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KRISHNA'S LONG JOURNEY:

From Sacred Text to the Popular Arts

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1. Krishna represents a fascinating and complex personality that generations of scholars have struggled to understand. Some have tried to understand the reasons behind his unparalleled popularity among the people of India and later among numerous devotees beyond these shores as well, while others attempted to unravel distinct facets of this attractive divinity. It is difficult to state whether Shiva or Krishna or even Vishnu or the ‘devi’ is worshipped more by the Hindus, but it may not be too difficult to state that where both the visual and the performing arts are concerned, it is a close call between the first two. The submission of this paper is that where Krishna’s present popularity at the mass level, as distinct from the scriptural and elite level, is a development that appeared in India only in the 15th century and arrived in full colour in the 16th century. In other words, it is incorrect to assume that the

same Krishna was as much of a favourite from, say, the Vedic age or the Gupta period.

2. The present paper will be tracing this argument and does not aspire to be a comprehensive overview of Krishna or of his countless expressions in the arts. It is submitted that the present pan-Indian popularity of Krishna came first and mainly when the *Bhakti* movement of started in the north and the west, followed immediately in the east. The south had embarked on this path centuries earlier and had produced the first major comprehensive work on Krishna half a millennium earlier. A recent foreign account sums up the efflorescence of artistic expressions on Krishna to the *Bhakti* wave with his role as "a guide, a lover or a friend", someone who was "to be worshipped through personal devotion" in whatever form the devotee chose (*KLD,2*). Auguste Barte had described Krishna as "a complex personality, mingling myths of fire, lightning, storm, heaven and sun" (Majumdar, 1969, 1-2) and obviously this excitement had to find its outlet in the arts. But our objective is to try to find why it took such a long time for this cult to come out of the enclosure of sacred texts to be

celebrated at the mass level through poetry, music, dance, drama and the visual arts.

3. Such an exercise may be useful for un-bundling convenient images that we nurse about the past without much thought as we then start believing that the glory which we witness currently around any phenomenon was something that existed in equal measure in the past as well. This is often not founded on facts and in ahistorical country like ours, the term ancient or *pracheena* is indeed very flexible and in sphere of religion it can cover something that could be several centuries old or a deity or temple that may well be just a few decades old. The pity is that even scholars often strain to link an existing phenomenon with its earliest known textual reference, without examining the context in which that "evidence" had originally appeared. The flaunted reference could very well be a scrappy passing remark or a generic description, but its repeated mention confers an imagined antiquity to the subject under discussion. Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983) had defined the contriving of such "agelessness" to a relatively recent belief or celebration as "the invention of tradition". This paper

submits that though the story of Krishna's success at the level of popular celebration is just six centuries old, it is sought to be related to several ancient references in the sacred texts that may be four times older. People with an inadequate sense of linear history are thus likely to mix up the years and frequently stretch the antiquity of an event or a belief to some "hoary past" by extending backwards the actual dates. This unrealistic or unhistorical tendency represents a vacuous habit that we could define as "the retrospective elongation of tradition". It is reiterated that Krishna's outstanding popularity in the cultural expressions like song, dance, verse and visual arts is one matter and the mention of just his name or some achievements a thousand or even two thousand years earlier in the texts is a completely different issue altogether.

4. Sacred texts and visual arts are distinct subjects and the unjustified blurring of lines between them damages objectivity. This makes these claims appear untenable and rejected outright by most serious historians which, in turn, creates unbridgeable rifts between dispassionate academia and emotion-based religious faiths. It is not denied that the

sacred texts did mention a deity or his prototype and extol his virtues, but then these texts appear to have treated him as one more of the gods who occupied the pantheon, not the central hero as he is held at present. Besides, this earlier discourse was restricted mainly to scholars, priests, poets and a small minority within the ruling groups. The main proof that an idea has captured the imagination of the masses lies in the profusion of its expressions in popular culture and this paper will go over a rather quick recapitulation of just some basic facts. Only certain ‘peaks’ in the historical development of the Krishna cult have been selected for their value as 'highlights', for dating and analysing his significant presence in sacred literature and the popular arts. There is no escape, therefore, from some amount of generalisation and the glossing over of exceptions, as every detour into the lanes and bye-lanes of this staggering labyrinth would confuse us more. Besides, if one takes up every mention, it would deflect us from the clarity in the argument. It does not ever belittle faith; it simply presents a transparent proposition in terms of what appears to be historically tenable.

5. Thus, while Krishna or his prototype did appear as some sort of an idea rather early in Indian history, it is often claimed without verification that Krishna's origin can be traced to the great Vedas. SK Bhattacharya mentioned in his work dedicated to the "Krishna cult" that there existed a sage called Krishna in the Vedic period, "but this Krsna of the Vedas has no connection with the popular Krsna" (1978, 1-2). Some scholars trace a reference to a chieftain in Vedic literature but he is described in terms of his dark colour which may have appeared unusual among fairer people. It is worth noting that the name 'Krishna' is more of a descriptive common noun rather than a specific name as such and it was basically the description of dark colour or shade. Krishna's other appellation, '*Shyam*', the dark one, also fortifies the same conclusion. A lot effort has been put in for centuries, but no one has found any trace of the epic hero in the main Vedas.

6. The saga of Hinduism has been one of relentless assimilation of varying cultic practices, beliefs and gods over which the superstructures of chants, texts, devotional songs and rituals were built. It was more convenient, therefore, to

refer to gods and goddesses through open-ended ‘generic’ names, because this facilitated the absorption of different entities into one mega-deity, as different forms or *roopas* . It appears that in the first millennium ACE, the original Vedic triad of Brahma-Vishnu-Shiva gave way to the triumvirate of Vishnu-Shiva-Shakti. While Brahma simply faded away, with just one major presence at Pushkar, the three broad-band cults of Vaishnavism, *Shaivism* and *Devi-Shakti* that appeared around these deities, slowly but perceptibly absorbed almost all other deities and it were these subsumed ones that were referred to through the different appellations.

7. One of the most effective tools of the ‘Brahmanic mode of appropriation and assimilation’ was to club different deities under one broad-spectrum banner through the instrument of *Satarupa-Ashottarashanam-Sahahranam*, ie, calling it by a thousand or even 108 names. Such comprehensive 'generic appellations' permitted Kali (the dark one) to be identified as the same deity as Gauri (the fair one). The tradition of reciting one hundred and eight names (*Ashtottara-Satanama*) or a thousand names (*Sahasranama*) as for Vishnu thus proved

extremely useful in connecting different or even conflicting divinities within these three broad mega-cults. Thus, despite their independent historic origins and existence at different widely-scattered sites, various powerful local deities could be assimilate under three omnibus belief systems, Shaiva, Vaishnava and Shakta. They came in with their own baggage of distinct cultic practices and reconciled through the stratagem of multiple names. In the appendix to his work on the *Vaishnava Iconology of Nepal* (1985), Pratapaditya Pal offers a large list of such appellations of numerous names for each deity. There are many religious books that elaborate each of the 108 or 1000 name that every major deity in India was called by and this was one of the unique tactics employed by the priestly classes of India to 'identify' distinct and often conflicting gods into grouped 'unities'.

8. In all fairness, we must remember that deities of other religions are also given multiple names, but nowhere is it so canonically standardised into multiples of 108 or 1000 like in India and this system is not used to unite distant gods or goddesses. It is also true that many characters in Hindu

legends like (say) Draupadi, were called by generic appellations, like Panchali or the daughter of Panchala, Shama or the dusky one, Yagnaseni or the person who rose from the sacrificial fire and so on. But the purpose of such epithets (instead or proper nouns or names) appeared to be to permit the hero or the heroine capable or open to the flexible absorption of the stories of other famous personalities or to subsume their remarkable acts. There are, of course, numerous legends of one or more remarkable ‘dark-skinned’ person or persons, whose deeds have been sung and they have been extolled sometimes as a tribal chief or a king; often as a warrior or a strategist; at other times as a thinker or a philosopher or then even as a lover. It is quite possible that many of these tales were merged into a charismatic divinity through formal textual versions in the course of time. According to DD Kosambi, there has been "the assimilation of many sagas to a single Krsna legend, whether or not the original hero bore the epithet of Krsna" (1962, 20). This compulsive trait to aggregate disconnected acts of divine prowess that were floating around in unstructured forms into acceptable standard worships is

seen among panegyrists, prophets or religious leaders all over the world, in almost all religions.

9. Scholars, like Biman Bihari Majumdar (1969) and SK Bhattacharya (1978), or even Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay (his famous *Shrikrishnacharit*) and DD Kosambi, who have studied the Krishna phenomenon contend that Krishna was a "cultic belief". It has moved back and forth on the religious landscape of India and like other successfully evolved deities, aligned itself at different historic stages with other more powerful religious beliefs. This explains partly why Krishna went often went by joint appellations like Vasudeva-Krishna. Bhattacharya also makes an interesting observation that *Bhagavatism* of which Krishna was a part developed and established itself by the 2nd century B.C. He relates that the roots of this new religion went back to pre-Buddhist times and that certain aspects actually arose from post-Rig Vedic religion, while some accretions came from many folk-cults like those of the *Abhira-Arias*. “Many indigenous and foreign primitive cults were slowly agglomerating around the two leading theistic systems, *Bhagavata Vaisnavism* and *Kapalika-Lakulisa*

Shaivism" (1978, 12). We will come to more on this aspect soon, and see how diverse beliefs were "streamlined" to move along more determined paths and how more homogenised worship-systems emerged from the initial state of flux, flexibility and ambiguity.

