India’s Great Love Story

GITA GOVINDA

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INTRODUCTION

In India, literature and imagery became fused in a unique fashion: series of miniature paintings, wrapped in bundles in cloth and carefully stored away in chests were extremely popular at the courts of Hindu princes between the 16th and 19th century. These extremely precious works of art, created with the finest brushes and rendered in costly pigments, including gold, recount some of India’s greatest tales. They tell of mighty Hindu gods and goddesses and the great adventures and emotions experienced by human beings.

One of these stories is the *Gita Govinda*, a poem that celebrates the love between a god and human girl. Over the course of time, many artists have tried to render this tale in images, but none succeeded better in capturing the magical poetry, the emotional power, and the narrative impact than the *Gita Govinda* created by a family of artists from Guler, a small town in today’s state of Himachal Pradesh.

In the 18th century, Manaku and Nainsukh of Guler, together with their sons, created two pictorial series of the *Gita Govinda*, unsurpassed in significance and beauty to this day. Each of the two cycles contains 151 paintings alongside a whole set of drawings which are today spread across the entire globe. With a selection of some of the most beautiful works, the exhibition invites viewers to immerse themselves in the ups and downs of a love story between a god and a human.
THE GITA GOVINDA – KRISHNA’S SONG

Gita Govinda, short for Gitagovindakavyam, means the “song which sings the praise of Krishna”. The Hindu god Krishna is known under many names, among them Govinda, “best of cow herders”. The names, which also feature in subheadings of the Gita Govinda, have to do with the many legends that surround Krishna and the god Vishnu. Krishna is venerated as a god in his own rights, but, according to many traditions, he is one of the ten incarnations, or “descents” (avatara), of Vishnu.

The Gita Govinda was composed by the poet Jayadeva in Sanskrit at the end of the 12th century, probably at the court of King Lakshmanasena in East Bengal. Informed by India’s rich mythological tradition, the poem recounts the love story between Krishna and the shepherdess Radha.

Jayadeva merges the uncountable but nameless shepherdesses of earlier narratives into one figure, Radha, and so creates a new heroine who becomes the embodiment of love and devotion towards a divine being (see: bhakti). With its exquisite poetical language and subtle style of narration, the Gita Govinda became the apogee of Sanskrit poetry and the paragon of many later religious lyrics. It gave rise to countless manuscripts, illustrations, and paintings over the centuries to come.

In the year 1730 the lady Malini had this picture-book of the Gita Govinda made by the male painter Manaku.

2 Radha and Krishna confer darshan
Final leaf from the second Guler Gita Govinda series of ca. 1775
Master of the first generation after Manaku and Nainsukh of Guler
India, Pahari region, Guler
Museum Rietberg Zurich
Permanent loan, collection of Barbara and Eberhard Fischer

GITA GOVINDA – INDIA’S GREAT LOVE STORY

SARGA 1: CONVIVIAL KRISHNA – RADHA FALLS IN LOVE

The love story between the shepherdess Radha and the god Krishna commences with a nightly walk in a dark forest, after Krishna’s foster father had asked Radha to accompany his son on his outing. Faint hints suggest that this is also the couple’s first night of passionate love.

But afterwards, when Radha, consumed with love, wanders through the dense brushwood in search of Krishna, she cannot find him. Radha’s best friend tells her that Krishna is enjoying himself in the company of a group of other shepherdesses. He’s playing the flute and dancing with them. Around them, the first heralds of spring are springing up – it smells of sandalwood, a cuckoo is calling, and buds and flowers are sprouting everywhere – but what about Radha, sick with jealousy?
Sarga 2: Carefree Krishna – Radha’s Emotional Chaos

Her friend’s account of Krishna’s behaviour has deeply offended Radha. She pictures to herself Krishna surrounded by beautiful girls. Hurt and ridden by jealousy, she hides in the bushes. She tells her friend about their first night together and enthuses about Krishna. Deeply hurt, she imagines how Krishna is now lavishing the tenderness she briefly experienced on other girls. Her worst nightmare, however, is that by now Krishna has forgotten all about her. She feels derided but still longs for him with all her heart. Overwhelmed by grief and heartbreak, she asks her friend to help her.

...I remember Krishna dancing in the rasa roundelay, jesting in amorous prankish play.

For even while wanton Krishna delights among the girls without me, My perverse heart still loves him. What am I to do?

But Radha and Krishna strayed from the homeward path and into the woods.

