narada a cow. It is quite a humorous episode, very well depicted by Umapati. At the end of Shankardeva's play, when Satyabhama tries to tease Rukmini by showing the Parijata tree in her possession, Rukmini quietly replies: 'O sister Satyabhama, what





7. Festival of colours - Krishna, Radha and their companions



8. Rath Yatra of Jagannatha - Krishna



are you saying? Our Swami Krishna is the Parama Guru of the world. There is nothing in the world you cannot get by serving his feet. You can get *Dharma*, *Artha*, *Kama* and *Moksha* easily by worshipping him and you speak about a mere Parijata tree!

Shankardeva wrote his one-act plays to describe the greatness of Krishna *bhakti* by depicting suitable episodes from Krishna's life. He uses a very simple technique of presenting a Krishna story. The *Sutradhar* relates the story with the help of actors enacting different roles. He remains on the stage throughout the performance, guiding the course of the story and commenting upon the dramatic action taking place on the stage. The play takes a form of *Kirtan* in which actors appear to speak out their dialogues or sing their songs.

Madhavdeva, disciple of Shankardeva, wrote short plays called *Jhumuras*, depicting the childhood *Leelas* of Krishna. He wrote his first play, *Arjun Bhanjan Yatra*, in 1538. His other plays are *Chor Dhara Jhumura*, *Bhumi Lutiya Jhumura*, *Bhojan Vihar Jhumura*, *Brahma Mohan Jhumura*, *Kotor Jhumura* and *Ras Jhumura*. A free translation of *Ras Jhumura* is given here to give some idea of the Shankaria theatre.

Ras Jhumura

Sutradhar : (Song)

Behold! Krishna, the Lord of the Universe is coming!

With him is beautiful Radha, equally charming.

Bejewelled with precious stones,

Adept in the arts of love,

Playing sweetly on his flute,

The Lord is coming, enchanting the world.

Radha : O God of gods, I humbly bow before thee. Except for drinking deep from thy honeyed lips, I have no desire left in me. Are not these the same lotus feet which always remove the pain of love surging in my breast?



Sutradhar : (Song)

Standing before Hari with folded hands Radha
bespeaks,
No desire is left in me except to kiss your lips.
Listening to her words Hari naughtily smiled
And hear now with attention how he replied.

Krishna : O clever girl, I understand you well! I am the
supreme God of a million universes and you have
the audacity to climb over my shoulders! I left
other beautiful girls for you and you are dishonour-
ing me.

Sutradhar : Behold, O members of this learned assembly, how
the crafty Gopa girl is trying to trick the Supreme
Being! But God takes delight in fulfilling the desires
of his devotees. So chant his name and say with
me—*Hari bola, Hari bola*.

(Song)

Radhe, soul of the universe is Govinda.
He is the supreme God.
Do not be vain with him.

Radha : My Lord, I heard what you said, but now please
listen to me.

(Song)

Yadava O! Even the Vedas failed to understand
you.
And I am a mere Gopa girl.
No wonder I am deceived by your *Maya*.
Will you not pardon me?
Krishna, ascetics cannot realize thy real self in their
meditation. Even deities like Brahma fail to grasp
your greatness. Here I touch your lotus feet, forgive
me for my foolishness. Show me mercy, my Lord,
allow me to drink deep from your honeyed lips.



I have become a slave to thy feet. Now do not renounce me!

Sangi : O Parameshwar, Radha has spoken rightly. Being immersed in Maya, she failed to understand your real self. Please forgive her.

Krishna : O Radhike, I was only teasing you. Forsake your remorse. Get up, please, for my sake. I was merely sporting with you.

Sutradhar : After listening to her humble pleadings Krishna felt delighted. Now, O members of this learned assembly, see! Listen! How, to fulfil her desire, Krishna sported with Radha. God is always kind to his devotees. So chant his name with me.

(Song)

Adept at the *Ras* of Vraja,
See Krishna dancing with Radha.
On her lips, a kiss Krishna planted.
By its sweetness Radha is enchanted.
Embracing him with her tender arms,
She takes her mouth close to his, and tastes his charms.
Looking deep into his eyes, she clings to him,
And enjoys the supreme pleasures of love unbounded.
Thus did Radha worship sweet Hari.
Poet Madhav joyously sings to his glory.

Sutradhar : O members of this learned assembly, to liberate the sinful people living in the *Kali Yuga*, Lord Krishna took the human form and performed his many *Leelas*. Those who will listen to his stories, and chant his name, will achieve salvation. That is why we should surrender our souls with devotion to him, and him only, and always say *Hari, Hari*.

In the *Ras Jhumura*, apart from the usual *Sutradhar* and *Sangi*,



there are only two characters, Radha and Krishna. The basis of this play is an episode in the *Ras Panchadhyayi*, where it is stated that while dancing with the Gopis, Krishna suddenly disappeared, taking one of them with him, who then requested Krishna to carry her on his shoulders. *Jhumuras* are generally performed in the daytime by child actors.

Gopal Ata, Daityari Thakur, Ramcharan Thakur, Dwija Bhushan and many others wrote Ankia plays in Assamese mixed with Vrajaboli, on the Krishna theme, and the tradition of staging them still continues. The plays are generally performed in the rectangular prayer hall called Namghar which is attached to Manikut where the idols of the deities are kept. At one end of the Namghar there is the *Guru Asan*, a high pedestal on which sacred works like the Bhagavata are kept. Actors present the play facing the *Guru Asan* respectfully.

Basically the Namghar is a simple structure—a rectangular hall with thatched roof supported by wooden pillars. The walls are made of bamboo mats which can be removed, if required, to accommodate a large audience. However, the big flourishing Satras have constructed majestic concrete Namghars. The outer walls are painted with various scenes depicting the Krishna story. Sometimes a pavilion called Bhaona Ghar is specially erected to stage the plays. In the Namghar there is no specially raised platform for performing the plays. The actors and the audience are on the same level. On festive occasions people assemble in large numbers to witness the Krishna plays performed there.

The performance opens with *Dhemali* by the Gayan Bayan Mandali. Clad in white *dhoti*, shirt and turban, the members of the Gayan Bayan party play on drums called Khol various types of *Dhemalis*. Then enters the *Sutradhar* wearing a white flowing skirt and a turban. He bows before the audience and sings benedictory verses while he dances. He introduces the characters, tells the audience briefly about the action to commence, maintains the link of the story and comments upon the portions enacted. Taking the cue from him, actors come on the stage. Important characters make their entry from behind the white curtain, *ar-kapor*, held before them by two persons. When Krishna makes his appearance, flowers are showered on him. Members of the assembly bow before him in reverence and in one voice chant his name: '*Hari Bola, Hari Bola*'.



The make-up room is called Cho-Ghar. Indigenous dyes are used for make-up. The colour symbolism is used to indicate the inner nature of the dramatic characters. The demonic characters are painted black. Red is used to indicate brutality and white marks the saintly character. Light blue make-up is used for Krishna who wears a yellow silken *dhoti*, 'pitambar', and in the diadem on his head a colourful peacock feather is attached. Sometimes he wears a gold embroidered velvet jacket. He has colourful and fragrant garlands around his neck, and carries a flute in his hand. In *Jhumuras* he dresses like a cowherd. Glittering jewellery is used for characters like Kings, etc. Characters like Kalia, Yama, Garuda, Putana and Brahma appear in the arena wearing appropriate masks.

Krishna theatre in Assam is basically operatic in form and more stress is laid on dancing and singing than on prose dialogues which are also delivered in a lyrical manner. Many melodious indigenous and classical *Ragas* are used in the play. Ankia plays are rich in musical content. Shankardeva evolved a dance style known as Satria to help the actors dance to the songs in the plays. Dances performed by Krishna are known as Krishna Bhangi. *Ras* dances in the Satria style are very popular. They are performed as a part of a play or even independently. The Gopis enter the arena dancing. They wear colourful skirts—*Ghagaras*—which swirl when the dancers move around Krishna. The Satra institutions have evolved many delightful semi-dramatic dances based on the Krishna theme. For instance the concluding song, Bhatima, of *Keli Gopal Nataka* describes the ten incarnations of Krishna. This song is independently danced out as the *Dashavatari nach*. Many delightful compositions from the plays of Shankardeva and Madhavdeva are used for solo or group dancing. As a medium of expression dance is so deeply woven into the texture of Ankia theatre that battle scenes are also choreographed and are called *Yuddhar nach*.

Krishna theatre in Assam has flourished under the patronage of Satra institutions which are powerful religious, social and cultural community centres. They maintain the troupes and train the actors in the Satria style of dancing and singing. Many Satra heads have written beautiful Krishna plays. The celibate monks of the monasteries, 'Kevalia Bhagats', also participate in the performance by enacting different roles.

The plays are performed as an offering to Krishna. Watching the



performance is considered an act of great merit. It bestows upon the devotees various 'Phalas' or rewards in terms of temporal and spiritual benefits. *Keli Gopal Nataka* is described as 'Kamajayi'—a play which helps the devotees to conquer their carnal desires. The persons who will sing or perform this play will be able to worship Krishna with full devotion, says Shankardeva at the end of his play *Patni Prasad Nat*. And has not Krishna assured his devoted worshippers that all their desires will be fulfilled?





39. Krishna



40. Krishna and Bhama



41. Indra surrendering before Krishna





42. Main Gate, Barpeta Satra



43. Namghar, Barpeta Satra

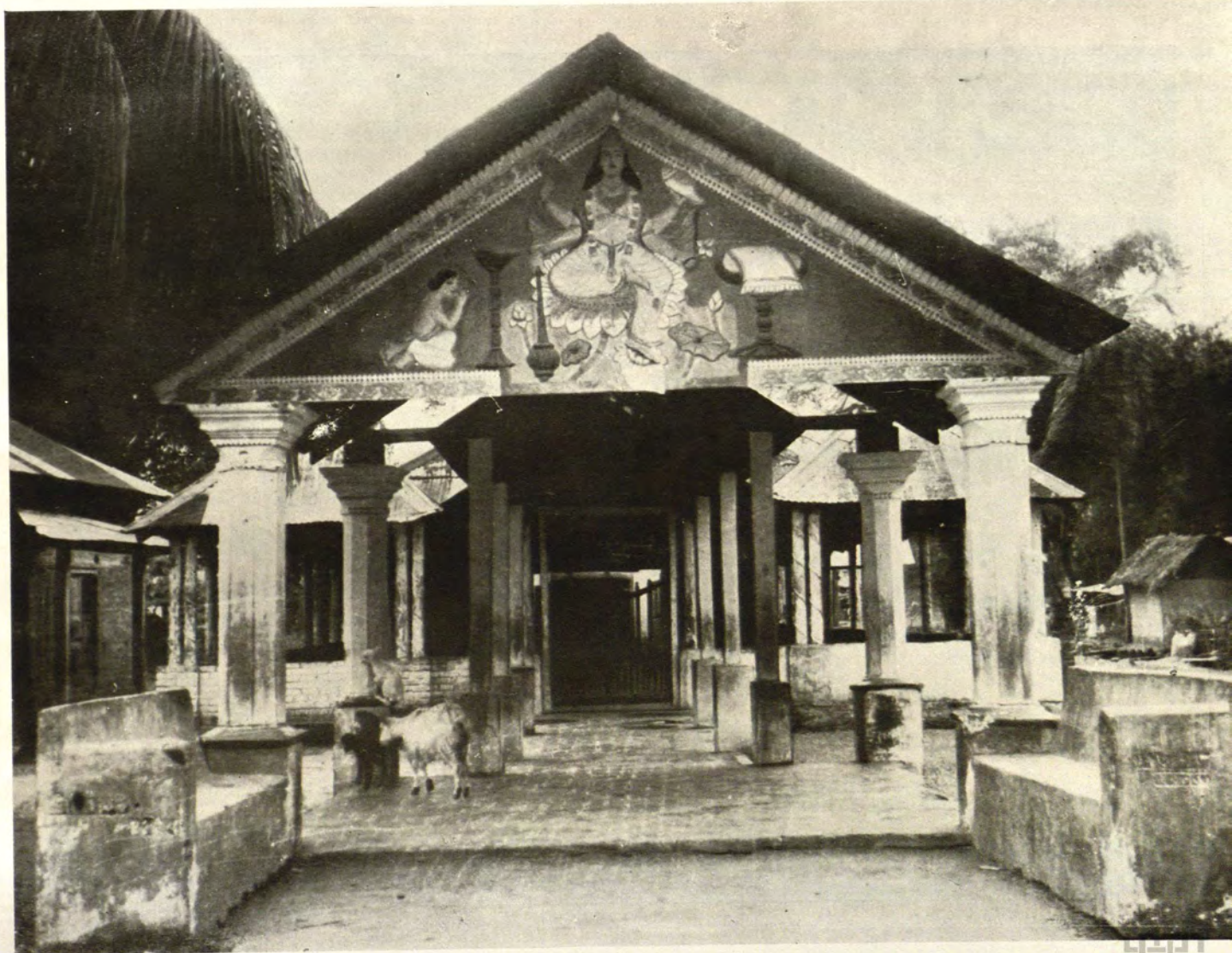


44. Guru Asan, Namghar, Barpeta Satra



45. Rukmini Haran Nat

46. Village Namghar



47. Ram Vijay Nat



48. Ram Vijay Nat



कदम्बसूतकुण्डलं सुचारुगण्डमण्डलम्
व्रजाङ्गनैकवल्लभं नमामि कृष्णदुर्लभम्
नवीन गोपनागरं नवीन केलिलम्पटम्
नमामि मेघसुन्दरं तडित्प्रभाल सत्पटम्
निकामकामदायकं दृगन्तचारुसायकं
रसालवेणुगायकं नमामि कुंजनायकम्

—श्री शंकराचार्य



KRISHNA ATTAM



According to a Puranic myth, Kerala is a narrow strip of land reclaimed from the sea by the legendary Brahmin warrior Parashurama, an incarnation of Vishnu-Krishna, for his own habitation. No wonder the cult of the Bhagavatas has flourished in the region since ancient times. The celebrated Trivandrum shrine of Padmanabha, where the Lord slumbers in *yogic* trance, is mentioned in a Tamil epic belonging to the second century. In this beautiful land, around the mid seventeenth century, emerged a colourful dramatic form called *Krishna Attam*, based on the Krishna legend.