10. There are many divergences and even contradictions in the Krishna story but students of religion know that this has happened everywhere in all large religions that took several centuries or millennia to evolve to their present stage. This becomes clear when we compare this cult with the confusion that prevailed in the early days of Christianity. Christian ideologues literally struggled for the first half of the new millennium to make sense out of the veritable forest of tales about Jesus and his precepts. These vicissitudes are all well documented and accepted and we may refer to just a few books on this tumultuous period. Walker's A History of The *Christian Church* (1970), Frend's *The Rise of Christianity* (1984) and Irvin & Sunquist's *History of the World Christian Movement* (2001, Vol 1) are among the dozens of academic studies that faithfully document every difference in thought and action.

They detail the many schisms and ruptures and the methods employed, whether ethical or not, to achieve this 'consensus'. Historians and even religiously-indoctrinated scholars have never hidden the desperate measures taken to contain violent differences of ideologies behind claims of the "inviolability of faith" or covered the tracks through myths and legends. Peter Brown's *The Rise of Western Christendom: Triumph and Diversity* (1996 Oxford) is another study in this vein. We are, thus, aware of the numerous attempts that were made to expurgate "undesirable narratives" like those of the Gnostics and also institute an "official set of Gospels". The early Church fathers struggled for centuries, through so many experiments and Codex, Canons, Councils and Synods, to try to reach a reasonable consensus on what the agreed version should look like. This complicated process began its first phase in the 1st century with Clement of Rome and went all the way up to Pope Innocent I in the early 5th century, but the other phases continued for a thousand years more.

11. Compared to these long drawn, complex and elaborate procedures for bringing some order within the chaos

of then-existing beliefs in the Christian family, the twists and turns in the Krishna chronicles look surprisingly smooth. After all, it only required the periodic modifications of and additions to sacred texts to accommodate certain folk beliefs or ballads that thrived among the diverse social groups at different historical stages. The objective in India was to coalesce the popular stories of divine heroes or supermen into single meta-narratives, and quite often, materials, facts or stories about one heroic figure were juxtaposed or dovetailed into another emerging super hero or a divinity. We must remember that all competing cults and belief systems had to reach out and appeal to the masses, unless they were intrinsically esoteric or secretive by nature. These and other processes lent strength, sanctity and colour to sacred literature, like the Bible, which thus made them more epical, fascinating and gripping. They also helped the common folk identify, associate and bundle, either for the sake of simplicity or to heighten the excitement of the story, the feats of disaggregated ‘supermen’ with or within one more comprehensive deity. There is hardly a single religion that has not permitted or encouraged this snowballing

of myths and rolling them into larger tales of valour, piety or miraculous deeds, with every passing period.

12. The mass-scale production of Buddhist *Jataka* tales through the mode of absorbing many existing local legends and popular folktales. As early as 1881, Rhys Davids had undertaken the comparative study of the folklore elements in these religious and moral tales in his *Lectures on the Origin and Growth of Religion as Illustrated by Some Points in the History of Indian Buddhism.* The fact that animal fables appear frequently as the 'previous birth stories' of Lord Buddha and also that hard scholars have found it difficult to posit them as any form of credible history leads one to believe that local legends that were prevalent in the Ganga Valley at that time were simply adopted and repackaged into these *Jataka* tales, with the appropriate interpolation of a *Bodhisattva*. AK Warder defines the *Jatakas* as "precursors to the various legendary biographies of the Buddha" (2000, 286-87) but he himself points out that "very little biographical material about Gautama's own life has been recorded in them" (332-22). Grand L Voth (2007) was clearer on this issue when he said

“Many of the stories and motifs are derived from vernacular oral traditions (that existed) prior to the *Pali* compositions". Oskar Von Hinuber stressed on the folk origins of these semi-canonical tales when he mentioned that “these stories are of interest to folklorists” (1997, 17). The *Jatakas* are among the earliest Buddhist literature and though not strictly a part of the canons, many Buddhists in Andhra-desha and elsewhere accepted them as canonical texts. Like Hinduism, both the Buddhist and Christian churches have long histories of amalgamating diverse grass-roots stories and adventures into mainstream religion. So did Krishna and his cult.

13. Returning now to Krishna, we find that the first mention of his name appears in the *Chhandogya Upanishad,* as “*Krsnaya devakiputraya*" or "Krishna, the son of Devaki" (III. 17.6) This text is dated between the 8th and the 7th centuries BCE, and we may accept the median, i.e., the 7th century only for the sake of convenience. The *Taittiriya Aaranyaka* (Section X, 1.6), that appeared a couple of centuries after the *Chhandogya*, refers to Vishnu, Narayana and Vasudev repeatedly as three separate deities (Jaiswal 1980, 32 ff). Thus

Hermann Jacobi, the noted Indologist, stated in 1908 that the three gods had not yet syncretised into one powerful, comprehensive deity. Jacobi held that “when the Vedic period drew towards its end, Vasudeva was considered an equal of Narayana and Vishnu but that Krishna, the son of Devaki, was still regarded in the Vedic period quite differently. He was considered as only a wise man who was enquiring into the highest truth, and it was only much later that he was given equal status where Vishnu was concerned. It is clear that Vasudeva the god, and Krishna the sage were originally different from each another, and it is only afterwards that they became one deity. This gave rise to or brought to perfection a theory of incarnation (Vol VII, p. 195: James Hastings, *Encyclopedia of Religion & Ethics*, quoted in Majumdar, 1969, 5). In fact, in her classic work on *The Origin and Development of Vaishnavism*, Suvira Jaiswal mentioned the four deities and their combinations (1967, 32 ff), Narayana-Vishnu, Sankarsana-Baladeva, Vasudeva-Krishna and Sri-Laksmi, as components of the core of *Vaishnava* mythology. RG Bhandarkar felt that “the word Vasudeva was not originally a patronymic but the name

of a member of the *Satvata*, or *Vrsni* race, who had a religion of their own, in which Vasudeva was worshipped". This view is contested by other Indologists like Hopkins, Keith and Ruben and others (Majumdar, 1969, 5), even though Vasudeva clearly mentions his *Vrishni* origins in the *Bhagavad Gita*, and this is also reiterated on the Mora stone inscription (1978, 11-12). Bhattacharya also cites Rajuvulla as mentioning this linkage in the first century BCE.

14. Majumdar felt that "if Krishna was regarded as *Achyuta* in the days of *Chhandogya Upanisad*, he must have flourished some centuries earlier than the date of its composition" (1969, 15) though he admits that "there is considerable difference of opinion regarding the period in which Krishna flourished". The nebulous proto-Krishna thus shuttled between better-delineated deities like Vasudeva, Vishnu and even Indra, and the last-mentioned gives us a clue why Krishna has often been referred to as the 'little Indra' or *'Upendra'*. We shall come to this Krishna-Indra issue soon, but we may mention in passing that quite a few images of Upendra-Krishna have been identified in the collection of the Bangladesh National Museum

by de Mallmann and Haque (1992, 112) that were confused earlier with *Vamanaavatara* of Vishnu. The pioneering historian of ancient Indian history, HC Raychaudhuri, felt that the new faith that developed on the banks of Yamuna "finally coalesced with a few *brahmanical* and popular cults to form the great federation of religions known as *Vaishnavism*" (1936). Bhattacharya joined in and further elaborated that *Vasudevism* united with Sankarsana worship and the cult of Vishnu-Narayana also aligned with the cult of *Shree* to give rise to the *Purush-Prakriti* theory. At some later stage, these were all engrafted into *Vaishnavism* (1978, 101). On the whole, scholars feel that it may be safer to assume that during those six centuries and more that separate the main Vedas from the period of the Buddha and Mahavira, the concept of Krishna may have been more of a sage or a divine scholar, inquiring into different facets.

15. Dating is difficult as we get odd claims like a Jaina tradition that placed Krishna as a contemporary of the 22nd *Tirthankara*, i.e., *Neminatha* in the 3rd millennium BCE, which would precede the Vedic period by over a thousand years. But

then, we also have the Bijholi Rock Inscription that actually mentions *Neminatha's* prowess and victory over Krishna and Balarama, so all we can say is that the date claimed is an exaggeration. There is a Jaina version of the *Harivamsa* where *Neminatha* is obviously superior to Krishna (Bhattacharyya 1978, 152-153) from which we can deduce that Krishna was important enough during that period not only for Brahmanism to take note of, but that Jainism also took him as a reference point. But this is more than a thousand years after we get the first whisper of Krishna in the Upanishad. These complications are deliberately cited to disabuse our minds about any over-simplicity in what we started by describing as a very complex personality. Some scholars feel that it may be safer to assume that during the four centuries and more that separate the Rig Veda from the period of the Buddha and Mahavira, Krishna may have been emerging in some specific regions, not all of northern India, but he was not yet a stand-alone divinity and usually appeared in conjunction with Vishnu or Vasudeva or Balarama or even Indra.

16. In his seminal work on Panini (1953), V.S. Agrawala stated quite clearly that during the celebrated grammarian's time, which is roughly five centuries BCE, Krishna was nowhere near his divine status. Panini refers to the joint worship of Vasudeva and Arjuna (Panini, *Ashtadhyayi*, VI, 2, 38) and Agrawala is certain that Panini knew the kernel of the episode that would reach full form some eight to twelve centuries later, as part of the *Mahabharata*. It is interesting that Panini mentioned Yudhisthira (VIII, 3, 95), Kunti (IV, 1, 176) and even Nakula (IV, 1, 103) so many centuries before the current *Mahabharata* was finalised, but he did not refer to Krishna. The latter is not visible during Panini's time or even as we are a couple of centuries closer to the Current Era, because we find that Kautilya does not even mention him, while extolling his brother, Sankarsana. The Panini-Kautilya centuries were when the earliest tales of what became the Mahabharata were still "the tales of the *Sutars*", the minstrels who were the plebeian folk of that period. Several Several scholars like SP Gupta and KS Ramachandran (1976), state that the Mahabharata went through at least three stages, Jaya (Victory) with 8,800 verses

attributed to Vyasa, Bharata with 24,000 verses as recited by Vaisampayana, and finally the Mahabharata as recited by Ugrasrava Sauti with over 100,000 verses. JL Brockington (1998) felt that it may have been different but no serious scholar ever doubts that the shlokas of the Mahabharata were continuously re-worked and added on, for several centuries.