3 Radha and Krishna walk through the dark woods
   Drawing for the second Gita Govinda series of ca. 1775
   Master of the first generation after Manaku and Nainsukh of Guler
   India, Pahari region, Guler
   Private collection of Eva and Konrad Seitz

...Krishna strays and plays, my friend, dancing with young girls.

4 Krishna dances with the cowherd girls
   Folio from the second Guler Gita Govinda series of ca. 1775
   Master of the first generation after Manaku and Nainsukh of Guler
   India, Pahari region, Guler
   Museum Rietberg Zurich
   Gift Collection of Horst Metzger

5 Krishna dances with the cowherd girls
   Folio from the first Guler Gita Govinda series of 1730
   Manaku of Guler (ca. 1700–1760)
   India, Pahari region, Guler
   Museum Rietberg Zurich
   Gift Collection of Horst Metzger

Winds from the Malabar Mountains... blow towards the lordly Himalaya, longing to bathe in its snow...

6 The warm South wind blows towards the Himalaya
   Folio from the second Guler Gita Govinda series of ca. 1775
   Master of the first generation after Manaku and Nainsukh of Guler
   India, Pahari region, Guler
   Museum Rietberg Zurich
   Gift Collection of Eva and Konrad Seitz

7 Krishna relishes in the company of the cowherd girls
   Folio from the second Guler Gita Govinda series of ca. 1775
   Master of the first generation after Manaku and Nainsukh of Guler
   India, Pahari region, Guler
   Museum Rietberg Zurich
   Permanent loan, collection of Barbara and Eberhard Fischer

8 Radha complains to her friend; Krishna dallies with the cowherd girls
   Drawing for the second Guler Gita Govinda series of ca. 1775
   Master of the first generation after Manaku and Nainsukh of Guler
   India, Pahari region, Guler
   Museum Rietberg, Zurich
The first time he made love to me, I was very shy... as he loosened my skirt to uncover my thigh, he cajoled me with his flattering wiles...

9 Radha remembers the first night with Krishna
Folio from the second Guler Gita Govinda series of ca. 1775
Master of the first generation after Manaku and Nainsukh of Guler
India, Pahari region, Guler
Museum Rietberg Zurich
Permanent loan, collection of Barbara and Eberhard Fischer

SARGA 3: CONFOUNDED KRISHNA – RADHA IS MISTAKEN

However, Radha is wrong. Krishna is not all that carefree as it appears. He tears away from the shepherd girls and goes in search of Radha in the forest, alas to no avail. Remorse overcomes him, and he sinks to the ground in dismay.

He realizes that Radha must have seen him in the company of the other shepherdesses, and reproaches himself. Anxiously he imagines Radha’s angry looks. Only then does he realize how his heart yearns for Radha. Full of longing and plagued by his bad conscience, he calls out to her and begs her for forgiveness. His deeds as a hero appear worthless compared to his present battle for love. Like Radha before him, he is carried away by memories of her beauty.

And then, in a grove on the banks of the Yamuna, he despondently repented.

10 Grief-stricken, Krishna seeks solitude
Folio from the second Guler Gita Govinda series of ca. 1775
Master of the first generation after Manaku and Nainsukh of Guler
India, Pahari region, Guler
Museum Rietberg Zurich
Gift Collection of Eva and Konrad Seitz

11 Grief-stricken, Krishna seeks solitude
Drawing for the second Guler Gita Govinda series of ca. 1775
Master of the first generation after Manaku and Nainsukh of Guler
India, Pahari region, Guler
Museum Rietberg Zurich
Gift Collection of Eva and Konrad Seitz

...I've already been ravaged by a shower of arrows – the darting glances of a doe-eyed girl; and now, I have no hope for recovery.

12 Krishna grieves
Drawing for the second Guler Gita Govinda series of ca. 1775
Master of the first generation after Manaku and Nainsukh of Guler
India, Pahari region, Guler
Private collection of Eva and Konrad Seitz

“Don’t string your bow! Put down that flower-tipped arrow!”

13 Krishna tries to keep Kama, the god of Love, away
Folio from the first Guler Gita Govinda series of 1730
Manaku of Guler (ca. 1700–1760)
India, Pahari region, Guler
Government Museum and Art Gallery, Chandigarh, India
SARGA 5: CRAVING KRISHNA – RADHA IS SORELY MISSED

The words of Radha’s friend do not go unheard. Krishna sends her to find Radha and bring her to him. He will wait for her. So, the friend goes back to Radha and describes in detail Krishna’s suffering and yearning. He regrets his behaviour: despair and yearning have reduced him to a moaning heap of misery; he longs for nothing more than being reunited with Radha. By describing Krishna’s impatience and joyful expectation, the friend tries to persuade Radha to set out and find him. With gentle allusions to another night of love, she even tries to rouse Radha’s passion and overcome her despair and anger.