The Krishna cult in Kerala received impetus from the Alvar *bhakti* movement in the Tamil country between the sixth and the ninth centuries. King Kulashekhara of Malabar is counted among the Alvar saints who were great Krishna devotees. His collection of devotional hymns, *Mukunda Mala*, is often compared with Jayadeva's *Gita Govinda*. Keralite by birth, Adya Shankaracharya wrote lyrical *ashtakas* in praise of Lord Krishna. In his *Govindasataka*, he depicts various delightful sports of the cowherd Krishna. He composed these *ashtakas* at the behest of his mother who was a great devotee of Krishna. This shows that by the seventh century the Krishna cult had become quite popular in the region.

Many poems, epic in nature, have been written on the Krishna theme since the twelfth century, including *Srikrishna Vilasa* by Sukumara, *Srikrishna Vijaya* by Sankara, and *Krishna Gatha* by Cherussery. Poetic works like *Ras Krida* and *Gopi Kamoda* depict the erotic



mysticism inherent in the cult of Krishna. Melapathur Narayan Bhattathiri's composition *Narayaniam*, known as the gospel of Guruvayur, is considered as sacred as the *Bhagavata* itself. Bilva-mangala's exquisitely beautiful work *Krishna Karnamrita*, known for its devotional flavour, had a deep influence on Chaitanya Mahaprabhu. He carried the work with him to Bengal. The medieval Keralan poetry made the Krishna lore popular among the masses.

Many diverse dance-drama forms have flourished in Kerala since ancient times. The histrionic skill of Chakyar, a traditional dancer-actor of the region, is described in *Silappadhikaram*, a Tamil epic of the second century. These temple actors who trace their lineage to Suta, the narrator of *Mahabharata*, evolved a *Kutiyattam* style of presenting classical Sanskrit plays. The plays are still staged by the Chakyar men and the Nambyar women in the spacious temple theatres known as Koothambalams. It is significant to note that the *Kutiyattam* repertory includes Bhasa's *Balacharitam* which is the first extant Krishna *Leela* play of India. Usually through the enactment of this play the young Chakyar actors are initiated to the stage.

King Kulashekhar Varman of Mahodayapura who flourished in the tenth century made significant contributions to the *Kutiyattam* theatre of the Chakyars. It was he who first introduced the *Manipravalam* style of speech in Sanskrit theatre, to bring it closer to the local audience. This involved the explanation of Sanskrit and Prakrit dialogues by the *Vidushaka* (jester) in the Malayalam language. One of the two plays written by him is *Subhadradhanajaya* which is based on the Krishna theme. In this play we come across a clever, scheming Krishna who brings about the union of his sister Subhadra with his Pandava friend Arjuna against the wishes of his elder brother Balarama.

In the twelfth century, Jayadeva's musical opera, *Gita Govinda*, reached Kerala and became quite popular under the name *Ashtapadi Attam*. The sweet lyrics of Jayadeva were sung and enacted in the Vaishnava temples. This had a deep impact on the theatrical tradition of the region. In fact it is basically *Ashtapadi Attam* which inspired Manaveda, the Zamorin of Calicut, to evolve a new theatrical form based on the Krishna theme. However, like Jayadeva, he did not confine himself to the *Ras Leela* episodes only, but tried to dramatize the whole of the Krishna story. *Krishna Giti*, a cycle of eight Krishna plays written in Sanskrit by Manaveda, was successfully staged in





9. Yogeshvar Krishna - Krishna Attam





10. Krishna, Balarama fighting with Kansa's wrestlers



1650. The new theatrical form acquired the name *Krishna Attam* and became instantly popular.

The impact of the ancient *Kutiyattam* theatre of the Chakyars on the *Krishna Attam* is quite evident. The highly stylized mode of acting, colourful make-up and costumes and many other stage conventions of the earlier *Kutiyattam* theatre were adopted with some modifications by Manaveda while evolving his new theatrical form. However he introduced two important innovations which were later used in *Kathakali* as well. In *Kutiyattam* the actors deliver their own dialogues, but Manaveda entrusted that task to the chorus and made the actors only enact the lines sung by the chorus. By divesting the actors of their speech he made them concentrate more on the *abhinaya*. This, in a way, was necessary because of the dance oriented nature of the new form. There was no dancing as such in the earlier *Kutiyattam* theatre. Manaveda introduced a vigorous style of dancing which leaves the actor breathless and affects his speech, so the spoken word was taken up by the chorus. Manaveda dispensed with the extremely slow pace of the *Kutiyattam* theatre, and made *Krishna Attam* more racy and action oriented. A Chakyar actor picks up a single act of the play and performs it for several days. Manaveda avoided this and made *Krishna Attam* more crisp and precise. In *Kutiyattam* the *Vidushaka* occupies the most important position in the total scheme of the presentation. He strays from the actual text and takes the liberty of commenting with his characteristic oblique humour and sarcasm, not only on events in the play, but also on the contemporary social scene. No such character is introduced by Manaveda in *Krishna Attam*, maybe because of its avowedly religious nature.

The deep devotional flavour of the *Krishna Attam* can be explained by a legend associated with its origin. Manaveda once had a divine vision of the child Krishna. He saw the deity playing happily under the *Ilanji* tree in the premises of the Guruvayur temple. When he came out of the blissful mystic trance he found a colourful peacock feather fallen from the head-band of the cowherd Krishna. This mystic experience inspired Manaveda to compose his *Krishna Giti* which was dramatized as *Krishna Attam*. The legend further states that the beautiful peacock feather, received by Manaveda as a token of the Lord's grace, adorned the crown of the actor who played the role of Krishna in the opening performance. The sanctity of the performance is still maintained meticulously. Before starting the series of plays the



actors observe a fast for a day to purify themselves. Devout members of the audience also observe a fast. The plays are performed as a votive offering to the Lord who is supposed to be present there, witnessing the *Leelas*.

Krishna Attam is a cycle of eight plays which are performed for eight consecutive nights. As it is not considered appropriate to end the drama cycle with the play *Swargarohana* in which Krishna's demise is shown, the next night again the first play of the cycle, *Avatharam*, is staged. This implies that Krishna is reincarnated again and again to protect his devotees from evil. The following is a brief synopsis of the plays of the *Krishna Attam* cycle.

1. *Avatharam*

The Earth goddess prays sorrowfully to Brahma to relieve her from the tyranny of Kamsa. The marriage of Vasudeva and Devaki takes place. A divine voice foretells the death of Kamsa at the hands of their eighth child. Vasudeva pacifies Kamsa.

Kamsa kills the first six babies born of Devaki. Ananta is conceived next. Vishnumaya enters Devaki's womb.

Devaki conceives for the eighth time. Vishnu is born as Krishna. Vasudeva exchanges the child with Yashoda's new born girl. Kamsa enters angrily. When he tries to kill Yashoda's child taking her to be Devaki's, by striking her against the rock, the child tells him that his enemy is safe elsewhere. Kamsa orders the killing of all the children.

Yashoda and the Gopis are happy that Krishna is born. Putana attains heaven. Krishna grows steadily. The Gopis complain to Yashoda about the theft of butter by the child. She scolds Krishna and consoles them.

2. *Kaliyamardanam*

Yashoda sees all the worlds in Krishna's mouth. The naughty child is tied by Yashoda. *Arjuna Bhanjana Leela*. Krishna frees Nalakubara and Manigriva from a curse.



Krishna goes to Vrindavana. Krishna kills a demon who comes to Vrindavana in the guise of Baka. Agha who comes disguised as a snake is killed by Krishna. He rescues the cows and cowherds that had entered the snake's mouth.

Brahma praises Krishna.

The demon Dhenuka is killed by Balarama.

Krishna jumps into river Kalindi. The cobra Kalia becomes angry. While others are horrified Krishna dances on his hood.

Krishna steals away the clothes of the Gopis.

He tells Nandagopa to worship Govardhana instead of Indra.

3. *Ras Krida*

Krishna plays on the flute. The enchanted Gopis come to him. He sports with them.

Krishna elopes with Radha. The other Gopis go in search of him. They find Radha abandoned by Krishna because of her pride. They all go to the banks of the Yamuna and meditate. They shed all their pride and Krishna appears before them.

Ras dance by Krishna and the Gopis.

The Yaksha Shankhachuda takes away the Gopis who were with Balarama. Krishna follows him and kills him. Krishna gives 'Chudamani' which he takes from the Yaksha to Balarama.

4. *Kamsa Vadham*

The angry Kamsa tries to kill Vasudeva but Narada dissuades him. Vasudeva and Devaki are imprisoned by Kamsa.



Akrura, under orders from Kamsa, goes to Vrindavana to fetch Krishna and Balarama. The Gopis shed tears at their departure.

Armed with the teeth of Kuvalayapeeda, an elephant of Kamsa, they kill his wrestlers Chanura and Mushtika. Kamsa is also killed by Krishna. They free Vasudeva and Devaki.

5. *Swayamvaram*

As a tuition fee to their Guru Sandipani, Krishna and Balarama retrieve Sandipani's dead son from Yama, the god of death.

Kalayavana comes to fight with Krishna. In the chase Krishna tricks him and brings him before Muchakunda who reduces Kalayavana into ashes. Krishna appears before Muchakunda in his divine form with four arms.

Balarama weds Revati.

Rukmini who loves Krishna sends a messenger to Dwaraka to inform him of the intention of her brother to marry her off to Shishupala against her wishes.

Krishna takes away Rukmini and angers her brother Rukmi. He battles with Rukmi and humiliates him.

In search of 'Syamanthakam', a precious jewel, Krishna reaches the cave of Jambuvan. The defeated Jambuvan offers his daughter Jambavati to the victorious Krishna.

Krishna gives the jewel to Satrajit and marries his beautiful daughter Satyabhama. Satyabhama is enchanted by Krishna's subtle wit.

6. *Bana Yuddham*

With Satyabhama Krishna goes to battle with Narakasura. He kills the demon Mura. Then he has an encounter



with Naraka. Krishna, hit by an arrow, swoons. Bhama continues the fight. Krishna recovers and kills Naraka.

Krishna does penance to please Shiva and gets his blessings. Narada informs Krishna about the imprisonment of his grandson Aniruddha by Bana. Krishna defeats Bana in battle and his protector Parama Shiva. Usha, Bana's daughter, marries Aniruddha.

7. *Vivida Vadham*

While Balarama is enjoying himself with wine and women, Vivida disturbs him. Balarama kills Vivida.

Krishna goes to Jarasandha with Bhima and Arjuna in the guise of Brahmins and appeals him to fight with any one of them. In the fight Bhima kills Jarasandha.

In the *Rajasuya* the Pandavas worship Krishna. Shishupala abuses Krishna and is killed by him.

The beginning of the Mahabharata war. Krishna narrates the *Gita* to Arjuna.

Sudama comes to Krishna who bestows on him immense wealth.

8. *Swargarohana*

Uddhava, who knows that the Yadavas are going to be destroyed because of the curse of sages, goes to Krishna who is about to ascend to heaven.

Krishna gives advice to Uddhava who returns to Badari.

Using the method of *yoga* Balarama abandons his body.

Jara shoots an arrow at Krishna by mistake. Krishna pardons the weeping hunter and grants him entry into heaven. Krishna's chariot-driver Daruka enters. Consoling him Krishna sends back Daruka.



Krishna turns himself into Mahavishnu.

The episode ends with *Shri Vaikuntham* in which songs in praise of Vishnu-Krishna are sung.

Now-a-days *Krishna Attam* is mainly confined to the Guruvayur temple where it is performed as a votive offering to Lord Krishna, the presiding deity of the shrine. According to *Sthala Purana* of Guruvayur, Krishna enjoined Uddhava to rescue his idol from Dwaraka which was about to be submerged into the sea. This was done with the help of Guru and Vayu and the sacred idol was installed in the Parashuram Kshetra. The place became famous as Guruvayur and came to be known as the Dwaraka of south India. The temple has maintained its own *Krishna Attam* troupe which performs various Krishna plays in a majestic open air concrete *mandapam* adjacent to the main shrine. The devotees arrange the performance of different plays as offerings in the hope of fulfilling their desires. For instance, a devotee who desires to beget a beautiful child offers the performance of *Avatharam* to the deity and the one who wants a handsome husband like Krishna offers the performance of *Swayamvaram*.

A second-floor corner room adjacent to the wall is turned into *Nepathya Griha* where all costumes, jewellery, masks and other make-up material are kept. Sitting on a mat the actors start their make-up and prepare themselves for the particular play they are enacting. Rice paste or *chutti*, charcoal powder, Indian blue, red arsenic and similar other indigenous dyes are used for the make-up. Glittering diadems and other ornaments are worn by the actors according to their roles. Characters like Brahma, Yama, Putana, Mura, Narakasura, Jambuvan wear painted masks. The bodily movements of the actors are so meaningfully choreographed that even the static, immobile masks worn by them come alive and start projecting various sentiments and emotions.

