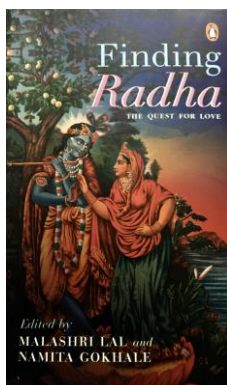


**Chapter 2, Finding Radha (Penguin, 2018)  
Ed. Malashri Lal and Namita Gokhale**



**IN SEARCH OF THE HISTORICAL RADHA**

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We cannot ever imagine Krishna without Radha, but not many are, perhaps, know that she actually entered the life and legend of Krishna rather late. An even lesser known fact is that Krishna himself took his own time to blossom as a dominant figure in Indian mythology. Contrary to what most people are told, Krishna was certainly not visible in the Vedic period — when all that was or is “holy, good and great in India” is claimed to have appeared. His first mention — just a wisp of it — appears well after the Rig Veda had been completed and over with. It is in the Chhandogya Upanishad of the 8th or 7th century BC or BCE (Before the Common Era), that we get one ‘Krishna, son of Devaki’: Krisnaya-devakiputraya. However sparse, this single mention of Krishna indicates that some legends about him were possibly in circulation somewhere, in the post-Vedic period.

This is about the time when the speakers of an Indo-Aryan language were coming to terms with the indigenous people of India — whom they had earlier reviled, rather intensely. Over the next few centuries, we get to hear of him, in bits and pieces, in other texts such as the Taittiriya Aranyaka, the Jain sacred tales, Panini’s Ashtadhyayi and so on. Vasudeva — as a divine character who is distinct from, yet allied to Krishna — makes his first physical appearance a century or so before the Christian Era or the Current Era commenced. On one side of a silver coin of Agotheles the Greek, we get an image of Vasudeva-Krishna. We must remember that, during this period, Vasudeva was an independent, established deity, while Krishna was a rather amorphous, upcoming deity on whom there was neither any literature or any icon. Pierre Amiet and his fellow scholars declare, rather decisively:

“there is no evidence of Krishna (or Radha) in sculpture or coinage or inscription before the Current Era began”<sup>1</sup>

The first clear image of Krishna appears in the Ekanamsa group of sculptures of 2nd century AD or ACE in Gaya, Bihar<sup>2</sup>, where he appears to have broken free from Vasudeva. But he is still yoked with Balarama, whose images, incidentally, are quite visible in the preceding three centuries. This Kushan period sculpture of Ekanamsa positions Krishna next to Balarama, with a female who is identified as ‘Subhadra’, their sister. The first sacred text that mentions Krishna is the Harivamsa of the 3rd or 4th century, that collated the hitherto-nebulous or patchy tales about Krishna into one authoritative omnibus. It is around this time that the Mahabharata and the Ramayana had reached a final stage of composition after almost five centuries “in the making” — busy absorbing and sewing together different, colourful tales from all over the Indo-Gangetic plains, and beyond. Yet, though both the Harivamsa and the Mahabharata extol the ‘mature and godly Krishna’, we do not come across any corroborative sculpture or other arts. These are all on Bala-Krishna as are the large number of sculptural or terracotta representations of Krishna that appear in the next six hundred years. Gupta and post-Gupta art depict Krishna as a baby or a child, not as a youth or adult — which precludes Radha’s arrival.