17. It is worth noting that Balarama or Sankarsana found definite mention in Kautilya's work of the 4th century B.C.E, (Jaiswal 1980, 52 ff), which could indicate that the "god of the plough" mattered more where the eastern part of the Ganga basin was concerned, as compared to the pastoral settlement at Braj. Megasthenes, the Greek ambassador to Pataliputra, also possibly referred to the same Balarama as the Indian version of Heracles or Hercules. This is James Tod's view but Edwin Francis Bryant insists (2007) that this mention of a great 'hero' of epical proportions is actually that of Krishna. Megasthenes clearly describes the hero as a member of the Suraseni clan of the great *Yadu-Vamsa*, living on the banks of the Yamuna in the Braj region of 'Mehtora', i.e., Mathura. The importance of this apparently-stray issue is to demonstrate

that for several centuries, Balarama was as important as Krishna, and frankly, even more during certain periods among different groups of people in the Gangetic valley. Suvira Jaiswal also quotes the work published in 1962 by Allan Dahlquist which examined afresh the problem of the identity of Herakles and Dionysos. According to Dahlquist, this Herakles is the Vedic Indra (Jaiswal 1980, 128, 236 ff), we now have three heroes to choose from, namely, Krishna, Balarama and Indra.

18. What comes out as fascinating in this Herakles debate is the hint that people in the Mathura region, especially the Yadus and their branch called Surasenas among which Vasudeva Krishna was born, actually worshipped Indra before Krishna appeared as the super-star. The nomadic cattle-grazing early "Aryan people" had originally worshipped Indra, the god of rain and thunder, because the elements really bothered shepherds quite a lot. The swing towards Krishna indicated that people in Braj had by then graduated towards a more settled pastoral life, on the banks of the Yamuna. DD Kosambi linked the evolution of the cult of Krishna to the change from the sacrificial Vedic society to agricultural society,

when the preference of god changed from Indra to Krishna (Chattopadhyay, 2002, 390-406). The Govardhana legend actually shows Krishna had to battle Indra to finally break free and, in fact, subjugate the mighty Vedic god. The thunderbolt–*Vajra* of Indra was pitted against the *Chakra*-disc of Krishna in a conflict situation, when Indra lashed incessant rains upon the villagers as a punishment for moving away from him. Krishna then lifted the entire Govardhana Mountain to protect his people from the wrath of Indra. We shall see later how this Govardhana motif is a favourite one in Krishna's representation in the fine arts.

19. Historian and Indologist Jan Gonda was of the opinion that "the younger Krishna cult was antagonistic to the ancient worship of Indra" and that Indra "being the losing party" and "he drives away Indra" (1969, 155). Gonda feels that "these stories intimate that Krishna directly overrode the older Vedic gods, especially Indra, his own cult becoming superior to local and contemporaneous divinities, but also to the Vedic worship of Indra." (1969, 156). But the Mahabharata, that often froze older tales, says that Krishna "slew all the *daityas* and *danavas*

and bestowed on Indra the sovereignty of the universe" (*Mbh.* 3, 12, 18f). Kosambi dispels such insertions when he states, on the basis of his pioneering work on texts and contexts that "the legend of his enmity to Indra reflects in the *Rigveda* the historical struggle of the dark pre-Aryans against the marauding Aryans" (1962, 24). References only to text appear; therefore, to be misplaced as they have been twisted and interpolated to suit every convenience. In any case, an appearance in texts without popular expression in ballads or the arts was hardly significant in an age when only the tiniest minority possible either wrote texts or read them.

20. But, DD Kosambi reiterated that the hostility between the mighty god of the Vedic Aryans and the rising dark-skinned deity of the indigenous people stating that "Krishna in the Rig Veda is a demon, enemy of Indra, his name being the generic designation of hostile dark-skinned pre-Aryans' (Kosambi, 1962, 115). To the student of historical anthropology, such sacred tales indicate the proxy wars that different competing socio-economic systems and groups fought out within specific geo-political theatres, foisting their own claims through their

chosen gods or goddesses. For centuries and millennia no elected legislatures existed, either to reflect the comparative strength of rival interest groups or to legislate on the affairs of the people and therefore phenomena like ‘agreed-to religious ethics’ and contests between rival deities on the pantheon filled in this gap. As the only available platform for both these critical social functions, the victory of one god over the other in the pre-legislature era actually signified the dominance of one claim or ideology or value system over the other. Krisna's Braj appears, however, to have been more pastoral than agricultural, though Balarama was present right through on Krishna's side carrying his heavy plough on his shoulder. It is submitted that the emergence of the Krishna cult was definitely a symbol for 'settled society' in place of wandering Vedic pastoralism, but if one goes by what is portrayed, Braj appears to have been more of settled pastoral society than a settled agricultural one.

21. While we are still in the closing years of the first millennium BCE, it is interesting to find Krishna cited in the great grammarian Patanjali's *Mahabhasya* which can

reasonably be dated to the late part of the 2nd century BCE. It is a commentary on Panini's *Ashtadhyayi,* which had blanked out Krishna, but three centuries later, we find Patanjali referring to Vasudeva in a definitely Krishna-form, though without using the actual name of Krishna. He refers to the evil Kamsa (II, 3, 36 of the text), to Vasudeva slaying Kamsa (III, 2, 111) and also dramatises this event, Kamsa-*Vadha* (III, 1, 26). Since Patanjali clarifies that Vasudeva is a synonym *(samjna*) of the Bhagavant, Albrecht Weber felt that Vishnu and Krishna "stood in a close relationship". As Jaiswal (1980,57) mentions, “Patanjali seems to have known the legends of the two gods in their more or less present form. He mentions Baladeva and Vasudeva among the Vrsni names and speaks of Krishna as second to Sankarasana, thereby indicating their relationship.” We find thus that Krishna is finally visible even as a second-rung deity just about a century before the Common Era, at least through Patanjali's great work of grammar.

22. It may be appropriate at this juncture to go beyond just written texts, whether of religion or of grammar, and examine other evidence as well. We will stray into art, which is a domain

we have reserved for the second part of the discussion, but it appears unavoidable and rather useful even here. According to DD Kosambi (1965, 115), "The sole archaeological datum about Krishna comes from his traditional weapon, the missile discus, a wheel what could be thrown and was sharp enough to behead an enemy. The disc may or may not be a weapon from the Vedic age and went out of fashion long before the Buddha; but a cave drawing in Mirzapur district (the Buddhist *Dakkhinagiri*, (Dakshinagiri) in fact) shows a charioteer attacking the aborigines (who drew the picture) with such a discus. The date would therefore be about 800 B.C., roughly the time when the first settlement at Banaras was founded." This appears a little far-fetched and linking an obscure faded sculpture to Krishna may not be fully tenable, as the *Sudarshana* Chakra was also used by Vishnu, who appears often as Krishna's progenitor but also is distinct from him or at variance with him and was often considered to be superior deity. We have, therefore, to examine the testimony as evident in inscriptions or in the visual arts to try to discover how much of Krishna we can find in them.

23. In this endeavour, we are bound to focus on what existed between the last two centuries BCE and the first two centuries of the Current Era, as no solid material evidence on Krishna is visible before this stage. This will also help us to cover the gap between the end of the Maurya era up to the early Guptas, when the epics were still "work in progress". Even during this period, we are unable to locate any image of Krishna, but we do come across a related sculpture and VS Agrawala considers this piece found at Mathura as an image of Balarama. In his book on the Curzon Museum, he stated that it belonged to the 2nd or could even be of the 1st century BCE. Agrawala called it "the earliest representation of any *Brahmanical* deity in the whole field of Hindu iconography" (1938, 31ff). This is very acceptable because India had embarked on the crafting of icons and images of deities only after the Greek intervention which left their indelible mark on the plastic arts of this land. Sculptures and idol-making began in real earnest: focusing almost entirely on the images of the Buddha. P Banerjee of the National Museum cites one more evidence from this period, a silver coin of Agathocles found at

Ai Khanoum in Afghanistan (Banerjee 1978, plates 1 and 2). It shows Balarama on one side and Vasudeva-Krishna on the obverse side. (Art Asiatiques, Tome XXVI, 1973, p123, quoted in Banerjee, 1978).

24. We do find more of Balarama images at sites like Ganesara (3rd century CE) in this region and what is of interest in the Indo-Greek coin is that Krishna was still only a part of Vasudeva and could not break free till the Current Era dawned. The point of note, therefore, is that in all the seven centuries that separate the *Chhandogya Upanishad* and the start of the Common Era, there was not one single expression in the visual or sculptural arts on our Krishna. The fact that stares at us is that even till the early decades of the Common Era, Krishna was yet to arrive without the support of senior gods or without any divine chaperone, either in the sacred texts or in the arts. Vasudeva, as distinct from Krishna, had however made his presence felt and we see material evidence of this in the Besnagar pillar that was constructed in his honour almost two centuries before the Common Era (EI, XXXXI, 91). Interestingly, this celebrated tower was not erected by an Indian potentate,

but by Heliodorus, the Greek ambassador who had converted to the *Bhagavata* religion.