…There on the ground, he tosses and turns, moaning aloud your name...

14 Krishna tosses on his bed of earth
Folio from the first Guler Gita Govinda series of 1730
Manaku of Guler (ca. 1700–1760)
India, Pahari region, Guler
Government Museum and Art Gallery, Chandigarh, India

…Krishna meditates on you, chanting mantras to invoke you...

15 Krishna misses Radha
Folio from the second Guler Gita Govinda series of ca. 1775
Master of the first generation after Manaku and Nainsukh of Guler
India, Pahari region, Guler
Private collection, courtesy of Eberhard Rist

16 Krishna suffers in the cold moonlight
Drawing for the second Guler Gita Govinda series of ca. 1775
Master of the first generation after Manaku and Nainsukh of Guler
India, Pahari region, Guler
Private collection of Eva and Konrad Seitz

…when you turn away from me, the moon sets my flesh on fire...

15 Radha suffers in the cold moonlight
Folio from the second Guler Gita Govinda series of ca. 1775
Master of the first generation after Manaku and Nainsukh of Guler
India, Pahari region, Guler
Private collection, courtesy of Eberhard Rist
...By the Yamuna, where the wind wafts winsome, there in the woods, Krishna rests...

18 Radha's friend tells her about Krishna's pain
   Folio from the second Guler Gita Govinda series of ca. 1775
   Master of the first generation after Manaku and Nainsukh of Guler
   India, Pahari region, Guler
   Francesca Galloway, London

   SARGA 6–7: COVETED KRISHNA –  
   DELIRIOUS RADHA

   Radha is too weak and emotionally overwhelmed to find her way to her lover. As soon as she realizes this, the friend hurries back to Krishna and tells him of Radha's inner turmoil and pain, begging him to overcome his stubbornness and give in. Instead of waiting for her to make the first step, he should go and find her. Finally, they arrange a new rendezvous: a banyan tree is chosen to shield the lovers from inquisitive eyes.

   But Krishna doesn't show up. With the moon high up in the sky, Radha waits, but in vain. She is terribly ashamed of being made to wait, alone in the forest at night, and wonders what is keeping him. Is Krishna himself too weak to make his way to her? Or is he with the other girls again?

   When Radha sees her friend returning alone, without Krishna, she is convinced: Krishna has fallen for a prettier girl! Wrought with despair, she envisions again how now another girl is enjoying what she experienced with Krishna and everything she ever hoped for from him. Now, completely robbed of her wits, Radha wants nothing else but to die of lovesickness.

   She has adorned herself, and everytime a leaf rustles, imagining you've come, she spreads out the bedding...

19 Radha is too upset to go to Krishna and sends her friend to him
   Folio from the second Guler Gita Govinda series of ca. 1775
   Master of the first generation after Manaku and Nainsukh of Guler
   India, Pahari region, Guler
   Musée national des arts asiatiques – Guimet

   He adorns with amaranth, bright like lightning, the storm clouds of her thick dark hair...

20 Radha imagines Krishna's betrayal
   Folio from the second Guler Gita Govinda series of ca. 1775
   Master of the first generation after Manaku and Nainsukh of Guler
   India, Pahari region, Guler
   Museum Rietberg Zurich
   Permanent loan, collection of Barbara and Eberhard Fischer

   He paints her foot, a bud, with lack...

21 Radha's memories mix with her own fears
   Drawing for the second Guler Gita Govinda series of ca. 1775
   Master of the first generation after Manaku and Nainsukh of Guler
   India, Pahari region, Guler
   Private collection of Eva and Konrad Seitz

   SARGA 8–10: CONFUSED KRISHNA –  
   RADHA IS FURIOUS

   At daybreak, Krishna arrives at last. On his knees, he begs for forgiveness, but in vain. Radha is deeply hurt. She feels betrayed and accuses him of infidelity, calling him a liar. Angry and disappointed, she sends him away.
Radha’s friend can no longer take this. She realizes that Radha’s senses are clouded by dismay and anger, and tries to calm her. How can Radha reject Krishna and turn him away, after all, he did come to look for her in the end? Now it is up to Radha to give in, otherwise she has no one to blame for her misery other than herself.

At last, Radha comes to her senses and, in the evening, once more lends an ear to Krishna’s words of apology. He tries to soothe her anger with sweet compliments. He assures her of his undying love and vows that she is the only girl and that only she has the ability to rouse such feelings in him.