To reach Radha, we need to cross another six long centuries, to reach the 9th century sacred text, the Bhagavata Purana. But before we come to the first Radha-like young woman in Brahmanical literature, we must mention a secular text that mentions Radha. The Gatha Saptasathi is a collection of seven hundred verses composed in Prakrit by a king named Hala. We know that he belonged to the upper Deccan but we do not know when he did so. This could have been in the 2nd century AD/ACE, which means this book preceded the final version of Mahabharata and the Harivamsa. Or, it could have been composed some three-four centuries later — no one knows. We are taken aback at the explicit reference — pada 225 of the first chapter, that says, “O Krishna, by the puff of breath from your mouth, as you blow the dust from Radha’s face, you take away the glories of other milk-maids”<sup>3</sup>. Not only this, we come across a verse in another work, Banabhatta’s Harshacharita, which describes how “the breasts of Radha made Krishna dance in the courtyard, and people were amazed.” It is clear that the myth of Radha and Krishna — including his loves and leelas — was surely known to a section of the masses of India, by the middle of the first millennium of the Current Era. The moot point here is, however, that Radha was still not ‘recognised’ by Brahmanical religion, even though we find Radha in Jain commentaries. In the 7th century, we get a mention in Bhattanarayana’s Venisamaraha. Another Jain scholar, Ananada-varadhana, also

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<sup>1</sup> Amiet, Pierre & 7 others, (1973), *Arts Asiatiques*, Tome XXVI, Parcourir Les Collections

<sup>2</sup> Banerjee, P. (1978) *The Life of Krishna in Indian Art*, National Museum, New Delhi, pg xvi

<sup>3</sup> Banerjee, S. (1993) *Appropriation of a Folk-Heroine*, Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla, page 9

mentions her in his famous Dhyanaloka, which preceded the first Hindu sacred text to refer to her, that too, rather indirectly — the Bhagavata Purana.

This Purana speaks of an unnamed lady who is so much like Radha, but she is not called Radha — she actually remains without a name. In his well-researched work, Sumanta Banerjee<sup>4</sup> states that she has been called Anyaradhita or the ‘conciliated one’ —which is an appellation, not as a proper noun. And she is conciliated by a Krishna-like cowherd called Mayon who frolicked with several gopis and disappears occasionally with one of them. The Bhagavata Purana, however, mentions that she is usually singled out, for special favours. Because the cowherd (not Krishna, by name) is divine, this was his way of teaching humility to all the gopis and even the special gopi was also taught her share, by being abandoned, time and again. Book 10, Chapter 30, Verses 36-38 of this Purana describes it all. This solitary word, Anyaradhita, is taken by scholars to be the origin of the proper name ‘Radha’, but as we have seen, the name Radha was already known to the folk. We see how much time it takes a folk deity (or a popular tale or a rhyme) to reach the next higher level — of finding some mention in a sacred text.

Of course, ‘conciliation’ of Radha does form an integral part of the Radha-Krishna love-story and however ‘humiliating’ this act may have appeared to patriarchy, the common people enjoyed it. They could, obviously, identify themselves with the repeated episodes of ‘conciliation’ of the woman — irrespective of the religiously-sanctioned prescription of gender domination. These are the subtextual inferences of societal behaviour that copybook historians usually shy away from — as they are more comfortable with indexed hard references to quote from. In any case, it is interesting to note that Brahmanism finally ‘legitimised’ the character through a new Sanskrit Purana. It is worth noting that this bold Purana was composed in deep Tamil country and not in Braj or Mathura and also that by this time, all the 18 Maha-Puranas had either been completed or had reached a stage of maturity. They were all focused on male deities — Vishnu, Shiva, Brahma, Krishna, Agni, Vayu — and the major exception was the Markandeya Purana of the 7th or 8th century, that had ‘legitimised’ Durga. But the Devi Mahatmya episode did not feature in the main body of the MarkandeyaPurana — it came in through an appendix. We also need to be clear that though the Bhagavata Purana surely introduced a Radha-like character, who hailed from the community of herders and milk-men, and it also described in detail the divine dance, the Raas Lila, it is actually a long eulogy of Krishna. "Though art Brahman, the ancient One, the immortal One, free from all qualities and miseries. Thou art all-bliss.....the Lord of the Self, Atmesvara .... who is to be adored" (VIII.12.7).