While the actors are busy doing their make-up, the chorus enter the place of performance with musical instruments and take their stand on the right side of a huge brass lamp. Then starts skilful playing of drums, called *Kelikayya*. *Krishna Attam* uses pure *Sopana Sangeetham*—a form of music evolved and preserved by the temple musicians of Kerala. The drumming announces the commencement of the play and the audience start gathering in the *Mandapam*. Then holding



high a curtain in their hands, two persons appear on the scene. Behind the curtain four actors in the role of Gopis perform an invocatory dance while the chorus sing songs in the praise of the Lord. After the dance is over, the Gopis leave the place and the play proper begins. The important characters first dance behind the curtain and then appear from behind it in a majestic manner. The chorus sing the songs introducing the character while he is making his curtain-entry. Scene division is also indicated by the raising and removing of the curtain. When Lord Krishna enters, the fragrance of rose petals showered on him fills the whole atmosphere.

As stated earlier, the actors do not deliver their own dialogues but through dance and rich gesture language depict the meaning of the songs sung by the chorus. Apart from the dialogues of the characters the chorus sing the songs giving background information and maintain the story link between the various scenes actually enacted before the audience. The actors and the chorus together present the show to the viewers.

Except for a few wooden stools, no stage property as such is used in the performance. The audience and the performers are on the same floor level all the time. Two big brass oil lamps are lit to illuminate the acting arena. In *Kathakali* performances actors do not cross the lamps but *Krishna Attam* actors sometimes move beyond it.

Dances of Krishna are extremely graceful and enchanting. In the play *Ras Krida* he dances with Gopis in various beautiful formations. In *Kaliyamardanam* a small wooden snake is projected from behind the half-raised curtain, and Krishna performs a vigorous dance before it, as if he is actually dancing on the serpent hood to subdue him by the forceful impact of his feet. There are many battle scenes in the *Krishna Attam* plays in which Krishna and Balarama encounter ferocious demons. These scenes are choreographed in a forceful (*Tandava*) style adopted from the ritualistic folk dances of the region. The technique of swift turns, whirls and jumps associated with a variety of dance-dramas particularly those belonging to the Bhagavati cult, were woven into the texture of *Krishna Attam*, lending it a unique grandeur. The Krishna theatre of Kerala is of course not devoid of the delightful *Lasya* aspect of dancing. It is particularly manifest in the play *Ras Krida* in which Krishna performs *Mallipu Chital*, the jasmine garland dance, with the Gopis. They dance in a circle, sometimes forming in circle within, displaying beautiful patterns.



With the emergence of *Kathakali* on the theatrical scene of Kerala, *Krishna Attam* was slowly relegated to the background and ultimately remained mainly confined to the precincts of the Guruvayur temple. However, in the process, *Kathakali* itself started carrying the tales of Krishna to the people.

In a way *Kathakali* owes its origin to *Krishna Attam*. Tradition says that once the Raja of Kottarakkara requested Zamorin Manaveda to send his much celebrated troupe to his court to perform *Krishna Attam*. But Manaveda refused to comply, so the Kottarakkara king composed a cycle of eight plays based on the Rama theme and got them staged sometime during the latter half of the seventeenth century. The new theatrical form became much more popular after the Raja of Kottayam added to its repertory four plays based on the themes drawn from the *Mahabharata*. Soon plays based on the *Bhagavata* and other *Puranas* were being composed, enriching the new form which came to be known as *Kathakali* or *Attakatha*. The *Krishna Attam* is in pure Sanskrit, but the new form adopted *Sanskritized Malayalam* as a medium of expression, which brought it closer to the people. In course of its evolution the enactment of the Krishna legend became a prominent part of the *Kathakali* theatre.

The *Kathakali* technique betrays the deep influence of earlier theatrical forms of the region including *Krishna Attam*. Probably the influence of *Kutiyattam* and *Ashtapadittam* reached *Kathakali* through *Krishna Attam*. A clear division of recitation and acting between the chorus and the actors, the technique devised by the *Krishna Attam*, has been accepted by *Kathakali*. However it completely dispensed with masks and instead evolved a most colourful style of make-up which is divided into five categories: *Paccha*, *Katti*, *Tadi*, *Kari* and *Minukku*. *Kathakali* acting is highly stylized and more elaborate and pronounced than that of *Krishna Attam*. Likewise, *Kathakali* costumes are more ornate and rich. However the source of many Krishna plays enacted on the *Kathakali* stage is Manaveda's *Krishna Giti*. *Kathakali* presented the Krishna legend in a more grandiose and imposing shape, enhancing its mass appeal.

The *Kathakali* performance opens with *Keli*, a playing of drums and other instruments like gongs and cymbals. It is followed by a dance behind the curtain by a pair of female characters which is called *Thotayam*. *Nandi* verses (prayer at the opening of the play) are sung



invoking various deities. In *Purapad* which follows *Nandi* the hero of the play with his consort performs a majestic dance. After their departure, it is significant to note, a song from the *Gita Govinda* is sung by the chorus. The following *Ashtapadi* from the 11th Canto is rendered in the last part of the *Purvaranga*—prelude of the play:

*Manjutarakunjatalakelisadane
Vilasa Ratirabhasahasitavadane
Pravisha Radhe, Madhava Samipamiha!*

Face radiant with love's desire
Enter O Radhe in this beautiful bower
To be with Madhav in blissful union!

This connects *Kathakali* with Jayadeva's opera which was popular in Kerala as a *Ashtapadi Attam*. The use of the verse signifies that whatever the audience are going to see after the *Purvaranga* is basically the theatrical rendering of the divine sports of Vishnu-Krishna and his various incarnations. *Kathakali* started with Rama plays, and Jayadeva in his famous *Dashavatar Ashtapadi* counts Rama among the ten incarnations of Krishna. It is also significant to note that the *Kathakali Sutradhar* who is the leader of the chorus is called *Bhagavata*, that is, a devotee of Vishnu-Krishna. All these factors betray the influence of the Krishna cult on the *Kathakali* theatre.

Rajasuya, *Putana Moksha*, *Kamsa Vadha*, *Rukmini Swayamvara*, *Narakasura Vadha* are some of the prominent Krishna plays enacted on the *Kathakali* stage. In many *Mahabharata* plays he appears as one of the major characters who dominates the scene. It is interesting to note that in the play *Putana Moksha* the child Krishna is represented by a wooden doll. The actor enacting the role of Krishna wears an imposing make-up under the *Paccha* category. This colour scheme is used for the make-up of noble characters including divinities and mythological heroes. Krishna's face is painted green with a prominent black lining around his eyes. His lips are given a deep red coating. He wears a magnificent yellow skirt and a blue jacket. On his head a vase-shaped diadem with peacock feathers known as *Krishnamuti* is placed. Over glittering jewellery he wears a colourful garland of flowers.

In *Kathakali* there is not much scope for the *Bala Leela*—childhood



acts of the divine cowherd. It takes greater interest in portraying the mature Krishna who is a friend of the Pandavas, and of Draupadi, the beloved of Rukmini, the *Sutradhar* of the *Mahabharata* war, the patron of Sudama. It suits the spirit of *Kathakali*. Episodes from the life of Krishna which are full of *Veera*, *Shringara* and *Adbhuta* sentiments are taken up by *Kathakali* actors for enactment and presented with spectacular grandeur.

By enacting the *Krishna Leelas* through various dramatic forms including *Kutiyattam*, *Ashtapadi Attam*, *Krishna Attam* and *Kathakali*, Kerala paid a rich tribute to Krishna.





49. Avatharam, Kansa at the marriage of Vasudeva and Devaki

50. Kaliamardanam, Krishna stealing the cloths of Gopis





51. Ras Krida, Gopis approach Krishna on hearing his flute



52. Krishna and Gopis, Mullapoochuttal dance, Ras Krida





53. Swayamvaram, Krishna and Kalayavana



54. Bana Yuddham, Narakasur, Garuda and Satyabhama

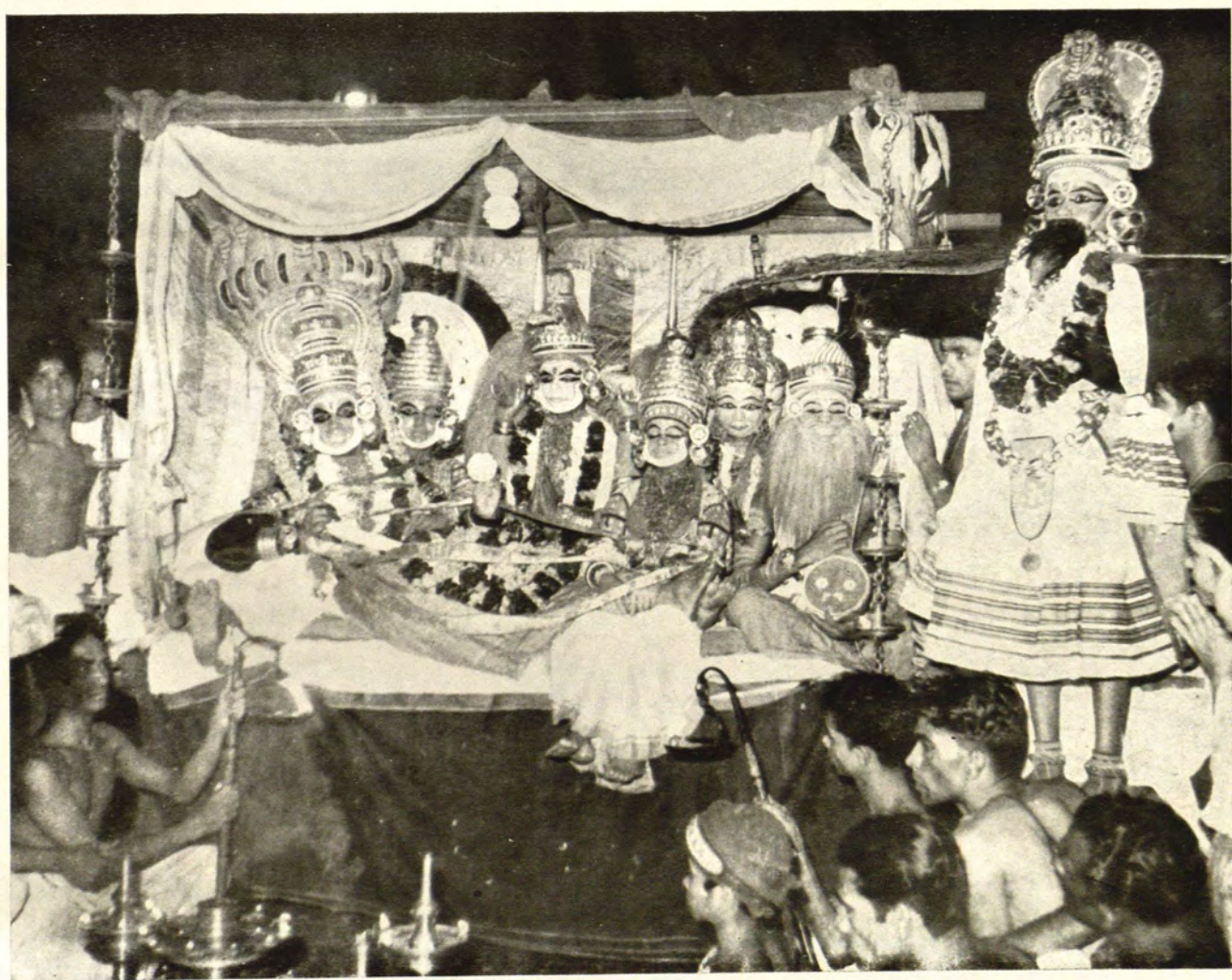


55. Vivida Vadham, Balaram and toddy tapper



56. Krishna, Balarama fighting with Chanur and Mushtik





57. Swargarohanam, Vishnu-Krishna, Bhoodevi, Shridevi, Shiva, Brahma and Garuda





58. Make-up room with masks, Guruvayur temple, Guruvayur

वेदानुद्धरते जगन्निवहते भूगोलमुद्विभ्रते
दैत्यं दारयते बलिं छलयते क्षत्रक्षयं कुर्वते
पौलस्त्यं जयते हलं कलयते कारुण्यमातन्वते
म्लेच्छान्मूर्च्छयते दशाकृतिकृते कृष्णाय तुभ्यं नमः
—गीतगोविंदम्



KALA



Indira Gandhi National
Centre for the Arts

In the tiny but beautiful region of Gomantaka various enchanting forms of the Krishna theatre have survived through the years.

Situated between the Sahyadri ranges and the Arabian sea, we find Gomantaka mentioned in the Bhishma Parva of the *Mahabharata*. It derives its name from its once abundant wealth of cows. Around the second century before Christ, Gomantaka was ruled by the cowherd Abhira community whose favourite deity was Krishna. Colourful *Ras* dances were prevalent in this Gopa community. Even today the Dhanagars of Gomantaka, who are said to be the descendants of ancient Abhiras, are known for their love of *Ras* dances.

Gomantaka is known for its theatrical arts and rich music. *Silappadhikaram* mentions beautiful dancers from the Konkan country 'whose dark curly hair were loosely woven with shining garlands, whose incipient breasts were adorned with jewelled chains and whose long eyes resembled dark carps'. One cannot rule out the possibility of their performing *Ras* dances based on the Krishna theme as they were quite popular in the region.

The earliest extant dramatic form of the Gomantaka is *Jagar* which betrays the deep influence of the Krishna cult. In the *Purvaranga* of the performance, a girl dances holding an image of Krishna in her hand. After the *Purvaranga*, two demons—Madhu and Kaitabha—appear on the scene wearing fearful masks. They are slain by Matsya



incarnation of Lord Vishnu-Krishna. It is significant to note that in the *Natyashastra*, Bharata attributes the origin of the four styles of dramatic representation—*Vrittis*—to the actions, speech and movements of Lord Krishna at the time of killing these two demons. In a way *Jagar* may be described as an enactment of the myth associated with the origin of the *Vrittis*.

