Moods of the ‘Madhusudana’ in Jayadeva’s ‘Gita Govinda’: a Theological Analysis

Souhardya De,
Prime Minister’s YUVA Fellow,
Ministry of Education, Government of India
hello@souhardyade.co.in, +91-8436155929

Upload Date: 16th July, 2022

ABSTRACT

Jayadeva's 'Gita Govinda', a text of great literary value in the Sanskritic corpus, is not without a very interesting theological dimension to it. Often overlooked, it is in this text that we find the human-like 'God-man' protagonist Krishna dependent on Radha, his romantic interest, for feeling what the poet says he feels. Through a close analysis of the moods of Krishna, as detailed by Jayadeva, after which the poetic sargas are oftentimes named, this paper tries to shed light on the concept of 'avatar' as can be seen from Jayadeva's work and if his Krishna is indeed the 'avatar' of Vishnu, the 'God', as stated by the poet in his Vishnuite hymn earlier. Are not Jayadeva's Krishna's emotions contrary to the doctrine of impassibility, that 'God' is often attributed to, by the Abrahamic ways of life? If so, who or what, then, is Krishna? This paper also sheds light on questions that might be of some interest to readers in the process of decoding the theological aspect of the text. Conclusively, it attempts to draw a parallel between Jayadeva's depictions of his Krishna and Megasthenes' Herakles, and point to how the godliness attributed to Krishna, the avatar of 'God' is but a figment of devout imagination and an add-on to the tales and folklores about the human Krishna, immortalising him in truth.

Keywords: Jayadeva, Gita Govinda, Theology, Krishna, Radha, Edwin Arnold

Moods of the 'Madhusudana' in Jayadeva's 'Gita Govinda': a Theological Analysis

Throughout history, man has always been questioning the established communitarian beliefs (in the sense that when a 'belief' is considered 'established', it is generally followed by a 'community', i.e., a group of people with a similar metaphysical outlook, as a whole, rather than by distinct individual notions as such) revolving around the nature and identity of 'God'; even before the concept of what or who we now refer to as 'God' came to be. An early poet of the Rig Veda, naturalistic as well as quite philosophically sophisticated, unlike most of his contemporaries, writes in the Nāsadīya Sūkta, for instance:

"Whence, whence this manifold creation sprang ? — The gods themselves came later into being. — Who knows from whence this great creation sprang? — He from whom all this great creation came. Whether his will created or was mute, The Most High seer that is in highest heaven, He knows it, — or perchance e'en He knows not."[1] From the lines above, it is well-nigh intelligible that the Rig-Vedic poet who writes this does so not because the concept of 'God' fascinates him or that he has had some divine revelation as many later sect-leaders have often claimed to[2], but because he is an ignorant man dissatisfied with 'ignorance' and in a quest of dispelling the veil of ignorance by journeying to the realm of 'revelation', questions his beliefs, so that he may unearth the highest Truth, that of creation, and fulfil what is a man's motive of being.

The fact that Professor Müller, in this translation of his, writes that "gods" and not 'God', came after the creation, is one of great significance. The concept of the fundamental creator 'God', i.e., "The Most High seer that is in highest heaven", cannot and should not be equated with that of the lesser deified "gods". What is meant by that is, "gods" are aspects of the nature, they that govern nature but are themselves bound by the laws of nature, whereas the "The Most High seer that is in highest heaven" is what is the incomprehensible reality, the Truth, the fundamental force whence all creation sprang. It is this Truth, recognised from time immemorial as being the "God Almighty" that "is nameless and formless"[3] that men have vainly tried to name. From here, thus, can the birth of the Rig-Vedic "gods", deified aspects of nature and parts and parcels of the concept of 'God' be drawn. To the Hindus, whose faith is an "ever evolving, self-sowing seed, with newer dimensions of the religious order ever opening up to sectarian adherents that follow"[4], this 'God' can be anything and everything that the sectarian 'prophet' might come up with. He can be the calm preserver of the world order, Vishnu, the Tamasic destroyer Shiva, or the fundamental feminine force Shakti. To the poets of the Rig Veda, He had either been Indra, the Lord of thunder and rains, or Surya, the Sun-God, or even Varuna, the pacific Lord of Waters and world order, at times. So long as it concerns the Vedic divine hierarchy, it has to be left unto the poet penning the hymn down to decide who he shall devote himself and his verses to, and address as the supreme Lord. Such organisation, that leaves a 'god's' superiority to individual belief, termed 'Kathenotheism' by Müller, explains in part why "no one is first always, no one is last always."[5]