…O my beloved, my sweetheart, please,  
Don’t be angry, please be fair.

22 Radha sulks and turns Krishna away  
Folio from the second Guler Gita Govinda series of ca. 1775  
Master of the first generation after Manaku and Nainsukh of Guler  
India, Pahari region, Guler  
Museum Rietberg Zurich  
Legacy of Lucy Rudolph

Don’t worry, frightened girl!...

23 Krishna asks for forgiveness  
Folio from the first Guler Gita Govinda series of 1730  
Manaku of Guler (ca. 1700–1760)  
India, Pahari region, Guler  
Government Museum and Art Gallery, Chandigarh, India

SARGA 11: CONTENTED KRISHNA –  
RADHA CAPITULATES

Then Krishna leaves Radha and her friend on their own again. Once more, the friend speaks to her in soothing words. In her opinion, Krishna’s feelings are true and genuine; she should give in and stop sulking and feeling angry. Finally, Radha’s anger eases. Her friend leads her to Krishna and encourages her to lay her doubts to rest. Radha steps forth and approaches her lover full of anticipation, fear, and uncertainty. However, as soon as she stands before him, all her shame melts away. Drunk with victory like after a successful battle, Krishna embraces his beloved Radha.

As evening, the thief of vision, approached, one of Radha’s friends spoke to her...

24 Radha believes Krishna  
Folio from the second Guler Gita Govinda series of ca. 1775  
Master of the first generation after Manaku and Nainsukh of Guler  
India, Pahari region, Guler  
Private collection, Zurich

You’re afraid of Love’s arrows, of love harsh and cruel; So enter here, Radha, and be with Krishna...

25 Radha is brought to Krishna by her friend  
Folio from the second Guler Gita Govinda series of 1775  
Master of the first generation after Manaku and Nainsukh of Guler  
India, Pahari region, Guler  
Private collection, Zurich
She gazed at Krishna: Long had he longed to make love to her, his one true love...

26 Krishna beams as he sees Radha
   Folio from the first Guler Gita Govinda series of 1730
   Manaku of Guler (ca. 1700–1760)
   India, Pahari region, Guler
   Government Museum and Art Gallery, Chandigarh, India

...How can you be so ambivalent towards the man who worships your feet
Like a slave purchased with but a pittance of your wealth...

27 Radha feels embarrassed
   Drawing for the second Guler Gita Govinda series of ca. 1775
   Master of the first generation after Manaku and Nainsukh of Guler
   India, Pahari region, Guler
   Museum Rietberg Zurich
   Gift of Balthasar and Nanni Reinhart

When Krishna killed Kamsa’s monstrous war elephant, playfully crushing it to death...

28 "A playful fight": Krishna kills the elephant Kuvalayapida
   Folio from the second Guler Gita Govinda series of ca. 1775
   Master of the first generation after Manaku and Nainsukh of Guler
   India, Pahari region, Guler
   Museum Rietberg, Zurich

SARGA 12: KINDLY KRISHNA – RADHA IS MUCH LOVED

At last, Krishna and Radha are alone. Free of inhibition they turn to each other, and the love play starts anew. All dreams come true. At the end of their night of love, drained but enraptured, Radha asks Krishna to help her dress, put on her makeup, and adorn herself.

This happy ending brings the story to a close. In the last words of the poem, its creator expresses his hope that his work has not only pleased his audience but in particular also Radha and Krishna.

...Looking at her, and well aware that her heart was in the mood for love, Krishna spoke to his beloved...

29 Radha shyly closes her eyes
   Folio from the second Guler Gita Govinda series of ca. 1775
   Master of the first generation after Manaku and Nainsukh of Guler
   India, Pahari region, Guler
   Museum Rietberg Zurich
   Permanent loan, collection of Barbara and Eberhard Fischer

...The lovely lover, drunk on the mead flowing from her lips, somehow experienced pleasure...

30 Radha and Krishna’s amorous play
   Fragment of a folio from the second Guler Gita Govinda series of ca. 1775
   Master of the first generation after Manaku and Nainsukh of Guler
   India, Pahari region, Guler
   Museum Rietberg, Zurich
When they started making love, as much a deadly battle as a sexy game…

31 Radha and Krishna’s amorous play goes on
Folio from the second Guler Gita Govinda series of ca. 1775
Master of the first generation after Manaku and Nainsukh of Guler
India, Pahari region, Guler
Private collection, courtesy of Eberhard Rist

…And embarrassed, Radha tried to cover her breasts, her feet, her loins with her hands…

32 The morning after
Folio from the second Guler Gita Govinda series of ca. 1775
Master of the first generation after Manaku and Nainsukh of Guler
India, Pahari region, Guler
Museum Rietberg Zurich
Legacy of Lucy Rudolph

I, Jayadeva, am the son of Bhojadeva and Ramadevi; May the verses of my “Gitagovinda” be sung by Parashara and others dear to me!