In this early folk theatre form of Gomantaka, we find the dormant seeds of later Krishna theatre which branched out in the form of *Dashavatar Kala*, *Gopal Kala* and *Gaulan Kala*. The word *Kala* has a special significance in the context of the Krishna myth. Harivijaya states that Krishna and his Gopa friends used to mix their eatables together and then distribute the mixture, *Kala*, among them all as a *prasad* of Krishna:

*Amuchya Shidorya Ekatra Karoni
Kala Vatasi Tu Chakrapani*

In the dramatic context we may explain the word as a mixing up of various theatrical elements like dance, song, music and dialogue, to weave a spectacular fabric of Krishna theatre, which we may accept as a divine *prasad*.

Among the most developed theatrical forms of Gomantaka, one is *Dashavatar Kala*. *Dashavatar* means the ten incarnations of Vishnu-Krishna. Though the Puranas and epics differ as to the number and the names of these incarnations, the most important among them are *Matsya*, *Kurma*, *Varaha*, *Narasimha*, *Vamana*, *Parashurama*, *Rama*, *Krishna* or *Balarama*, *Buddha* and *Kalki*. Originating in the early Vedic literature the concept of the *Avatara* took concrete shape in the Gupta period. In the eighth century rock-cut Adivaraha Perumal temple at Mamallapura we find an inscription mentioning these incarnations. It says: '... hasya Narasimhaschya Vamana Ramo Ramasya Ramasya Buddha Kalki cha te Dasha.' The missing words at the beginning of the inscription must have been 'Matsya, Kurmo, Vara...' The name of Krishna is not mentioned in the list because he is supposed to be the source of all these incarnations. In the famous *Dashavatar Ashtapadi* that occurs in the opening verses of Jayadeva's *Gita Govinda*, Krishna is not counted among the *Avatars*, but mentioned as a source of them all: '*Dashakruti krute Krishnaya Tubhyam Namah*' (I bow before thee oh Krishna of the ten incarnations).



The tradition of showing ten incarnations of Vishnu-Krishna on the stage certainly goes back to the tenth century in which Acharya Nandikeshvara wrote his famous treatise *Abhinaya Darpana* or the mirror of gestures. In this work, for the guidance of actors, the *Hasta Mudras*, hand-gestures, of ten incarnations are given. However, instead of Buddha, this work mentions Krishna as one of the *Avatars*. Writing about the hand-gesture of Krishna, the Acharya states:

*Mrigashirshe Tu Hastabhyamnyonyabhimukhe Krute
Ashyopakanthe Krishnasya Hasta Ityuchyate Budhee*

Both hands in *Mrigashirsha Mudra* facing each other, raised to the level of the mouth is *Krishna Hasta*.

All fingers extended straight and joined together is *Patak Hasta Mudra*; and when the middle of the *Pataka Hasta* is hollowed and the thumb and the little finger extended, it is *Mrigashirsha*. It forms the sign of the flute near the lips of Krishna. This is the most popular Krishna-motif in the dance dialect. A manuscript giving a detailed choreography of the *Gita Govinda* is found in the Sarasvati Mahal Library at Tanjore. This work describes this *mudra* as *Vanshadharana Mudra*.

The *Dashavatar Ashtapadi* of Jayadeva's *Gita Govinda* indicates the tradition of enacting the ten incarnations of Krishna on the stage. After Jayadeva many other poets composed *Dashavatar* songs for the stage. For instance Mahapurusha Shankardeva has included a *Dashavatar* song in his play *Keli Gopal Nataka* which is sometimes danced as a separate solo item in the *Satria* style. Likewise we find a *Dashavatar* song in the play *Bhama Kalapam* and also in the *Krishna Leela Tarangini*. But these efforts of presenting the ten incarnations of Vishnu-Krishna on stage remained confined to the domain of dance. The credit of evolving a full-fledged *Dashavatar* play goes to Gomantaka and the regions around.

The first positive evidence as to the existence of *Dashavatari* drama comes from the *Dasabodha*, a long poem composed by the Marathi saint-poet Ramdas, a senior contemporary of Chatrapati Shivaji. Says the saint:

*Khelata Netake Dashavatari
Tethe Yeti Sundara Nari*



Netra Modati Kalakusari

Pari Avaghe Dhatingana 6:8-11

While performing *Dashavatari* plays beautiful girls appear on the stage and allure the audience by their arty eye movements but in reality they are nothing but males in female guise.

From this verse in the *Dasabodha*, we know for certain that a dramatic form called *Dashavatar* was in vogue at the time of Ramdas and male actors used to act in female roles. But no further information on the style of its presentation or theme of the plays enacted is available. Around the same time, the *Yakshagana* theatre associated with the Bhagavata cult emerged in the neighbouring Karnataka. As the myths connected with the ten incarnations of Vishnu-Krishna were taken up for enactment by the *Yakshagana* theatre, it came to be known as *Dashavatar Ata* also. But, it is significant to note, there is not a single *Yakshagana* play which professes to present all the ten incarnations on the stage in a single performance.

In the *Dashavatar Kala* of Gomantaka, all the ten incarnations are generally brought on the stage in a single performance, and the main episodes connected with two or three of the incarnations are performed elaborately. Usually the Krishna theme dominates the scene because it is Krishna who manifested himself through these *Avatars* to relieve the earth of her burden of sins. The *Bhagavata Purana* says: 'Just as from an inexhaustible lake thousands of streams flow on all sides so also from Hari come forth countless incarnations.'

The *Dashavatar Kala* is generally performed in the spacious *Sabha Mandapa*, assembly hall, of the temple on festive occasions as an offering to the presiding deity of the place. After elaborate evening worship, the *Utsava Murti* of the temple deity is taken around in a procession with a lot of singing, dancing and display of fireworks. The image is then installed ceremoniously in the upper balcony of the *Sabha Mandapa* at the other end of which actors perform the *Kala* facing the deity.

The *Kala* opens with *Dhemali*, playing on the *Mridanga*, and big brass cymbals, first in a slow and then in a fast tempo. The chorus stand in a crescent-like formation with the *Sutradhar* in the centre, and no song is sung while *Dhemali* is going on. Then enters god Ganapati,



the remover of obstacles, with his two consorts Riddhi and Siddhi. Elaborate worship is offered to them by two Brahmins who crack all sorts of jokes exhibiting their greedy nature. After their departure Sarasvati, the goddess of learning, comes in dancing and sporting her peacock symbol. After giving her blessings to all she goes back. With this ends the *Purvaranga*.

The play proper opens with the enactment of the *Matsyavatar* story. Demon Sankasur steals the Vedas from Brahmadeva which Vishnu recovers by slaying the villain. Sankasur wears a black cloth mask with a protruding red tongue. He indulges in humorous conversation with the *Sutradhar*. He is a villain and a jester at the same time. This story is given prominence in the *Dashavatar* theatre.

Of the remaining incarnations, Kurma, Varaha, Vamana, Parashurama, Buddha and Kalki are mentioned by the *Sutradhar* in his song and sometimes their representations are shown on the stage. The Narasimha incarnation is quite popular and many a times the story of Prahlada is enacted. Rama *Avatara* is also popular. But it is usually the Krishna *Avatara* which is enacted elaborately because of its mass appeal.

The goddess Earth, troubled by the tyranny of demons, prays to Brahma to relieve her of her burden of sins. Along with Indra and other deities, Brahma goes to Vishnu and requests him to help the goddess. Vishnu agrees. On earth Kamsa arranges the marriage of her sister with Vasudeva and Vishnu takes birth as Krishna. Then through the various episodes the story of the mighty divine child is unfolded on stage.

Every *Dashavatar* troupe prepares its own script by arranging appropriate songs written by different poets into a neat story sequence. Dialogues are improvised taking cue from the songs sung by the *Sutradhar* and his chorus. It presents a rich fare of music and poetry. The *Dashavatar* actors wear masks of wood and papier mache when required. The Ganesha mask is considered most auspicious and it is worshipped along with the temple deity. Sarasvati ties a wooden peacock head to her waist suggesting that she is astride the bird which is her vehicle. Vishnu-Krishna wears a gold embroidered jacket, *dhoti*, and a glittering diadem on his head. Young Krishna is shown in cowherd dress sporting a flute in his hand.



If staged in a traditional manner, the *Dashavatar* play takes one full night for completion. Next morning another interesting form of Krishna drama, *Gopal Kala*, is staged in the temple *Sabha Mandapa* with equal enthusiasm. It is based on the story of the demon Pralambhasura who was killed by Balarama in Vrindavana. According to the *Bhagavata Purana*, the demon was sent by Kamsa to kill Krishna. The ferocious Pralambha, in the guise of a cowherd boy, mixes with the Gopas and starts playing various games with them. When he finds out that he cannot defeat Krishna, he lifts his elder brother Balarama on his shoulders and starts running. But mighty Balarama kills him by hitting him on the head with his fist.

The performers are divided into two groups, one is led by Krishna-Balarama and another by Pralambha. This reminds us of the division of the *Granthikas* into two groups, Kamsa *Bhaktas* and Krishna *Bhaktas*, referred to in Patanjali's *Mahabhashya*. Except for Krishna, Balarama and Pralambha, no other performer wears any make-up or costume. They are all in simple clothes. The *Sutradhar* starts the performance by invoking Lord Ganesha. He, along with his chorus, then sings a song about the games they played and how Krishna defeated the crafty demon in each one of them. All these games were once actually played on stage but now the practice has been discontinued.

The two groups led by their respective leaders stand facing each other. One group sings a riddle and challenges the other to solve it. Then comes the turn of the other group to sing a riddle. This goes on for an hour or two. The audience immensely enjoy the verbal duel. In the end Pralambha lifts Balarama on his shoulders and starts running. Balarama hits him on his head and kills him instantaneously. The *Sutradhar* and his chorus then sing songs invoking Krishna and Balarama while they break a pot full of milk and curd. The contents of the pot are distributed among the audience as *prasad* of the divine cowherd. And with this ends the interesting *Gopal Kala*.

The oldest and most popular form of Krishna drama in Gomantaka is *Gaulan Kala*. It is enacted in the temple *Sabha Mandapa* by child actors, both boys and girls. As it is performed in the afternoon it is called *Dis Kala* also. It is a proper play in which various childhood sports of Krishna are depicted. Interesting duets of Radha and Krishna, and Gopis and Krishna, as also their delightful dances enliven the *Gaulan Kala* performance. Like *Manasukha* of the *Ras Leela* theatre



of Vraja, Pendya and Vakadya, two Gopa playmates of Krishna, act as jesters. While speaking Vakadya stammers a lot which creates many humorous situations.

The *Gaulan Kala* performance opens with a musical discourse by the *Sutradhar*. Through his songs he invokes various deities and underlines the importance of worshipping Krishna. Sometimes he delivers a sermon explaining the metaphysical aspects of the Krishna cult. Then the play proper begins. The dialogues are generally in verse and the stress is on singing them. Radha appears as a favourite Gopi of Krishna, but the strong aura of eroticism that pervades the Krishna poetry of Orissa and Bengal is absent here. Their relationship takes the form of a mild flirtation of an adolescent boy with a slightly older girl. In *Gaulan Kala* emphasis is more on the naughty pranks of the child Krishna than on his amorous exploits. For instance, here is a brief scene from a *Gaulan Kala* play:

Krishna and his Gopa friends assemble under a tree at the outskirts of Vrindavana.

Krishna : Well friends! Where should we play today?

Pendya : (Song)

I will tell you Krishna,
Let us go to the Yamuna with the Gopalas.
Lovely are the Yamuna banks.
Let us play there Shriranga.
If the cows are thirsty,
Water is there, Govinda!

Vakadya : (Trembling with fear) But I will not go there.

Krishna : Why, Vakadya?

Vakadya : (Song)

If we go there,
Will Kalia spare us?
Coming out of the Yamuna,
Will he not devour us?



Krishna : Then let us go to Kunjavana to dance, sing and play.

All : Excellent idea! Let us go there.

Krishna : But without milk and butter to feast on there is no fun in going for a picnic. Now decide whose house we should raid today!

Vakadya : No Krishna, I am afraid of the Gopis.

(Song)

Gaulinis will wake up.
They will catch us,
And give us a beating, Govinda!

Pendya : You are a coward Vakadya. Be bold like me!

Vakadya : I know how bold you are. You will be the first to run.

Krishna : Please do not quarrel friends. It is not good.

Pendya : I think we should steal butter from Radha's house.

(Song)

Proud of her beauty,
Radha considers herself clever.
We will teach her a lesson
That she will forget never!

Krishna : I was also thinking the same way. Now let us move. Yesterday she refused to dance with me in Kunjavana. Now I will teach her a good lesson.

(Song)

Quietly entering her house,
Let us break her milk pot,



And run with the butter
That will come to our lot!

All : A good plan. Let us go.

They all enter the house of Radha. As Krishna is about to reach for the milk pot Radha enters. She catches Krishna and all the others run away.

Radha : You naughty butter-thief, I will not spare you now!

Krishna : Why are you so angry Radhe? What wrong have I done?

Radha : Don't act innocent. Were you not trying to steal butter from this pot?

Krishna : Not at all, Radhe. I saw a cat hovering around the pot, so I came here to drive her out!

Radha : Do not lie to me Krishna, I will not be deceived by your clever words. I will now take you to mother Yashoda who will give you severe punishment.

Krishna : Please do not do that. You are a good girl, Radhe!

Radha : On one condition will I leave you.

Krishna : I will do whatever you ask me.

Radha : Do you promise?

Krishna : Yes I promise.

Radha : Then play on the flute for me.

Krishna : With pleasure. But you will have to sing and dance.

Radha : As you wish O Lord!

Radha sings and dances while Krishna plays on the flute.