To Jayadeva, author of the 'Gita Govinda', the text of our interest, this supreme 'God' is Vishnu, a representative of 'His' (that is, of the Highest Being's) satvik aspect[6], and it is around Krishna's, also often called Madhusudhana, one among the many 'avatars' of Vishnu, love for Radha, that the plot in the text is centred.

With an introductory worded-oblation to Lord Ganesha, the first of the worshipped[7], Jayadeva presents the reader with his hymn to Vishnu, wherein, in the music Mâlava and the mode Rupaka[8], he carefully incorporates stories of the 'Dashavataras' and narrates mythical deeds through which the supreme Vishnu is, through his 'avatars', shown to preserve the balance of the worldly order and lead the path for mankind to tread on.
In brief, states the penultimate stanza:

"Fish! that didst outswim the flood;
Tortoise! whereon earth hath stood;
Boar! who with thy tush held'st high
The world, that mortals might not die;
Lion! who hast giants torn;
Dwarf! who laugh'dst a king to scorn;
Sole Subduer of the Dreaded!
Slayer of the many-headed!
Mighty Ploughman! Teacher tender!
Of thine own the sure Defender!
Under all thy ten disguises
Endless praise to thee arises."[9]

This stanza above sure enough demonstrates the Vaishnavite (a sect, to the adherents of which, Vishnu is the supreme 'God') perspective that the poet pens the poem down from. What would, however, be of greater significance in here, would be to recall that the earliest of these 'Dashavataras', namely the fish, the boar, and the totemistic one (tortoise), were originally attributed to the rajasic creator-god Brahma, before they were, as Edward Hopkins explicitly puts it, "stolen from him and given over to Vishnu."[1o]
The fact that, in his work Gita Govinda, our learned poet ascribes these works of wonder and preservation of the world order to Vishnu and not Brahma, only adds on to prove the Vaishnavite perspective his work has been written down from.

The first substantial poetic sarga(Note-1) that Jayadeva pens down, in the music Vasanta and the mode Yati, is titled the 'Samodadamodaro', or as Arnold translates it, "The Sports of Krishna"[11]. What would be quite an interesting observation when looking at this sarga would be the fact that the poet begins with (adjectifying) attributing human-like characteristics to both 'Krishna' and 'Radha', his protagonists. The lines say:

"Beautiful Radha, jasmine-bosomed Radha,
All in the Spring-time waited by the wood
For Krishna fair, Krishna the all-forgetful,—"

The only sizeable visualisation that could be formed going through the above lines, wherein it is stated that Radha, the "jasmine-bosomed" waited in the "Spring-time" for "Krishna the all-forgetful" by the "wood", would be that of two human lovers romancing or at-least that is what the poet intends to make them do, it seems, in the Spring, or what is Vasant, the season of love and nature-awakening in the Hindu corpora.
Jayadeva, however, is not the first to do this. In fact, he comes after a long list of more popular authors who have represented Spring as being the season of love in Sanskritic literature. Kalidasa,

indubitably the most well known of ancient Indian dramatists and playwrights, writes in the Ritusamhara, for instance,

"The warrior Spring,
Comes with armorial bearing.
Armed with the nimble shafts
Of the swelling mango blossom.
And the murmurous line of bees
Is the twang of his lustrous bowstring
He is shooting his flowery arrows, my dear.
To pierce the hearts of lovers."[12]

However, that Jayadeva, who, in the Vishnuite hymn[13] of his, calls his Lord the "Master of the world", "Ruler of wave and wood", "Immortal Conqueror", and "the King of Day and Night", also addresses Him as the "all-forgetful" who "wantoned in the wood" and as the one who's "laughing, toying, dreaming his Spring away" in the Samodadamodaro, Sarga the First[14], does deserve some attention. How could a 'God', all-powerful, preserver of the balance of the worldly order and humankind, be what he is, in here, shown to be? Or, is it that Krishna, the protagonist, being only an 'avatar' of the Lord 'God' isn't, in himself, an 'All-God'?
Such questions demand, as a prerequisite, an understanding of the term 'avatar'. It is quite unfortunate that this Sanskrit word, literally meaning 'descent'[15], is often translated into English to mean "incarnation"[16], a concept that is not wholly similar to it[17], and thus is not able to express the concept of 'avatar' in its entirety.