33 The poet Jayadeva in front of Radha and Krishna
Drawing for the second Guler Gita Govinda series of ca. 1775
Master of the first generation after Manaku and Nainsukh of Guler
India, Pahari region, Guler
Museum Rietberg Zurich
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BHAKTI – AN INDIAN DEVOTIONAL FORM

In India, the Gita Govinda still represents one of the most significant reference texts of bhakti, a widespread form of devotion in Hinduism to this day. Bhakti stands for the participative devotion to a divine being, centring on the all-embracing and unconditional love of a human being for a god or goddess such as, for example, Vishnu, Shiva or the Devi – including all their names, manifestations, and descents (avatara) under which they are revered. Music, poetry, and art support and promote the devout and ardent sentiments of its followers.

In theological terms, bhakti is usually attributed to the Bhagavad Gita, a Hindu text that possibly traces back as far the 4th century. Later, it was supplemented by other narratives such as the Bhagavata Purana. Apart from Sanskrit texts, we also have a rich literary tradition written in various Indian vernaculars. The fact that the idea of selfless devotion is not reserved for the few but open to all social strata, means that less privileged groups (such as women and the lower classes) are also granted access to the divine. The text of the Gita Govinda which has been recited in temples since the 15th century, is a perfect example of the kind of love and devotion humans direct towards a divine being – and which indeed is reciprocated.

34 Vishnu sees Lakshmi mirrored
Folio from the second Guler Gita Govinda series of ca. 1775
Master of the first generation after Manaku and Nainsukh of Guler
India, Pahari region, Guler
Museum Rietberg Zurich
Gift Collection of Eva and Konrad Seitz
Indian tales and stories are notoriously complex and elaborate – capturing them in images is quite a challenge in terms of design as well as rendition, and requires detailed planning. First, the artists have to decide on which of the episodes are key to the tale. They must know the story very well and be able to discern the significant from the unimportant. Depending on how they are remunerated for their efforts, the series can turn out to be longer or shorter. And, of course, in the end it all comes down to the artists’ creativity.

Before an artist starts with the actual painting, he first creates sketches and then preliminary drawings, which are rendered directly on the paper – probably for the whole series at once. These are then coated with a fine layer of lime, allowing the drawing to still shimmer through. The colour pigments are then carefully applied, layer by layer, after which the reverse of the painting is polished. The rendition of the facial features and the jewellery is the last step in the process.
The “Second Guler Gita Govinda series of ca 1775” is a special case in this respect. We have single sheets of it containing all three work steps, that is, the sketches, the pre-drawings, and the finished paintings. However, not only are there certain discrepancies between the paintings and the drawings, the drawings also appear to have been reworked several times. In other words, it is not inconceivable that the drawings were only made, or at least altered, after the pictures had been painted.

42 Three sketches for the second Guler Gita Govinda series of ca. 1775
Attributed to Nainsukh of Guler (ca. 1710–1778)
India, Pahari region, Guler
Museum Rietberg Zurich
Legacy, Collection of Alice Boner

43 Grieving Radha
Drawing for the second Guler Gita Govinda series of ca. 1775
Master of the first generation after Manaku and Nainsukh of Guler
India, Pahari region, Guler
Museum Rietberg Zurich

44 Grieving Radha
Folio from the second Guler Gita Govinda series of ca. 1775
Master of the first generation after Manaku and Nainsukh of Guler
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46 Hallucinating Radha
Folio from the second Guler Gita Govinda series of ca. 1775
Master of the first generation after Manaku and Nainsukh of Guler
India, Pahari region, Guler
Private collection, courtesy of Eberhard Rist

47 Radha sits, leaning on a tree
Drawing for the second Guler Gita Govinda series of ca. 1775
Master of the first generation after Manaku and Nainsukh of Guler
India, Pahari region, Guler
Museum Rietberg Zurich

48 Radha sits, leaning on a tree
Folio from the second Guler Gita Govinda series of ca. 1775
Master of the first generation after Manaku and Nainsukh of Guler
India, Pahari region, Guler
Private collection, Zurich

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