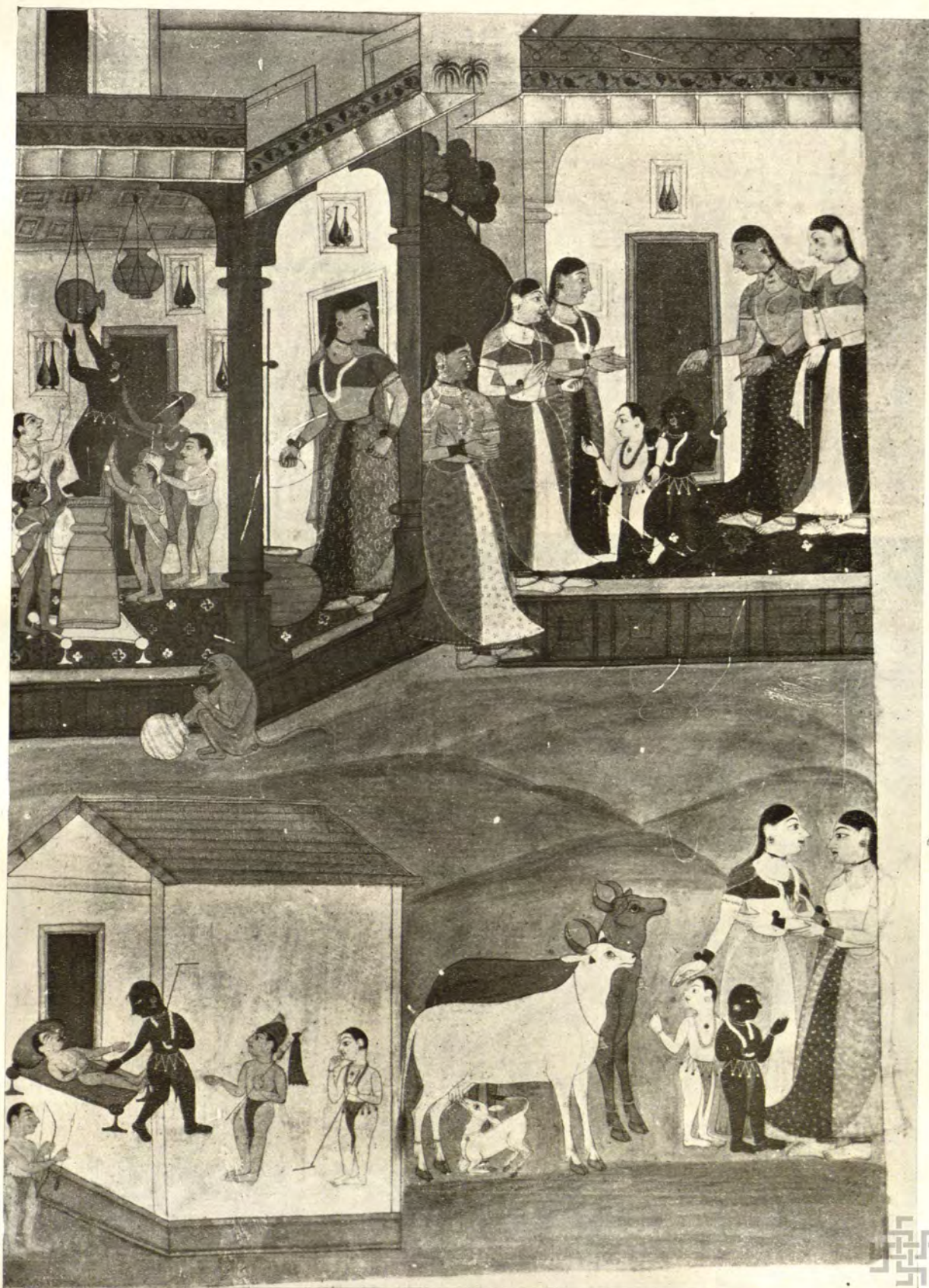
On festive occasions the beautifully decorated *Sabha Mandapas* of Gomantaka temples vibrate with song, dance, music and drama, depicting the divine deeds of the playful cowherd boy. And the *Sutradhar* assures his audience:

*Gokuli Kride Purna Hari,
Techi Parise Gatha,
Hoshil Pvan tu . . .*

With heart full of devotion listen to the story of the playful Krishna, who sported in Gokula. It will rid you of your sins!



59. Childhood pranks of Krishna





60. Mahalakshmi temple
Sabha Mandapa, Panaji



61. Dashavatar, Sutradhar
and his chorus



62. Dashavatar, Ganesha with Riddhi and Siddhi



63. Dashavatar, Ganesha worship





64. Dashavatar, Saraswati



65. Dashavatar, Vishnu-Krishna as Matsya Avatar



66. Matsya Avatar fighting with demon Sankasur



67. Gaulan Kala, Krishna with Gopa friends





68. Gopis holding butter thief



69. Radha and Krishna



70. Krishna and Gopis, Stick Dance—Tipari





71. Dashavatar, jesting priests of Ganesh

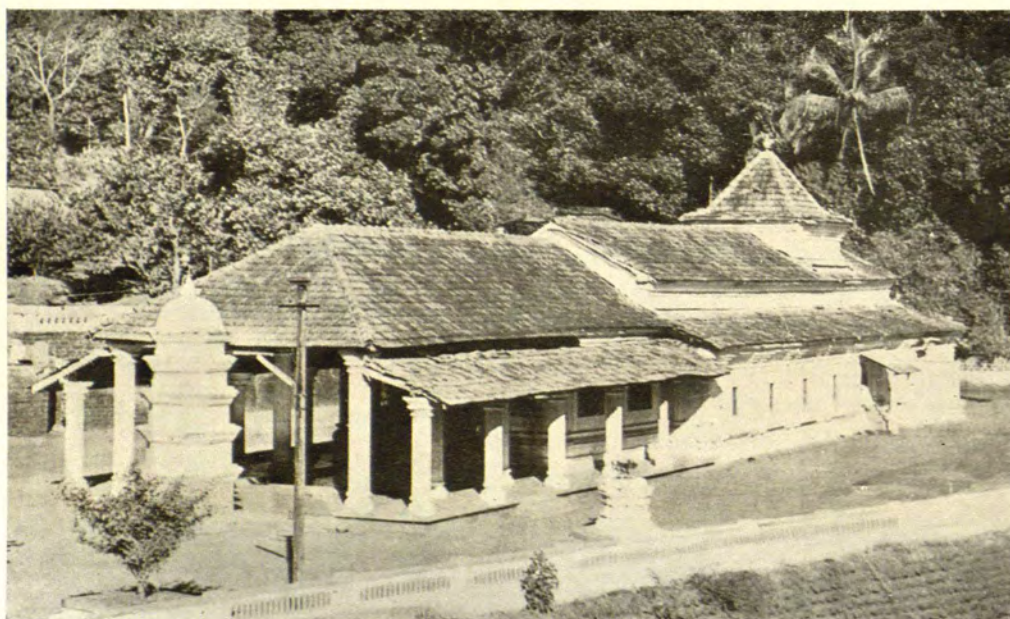
72. Toarch-bearer



73. Kala, chorus offering prayer to deities



74. Datta Mandir, Sankhali, Dicholi, Sabhagriha



णच्चणसलाहणणिहेण पासपरिसिठिआ णिउणगोवी
सरिसगोविआणो चुम्बइ कपोलपडिभागअं कण्हम्
[नतनश्लाघननिभेन पार्श्वपरिसंस्थिता निपुणगोपी
सदृशगोपीनां चुम्बति कपोलप्रतिमागतं कृष्णम्]

—गाथासप्तशती



KRISHNA IN FOLK THEATRE



Krishna is the favourite god of the common people. In the *Bhagavata Purana* Krishna himself says that he is of humble origin and is worshipped mostly by the common people. Indian folk art and literature are permeated with Krishna lore. The ancient tradition still continues to flourish in the rural areas.

The folk theatre in Maharashtra is deeply influenced by the cult of Krishna whose impact has been felt in the region since the beginning of the Christian era or perhaps even earlier. A Satavahana inscription of Naneghat opens with a benedictory verse to Vasudeva and Sankarshana and we know of at least two kings of the dynasty bearing the name of Krishna. Vitthal of Pandharpur, an ancient deity of Maharashtra, is nothing but a local version of Vishnu-Krishna. In the premises of his temple there is a shrine of Rukmini in which we find the images of Radha and Satyabhama. Two powerful sects in the region, the Mahanubhav and the Varakari, worship Krishna with great devotion. Krishna's links with Maharashtra are through Rukmini, the beautiful princess of Vidarbha, who married him defying her brother.

In the collection of Maharashtrian Prakrit folk verses or *Gathas* by Hala Satavahana of Paithana, the Krishna myth finds its rich expression. The first literary reference to Radha is found in one of the enchanting *Gathas* composed by the Maharashtrian folk poets. The *Ras* dance too is mentioned. Its enactment by the folk actors who are mentioned in the *Gathas* cannot be ruled out. In these *Gathas* many scholars try to seek the origin of the *Lavani* songs to which the dancers perform on the *Tamasha* stage. And it is significant to note that a large number of *Lavanis* depict *Leelas* of the divine cowherd.



Though it originated much earlier, *Tamasha* as a form of theatre really flourished in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries under the patronage of the Peshwas. The Peshwa records mention the practice of bringing *Govindachi Songe*, that is actors impersonating characters in the Krishna story, on the stage. Many saint-poets and *shahirs* composed beautiful songs on the Krishna theme which were taken up for performance by the *Tamasha* artists. Dialogues with lots of humour and eroticism were improvised to entertain the audience. The songs based on the Krishna theme, particularly depicting his childhood pranks, dalliance with the Gopis, and romance with Radha, are popular on the *Tamasha* stage. The story of Chandraval, the beautiful younger sister of Radha who was cleverly seduced by Krishna disguising himself as Radha, is a contribution of the Marathi *Shahirs* to the Krishna myth.

The typical *Tamasha* performance starts with singing of benedictory verses invoking Lord Ganesha, the remover of obstacles. These songs are called *Gana* songs. A very interesting scene follows in which the entire *Dan Leela* of Krishna is enacted elaborately.

A group of young Gopa girls headed by Radha enter the stage acting as if pots full of milk and curd are perched on their heads. They are going to the Mathura market to sell the milk and curd. The girls are intercepted by naughty Krishna and his cowherd friends who demand a toll in the form of curd and milk. The adamant Gopis refuse to relent and a quarrel ensues. Ultimately the Gopis surrender the pots to Krishna. A great deal of singing and dancing take place, they all tease each other through dialogues in prose and verse, often using words with underlying erotic significance. The songs to which they dance are called *Gaulan* songs, the songs of cowherd girls. An elderly lady known as *Mavashi* and a jester, *Songadya*, add humour to the scene. There is no written script, though it is possible to reconstruct the scene with the help of some *Lavani* and *Gaulan* songs:

Dan Leela

Enters Radha with Gopis.

Radha : Girls! Let us move fast. We are already late for the market.

Mavashi : Yes let us hurry.



(Song)

We the lovely girls of Vrindavan
Ankle-bells on our feet
Hurrying to Mathura Market
Milk in our pots is sweet.

Enters Krishna with his friends.

Krishna : Gopis! Where are you going without my permission?

Radha : Let us go, O son of Nanda, we are already late. Otherwise we will complain to mother Yashoda.

Krishna : By all means dear! But first pay us a toll. Give us milk from your lovely pots.

Songadya: Yes, your pots are really lovely and round Radhe.

Radha : I will not give you anything before you reply my question. Where were you, Srihari, last night?

(Song)

Face smeared with collyrium,
Eyes looking red,
Have you not spent the night
With some lovely Gopi in bed?

Krishna : What an accusation, O Radhe!

(Song)

My cow lost her way in the forest.
Searching for her I wandered without rest.
I spent a sleepless night.
So my eyes are red.

Radha : I see!



(Song)

Your hair is dishevelled, your face yellow,
Your crumpled clothes are fragrant with perfume.
Confess the truth, Govinda.
Why are you so reluctant?

Krishna : No! No! Radhe . . .

(Song)

I went to collect flowers in the garden.
The rain made me take shelter under jasmine
bowers.
The tiny drops that trickled through,
Made fragrant all my clothes.

Radha : How can we, ignorant Gopa girls, match your clever
speech? Come girls, let us go.

Krishna : (*Holds her hand*) Don't try to trick me! Give us all
your milk and butter and before leaving sing a song
for us and give us a dance as well.

Songadya : Krishna, the milk in those lovely, rounded pots must
be sweet. Don't let her go till you have it.

Gopis : Well Radhe, let us sing and dance. Otherwise Vana-
mali will not allow us to go.

Radha : If you play on your flute . . .

Krishna : Certainly!

Krishna plays on the flute. The girls sing and dance.

Gopis : (Song)

In the gentle breeze the ear-rings of Radha move.
Fluttering her eyelids amorously she is on her way
to the market.





11. Radha, Krishna - Tamadia Krishna





12. Krishna and Gopa girls



13. Krishna being blessed by Sage Narada



Seeing her beautiful gait, Hari is lost.
Leaving his cows, he starts milking the bull.

And so, song after song is sung and the dance carries on. The girls, draped in glittering *sarees* nine yards long, with the tinkling bells of their *Mekhala* and *Painjan* chiming musically, dance provocatively. Many *Gaulan* and *Lavani* songs on the Radha-Krishna theme are extremely sensuous but some of them are really devotional in nature. After the advent of the modern Maharashtrian theatre, *Tamasha* started performing dramatic skits known as *Vag*. We find some *Vags* based on the Krishna theme also.