There would be two propositions one would be interested in talking about, when the concept of 'avatar' is brought to the forefront. The first; are 'avatars' real humans, like Buddha, often taken to be the ninth Vaishnavite 'avatar', is? If so, why do fellow men deify them and worship them in the likes of noble gods? The second, if we consider for a moment that 'avatars' are semi-divine beings on earth and are here to restore the balance of life through deeds miraculous, are they even real? Won't opining so be putting them on the edge of non-existence (for that would seem almost mythical)? These propositions above are certainly contradictory to one another and in Jayadeva's Gita Govinda, a slight inclination towards the first, i.e., that Krishna is a man deified, is observed.

The most significant thing about the text, when looking at it from a theological point of view, and that which also backs the first concept of 'avatar' as stated above, is perhaps in what some of its sargas have been titled. It is quite surprising indeed that Jayadeva titles them after Krishna's very human-like activities and moods, as in "Samodadamodaro", literally meaning "The Sports of Krishna", "Sakandkshapundarikaksho", literally meaning "The Longings of Krishna", "Mugdhamadhusudano", literally meaning "Krishna Troubled" and "Snigdhamadhusudano", literally meaning "Krishna Cheered" and so on. That Jayadeva sees Krishna, an 'avatar' of his 'God', in such human-like manner, points to another supposition; that a 'God-man' is no different to a man when it comes to how he lives, loves and expresses the wide array of humanly emotions.
In the fifth sarga "Sakandkshapundarikaksho", Radha's maid says to her,

"By the edge of the river, far wandered
From his once beloved bowers,
And the haunts of his beautiful playmates,
And the beds strewn with flowers;

Now thy name is his playmate—that only!—
And the hard rocks upstarted
From the sand make the couch where he lies,
Thy Krishna, sad-hearted."

And again, in the "Vipralabdhavarnane Nagaranarayano", where Radha speaks to herself in anticipation, fearful if Krishna would "betray" (that no 'God' can do) her,

"Tis time!—he comes not!—will he come?
Can he leave me thus to pine?
Yami hê kam sharanam!
Ah! what refuge then is mine?
For his sake I sought the wood,
Threaded dark and devious ways;
Yami hê kam sharanam!
Can it be Krishna betrays?"

Jayadeva's Krishna, thus, is not, as many might suppose, 'perfect' or even anywhere near to 'perfection' (in terms of upholding the ideals that society regards as being 'perfect') like that of Vishnu's other 'avatar' Lord Shri Rama, in the Ramayana, who's often fondly referred to as 'Maryada Purushottam' for having, both in his exile and reign, lived up to the ideals[18].
Jayadeva's Krishna is rather frivolous; when it is Spring, he entertains himself in the company of the 'gopis', often, in the process, being implanted with a kiss or two, incurs the rage of Radha, his beloved, who has a maid incite her further, repents to himself for having not given company to Radha, faces a playful trial, and eventually, wins her back.

Can it be, thus, that 'God' feels, i.e, that He has emotions? Or is it that 'God' is, as many theologians often tend to claim, impassible[19]? Considering for a moment that He is, what or who then is the Krishna in the Gita Govinda?
In order to shed some light on this, the first thing one should do is define what he means by 'emotion'. If it is us humans who have attributed what we know as 'emotions' to the transcendent Creator, what surety do we have that the definition of 'emotion' we live with, is also applicable to an otherwise incomprehensible 'God'?