25. A few years later during the same century, there is the Nanaghat Inscription found near Pune that invoked Sankarsana and Vasudeva, along with Indra, Yama, Varuna and Kuvera (EI, X, App, p 121). DR Bhandarkar specially cites an inscription that was found at Ghosundi in the Chittogarh area of Rajasthan, which mentions again the worship of Sankarsana and Vasudeva, along with other deities. DC Sircar dates it to the 1st century BCE (1942, 90 ff.) and we find yet again another inscription of the same period at Mora in Mathura that mentioned five great heroes of the *Vrisni* clan, who according to JN Banerjea, were Vasudeva, Sankarsana, Pradyumna, Samba and Aniruddha. Though the last three were below Krishna in terms of age and relationship, we find that Krishna had not yet been articulated as distinct from Vasudeva. But his brother Balarama-Sankarsana was quite prominent in his own right, well before the Current Era started and there is epigraphic evidence in the *Umachal* Inscription of the 6th century CE (Sircar, EI, XXXXI, 67 ff.) that mentions Balarama's

worship. But we find so little of Krishna in the arts or in inscriptions in the early period that the celebrated iconographer, Gopinatha Rao felt as early as 1914 that "it is convenient for more reasons than one to deal with Balarama and Sri-Krishna together" (1914, 195).

26. Let us move away from material representations of Krishna as we have more of this in the second part of this piece where we discuss art and let us get back to the texts. It is only proper to begin with the *Mahabharata* and then go on to the *Gita* as both are inextricably linked to the warrior-diplomat Krishna. The composition of these two critically important texts started at least about five centuries before the Common Era, in the age of Panini, but they reached their mature stage only in the 4th or 5th century CE (Michel 2000, 44ff), during the rule of the Imperial Guptas. The *Mahabharata* attempted to trace the line of ancestors of Krishna in the *Drona Parvan* (VII, 125. 6) and in the *Anusasan Parvan* (XIII, 147), but cannot really do justice to it, as its focus was naturally on the *Kuru Pandava* war. Genealogies were best left to the *Puranas and* the *Matsya Purana* version of 32 generations is the one that is prevalent

among the *Vaishnavas*. The *Narayania* section of the *Shanti-Parva* of the *Mahabharata* refers to him repeatedly as ‘Hari’ and ‘Keshava’. "Visno jisno hare krsna" from the *Mahabharata's* Shanti Parva (47, 14-15) is just one such. The fifth *parva* of the *Mahabharata* (Section 48.8) also refers to the joint worship of Arjuna and Krishna-Vasudeva, who are identified with Nara-Narayana in their previous birth. As we shall see, the relationship between Balarama and Krishna could be rather debatable at times and there are episodes where some sort of a rivalry is evident. Suvira Jaiswal makes an interesting observation when she says (1980, 59) that “In one passage of the *Mahabharata*, Baladeva had to admit frankly that he could not dare cast his eyes on the world without the favour of Krsna and so he followed and assisted Kesava in whatever he wished to achieve” (*Mbh*, III. 187.10).

27. It has been agreed by scholars who devoted their lifetime to the study of the Epics and *Puranas* that the final versions of the *Mahabharata* or the *Bhagavad Gita,* or even the Ramayana or the *Harivamsa* were available to us in the form that we recognise today, only from the 4th century of the

Common Era. But this is not to deny the evidence that is so abundant, that their major episodes can be seen in disaggregated pieces almost a thousand years before. We have stressed repeatedly that the traditional stories centring on Krishna are quite visible several centuries before the Common Era, but under other names and in variant versions. "The *Mahabharata* is considered the oldest and the most reliable source of the life history of Krishna" says SK Bhattacharyya (1978, 26), but researchers of history find it extremely fluid and unstable to handle for their purpose. But let us also not forget that some the virtues or miracles of the Mahabharata that are ascribed to Krishna have been questioned by scholars of the highest orders as ex post facto sensationalising of his role. In fact, even the most reliable scholars like V.S. Sukhtankar and the team at the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute deleted the dramatic role of Krishna in the *vastraharan* episode of the *Mahabharata* from the critical edition of the text. This was where Draupadi was disrobed in the open royal assembly and they were convinced after fifty years of research that Krishna’s

miracle of sending her an endless supply of clothes was, indeed, a later interpolation.

28. Viewing this from a different angle, however, we do find that the flexibility of this epic and other legends actually constitutes its strength and self contradictions have helped absorb a lot of extraneous materials. After all, Indian sacred texts and epics had perforce to absorb countless local tales into the religious frame and thereby legitimise, subsume and harmonise conflicting beliefs and cultic diversities. As Sukthankar, its greatest authority, explains "the epic text has undergone momentous alterations in the course of its long and eventful history" (Vol 1, 333). Yet it had to remain attractive in order to appeal to widely divergent cultures and had subtly to inject moral codes. Unlike religions like Christianity and Islam that had a ‘start button’ and could resort to palpable "religious legislation" by issuing periodic diktats and stringent orders to their followers, Hinduism had no such formal control or command systems. Within these limitations, poets, preachers and priests had still to attract their adherents and weave tales

that could serve as religio-cultural binders that covered much of the huge subcontinent.

29. The text of the *Bhagavad Gita* is located in just eighteen chapters of the *Bhisma Parvan* (XXIII to XL or 23rd to 40th chapters of the Critical Edition) which itself is a segment of the epic *Mahabharata*. We will avoid the old controversy around its composition, which ranges from the 5th century BCE and pre-Buddhist period (SN Dasgupta, 1922-55, Vol 2, p 532) and adhere to the rough consensus that Sukthankar mentions, that "it appeared in its present form in the second century BCE". Several scholars like Dahlmann, SN Dasgupta and SC Roy "believe that the *Bhagavad Gita* was composed earlier than the Mahabharata and inserted in the epic later on with certain additions" (Bhattacharyya, 1978, 44). The *Gita* mentions ‘Krishna’ directly five times and as ‘Rishikesh’ another five times, and as ‘Achyuta’ on three occasions. Incidentally, even Arjuna refers to Krishna three times by the same term ‘Achyuta’, in the *Bhagavad-Gita*, but Bhisma refers to Krishna as a master of the Vedas and the *Vedanga* in the *Mahabharata* (II, 35.18), which again confirms Krishna’s recognition as an

erudite scholar. "The Krsna of the *Gita* is different", comment scholars like Chatterjee, "from Krsna of the *Bhagvata*, which strictly follows the *ananda*-doctrine of the *Upanisads*, and *Vaisnava* theology" (1976, 44).

30. As seen, it is extremely difficult to locate direct references to the name 'Krishna' before the Common Era except under the name 'Vasudeva' though the stories under this joint name are definitely recognisable with those that we usually associate with Krishna. Even early iconographers like H. Krishna Sastri, who listed and examined Hindu deities over a century ago, followed the time-honoured tradition of considering Krishna to be just one segment within the overall concept of Vishnu (1916, 37ff). Multiple appellations and joint deities that were used so profusely in the Gita may have been juxtapositions that were needed to escort Krishna on to the stage with the help of more famous or recognisable gods. But, Krishna was definitely present in his own right by the early centuries of the present era, though he was still not the most sought-after god. Shiva and Vishnu were in great form over this entire first millennium and this is quite evident from the

profusion of stories of their rivalry that appeared in sacred literature as well as in cultural expressions. The Bhagavad Gita cited the concept of Vishnu's incarnations and it declares, that "whenever righteousness declines and unrighteousness grows powerful, then, O Bharata, I manifest myself. I come into being age after age to protect the good, destroy the wicked and establish righteousness' (Chapter 4, verses 7 and 8 in *Nabar* &*Tukar* 1997: 20). Though Krishna did appear as Arjuna's charioteer, which is on the cover and is at core of almost every version of the text in the last few centuries, the *Bhagavad Gita* may not have been fixated so completely on Krishna, as is imagined today. This body of didactic wisdom played a big role in elevating Krishna in the early centuries of this Era, but the fact remains that Shiva, Vishnu and even the Devi had stronger bases, until the *Bhakti* movement of the 15th and 16th centuries changed the scene decisively in favour of Krishna and Rama.

31. The story of Krishna and Balarama appears in a proper consolidated form in the *Harivamsa*, which *Puranic* experts like FE Pargiter (1922) and RC Hazra (1940) date to the 3rd or 4th

century CE. This is also the same period when the fully-blossomed version of the Mahabharata and the Gita are made available. "Vedic Visnu whose stature had been developing steadily through the Vedas, the *Brahmanas* and the *Upanisads*, was transformed into the historical Krsna, the son of Devaki, mentioned in the *Chhandogya Upanisad* and in the Mahabharata, Krsna is an incarnation of Visnu though he had grown into an exalted figure." (Chinmoyi Chatterjee, 1976)

32. Let us move to the next text on Krishna, the *Harivamsa*, which is often regarded as a *Purana* as it fulfills the five essential requirements to qualify as a Purana, i.e., the *pancha-lakshana.* From cosmogony to genealogy, this text actually traces the birth of Krishna and his tryst with Kamsa the archetypal villain in Indian lore. The *Harivamsa* text essentially collates and unites the tales of Krishna from different sources, as this divinity indeed took quite some time to emerge as an independent powerful god. As Rudolph Otto sums it up, "That Krishna himself is a historical figure is quite indubitable…….The *Harivamsa* features his rise into prominence…..combines together to form a readily intelligible figure…..who rescues his

people, becomes their leader.....and acquires the status of a religious hero" (1933, 268). The *Harivamsa* gave almost equal importance to Balarama or Sankarsana, and focuses on his ploughshare, while deifying Krishna's exploits in a powerful pastoral society. It links the Krishna of Braj on the Yamuna with the ruler of Dwarka in Gujarat and thus constitutes an indispensable part of the core of Hindu beliefs and world-view that comes out best in the *Mahabharata*. As the supreme deity of the settled pastoral civilisations of northern and western India, Krishna had to battle the mighty Vedic deity, Indra, that we have seen before. He had perforce to accompany his brother, the plough-bearing Balarama, who was the inspiration of agriculturists and a hero to many others, until he could emerge out of his shadow. Indian thought abjured confrontation between contradictory metaphors, choosing rather to emphasise on their ‘‘synthesis’: hence, we have Krishna and Balarama not as rivals but as brothers and friends.