It will not be out of place here to give a brief account of a very interesting dramatic folk festival held near Barasana every year on *Bhadrapad Shukla Trayodashi* which generally falls in the month of August or September of the English calendar. Barasana, a small village situated in the Vrindavan area, is supposed to be the place where Radha lived with her father Gopa Vrishabhanu. There is a beautiful Radha temple here which is popularly known as *Ladaliji Ka Mandir*. Nearby is the Nandgaon village, where Krishna used to reside. In the Nanda temple which is known as *Nanda Mahal*, there are idols of Krishna, Balarama and their foster parents Nanda and Yashoda.

According to local legend, it is near Barasana that Krishna intercepted the Gopa girls headed by Radha and demanded milk and butter for him and his friends. The place is known as *Sankari Khor* which is a narrow lane between two hills.

In memory of Krishna and Radha's sweet quarrel, the whole episode of *Dan Leela* is enacted here every year. Singers from Nandgaon assemble on one hill and the other one is occupied by those from Barasana. One group sing songs called *Rasia*, demanding milk and butter, and the other group refuses to oblige. The dialogue in verse continues. In the end, boys enacting the roles of Radha, the Gopis, Krishna and his friends, reach the lane. In the scuffle that ensues Krishna naughtily breaks the milk pots on the heads of the Gopis. A large number of spectators assemble at the place to witness the play. There are many such dramatic festivals when the people of Vraja enact the *Leelas* of their favourite deity. Probably the *Dan Leela* scene of the *Tamasha* theatre was inspired by *Mataki Leela* at Sankari Khor.



The ancient land of Karnataka abounds in variety of theatrical forms. The most colourful and vigorous among them is the *Yakshagana*, the musical opera of the Yakshas. During the course of its evolution it came under the influence of the cult of Vishnu-Krishna as is evident from its other epithets like *Bhagavatar Ata* and *Dashavatar Ata*. Some scholars believe that the *Yakshagana* theatre originated and evolved in the hilly region around Udupi, one of the main centres of the Krishna cult in Karnataka established by Madhavacharya in the early thirteenth century. A sixteenth century inscription found at Laxminarayana temple at Kurugod indicates that there was a practice of performing a *Kirtaniya* form of *Yakshagana* known as *Tala Maddale Seva* in the Vaishnava temples. The *Yakshagana Sutradhar* who is respectfully called *Prathama Vesha* due to his importance, is known as *Bhagavata*, a devotee of Vishnu-Krishna. He dramatizes mythical episodes particularly from the *Bhagavata Purana* and presents them on stage through song, dance and music.

In the *Purvaranga* of a *Yakshagana* performance, a pair of young *Bala-Gopalas* symbolizing Krishna and Balarama perform a dance singing songs in praise of Krishna. This is followed by a dance by two dancers in female garb known as *Stree Vesha*. Through their songs they describe the beauty of Krishna, his romance with the Gopa girls and his childhood pranks in a form of complaint to his mother Yashoda. According to scholars these two dancers represent Rukmini and Satyabhama, consorts of Lord Krishna.

Krishna holds a unique position in the *Yakshagana* theatre. It is believed that the play that is being presented is nothing but a manifestation of the divine sport of Lord Krishna. The *Yakshagana* play is called *Prasanga*. We find many *Prasangas* based on the Krishna theme including *Krishnarjuna Kalaga*, *Krishna Balalile*, *Rukmini Swayamvara*, *Chandravali*, *Gita Parijat*, *Kamsavadha* and *Jambuvati Kalyanam*. The *Yakshagana* theatre prefers to select dramatic episodes from the later life of Krishna for enactment.

Krishna's entry on the stage is a most spectacular affair. A curtain is held by two persons behind which Krishna makes his dignified appearance and performs a dance. With great sense of devotion, the *Bhagavata* and his chorus start singing songs in the praise of the divinity. After some time the curtain is removed and Krishna comes forward dancing majestically. His smooth face has blue make-up and



his lips are painted a deep red. He is clothed in *Pitambara*, a yellow garment, in the *Neri Udige* style. His head is adorned with a glittering turban, and in one hand he holds his famous weapon, the *Sudarshana Chakra*.

After the play is over, an auspicious song invoking the ten incarnations of Vishnu-Krishna is sung along with songs in praise of other deities. While returning to the make-up room, the actors sing the following song:

Rama-Krishna have returned home, open the door.
Like the *Kamadhenu* they are, be blessed with happiness.

According to Dr Karanth these lines indicate the homecoming of Balarama and Krishna for rest after performing the *Leelas*. Illusion and reality are inseparable in the *Yakshagana* theatre. Though other mythological stories are taken up for enactment on the *Yakshagana* stage, the Krishna lore dominates the scene.

Another interesting folk theatre form based on the Krishna theme that emerged in the early nineteenth century in northern Karnataka is *Krishna Parijat*. The play originally composed by Aparala Timmanna was later taken up by Kulgod Timmanna for enactment. It relates the familiar story of *Parijat Harana* recorded in the *Bhagavata Purana*. Krishna, Narada, Satyabhama and Rukmini are the main characters. It is a musical play full of songs. The plight of Krishna caught between two jealous wives quarrelling for the possession of the *Parijat* flower is portrayed humorously. Krishna and the other characters appear in ordinary costumes unlike the gorgeous glitter of *Yakshagana*. The influence of modern Maharashtrian musical theatre on this folk theatre form is quite evident. In *Yakshagana* boys play the female roles but in *Krishna Parijat* women actresses were introduced to enact the roles of Satyabhama and Rukmini.

The quarrel between Rukmini and Satyabhama symbolizes similar clashes in the polygamous rural society of yesteryear and hence the theme is quite popular in folk theatre. A very interesting translation of a Telugu dramatic poem, *Satyabhama Katha*, is given by B. Rama Raju:

Bhama : It is all right, let it be so Rukmini!



Rukmini : O you have twisted your finger, O Satya!

Bhama : Are you my equal, O Rukmini?

Rukmini : Try to behave well.

Give up the proud mien, you are putting on.

O Bhama, why pull others into the quarrel?

Abandon petty-mindedness.

Don't cherish chagrin against others.

Why provoke a quarrel?

No one is afraid of you and your shrewish nature.

Bhama : Watch your words,

O elder sister do not moralise,

You shut your mouth.

O Rukmini you are a witch,

You do not speak the truth,

And vainly wave your hands before others.

Rukmini : You stop twisting your mouth in contempt.

It is interesting to compare the concealed jealousy which finds sophisticated expression in the plays of court poets who wrote on similar themes, with the blunt exchanges portrayed by rural folk poets. It also points at the universal appeal of the Krishna theme, in spite of the difference in the level of sophistication.

In medieval Mithila a highly Krishna-oriented operatic form emerged known as *Kirtania Nataka*. *Kirtan* means singing the glory of Lord, and the musical rendering of his stories and chanting of his sacred name is one of the nine forms of devotion. Stressing the importance of *Kirtan-bhakti* the *Bhagavata Purana* says:

Kalerdoshanidhe rajannasti hyeko mahan gunah

Keetarnadeva Krishnasya muktasangah param vrajet

O king, this Kali age is full of bad things but there is one really great quality about it. In this Yuga a person can achieve salvation just by performing the *Kirtan* of Krishna.

The Mithila Krishna plays were *Kirtans* in dramatic form. These



plays presented a beautiful synthesis of classical and folk theatrical traditions. Retaining the structure of the classical Sanskrit play they introduced beautiful Maithili folk songs which occupied a prominent position in the scheme of the play. It is *Kavivar* Umapati Upadhyaya who first introduced Maithili songs in his otherwise Sanskrit-Prakrit play *Parijatharana*, which is based on the Krishna theme. Gradually singing and dancing to Maithili songs gained importance, relegating Sanskrit-Prakrit dialogues into the background. Some playwrights even gave up the framework of Sanskrit drama and converted the *Kirtania* plays into musical opera.

Many Krishna plays were written in the *Kirtania* tradition particularly in the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries. Prominent among them are *Rukmini Parinaya* by Ramapati Upadhyaya, *Shri-krishnajanmarahasya* by Shrikanta Ganaka, *Usha Harana* and *Madhavananda* by Harshanatha and *Parijat Harana* by Shivadatta. But the most interesting among the *Kirtania* plays based on the Krishna theme is *Kavi Nandipati's Krishna Kelimala* written at the end of the eighteenth century. It is a delightful play with abundant Maithili songs depicting the various *Leelas* of Krishna.

Some of the *Leelas* depicted in the *Krishna Kelimala* place the dramatis personae in a typical rural situation to create humour. The *Dan Leela* episode described by him is quite different from what is usually portrayed by the other playwrights. Usually it is Krishna who dominates the scene and the helpless cowherd girls are compelled to part with the curd and butter. But in Nandipati's play Krishna is at the receiving end. When he tries to cross the path of the Gopis, they give him a good beating. A song describes this hilarious situation:

Ekahi ber shabhe ghasali
Krishnak upar chubi khashali
Gala thunuk pitha chat
Keao Gopi chiuti kat
Konahu jhataha konahu chep
Keao dahi mukha lepa

They all attacked Krishna at the same time. Some slapped him on his cheeks and some delivered blows on his back. Some pinched his skin, some started using sticks and stones. They smeared the face of naughty Krishna with curd.



With heart full of pity and love, Radha saves him from the angry Gopis. In another humorous scene, seeing the love-lorn condition of Radha, her mother thinks that she is haunted by a ghost. To conceal the marks of her lovemaking, Radha also pretends that she was really attacked by the ghost when she was walking down a lonely road without her friends in the early hours of the morning. However, to the great relief of her parents, exorcist Krishna relieves Radha of her ghost.

The Maithili theatre reached as far as Nepal. It flourished there under the generous patronage of the Malla Kings. The first extant Maithili play in Nepal is *Kunjavihari Nataka* which was written at the end of the sixteenth century on the Krishna theme. Dr Jayakanta Misra contends that the play, written by Ramachandra and Viranarayan, betrays the deep influence of Jayadeva and Vidyapati. There are a number of plays written on the Krishna theme in the *Nepal Darbar Library*. We also find Krishna plays in Nevari and Bengali languages in the library. Actors used to enact these plays to entertain their audiences.

With the increase in the popularity of the Krishna cult there emerged various regional varieties of Krishna theatre in the folk style in different parts of the country. Even Guru Nanak refers to the money-seeking actors performing various *Kan Kahania* before the market crowd. Though they adopted somewhat different styles of presentation, there are some basic similarities in their format. Operatic in nature, they base their performance on Krishna songs arranged in a neat story sequence. Taking cue from the songs the actors improvise prose dialogues on stage. Many typical rural situations are included in the performance which are not found in the *Bhagavata* or any other *Vaishnava Purana*.

Some folk theatre forms like *Krishna-Jatra* of Bengal and the *Ras Leela* of Orissa are completely Krishna oriented and no myth other than the Krishna myth is enacted on stage, while some like the *Bhavai* of Gujarat, the *Nautanki* and *Bhagat* of Uttar Pradesh enact Krishna plays along with other plays. For instance, a very interesting item known as *Tamadia Krishna* is included in the *Chhau* repertory of Mayurbhanj. Tamad is a region on the border of Bengal and Orissa inhabited by tribals. Some Vaishnava *Mahants* settled there and taught the tribal population *Jhumura* songs based on the Krishna theme. Some



of these songs are picked up for enactment in the Mayurbhanj *Chhau* of Uttar Sahi. One song says:

Sonar gagari hate
Rai chale che pathe pathe

With a golden pot in her hand
Radha is moving on the road.





75. Krishna, popular folk deity





76. Krishna and Satyabhama



77. Krishna, Satyabhama and Rukmini





Tamasha



79. Radha



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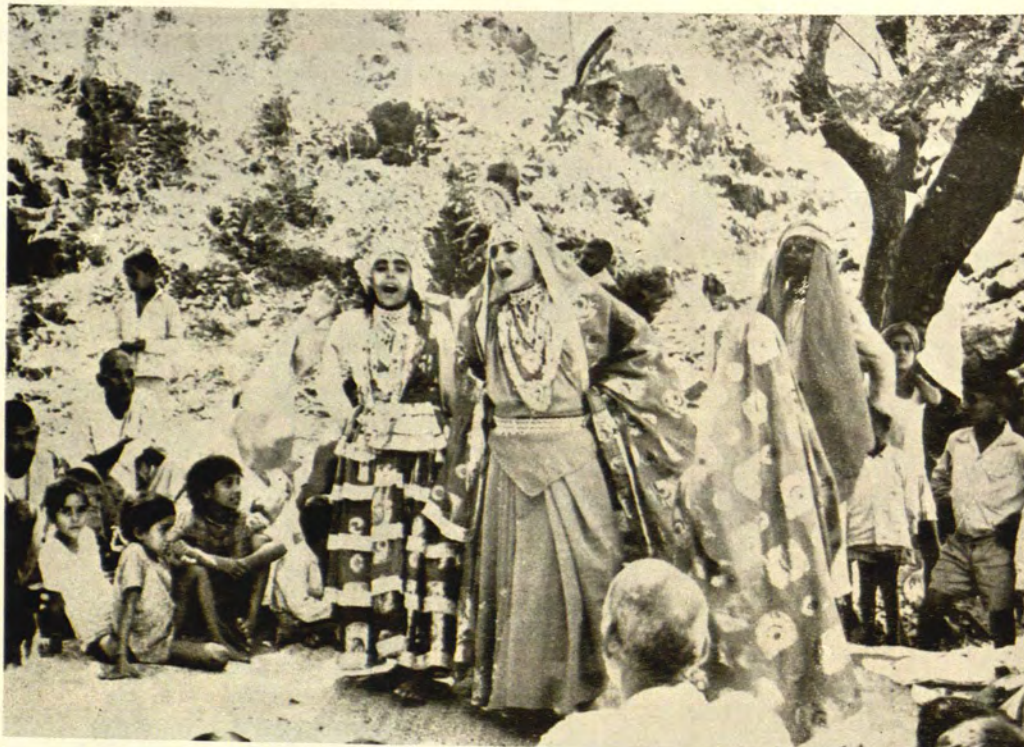
80. Krishna, jester Pendya-stopping group of Gopa girls led by Mavashibai



81. Gopi dancing with Dholaki wala



82. Yakshagana



83. Dan-Leela at Sankari Khor



स्वराञ्चित-विपञ्चिका-मुरज-वेणु-संगीतकं
त्रिभंग-तनुवल्लरी-वलित-वल्गु-हासोल्बणम्
वयस्य-करतालिका-रणित-नूपुरैरुज्ज्वलं
मुरारिनटनं सदा दिशतु शम्भं लोकत्रये ॥

—श्री जगन्नाथवल्लभनाटकम्



KRISHNA IN CLASSICAL DANCE



In the *Bhagavata Purana* occurs the story of the ferocious cobra *Kalia*, who by his poisonous existence contaminated the Yamuna waters and posed a constant threat to the cowherd settlements on her banks. To subdue him Krishna jumped into the Yamuna from the tall *Kadamba* tree on her banks. Angered by this, *Kalia* attacked Krishna with all his might. But the divine child defeated *Kalia* and started dancing the *Tandava* on the hood of the cobra. The dance was so attractive that music-loving deities like the Gandharvas assembled there with their musical instruments and started singing. In this context the *Bhagavata* describes Krishna with the epithet *Akhila-Kaladi-Guru*, the apostle of all arts. According to *Kathak* tradition, the basic dance syllables *Ta Thai Tat* that emanated from Krishna's feet hitting the hood of *Kalia*, were the source of all classical and folk dance styles of India.