Besides, there are two known ways through which humans usually describe 'God'. The first, through the usage of superlatives, and the second, through negatives. We usually tend to attribute to 'God' the highest measure of the good qualities (or at-least that is how we perceive them) we are born with. For instance, 'God' is omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent (instances of the attributes are found in Psalm 139:13, Isaiah 26:4 and Jeremiah 23:24 in the Bible respectively). It is no coincidence that 'God' is such, for knowledge, power and mindful presence are qualities inherent in every human. 'God', being the Highest Reality and the one who, as David, in the Bible, puts it, "created my inmost being...knit me together in my mother's womb"[20], must be the best of them.
Similarly, humans also attribute to 'God', through negatives, that which they consider a not-so-good aspect of their being or by negating something that is easily understandable, for if it is, it certainly isn't 'God'. But how could one come to such a conclusion? Why is it such that, that what is understandable to the human mind, is, or rather can't be 'God'? Before delving into this question, however, it'll be reasonable enough to keep in consideration that 'transcendence' (that God is

beyond everything material or known)[21] is universally applicable. Thus, anything that is beyond perceptibility or knowledge is 'God'.

Thus, in the Isaiah 40:28, it is stated,

" He will not (note the 'not') grow tired or weary,
and his understanding no one can fathom (thus that which 'cannot' be understood)"[22]

Why would then 'God', the Creator, He who formulated the laws of nature and created beings[23], Himself be bound by them? Why would His 'happiness' and His 'sorrow' be dependent on the activities of another being? Wouldn't that put the concept of His fundamental being into an existential conflict, that He is all there is, independent of anything whatsoever[24]?

In the "Kalahantaritavarnane Mugdhamukundo", the ninth sarga, to Radha, the maid says,

"Let him speak with thee, and pray to thee, and prove thee
All his truth;
Let his silent loving lamentation move thee
Asking ruth;
How knowest thou? All, listen, dearest Lady,
He is there;
Mâ kooroo mânini mânamayè,
Thou must hear!"

And again, in the tenth sarga, "Maninivarnane Chaturachaturbhujo", Krishna says,

"Thou, thou hast been my blood, my breath, my being;
The pearl to plunge for in the sea of life;
The sight to strain for, past the bounds of seeing;
The victory to win through longest strife;
My Queen! my crowned Mistress! my sphered bride!
Take this for truth, that what I say beside."(Note-3)

The fact that, to Jayadeva's Krishna, who, if we consider for a moment, is, in truth, an 'avatar' of Vishnu, Radha has been the "blood", "breath", and "being", only puts Radha at a higher pedestal than what is Krishna's own, for it is in Radha forgiving him that he now finds delight, in Radha hearing what he has to say that he will "live!"[25]
What kind of an 'all-God', then, is Jayadeva's Krishna? Or perhaps, he isn't one. Perhaps, the 'God-man' Krishna that Jayadeva writes about, is, in fact, Megasthenes' Herakles, one who bore a club, discus, and a conch, and lived and roamed about in the ancient Indian towns of Kleisobora and Methora[26]. Perhaps, the Krishna Jayadeva knows is an ordinary man who had achieved a greater degree of understanding of the world around the community that first deified him, in the times he lived in, and performed feats that looked miraculous to those around, thus being immortalised in legends and folklores.

References:

1. Müller, Max. “Antiquity of Philosophy”, History of ancient Sanskrit literature, so far as it illustrates the primitive religion of the Brahmans, page 564, Williams and Norgate, 1859.

2. Wahlberg, Mats, "Divine Revelation", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2020 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2020/entries/divine-revelation/>.

3. Solomon, Jeffrey M., “All is One”, Playing in the Mind of God, page 31, AuthorHouse, 2003.

4. De, Souhardya. “God, Para Brahman and the Hindu Henotheism”, The Sunday Guardian, 24th July 2021. (access link: https://www.sundayguardianlive.com/culture/god-para-brahman-hindu-henotheism)

5. Müller, Max. “Lecture V: The Lessons of the Veda”, India: What can It teach Us, pages 348-49, Funk and Wagnalls Publishers, 1882. (accessed on Apple Books)

6. V, Jayaram. “The Truth About Shiva's Essential Nature”, Hindu Website (access link: https://www.hinduwebsite.com/siva/shiva-lord-of-tamas.asp)

7. Usha, KR. “Why Ganesha has a Broken Tusk or Why the Moon has a Crater”, Silk Routes, The International Writing Program, The University of Iowa (access link: https://iwp.uiowa.edu/silkroutes/city/bangalore-india/text/cultural-lens-childrens-stories-why-ganesha)