33. "The full narrative (of Krishna) would go on at least to the twelfth century A.D" commented DD Kosambi (115) "and the *Vishnuite* reforms of the great *Acharya* Ramanuja". It is

noticeable; however, that *Puranas* constitute a clear departure from the earlier Vedic worship that consisted of prayer and sacrifice, to image-worship and devotion. The early *Puranas* do mention Krishna, Vishnu and Vasudeva, sometimes in conjunction and sometimes as separate entities. Among the early references, we have, for instance, the *Vayu Purana* (Chapter 99, verse 428-9) and the *Matsya Purana* (Chapter 273, verse 49-50) extolling Krishna's virtues. The *Vishnu-Purana* is often referred to as the *Purana-Ratna* or the jewel among the eighteen *Maha-Puranas* and has a special significance for *Vaishnavas* as it mentions the incarnations or the avatars of Vishnu. "The role is that of intermediaries between the divine and the human worlds, sent to earth in times when the balance between good and evil is upset in order to restore equilibrium between the two forces."Krishna occupies a pride of place in the *Vishnu Purana* (as in Section IV, Chapter 24, verse 35 & 36), but as one of the several forms of Vishnu, not as the main star. In fact, the early *Puranas* clearly state that *Kali-Yuga* begins as soon as Krishna-Vishnu returns to heaven. In a recent work, Cummins describes this entry as an *avatar* (2011,

178) in these words: "The prince-cowherd Krishna is included among Vishnu's *avataras* in early lists and representations. Over the course of time, Krishna rose in importance; although he came to earth and lived and died among humans, he came to be considered something more than an *Avatara*. Whether *Avatara* or not, Krishna's earthly story remains the same.

34. Scholars believe that while the earlier form of *Vaisnavism* was more or less ethical, it changed its character with the advent of the Guptas and harped more on the heroic aspect of Krishna that attracted attention, like his exploits of demon-slaying. Towards the end of the Gupta period, Krishna appeared to be claiming a far larger place in *Vaishnava* thought. As evidence, we come across excellent specimens depicting such heroism in the paintings and sculptures of the Gupta period and style such as the 6th century image of Krishna lifting Mount Govardhana from Deogarh, in the ASI collection of the National Museum. Scholars have not yet come to any unanimous conclusion about the composition/dates of the *Puranas*, but they normally place the origins of the oldest *Puranas* at around the 3rd century B.C.E. and that their mature

versions 3rd and 4th centuries of this Era, as in the case of the *Vishnu Purana*. Some continued with their composition for several centuries after the Guptas, or appeared much later, like the *Bhagavata Purana* of the 9th or 10th century which was focused on Krishna or the *Brahmavaivarta Purana*. We shall return to the *Bhagavata Purana* a little later, but we may do well to remember that dating them is extremely difficult and serious scholars have repeatedly noted that interpolations were made over several centuries. Pioneering scholars like Pargiter tried hard, as early as in 1922, to estimate the period of the original compositions of some older *Puranas* (1979, 49-56) but the exercise proved too complex. As RC Hazra (1940) observed, all the *Puranas* were tampered for several centuries after their original versions appeared, so local exigencies and problems could be conferred with some legitimate solution, by simply modifying a verse or a section of the relevant text.

35. The *Matsya*, *Vayu* and *Vishnu Puranas* are taken in the category of early *Maha-Puranas* that were available in their mature or final forms by the 4th/5th centuries CE. The *Brahmananda, Vamana, Kurma* and *Linga Puranas* were

composed later and work on them continued all the way up to the 10th or even 11th centuries. The *Harivamsa*, which is the first of the two most important texts where Krishna is concerned, was available from the 4th century and the *Bhagavata Purana*, the other, is estimated to belong to the 9th century or even the 10th century. Each *Purana* had its own agenda and the *Vishnu Purana*, for instance, concentrated on Vishnu and thus ensured that he overshadowed all other gods. Though the 5th book of the *Vishnu Purana* was entirely absorbed in describing Krishna's life, it ultimately positioned him as just another incarnation of Vishnu.

36. Not all references to Krishna in all the *Puranas* can be accepted as credible evidence. Baladeva Upadhyay cited the 18th *Adhyaya* of the *Agni Purana* for a reference to Krishna, but de Mallman (1963) differed and pointed out that such descriptions were often not made so directly in that period.. As de Mallmann stated with authority, they appeared through names like *Trailakya-Mohana* and these did need quite a lot of expertise to locate and decipher (Haque, 44). According to Upadhyaya the *Brahma Purana* has 33 *Adhyayas* on Krishna

while the *Padma Purana* dedicated half a dozen of its *Adhyayas* to his subject. These are more acceptable but it is not clear as to how much of it could be taken as ‘original’ and how much as ‘later insertions’. Chinmoyi Chatterjee stated that "in the *Padma-purana,* he is the ever young eternal consort of Radha and shines brilliantly in the costume of a cowherd body", but omitted to mention how this part was retrofitted once a prototype of Radha was introduced into sacred literature by the *Bhagavata Purana*. Upadhyaya also declared that Krishna did find mention in a few other *Puranas* as well (1969, 159-168), but from the point of true linear history, we must also be wary of later interpolations. In fact, the entire religion survived so adroitly thanks to these later additions to sacred texts, that were actually given retrospective status, because this policy permitted it quite a lot of flexible religious legitimisation.

37. "The theology of the *Kurma Purana* is marked by the intermingling of two cults, namely, *Viasnavism* and *Shaivism*. Vasudeva is known as Krsna, Visnu and is designated by all the synonymous terms indicating Krsna, viz., Govinda, Madhava, Kesava, Hrisikesa, Acyuta, Hari and Yajnesa." (Chinmoyi

Chatterjee, 1976, 57). The later text, *Brahma-vaivarta Purana*, describes Krishna as "the son of Vasudeva and the killer of demons, slayer of Kamsa and Sisupala and at the same time the friend of the cowherd boys. He is again the hero of the love-dalliances with the Gopis at Vrndavana." (1976, 61). This text presented Radha as "the dominant figure....who is identified with the eternal mother goddess, Durga" (Asim Kumar Chatterjee, 1995, 16ff). It also elevated Krishna as the ultimate god who was higher than Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva and Prakriti. In fact, H.H.Wilson substantiated this trend when he recorded “the humiliation of the leading personages of the Hindu pantheon for incurring the displeasure of Krishna" (1840, 113).

38. All said and done, even the powerful Krishna who finally emerged as a great god some 1300 years after the first trace of his name appeared in the *Chhandogya Upanishad,* had to compete against his mega alter-ego Vishnu. He had to survive and hold his own ina filed that was dominated by other powerful rival *avataras* of Vishnu, like Rama and at times come up with a joint deity like *Rama-Krishna*. Besides, he had to

contend with Shiva for several centuries even if rapprochement came occasionally through the *Hari-Hara* type of joint worship. Krishna had, of course, to take into serious cognisance of the "*devi*" and here again, the perennially absorptive Hindu system tried hard for reconciliation through images like *Kali-Krishna*. But, let us not forget that Krishna would have remained incomplete without the tales of his delightfully naughty but so endearing childhood. We are referring to the infant BalaKrishna or Balagopala and to Krishna's adolescence and youth as a cowherd, Gopala or Kanhaiya. We shall, of course, come to his partnership with Radha, but let us concentrate here on the child-Krishna and try to find out how this form emerged after the adult Krishna had first made his mark in the epic period.

39. Klaus K. Klostermaier tried to trace him in his *A Survey of Hinduism for BalaKrishna* and actually delineated the present day Krishna as "an amalgam of various elements and the second important element is the cult of Krishna Govinda. Still later is the worship of Bala-Krishna, the Divine Child Krishna, a quite prominent feature of modern *Krishnaism*. The last element seems to have been Krishna *Gopijana-vallabha,*

Krishna the lover of the *gopis,* among whom Radha occupies a special position" In some books, Krishna is presented as "the founder and first teacher of the *Bhagavata* religion" (2005, 206). We shall come across these stages and personas at every step and for the sake of simplicity, we may proceed with just three distinct stages or versions of Krishna, the first among which is the one created by the *Gita-Mahabharata* tradition as an adult warrior, diplomat, philosopher, leader and king of Dwarka. His most typical personification is as *Partha-sarathi* the charioteer of Arjuna in the *Mahabharata* who counsels him and the whole of mankind, through the *Bhagavata Gita* sermon. The second may be described as the young Balakrishna category, which includes the toddler Gopala, the young Govinda and so on. As we shall see, both visual and performing arts concentrate much more on the junior Krishna than on the senior version. And the third persona is what we can call the Radha-Krishna or the *Gopijana-vallabha* series, which raises him to ecstatic heights in popular and the later classical expressions, from literature to poetry, song, dance and, of course, paintings and sculptures.