The cult of Krishna accepted dance as a medium to appease its dark-hued god and gave it a definite place in the rituals. This exerted great influence on various classical and folk dance styles that flourished in the different parts of the country.

Though the Indian classical dance styles remained indebted technically to treatises like *Natya Shastra*, *Abhinaya Darpana*, *Abhinaya Chandrika* and *Nritya Ratnavali*, emotionally they were attached to the Krishna cult particularly since the medieval period. A very interesting episode revealing the association of dance with Krishna worship is recorded in the fourth *Taranga* of Kalhana's *Rajatarangini*. Once King Lalitaditya found two beautiful girls dancing in a deserted place. They



told the King that for generations the tradition of dancing at that particular place existed in their family. The puzzled King got the place excavated and found in the process the beautiful temple of Krishna.

The influence of the Krishna cult on classical dance can be traced to the *Harivamsha Purana* where we find Apsaras presenting dances on the Krishna theme in the classical *Chalikya Gandharva* style. However with the advent of Jayadeva the Krishna theme became quite popular with classical dancers and from the sixteenth century its influence started becoming more and more pronounced.

Nearly all the major classical dance styles in the country took up the enactment of lyrical Krishna poetry, *Krishna Shabdam*, composed by medieval poets in different languages including Sanskrit. Embellished with subtle shades of various aesthetic sentiments, they found Krishna literature eminently suitable for enactment. In the art of dancing, prominence is given to the depiction of *Sringara Bhava*, the erotic sentiment. Erotic mysticism associated with the Krishna cult which is particularly manifest in the *Radha-Madhava* lore holds a tremendous appeal for the dancers. They can depict with subtle distinction various *Nayak-Nayika Bhedas* in terms of *Radha-Madhava Sringara*.

Nayak means hero, lover or husband. *Sringaramanjiri* defines the *Nayika* as a *Sringararasalambanam Stree*—a girl in love, one who causes erotic sentiment. Various types of *Nayikas* are described in the *Natya, Kama* and *Sahitya Shastras*. According to Bharata the *Nayikas* are of eight kinds: *Vasakasajja*—one dressed up for union, *Virahotkanthita*—one distressed by separation, *Swadhina Patika*—one having her husband in subjection, *Kalahantarita*—one separated from her lover by a quarrel, *Khandita*—one enraged by her lover, *Vipralabdha*—one deceived by her lover, *Proshitabhartraka*—one with a sojourning husband, and *Abhisarika*—one who goes to her lover. Depiction of these *Nayikas* is quite popular with the dancers well versed in classical tradition. Radha and Satyabhama experience all these states, hence they became the popular *Nayikas* of major Indian classical dance styles. The life of Krishna is so colourful that episodes suited to every mood and style of presentation can be easily selected by the dancer. This has helped the Krishna cult to influence classical dance styles in a big way. As the great Orissa poet Jayadeva stands out as an important landmark of Vaishnava influence on the theatrical arts of the country, let us start our survey with the *Odissi* style of dancing.



The history of dance in Orissa dates back to the times of Emperor Kharavela who is described in the Hathigumpha cave inscription as adept in the theatrical arts; *Gandharva-vedo-budha*. One of the earliest sculptures of a dancer is found in the Rani Gumpha cave theatre ascribed to him. Various inscriptions point at the tradition of consecrating beautiful dancing girls to Shaiva and later Vaishnava temples. These dancing girls whose sculptures adorn the magnificent Orissa temples basically evolved the *Odissi* dance style.

The cult of Krishna has existed in the Kalinga region for a very long time. The Imperial Gangas and later the Gajapati rulers extended royal patronage to it. The majestic temple of Jagannatha became the great centre of Krishna theatre and its Nata Mandir began to vibrate with the dance-dramas of poets like Jayadeva and Ramananda Raya. The temple girls, *Maharis*, learnt the art of interpreting the Krishna theme through dance and acting at the feet of Vaishnava masters.

Maheshvar Mahapatra, the author of the fifteenth century canonical work on *Odissi* dance, *Abhinaya Chandrika*, was in the court of King Sriman Narayan Deva of Khemundi. The King was not only a great lover of dancing, but also a profound Krishna devotee. Like a parrot he used to utter continuously the name of Krishna and Krishna only—*shukavat sarvada vakye Krishna Krishneti kevalam*. In his treatise, Mahapatra speaks about the tradition of enacting Krishna *Leelas* in the region. He calls it *Abhinayarupena Srikrishna Charitavali*—dramatic enactment of the life of Krishna. He also writes about the *Ras* dances:

*Ras Mandala yuktecha Radhika Vrajanandanah
Sakhiveshadharah sarve nata shreni visheshatah
Srikrishna charitam punyam Jayanti swaramashrite!*

With Radha and Krishna in centre, actors in the guise of *sakhis* used to perform *Ras* dances and sing auspicious songs depicting the life of Krishna.

It is in such an atmosphere that the *Odissi* dance developed. No wonder it is profoundly permeated with Krishna lore. Sanskrit and Orissan Krishna poetry including the *Gita Govinda* songs form the textual material for the *Odissi* performer. Many Orissan poets including Kavisurya Baladeva Ratha, Gopal Krishna Patnaik and Banamali Das wrote beautiful compositions on the Radha-Krishna theme.



The *Odissi* performance opens with *Pushpanjali* which is followed by *Mangalacharanam*. A dancer appears with flowers in her hands which she scatters on the stage and then sings a song invoking various deities including Ganesha. Then she performs a dance known as *Batu Nrutya* in the honour of Shiva. She moves to *Pallavi* in which a Sanskrit verse describing a divine image is interpreted through dance movements. This is followed by *abhinaya* which means presenting the song through *nrutya* and *abhinaya*. The songs selected for enactment are usually based on the Radha-Krishna theme which give ample scope for showing the *nayak-nayika bheda*. The dancer slowly unfolds the emotive content of the composition through her lyrical expression. She portrays how Radha suffered in separation, how she pined for union and how she was ultimately united with her dark lover. Jayadeva's *Dashavatar Ashtapadi* is often taken up for stage rendering and presented in a majestic manner by the *Odissi* dancer. The emphasis of *Odissi* is on showing the Radha-Krishna *Sringara bhava* in all its splendour. Thematically the sculpturesque dance style of *Odissi* is immensely Krishna oriented. It will not be an exaggeration to say that while Radha is the heroine of *Odissi*, Krishna is its presiding deity.

Kathak, a classical dance style that flourished in north India, is in almost the same position. *Natavar*, the great dancer-actor, is one of the epithets of Krishna. The association of *Kathak* with the cult of Krishna is so close that it is sometimes referred to as the *Natavari Nrutya*. Even after it came under Muslim influence and became the dance of courtesans it never lost its original devotional core completely.

Kathaks were essentially story tellers who adopted the technique of dance and acting to embellish their narration. Krishna was their most favourite deity. Ananda Coomaraswamy has graphically described the art and the devotion of the great *Kathak* Bindadin Maharaj:

Old man . . . sang a Herd-Girl's complaint to mother of Krishna. He sat on the ground and sang his poem. Picking up a scarf, he used it as a veil . . . and no one could have remembered that he was anything but a shy and graceful young girl . . . She told how Krishna had stolen butter and curd, what pranks he played, of his love making and every sort of naughtiness.



The great art historian and philosopher makes a very significant observation about the cultural heritage of the *Kathak*. He says:

But such an action-song as this does not belong to him, or depend on his genius for its being, even though he may have composed the particular words of it; it belongs to the race and its old vision of a cowherd god.

There are several alluring compositions of Bindadin Maharaj on the Krishna theme that are for *Kathak* performances. They certainly speak of the rich Krishna-experience of the preceding generations of *Kathaks*. From their eloquent narrative art emerged the dance form *Kathak* and the dance-drama *Ras Leela*. Of the several alluring compositions of Bindadin Maharaj which the *Kathak* dancers use one is given below:

Mohe chedata Mohan Banavari
Dagar chalat mai dekho deta gari
Natakhat Nanda ke lal na mane
Binda suno mai ena sanga hari

Look! How he teases me, the ever alluring Krishna
 Seeing me moving down the lane he abuses me
 The naughty son of Nanda pays no heed to my protests
 O Binda, I know not what to do!

Equally important is the contribution of the last of the Oudh kings, Nabab Wajid Ali Shah, in shaping the modern *Kathak*. Taking inspiration from the Vraja *Ras* tradition, he staged *Rahas*, a dance-drama based on the Krishna theme. His play *Radha Kanhaiya Ka Kissa* is quite well-known. He also wrote beautiful compositions for *Kathak* enactment. In one of his songs he refers to the flute playing Krishna, the lanes and bowers of Vraja, charming Radha and the beautiful Gopa girls:

Jugal Kishore basuri bajavat
Chod kunjan aur galia
Akhtar Radha ke sang chalo
Mathura Vraj vanita rang ralia

There is also a vast collection of Krishna poetry in Braj *Bhasha*



from which *Kathaks* select compositions for stage performance. In the following *Thumari*, Radha is described as the *Abhisarika Nayika* going eagerly to meet her dark lover:

*Chalat alabeli pike milan ko
Nakha shikha solah srigar karat hai
Gori nirakhat piya ke avan ko
Chalat alabeli . . .*

Behold! Beautiful Radha is going to meet her lover, Krishna.
Decorating herself from her hair to toe in sixteen types of
make up,
The fair-one is seeking him with heart full of love!

Songs about Holi played by Krishna with Radha and other Gopa girls and boys are also popular with *Kathak* dancers. In the season of Spring, *Vasant*, Krishna smears everybody with colour:

*Holi khelata Shri Nandanandan
Apane rasik mandali ke sang, gavat gita Suchandan;
Eka eka par, dekha dekha kar, dalat hai Sukhakandan!
Vrindavan khel machyo bhari,
Vrindavan ki gori nari, Vraja ki Sri Radha pyari!*

The son of Nanda is playing Holi.
Singing songs with his group of naughty friends
He is smearing everybody with colours.
Vrindavan is aglow with Holi revellers.
Fair are the girls of Vrindavan.
The darling of them all is Radha.
Naughty Krishna is teasing them all!

Colourful *Thumari*, *Bhajan*, *Dhrupad*, *Dhamar*, *Kabitta*, *Gazal* compositions woven around the Krishna theme form a major portion of the *Kathak* repertory. *Kathaks* take great delight in depicting the childhood pranks of Krishna and his naughty flirting with beautiful Gopa girls.

The *Kathak* performance starts with *Vandana*, in which the deities Saraswati and Ganesha are invoked. It is followed by a pure dance item like *Sthana*, *Amad*, *Paran*. After that the interpretation



of a song through graceful *Mudras* and eloquent gestures is taken up. The dancer explains and elaborates on the meaning of each single word of the song including its deep emotive content. Like its intricate foot-work *Kathak* is famous for its *Bhava Darshana* (acting) also. Recently some *Gurus* have composed full-fledged dance dramas in the *Kathak* style on the Krishna theme. It is obvious from the similarities in the art of the *Kathaks* and the *Rasdharis* that both must have originated from the same source—the dance oriented cult of Krishna.

Evolved by the Vaishnava *Bhagavatulus* the classical *Kuchipudi* dance style of Andhra betrays the deep influence of the Krishna cult. The dance style is named after the village where it evolved. In the latter half of the thirteenth century, quite a large chunk of the Andhra region, including Kuchipudi and Srikakulam, came under the sway of the Imperial Ganga rulers of Orissa. During this period influence of the *Gita Govinda* reached Andhra. Dancers from Kalinga performed Jayadeva's opera in the region under Ganga rule. This inspired many local poets to write lyrical compositions on the Radha-Krishna theme. Gopal Krishna Saraswati of Srikakulam wrote a dance-drama, *Sri-krishna Jala Krida* and a treatise on dance, *Gopal Krishna Vritti*. Krishna theatre became immensely popular in Andhra during the period.

The impact of this movement was felt by the Brahmins of Kuchipudi villages who were masters of the *Natya Shastras*. In addition to *Shiva Leelas* that they were already enacting, they took up *Krishna Leelas* also for enactment. The most notable contribution of the Kuchipudi school to Krishna theatre is a dance drama known as *Bhama Kalapam* written by Siddhendra Yogi in the beginning of sixteenth century.