8. Arnold, Edwin. “Om! Reverence to Ganesha!”, Indian Poetry, page 10, Trübner and Co., Ludgate Hill, 1886. (accessed on Apple Books)

9. Arnold, Edwin. “Hymn to Vishnu”, Indian Poetry, page 16, Trübner and Co., Ludgate Hill, 1886. (accessed on Apple Books)

10. Hopkins, Edward Washburn. “History of the Hindu Trinity”, The Religions of India, page 1216, Ginn and Company Publishers, 1895. (accessed on Apple Books)

11. Arnold, Edwin. “Sarga the First”, Indian Poetry, page 24, Trübner and Co., Ludgate Hill, 1886. (accessed on Apple Books)

12. Pandit, R.S. “Spring”, Ritusamhara or the Pageant of the Seasons, page 61, The National Information and Publications Ltd., 1947.

13. Arnold, Edwin. “Hymn to Vishnu”, Indian Poetry, pages 12-21, Trübner and Co., Ludgate Hill, 1886. (accessed on Apple Books)

14. Arnold, Edwin. “Samodadamodaro”, Indian Poetry, pages 24-33, Trübner and Co., Ludgate Hill, 1886. (accessed on Apple Books)

15. Lochtefeld, James. “Avatar”, The Illustrated Encyclopedia of Hinduism, Vol. 1: A-M, page 72, Rosen Publishing, 2002.

16. Kim, Sebastian CH. Christian Theology in Asia, pages 169-172, Cambridge University Press.

17. Matchett, Freda. Krishna, Lord or Avatara?: The Relationship Between Krishna and Vishnu. Routledge, 2002.

18. Awasthi, Sashi. “Sanskrit sahitya me maryada purushottam Ram Ram ke vyaktitva krititva charitra evam loknayakatva ka vivechnatmak adhyan”, Chhatrapati Sahuji Maharaj University, Department of Sanskrit, 1991. (access link: shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in:8080/jspui/handle/10603/263415)

19. Sasser, Nathan. “God is Impassible and Impassioned”, Reformation21, 16th September, 2013. (access link: https://www.reformation21.org/shelf-life/god-is-impassible-and-impassioned.php)

20. Psalm 139:13, The Holy Bible, New International Version. (access link: https://www.blueletterbible.org/niv/psa/139/1/t_conc_617013).

21. Jenkins, Amanda. “Theology Thursday: Transcendence”, Theology and Ministry, Grand Canyon University, 14th November, 2019. (access link: https://www.gcu.edu/blog/theology-ministry/theology-thursday-transcendence)

22. Isaiah 40:28, The Holy Bible, New International Version. (access link: https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Isaiah+40%3A28&version=NIV)

23. White, Thomas. “In the Beginning”, Cedarville Magazine, Cedarville University, Spring 2017. (access link: https://www.cedarville.edu/-/media/Files/PDF/President/Presidents-Magazine-Articles/Cedarville_Magazine_Spring_2017.pdf)

24. Sauvage, George. "Aseity." The Catholic Encyclopedia. Vol. 1. New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1907. 30 Dec. 2021 (http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/01774b.htm).

25. Arnold, Edwin. “Kalahantaritavarnane Mugdhamukundo”, Indian Poetry, page 150, Trübner and Co., Ludgate Hill, 1886. (accessed on Apple Books)

26. Hopkins, Edward Washburn. “History of the Hindu Trinity”, The Religions of India, page 1206, Ginn and Company Publishers, 1895. (accessed on Apple Books)

Note 1: In order to get a clear idea on the text divisions in the Sanskritic mahākāvyas, please refer to Lidia Sudyka’s (Jagiellonian University, Kraków) article “Ucchvasa, sarga and lambha'; Text divisions in Sanskrit poems (mahakavyas)”, published in the Cracow Indological Studies, Volume XIII, pages 15-39, 2011

Note 2: This, and all verses that precede it, including the translations of the names of the sargas as penned down by Jayadeva, have been taken from Edwin Arnold’s translation of the ‘Gita Govinda’ in his work titled “Indian Poetry”, published by Trübner and Co. in the year 1886.