40. We shall discuss these three distinct genres later on but at this point we may see how the child Krishna was suddenly subjected to attention by a number of eminent Western scholars in the latter half of the 19th century and in the early 20th century. They noticed certain points of similarity between the cult of Krishna and Christianity and since the child form appears in the *Harivamsa* only three to four centuries after Christ, they came to the conclusion that many of the legends of this part of the Krishna saga were borrowings from Christianity. It all started with Georgi's work *Alphabetum Tibetanum* in Rome in 1762. Thereafter, Albrecht Weber, F. Lorinser, and Edward Washburn Hopkins led prominent scholars to declare that Christianity influenced the Krishna cult, especially the story of the miraculous escape of the divine baby from the wrath of the cruel king, be it Herod in the Bible or Kamsa in the Krishna legend. Weber, one of the chief protagonists of this theory, published *An Investigation into the Origin of the Festival of Krsna Janmastami* in 1874 that centred on the birth of Krishna and brought to light many similarities

involving the two divinities, Christ and Krishna (1874, 21-5; 47-52).

41. These arguments were supported and carried further by Hopkins in *The Religions of India* (1895, 430), Kennedy J *(JRAS*,1907, 951-99 & 1908, 505-21) and Macnicol in *Indian Theism* (1915, p.iv). Rosen went so far as to claim that the whole Vedic system of *avataras*, “divine incarnations”, was “borrowed” from the conception of Christ’s incarnation (1989, 11) and “Lorinser declared that the *Bhagavad Gita* was simply an expurgated New Testament” (Kangle, 1963, 13). Even Indian scholars like RG Bhandarkar (1913) felt that the Balagopala tradition may actually have been borrowed from the Christian tradition and that it was brought into India by the *Abhiras* who migrated from the western Asia. “The many folk legends associated with Krishna indicate his possible origin as a pastoral folk deity, perhaps first worshipped by the *Abhira* tribe who lived as nomads between Mathura and Dwaraka in northern India” (Bhandarkar, quoted in Sen 1991: 79). Kosambi often came up with quite unorthodox views, but here he agreed and noted that the "basis of the Krishna legend is that he was a

hero and later demi-god of the Yadu tribe, one of the five main Aryan people (*Panca-janah*) in the oldest Veda; but these Yadus were alternately cursed or blessed by the Vedic hymn-singers, according to current alignment in the constant fighting between Panjab tribes. Krishna is also a *Satvata*, an *Andhaka-Vrishni*, and fostered in a gokula, cattle-herders' commune, to save him from his maternal uncle Kamsa. The transfer related him moreover, to the *Abhiras*, a historical and pastoral people early in the Christian era, progenitors of the modern *Ahir* Caste" (1965, 11).

42. In this debate, it may be proper to split the two claims, (a) whether the *Abhiras* or other Central Asian people who entered India actually brought in these folk beliefs and (b) whether this was borrowed from Christian stories. After all, there is a lot of similarity in the divine birth of the world's saviour (Krishna/Christ)) and the infant's escape from the wrath of the evil king who wanted to kill him (Kamsa/Herod). On (a), there is no harm in accepting, for the sake of argument, that the folk tradition of a 'divine baby' was part of the common lore of the wandering groups of Central and West Asia. Dating this

is, however, a complex problem and this process of interjection may well have been from the 1st and 2nd centuries C.E. and stretched over subsequent centuries. Bhandarkar and Kosambi feel that folk minstrels laced this miracle-story of the infant-god's birth and his subsequent post-natal survival with their own stock of earlier legends. Super-heroes have enthralled masses in all lands and in India, the yearning for fantasy over reality continues unbroken for several millennia. This passion rules the present-day Hindi film industry, as also their clones in the regional languages and even in the fairy-tale opulence of Indian television soap opera.

43. But where the second argument or (b) is concerned, all that one can say is that all the three Semitic religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, borrowed from certain common stocks of legends of the Middle East, even though they developed them later into their individual holy corpuses. But, Christianity was hardly visible except in secret societies or underground locales in the first three centuries of the Current Era, and the early Christians who were persecuted by the mighty Roman Empire could hardly have passed it on, in refined Christian

format, to the *Abhiras*, who entered India in these early centuries of the Current Era. In other words, it may have come in embryonic form from a non-Indian source and Christianity may have adopted the same legends from this pool, without being in a position at that point of time to be powerful enough to repackage and export it to India. Klostermaier said that "according to historical testimonies, Krishna-Vasudeva worship already flourished in and around Mathura several centuries before Christ" (2005, 206).

44. This may gladden some but it is indeed difficult to come to any conclusion because the senior Krishna was hardly mentioned in his own right till the 2nd century CE and he appeared invariably through joint appellations with other mightier gods. And, Krishna's baby version took some time to make its presence felt even after the adult Krishna's stardom. Historians feel that *Abhiras* or *Ahirs* and other pastoral tribes who entered this land from central Asia settled in the western and the northern part of India. Many wandering tribes joined the Hindu order and were accepted as "warrior castes" through interesting tales of legitimisation, like the *Agnikula-yagna*

legend, in which new *Kshatriya* groups suddenly appeared out of the sacrificial fire as Surya-vanshis and Chandra-vanshi Rajputs. The '*Kshatriyas'* status of the *Ahirs* is, however, challenged though some of them claim to be of this caste, but it is best not get into this dispute.

45. It appears that the forefathers of the *Ahirs* made Punjab their first settlement while the *Vrishnis* were in occupation of the Braj-Mathura region, further south. There is a possibility that the two groups coalesced later into one mega-Yadava identity, and that they may have moved to Dwarka. But, for our purpose, we need to focus on the relatively late arrival of the child version of Krishna into the mainstream of his lore. After all, where the masses were concerned it was "emotional outreach" of the baby and naughty young Krishna that stirred *vatsalya*, the spontaneous gush of love for an innocent child. This emotion, that was hitherto missing in the Krishna lore, was injected into it once the darling toddler entered. The masses loved this role as is clear from the arts that nurtured it, but the elite savoured his role as a warrior or a strategist or a preacher. Again, it were the miraculous feats of the infant *Gopala* were

the ones that the arts found more interesting as subjects. If one recalls the most popular motifs in art, sculpture, poetry, song and dance, these are those of the baby Krishna stealing butter; lifting the *Govardhana* mountain; dancing on the hood of the dreaded serpent, *Kaliya*; slaying the evil demoness *Putana* and so on.

46. So, having examined Balagopala, let us now come to Radha. She entered the sacred legend of Krishna several centuries after he had established himself as an independent deity. We find no mention of Radha either in the first sacred text that mentioned Krishna,i.e, the *Chhandogya* Upanishad of the 7th century B.C.E., or in the definitive text on him, the *Harivamsa*, which is placed around the 3rd-4th century C.E. Not a single word on Radha is heard in any sacred text in the first 1300 years and we do not find any direct mention of Radha in devotional Krishna literature even in the next half a millennium or more. We are referring here to the second stage, ie, between the *Harivamsa* and *Vishnu Purana* of the 3rd-4th century C.E. and the *Bhagavata Purana* of the 9th century C.E.

We cite this latter date as scholars like JAB van Buitenen who delved deep into the antiquity of this *Purana* place it around the 9th century of the Current Era (1966, 23ff) though there are others who place it a bit later.

47. Even in the *Bhagavata*, all we get is a terse mention of one '*Anyaradhita*', not of Radha as such. The early *Puranas* like the *Matsyapurana* and *Brahmapurana* do not even "mention Krsna's love dalliances with Radha, which concentrate…….on the cult of Bhagvan Visnu" (Chatterjee, 1976, 51). So, historically, the Bhagavata is still the first religious book where we find some trace of the prototype of Radha and it also mentioned the *Rasa-Lila* or the circular dance of Krishna. It described how Krishna or Mayon mingled freely with the *gopis* and how he singled out one of the *gopis*, with whom he disappears (Book 10, Chapter 30, Verse 36-38) in order to teach humility to the others. This favourite *gopi* is, however, abandoned later for the same reason, but she remains without a name and there is only one reference to her being '*Anyaradhita*' (Banerjee, 1993, 7), as one who was conciliated

by Krishna. Scholars have often said that this is the origin of the proper name ‘Radha’, as conciliation forms an integral part of the Radha-Krishna love, as in any other love story. To be fair, this *Purana* was not about Radha, though it did introduce her. It is, in fact, a long eulogy of Krishna: "Though art *Brahman*, the ancient One, the immortal One, free from all qualities and miseries. Thou art all-bliss, without modification..... not different (from the world) and (still) different……the Lord of the Self (*atmesvara*),……. who may be adored (VIII.12.7)

48. But a *Sanskrit Purana* that was composed in Tamil country towards the end of the first millennium could not have described Krishna's intimate dance with milkmaids unless the soil was fertile for such unorthodox dalliances. We must remember that this romance was in the best traditions of Tamil *Sangam* poetry, through which unabashed romance made delayed but definite inroads into more orthodox religious texts. Two good examples one can give are that of *Kamba-Ramayanam* and *Kantha Puranam*. The Tamil concept of *punarchi* is not just love making, but is a sublime experience. It is part and parcel of the higher concept of real love unlike just

sex and the early Tamilians did not differentiate between love and love making. There is no doubt that in the first millennium CE, the *Dravidian* tradition appeared more emphatic in its assertion of *Vaishnavism* and in matters of love. Krishna Sharma discusses this in detail and she raises doubts about this postulate (1987, 296ff) but let us go over a bit of the southern version of *Bhakti*, irrespective of whether the movement originated there or not. The *Aham* poetry of the *Sangam* era of Tamil country concentrated a lot on the theme of love and cited the legend of Andal as a good example of passionate yearning for the lord. She was so obsessed with Vishnu that she could hardly exist without merging herself physically into his idol.