Proud and charming Satyabhama once annoys her husband Krishna by declaring herself more beautiful than him. Angered by her vanity he leaves her and goes to Rukmini. Bhama, suffering the pangs of separation, requests her *sakhi* to bring him back to her. When the *sakhi* asks Bhama to describe her Lord, she sings a song describing his ten incarnations. Bhama writes a letter to Krishna in all humility begging him to come back. Krishna relents and Bhama enjoys a blissful reunion.

This, in brief, is the story of the play. It is presented according to



the tenets of Bharata's *Natya Shastra*. Embellished by beautiful dances and rich classical music, the opera became immensely popular with the temple dancers.

The lyrics of *Bhama Kalapam* are very charming and dramatic. The song depicting the pride and confidence of heroine Satyabhama is quite popular. Says lovely Bhama:

I am Bhama, Satyabhama
I am the loveliest
the proudest
the most beloved
of Krishna's sixteen thousand wives!

I am gentle, I am tender
I am the favourite child
of the famous king Satrajit

Krishna's other wife Rukmini
proud on receiving *Parijata* flower
from my Lord, mocked me once!
But I am Satyabhama!
And when Krishna came to me,
I insisted he bring me
the entire *Parijata* tree.

For I am Satyabhama
the loveliest
the proudest
the most beloved
of Krishna's sixteen thousand wives!

However in the end her pride is shattered and she stands before her Lord in all humility signifying the fact that with humility you can win the God. Kuchipudi dancers usually pick up this piece for enactment.

The *Bhagavata Mela* dance-dramas of Melattur village, which is situated near Tanjore in Tamil Nadu, are off-shoots of the Kuchipudi school. In their repertory we find operatic Krishna plays like *Usha Parinayam*, *Rukmini Kalyanam* and *Kamsa Vadha*. These are still performed in Andhra and Tamil Nadu.





14. Vasaul Ras (Manipuri - Ras)





15. Radha (Kathak) - Alka Noopur



Many attractive solo dance numbers based on the Krishna theme are also presented by the Kuchipudi dancers. They select pieces from *Srikrishna Karnamrita* of Lilashuka, *Gita Govinda* of Jayadeva and *Krishna Leela Tarangini* of Narayan Tirtha. *Krishna Leela Tarangini* is written in Sanskrit and relates the story of Krishna from his birth to his marriage to Rukmini in a series of delightful songs. Very rich in musical content, the work is divided into twelve *Tarangas*. According to tradition it was composed at the Lord Venkatesha temple of Varahoor. On *Janmastami* (Krishna's birthday festival) these songs are enacted in the temples by the *Bhagavatars*. Kuchipudi dancers perform delightful dances based on these *Tarangas*.

Another important poet who wrote beautiful love songs on the Radha-Krishna theme in Telugu is Kshetrappa. Tradition says that he was in love with an extremely charming Devadasi who was a great devotee of Krishna, and inspired him to write his poems. His *Padams* (songs) are full of *Sringara Rasa* (erotic sentiments) and eminently suitable for dance performance. These *Padams* are a favourite of Kuchipudi performers.

There is a very interesting dance number in Kuchipudi. A dancer with a pot full of water on his head stands on the edge of a round brass plate full with water. Singing a song, *Balagopala Krishna Pahi Pahi*, he skilfully executes circles on the dance floor without spilling a drop of water. In the Kuchipudi terminology, the Krishna song is called *Krishna Shabdham*. In the Kuchipudi repertory there are many beautiful situations and appropriate *Krishna Shabdams* for dancers to enact. In one situation a beautiful young Gopi is shown preparing sandal paste for Krishna for whom she is waiting. The *Vasakasajjika Nayika* suffering the pangs of separation implores him to come:

Swami ra ra swami ra ra
Yaduyaduvamshasudhanmbudi chandra
Shatakoti Manmathakara
Narijana manasa chora . . . swami ra ra!

O Lord, come, please come, come O moon of Yaduvamsha!
 More beautiful than billions of cupids,
 O stealer of women's hearts,
 O come, please come!



The cult of Krishna reached the picturesque valley of Manipur somewhat late, but once there, it deeply influenced the culture of the region. A myth related to the origin of Manipur explains that this beautiful land was created by Shiva to dance the *Ras* with his consort Parvati. Shiva had once approached Krishna because he wanted to see a *Ras* dance. He was only allowed to listen to the *Ras* music and was asked to stand with his back to the *Ras* arena. Swayed by the music he turned round, but instantly everything vanished. However Shiva remembered all the music and with the desire to dance to it he created the land of Manipur. A somewhat similar myth is associated with the temple of Gopishvar Mahadeva in Vrindavan. It says that the temple was built in the memory of Shiva who once attended a *Ras* dance going on at Vamshivat in the guise of a Gopi.

It was King Bhagyachandra who really introduced the cult of Krishna, and also the *Ras* dances associated with it, in the valley of Manipur. He had the divine vision of *Ras* in a dream and converted it into reality. He prepared a beautiful wooden image of Govindji and installed it in his palace. *Ras* dances were arranged in the honour of the deity, in which the King's daughter, princess Shija Lairuibibi, enacted the role of Radha. The first *Ras Leela* was organized at Kanchipur on a specially constructed *Ras Mandal* near the royal palace.

These *Ras* dances in Manipur are divided into two broad categories—Gopa *Ras* and Radha-Krishna *Ras*. Gopa *Ras* is a beautiful dance-drama which enfold in a series of sequences various facets of Krishna's life in Vraja. Sage Narada is shown teaching Krishna and Balarama the art of tending cows. Then both the boys are shown playing ball with their friends, and enjoying themselves. After *Kanduka Krida*, they kill two demons, Bakasura and Dhenukasura, sent by Kamsa to destroy them. The childhood pranks of Krishna including his stealing of butter, teasing the Gopa girls, breaking their milk pots, and the binding of Krishna to a stone mortar by Yashoda as punishment, are the subject of *Ulukhal Ras*.

The Radha-Krishna *Ras* dances of Manipur are extremely colourful and are technically highly developed theatrical forms. Based on the *Ras Panchadhyayi* they reveal various facets of the Radha-Krishna relationship in an extremely tender and graceful dance style. Krishna appears in a blue dress with a peacock feathered diadem on his head. The Gopis wear red round skirts and glide softly on the stage. The



dazzling splendour of the costumes, the enchanting music, the soft lyrical movements, lend a dream-like quality to the whole performance.

In *Vasant Ritu* Krishna played Holi with Radha. This episode is depicted in *Vasant Ras*. Enraged by the attention given by Krishna to the beautiful Gopa girl Chandravali, Radha forsakes Krishna. He persuades her to forgive him and both play with colours along with their friends. In *Kunj Ras* the Radha-Krishna *Abhisar* is described, where Radha and the Gopis go to Krishna and dance with him. *Maharas* is the most elaborate of the *Ras* dances of Manipur which depicts the *Ras* episode of *Bhagavata Purana* in detail. Faubion Bowers has given in outline six main features of Manipuri *Ras*:

1. Krishna *Avishkar* (Appearance of Krishna)
2. Radha *Avishkar* (Appearance of Radha)
3. *Ras Leela* proper
4. *Bhangi* (Argument of *Ras Leela*; persuasion of Krishna to join the *Ras Leela*, rejection of Radha, rejection of Krishna, etc.)
5. *Melan* (Radha and Krishna reach agreement or dance in mirth or joy with Gopis)
6. *Prarthana* (Prayer: Radha and Gopis offer Krishna their devotion and pray that they all remain in this state of grace for eternity)

The story is unfolded through song, dialogue, music and dance in an atmosphere charged with devotion.

Based on the *Natya Shastra*, the *Bharat Natyam* is one of the oldest classical dance forms of India. It flourished in south India, particularly in Tamil Nadu, under the patronage of temples. A very interesting eighth century inscription refers to the superiority of the dance system based on the *Bharata-Mata*:

The elephant, blind with rut, which is an actor of another school, is deprived of his frenzy by the lion's roar of (the rules)



that are to be observed by actors, framed in accordance with the arrangement of the celebrated sentences of Bharata . . .

As the elephant, blind with rut, is deprived of his frenzy by the lion's roar, the actors of another school feel humble before the actor well-versed in the histrionic art propounded by Bharata. The inscription refers to dancer-actor Achalan who being well-versed in Bharata's *Natya Shastra* was respected by other actors. It goes to show that *Bharat Natyam* was a well established art in south India at the time.

Not only *Devadasis* (girls consecrated to the temples by Kings), but women from royal families also danced before temple deities. One such queen was Shantala, wife of King Vishnuvardhana of Karnataka, who is one of the earliest known *Bharat Natyam* dancers. *Krishna Leela* sculptures adorn the twelfth century Halebid and Belur temples in which Shantala used to dance.

In fact, right from the times of *Silappadhikaram*, dances based on the Krishna theme were popular in south India. Alvars and Vaishnava Acharyas contributed much to the spread of the Krishna cult. A famous eighth century Alvar saint started a tradition of religious dancing called *Arayar Natakam* which flourished in the Srirangam temple in Tamil Nadu. Describing this Krishna drama, S. Ramanathan Writes:

Four Arayars wearing a special dress and a crown stand before the deity. They have each a pair of cymbals with which they keep time as they recite the sacred Tiruvaymoli . . . One of them performs *Abhinaya* (postures) during the recital. The articles used for the deity for ornamentation are held symbolically to represent characters in these dramas. For example the garland on the deity is symbolical of Krishna, the gaudy cloth worn by the deity and called Pitambara stands for Putana who tried to poison Krishna to death, the big umbrella held over the deity represents the mythological Govardhana mountain associated with one of the exploits of Krishna. (*Bulletin of Institute of Traditional Cultures*, Part II, 1960)

The Vijayanagara emperor Krishnadevaraya who was a great patron of theatrical arts is credited with writing two beautiful Krishna plays in Sanskrit – *Jambavati Kalyanam* and *Ushaparinayam*. They used to be





84. Pushpanjali

85. Krishna Bhangi



Kathak
86. Radha doing make-up
to meet Krishna



87. Radha awaiting arrival of Krishna





88. Radha and Krishna playing Holi



Kuchipudi



89. Bhama Kalapam, Krishna and proud Bhama

90. Bhama Kalapam, Bhama's letter to Krishna





91. Krishna
92. Radha and Krishna

93. Mohini Attam,
Vishnu-Krishna



94. Kathakali, Krishna and Draupadi





95. Krishna in Kathakali



96. Bharatnatyam, Krishna



97. Bharatnatyam, Gita Govinda, Krishnaya Tubhayam Namah



98. Radha and Krishna



enacted by court dancers at the Chaitra festival of Virupaksha. The Hazara Ramaswami temple at Hampi is adorned with beautiful *Krishna Leela* sculptures.

A *Bharat Natyam* performance opens with a dance sequence called *Alarippu*, then moves to *Jatiswaram*, *Shabdam*, *Varnam*, *Padam* and *Tillana*. In *Shabdam*, *Varnam* and *Padam* the dancer has a wide scope of interpreting a song or a mythological episode or a prayer to the deity through *abhinaya*. In *Varnam* the heroine suffering the pangs of separation pleads with her Lord to come and make love to her. Sometimes the Lord is Krishna and the heroine Radha. There is a very beautiful composition of the well-known composer Papanasam Sivam depicting a Gopi's envy about Yashoda. On seeing Yashoda fondling Krishna she says, 'You must have done great penance O Yashoda. I see the child Krishna who is none other than Vishnu himself addressing you as Mother. How lucky you are.' In a beautiful Javali song, the *sakhi* teases Radha about her infatuation for Krishna:

One day I saw you, Radhe, moving on the lonely path in the darkness of night. On seeing Krishna passing by you covered your beautiful face with the golden saree. From under its cover I saw you beckoning him with your sweet covetous glances. Have you fallen in love with that Krishna who stole our clothes when we were bathing in the Yamuna?

The *Tarangas* of Narayan Tirtha, the *Ashtapadis* of Jayadeva and the beautiful Krishna *Padams* of Kshetrappa are taken up for enactment by the *Bharat Natyam* dancers. The sweet Krishna poetry suits the predominantly erotic mood of the *Bharat Natyam* art. In one of his delightful *Padams* Kshetrappa says:

Sakhi, why does he hide himself from me? He the Lord Gopala of Muvva-Puri should cast hidden glances at me!

Indeed this is an auspicious day, tell him he will be royally welcomed!

The Krishna myth is woven into the texture of the classical dance forms of India. Bhagavata cult accepts dance as a mode of divine worship. Here we remember the words of a dancer mentioned in the *Jaiminiyashavamedhaparva* which places dance above all other means of god realisation:



*Dhynena yoginam naiva lilaya drishyate Harih
Sansthita madbhramenatra sarve pashantu yoginah
Nrityatam gayatam chaiva nanavadya prakurvata
Yatha santushyate devo na dhyanadairiti shrutam!*

See ye Yogis, Hari, who does not appear before you even after doing deep meditation and severe penance, is standing before me in person, pleased by my dancing. Look, by dancing, singing and playing on musical instruments he can be appeased best.



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रासोत्सवः सम्प्रवृत्तो
योगेश्वरेण कृष्णेन
बलयानां नूपुराणां
सप्रियाणामभूच्चदस्तुमुलो



गोपीमण्डलमण्डितः ॥
लासां मध्ये द्वयोर्द्वयोः ॥
किङ्किणानां च योषिताम् ॥
रासमण्डले ॥ श्रीमद्भागवत ॥

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As a serious student of Indian art, literature and culture Shri M.L. Varadpande's contribution to Indological studies is quite significant. He is a scholar with a rare capacity to see historical facts in new perspective and offer original interpretation.

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