The fact that this Sanskrit Purana was written by Tamil scholars hints at the existence of a tradition where romance and unorthodox dalliances were accepted. We

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<sup>4</sup> op cit

need to appreciate that Tamil poetry, notably the Sangam literature, was quite familiar with the spirit of puranchi — which was not just love making, but a sublime experience. The romance described in the Bhagavata Purana was thus, in the best traditions of Tamil poetry, especially the Aham variety. Let us recall the story of Andal to understand how deep was the yearning for the lord in Tamil Vaishnavism, the Alvar tradition. Andal could just not live without him and thus merged herself physically into his idol. It is, therefore, not surprising that Sanskrit writers in Tamil country were more comfortable with a long poetic tradition that celebrated a spirited gopi, called Nappinnai in Tamil lore, who drew Mayon into her dance and was thus his favourite<sup>5</sup>. It was not only in South India, but also in Eastern India, that we get indications of Radha. In the same 9th century, we are intrigued to observe a partner positioned next to a sculpture of Krishna in Paharpur in Pala-ruled Bengal. As we have seen, Jain tradition was more open to Radha, while Brahmanical literature was still reticent or ambiguous about her. Jain scholars like Somadeva Suri and Vikramabhata, who wrote between the 9th and the 12th centuries, keep mentioning Radha.

The real credit for bringing Radha into the mainstream of devotional poetry, however, goes to Jayadeva in eastern India. His immortal Gita Govinda, composed in the 12th century, set new trends like the Ashtapadi or groups of eight lyrical couplets. He could portray divine love with such finesse that he became the fountain of inspiration for countless generations of poets, singers and dancers since then. Though Jayadeva mixed his Sanskrit with Apabhramsa, an Eastern sub-language, Brahmanical tradition not only accepted him and his Radha-Krishna, but several learned Sanskrit commentaries like Khumba's Rasikapriya, Shankara Misra's Rasa-Manjari and Tirumala Deva Raya's Sruti Ranjana were actually written on Jayadeva's work. We have also to mention two other later 15th century poets, Chandidas of Bengal and Vidyapati of Mithila who elaborated the path-breaking work of Jayadeva of Odisha very picturesquely. The trio's poetry could finally establish the Radha-Krishna legend beyond any challenge. We must not forget to mention that it was Vidyapati who could successfully express for the first time, the subtle nuances that personify the feelings of a woman, that male poets had missed earlier. It was, however, that the pinnacle was reached a century later by Surdas — who broke totally free from Sanskrit tradition. By composing in simple and lyrical Braj Bhasa, Surdas touched the common man as none else could dream of. However, Surdas was an Ashtachap poet and a follower of Vallabhacharya, who did not agree with the questionable marital status that the romance represented — so Surdas overcame the distinctly uncomfortable affair by promptly “getting them married”. Despite this, Surdas' language and emotions were so intense and his style so utterly masterly that he could describe Radha's pangs as a virahini as vividly as a passionate, forlorn lover.

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<sup>5</sup> Sumanta Banerjee (1993) page 225.

We have reached the 16th century by now, which is when one can safely aver that Radha and Krishna became an inseparable and accepted part of the Indian tradition. This is also the time when Mughal miniature paintings appeared and started circulating the finest polychromatic paper images ever, all over India. The Rajput schools and other genres of miniatures introduced the much-needed visual component to the story of Radha and Krishna. The Bhakti movement was another factor that really propelled the romantic tale and Chaitanya portrayed Radha as the metaphor for yearning “to be one with the lord” — to its fullest. Along with literature, visual arts and religion came the powerful and immensely popular medium of mass communication — the performing arts. Radha and Krishna were, thus, united for ever. We can conclude his brief account of how Krishna arrived nearly one and a half milleniums after the Vedas were first composed and, also noting how Radha took another 13 centuries more — to make it to the top billing position. A bit of history and a minimal sense of sequencing dates and events will easily belie oft-believed, oft-repeated notions of how deities like Radha-Krishna have always been a part of our history and culture for ever — without dates — i.e, sanatan or eternal. We are not demeaning them — we are only clarifying facts so that those who know less may not hijack them, for their own agenda.