49. *Sangam* literature, which constitutes the earliest extant literature in the Tamil language of southern India and dates from the second to the sixth century C.E, describes Krishna as Mayon, a deity associated with the forest region or *Mulla* (Banerjee 1994: 125 and NGV-2, *Sangam Historical*). This literature of the *Aalvars* of Tamil land appeared in the

interregnum of some five or six hundred years between the *Harivamsa* and the *Bhagavata*. It is in this context that we come across the spirited *Nappinnai*, the favoured milkmaid of Krishna. She is so popular in Tamil Nadu even now that many a girl child is given her name. It is this *Nappinnai* who danced with Krishna in the circular '*Rasa*' dance and a whole galaxy of scholars contend that Sanskrit scholars drew their inspiration for Radha from this favoured *gopi*. Milton Singer, who studied the Radha-Krishna *bhajanas* of Madras city(*Singer*, 1969) that is today's Chennai asserted that for centuries on end the *gopis* were a role model as devotees believed that if "they persisted in their imitation of the *gopis*' love for Krishna, their own devotion would be as intense and effective.....and they will be rewarded by the physical presence of Krishna" (1966, 130). It is this emotive appeal of Tamil *Vaishnavism* that led eventually to the first major codification of the life and exploits of the great Krishna in the *Bhagavata Purana*. Since this definitive text cannot be placed before the 9th century C.E, we find thar Krishna, who appeared with some clarity two centuries before the Current Era, had actually to travel for the next eleven

hundred years to develop an attractive child version and then pick up Radha as his partner.

50. As we have pondered over earlier, it is clear that Krishna would have remained rather pedantic and dry at the level of the masses, had it not been for both Balagopala and his Radha. "In this text, the concept of Bhagavan Visnu has been superseded by that of Bhagavan Krsna", states Chatterjee (1976, 69), and the "Krsna of the Bhagvata though identified with Visnu is more a loveable God than the all pervasive Being" With a *Maha-Purana* now dedicated to the proto-Radha, Krishna's journey to start dominating Indian religious thought and popular culture had thus begun. This slow process is not unusual in religion, as we have seen earlier when referring to the accepted versions (not one, but several) of the life and preaching of Christ. They also took many centuries to ‘mature’ and even after Western Europe reached some reasonable degree of consensus over Christ and his teachings, several Orthodox and other Eastern Churches continued to vigorously contest these agreed accounts.

51. But it is interesting to discover that while classical literature discovered or accepted Radha quite late in the day, popular folk-lore and poetry had no such qualms in mentioning her love affair with Krishna. Sumanta Bannerji's seminal work on the *Appropriation of a Folk Heroine* outlines this process and Sanujit Ghose's' *Radha: Folk Heroine or Divine Playmate* also gets into great detail. According to Banerjee "while the venerable '*puranas*' and Sanskrit religious textbooks took a long time to give respectability to Radha, she gained access much earlier in the literature composed in the colloquial *Prakrit*, underscoring again her humble origins" (Banerjee 93, 9). The first explicit reference to Radha is found in the *Prakrit* work of King Hala, who belonged to the upper Deccan, either to present-day Telengana or to Maharashtra. His *Gaha Sattasai* or *GathaSaptasati* (seven hundred verses) is a collection of verses in '*Prakrit*' composed sometime between the second and sixth century A.D. In Chapter 1, *pada* 225 of Hala's work, we come across this couplet: "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 milkmaids" (Banerjee 93, 9).

52. Even a single but clear mention of Radha-Krishna's love may be considered as evidence that this story was circulating at the folk level for at least a couple of centuries before it entered Hala's formal written text. After all, it does take quite a lot of time for a folk doggerel or rhyme or even a song or dance to reach the next higher level of receiving some degree of formal acceptance through mention in a written text, which was a domain that was tightly controlled by *Brahmans* and the upper castes.

53. King Hala's articulation from the repertoire of the folk is an indication that it was rising to the next level of secular text, the stage from which sacred literature would accept and appropriate it. As we have seen in Radha's story, "Sanskrit poets could not resist the flood of *Prakrit* and Tamil poetry and eventually gave in, to start Sanskrit Romantic poetry....with a rich and free transfers of idioms and metaphors into Sanskrit" (Dehejia 2002, 19). Hala's work must have been completed by the 5th or 6th century C.E., as Bāṇabhaṭṭa alludes to Hala's

work in his *Harsha Charita* of the 7th century: “The breasts of Radha made Krishna dance in the courtyard, and people were amazed.” The moot point here is that Radha was present in popular literature well before she appeared in the biographical work of Bāṇabhaṭṭa both of which precede her mention in the first sacred literature, the Bhagavata *Purana*.

54. We also come across another mention of Radha in Bhattanarayana’s *Veni-samhara*, which appeared at least a hundred and fifty years before the *Bhagavata Purana* was composed in the 9th century. Radha is cited by Ananada-vardhana in his famous *Dhvanyaloka*, where he suggested that ‘resonance’ is the soul of poetry and this work was also composed before the *Bhagavata*. It is clear that, in some parts of India, Radha appears to have come out in the open by then. Her name is mentioned in some verses in other writings, like those of Somadeva Suri and Vikramabhatta that appeared between 9th and the 12th/13th centuries. Once an interesting story gripped the masses, more so if it had elements of valour, sacrifice, jealousy or love, it circulated far more freely through popular doggerel or verses and in the performing arts, than it

could do through formal literature. We come across some startling, intimate descriptions in texts that amaze us even today and these may well be remnants of the earlier free-wheeling folk narratives. They persisted even after a lot of moral editing by purists, as without these parts, the attraction of the entire episode would have been diluted and lost.

55. Our task here is not to go through a comprehensive examination of *Vaishnavism* per se**,** but to try to locate where and when Krishna really bonded with the common people of India, which is evident in the profusion of several cultural expressions at some point of time. We shall, therefore, not dwell upon the great trinity of Vaishnava teachers who established the distinct schools of thought based on Vedantic philosophy, ie, Ramanujacharya, Madhvacharya and Nimbarkacharya, as they really do not concentrate on Krishna. To return to Krishna or more specifically, to his Radha, we find that though she starred in early-medieval Sanskrit literature, there is no doubt that it was ultimately Jaydeva of eastern India, who really established her to a position of glory. It was he who set her as Krishna's quasi-legitimate "better half", through

his lyrical *Gita-Govinda* and helped in propelling her to all India fame. Jaydeva was born most probably in Odisha, though Bengal also claims the honour, and he composed his *Gita Govinda* in the 12th century. The lyrical couplets of his *Krishna Lila* came out in groups of eight called *ashtapadis* and set new trends in Indian poetry for the melodious and sensual manner in treating a romance that captivated the poets of India. He desribed Radha and her *gopis* in vivid colours in her eight moods, the *ashtanaika*. She is portrayed with such finesse that they soon became a source of inspiration for others for centuries to come, in terms of composition, performance and dance.

56. Jaydeva's hymns, which were written in a mixture of Sanskrit and eastern Apabhramsa, had a profound impact on Guru Nanak and he incorporated two of his hymns in the *Guru Granth Sahib.* Barbara Stoler Miler's *Love Song of the Dark Lord* (1977) is one more tribute in English that follows a long tradition of translating Jayadeva that was started so early by Sir William Jones of the Asiatic Society of Bengal in 1792. It is obvious that Jaydeva's genius attracted the colonial ruers,

sceptical as they were of many aspects of Indian culture, and even Sir Edwin Arnold also made a translation in 1875. At the level of poets and performers, Jaydeva, may therefore, have done more to bring Radha to the centre-stage than all of sacred literature. His verses were the inspiration for a million cultural expressions in all dimensions of the arts, for the last eight hundred years and more. Many Sanskrit commentaries were composed on Jaydeva's works by stalwarts like Khumba in his *Rasikapriya*, Shankara Misra in his *Rasa Manjari*, Tirumala Deva Raaya in *Sruti Ranjani* and several others.

57. Though Jaydeva's composition of the 12th century is considered to be the first major break-through in enthroning Radha with Krishna in northern India, we get perplexed when we come across the Paharpur sculptures of Radha and Krishna that are dated to 9th century Bengal. This indicates that while cultivated literature on this theme took its own time to come out in the public domain, the legend of this romantic duo had caught the imagination of eastern India even before. These Bengal sculptures appeared almost three centuries before the *Gita Govinda*, which is more or less the time when Radha

featured in the Sanskrit magnum opus of south India, the *Bhagavata*. Where history is concerned, it clear that after the publication and acceptance of the *Gita Govinda*, the love affair of Radha-Krishna was no more taboo, even though it was adulterous in nature. Krishna was thus fortified with a new "love version" in addition to his child version and these two aspects were really the ones that drew him closer to the people. The tradition of sensual love that came to the fore through lyrical verses of Jaydeva of Odisha was soon extended to nearby lands by other great poets, like Chandidas of Bengal, and Vidyapati of Mithila, in their own different styles. This trio lent striking and exciting colours to the Lila of Radha-Krishna that was residing till then mainly in the realm of the sacred.

58. The problem with Chandidas of Bengal is that there are three sobriquets that came with his name, *Badu, Dvija* and *Dina*, indicating three different poets. It is, therefore, difficult to make out which Chandidas is really the great poet of Radha-Krishna, and after a lot of research, it is generally assumed that the main Chandidas was the earliest of them. He could be described as Ananta Badu Chandidas, a historical figure, who

was born in Bhirbum, West Bengal, in the early part of the 15th century. His *Srikrishna Kirtan* relates the love affair of Radha and Krishna and he draws his inspiration mainly from the *Bhagavata Purana*, but he improvised a lot and located his setting in medieval western Bengal, using scenes, stories, issues and metaphors from the Bengal countryside of the early medieval period. *Srikrishna Kirtan* is a collection of songs that indicated the ragas for their recitation and this definitely enriched the performing arts. The poet was himself deeply in love with a washerwoman well outside the confines of marriage and his verses bore the stamp of a deep personal passion in them.

59. The next *Bhakti* poet , Vidyapati was born in the middle of the 15th century in Madhubani, which is located in the eastern part of north Bihar. Courtier, scholar, and prose-writer, Vidyapati is primarily known for his love-lyrics composed in *Abahatta* Maithili, a language that inspired the three major languages of eastern India, Bengali, Odiya and Assamese and also impacted upon Nepali. In the tradition of Jayadeva's *Gita Govinda*, Vidyapati's love-songs re-created the loves of Radha

and Krishna. It has been said that his poems conveyed the devotion of Krishna's worshippers through the metaphor of human erotic love and we are reminded of Milton Singer's words that "the love of a woman for her husband or lover is more intense than any other form of love in the world" (1966, 131). At once sensuous and sensual, descriptive and dramatic, Vidyapati's songs ranged beyond the mythological to find their place in the heart of a human lover and he has often been compared to Dante in terms of passion. While Jayadeva wrote a unified dance-drama, Vidyapati offered several love songs that dwelt on the many moods of love and the different seasons for lovemaking. Jayadeva's poems celebrated Krishna's love and paid comparatively less attention to Radha, the woman, while Vidyapati was primarily concerned with the feminine aspect and the intensity of Radha's love and passion. Vidyapati's skill lay in expressing the subtle nuances of a woman’s feelings and it this filled in a gap that had not been given adequate attention to by earlier male poets.

60. We now need to come to Surdas as no analysis of Radha-Krishna can ever be complete without Surdas and his

Sursagar of the 16th century. In this, we need to also recall the role played by his contemporary Vallabhacharya in introducing him to the *Bhagavata Purana*, after which the blind poet took up his legendary work. By composing his verses in Hindi, Surdas broke free from Sanskrit, the language of the upper classes to enthral the masses of northern India. This helped spread the stories of both aspects of Krishna's loveable infancy and childhood as also his romance with Radha, even far beyond the Hindi belt. In their article on Surdas in Milton Singer's *Krishna: Myths, Rites and Attitudes*, SM Pandey and Norman Zide stated that "the fame of Surdas depends mainly on his descriptions of the activities of Krishna as a child and on his *lila* with Radha and the milkmaids" (1966, 177). The same holds good for Krishna's own fame as well, because without them he could not tower over the other gods, even in the 16th century, which is quite late in Indian history. Surdas concentrated on both these facets of Krishna or the two "supports" that foisted his position, Bala-krishna and Radha-Krishna. It is the fact that Krishna had these 'human' aspects that actually helped his phenomena to break out of the restricting confines of an

"overwhelming god-hood" that had characterised Vedic and even *Puranic* deities like (say) Parashurama.

61. In his inimitable yet simple and sweet verses, Surdas described each stage of Balagopala's growth that gushed forth with maternal love, *Vatsalya*. His verses conveyed how Radha and Krishna grew up together and moved from childhood affection to a much deeper love, until it was sanctified by marriage. Here, Surdas differed from his predecessors, Vidyapati and Chandidas, who do not refer to any marital relationship. The Hindi *Ashtachap* poets like Surdas, however, followed Vallabhacharyya in describing Radha's wedding, though they also portray vividly her pangs as a separated *virahini*. One may note the starkly different manner in which the poets and the people of the Magadha-Bengal-Odisha region handled and accepted such extra-marital relations in the *Lila* of Radha-Krishna, while the Hindi mainstream edited and legitimised their love, but ever so sweetly. The acute discomfort of patriarchal cultures in accepting any 'prohibited relationship' where women, especially married ones, were concerned came out rather strongly, but it is now time for us to

turn our focus on the history of how Radha was firmly established as Krishna's partner in the eyes of the common man by the 16th century when the *Bhakti* movement was at its peak. It is quite clear that there was a marked difference between the way the priestly and royal groups viewed Krishna, as a strategist, warrior and moral preceptor, and how the masses looked at him as a child, a hero and a lover. This is so evident in the performing and visual arts of India from the 16th century and thereafter.

62. It is time to turn to Sankaradeva of Assam, "whose literary output was considerable and covered a wide area: in Assamese, Assamese-Brajabuli and Sanskrit; prose, verse and poetical prose; translations, compilations from different texts and lyrical effusion; through songs and lyrics, longer narratives and a doctrinal treatise" (Rajkhowa, 2003, 200). According to Suniti Kumar Chatterjee "Srimanta Sankardeva (1449-1568) saint-scholar, playwright, social-religious reformer was a colossal figure in the cultural and religious history of Assam who united the straddling two major kingdoms of Assam, the Ahom and Koch. Sankaradeva found his people of Assam

disunited through different religions, *Sakta, Shaiva, Tantric, Buddhist* and *Animist*, and he was successful in applying the salve of Vaishnavism and brought to them spiritual peace and contentment" (Neog 1965). The religion he started, *Mahapuruxiya Dharma*, was part of the *Bhakti* movement that was then raging and he inspired *Bhakti* in Assam just as Ramananda, Kabir, Basava and Chaitanya Mahaprabhu inspired it elsewhere. His literary and artistic contributions are living traditions in Assam today and he introduced songs and performances to bring his message closer to the masses.“The religion he preached is practiced by a large population, and *Sattras* (monasteries) that he and his followers established, continue to flourish and sustain his legacy” (Das, Pathak, Das, *Biography of Sankaradev*)

63. Another great preacher who popularised Radha-Krishna was Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu of Bengal (1486-1534) "whose credit lies in fusing the (Vaishnava) devotional elements....that existed for generations in Bengal.....into one devotional fervour for Krishna" (Mukherjee, 1995, 71). He could make a distinct mark in a province where the goddess was dominant through

the cult of *Shakti*, but the important point is that he was successful not only in stabilising the idea of Radha-Krishna, but elevated it to the highest level of religion and the most desirable goal. Suresh Chandra Bhattacharya's analysis is that Chaitanya actually succeeded in founding a distinct *Vaishnava* sect called *Gaudiya Vaishnava* which differed from other *Vaisnava* sects and also that "Sri Chaitanya was conceived by his followers to be the unity of Radha and Krishna" (1995, 48). Another major historian of Bengal Vaishnavism, Ramakanta Chakrabarty described its theology to be "based upon the sectarian belief that other gods were manifestations of Krisna-*Brahman*" (1985, 107). Chaitanya simplified devotion at the mass level by popularising the chanting of the *Hare Krishna* mantra, that inspires a huge section within and outside the country even today. His short Sanskrit compositions, the *Siksastakam* (eight devotional prayers) were spread far and wide by his chief followers, the six *goswamis* of Vrindavan**.** Though Chaitanya ushered in a popular devotional movement that freed the masses from their obligations to priests and temples, his impact was felt most in the profusion of new

temples to Radha-Krishna, which is quite paradoxical. Thus, where the celebration of the Krishna cult at the base level was concerned, Chaitanya and Sankaradeva contributed the most in eastern India and there is no doubt that his worship was established firmly with deep roots in the east by the 16th century.

64. It is time for us to end this section on Krishna in literature, by referring to the contribution of some other great personalities whom we have not been able to mention so far**,** like Namdeva, Ramananda, Vallabhacharya and Mirabai. Namadeva, who flourished in the first part of the 14th century, wrote in Marathi and breathed a spirit of intense love and devotion to God. Namadeva is said to have travelled far and wide and engaged in discussions with Sufi saints in Delhi but is not directly connected with our theme. Ramananda is partly relevant as he was the first great *Bhakti* saint of North India who opened the doors of *Bhakti* to all in the 15th century, without any distinction of birth, caste, creed or sex. We had not mentioned him in this piece on Krishna, as he was a worshipper

of Rama and we may now move on to Vallabhacharya (1479-1531).

65. He was a contemporary of Surdas, whom he influenced deeply, and also of Chaitanya and Sankaradeva. He propounded the Vaishnava philosophy called *Pustimarga*, the path of grace and founded a school called *Rudra Sampradaya*. Vallabha was the author of a number of scholarly works in Sanskrit and *Brajbhasa*, and his importance lies in his influence on *Ashtachap* poets like Surdas. It is he who ‘sanitised’ the Radha-Krishna legend but positioned it firmly within the moral fibre of patriarchal religion in medieval north and west India. Mirabai's dates are a little hazy but researchers place her songs in the first half of the 16th century and it is believed that she was married to a minor royal family of Rajasthan. She was deeply committed to Krishna and after her husband's early death, she devoted her entire existence to singing praises of Krishna. Her conduct was unorthodox and bold, for which she suffered her trials and tribulations, but she is the most important pillar in our journey as the popularity of her songs and *bhajans* prove that Krishna had finally found his position in

the performing arts at least by the early 16th century. We may now look back a bit of the long journey of over two millennium that we have travelled from the 7th century BCE, when we first heard a wisp about Krishna in the *Chhandogya Upanishad*, to reach this stage at the peak of the Bhakti movement.

66. It is time now to take a look at the other cultural expressions beyond sacred and formal literature in order to judge when exactly Krishna appeared amidst a wider audience, through the visual arts. We need to compare this with the stages of his journey through sacred, secular and popular literature, to corroborate or to refute the postulate that his stardom came in rather late. At an earlier juncture, we have referred to the lack of material evidence on Krishna in the millennium before the Current Era. We also tried to locate him in inscriptions, architecture and sculpture or painting but we could not come across a single item. According to *Oriental Art: A Handbook of Styles and Forms*, it is "not until the appearance of the Mauryan style in the 3rd or 2nd centuries BCE do the historical period's earliest works of art appear in India" (*Auboyer*, 14). In this first flush of post-Harappan art of India

(there is none from the Vedic period), that is in Greek phase, we notice the dominance of stone sculptures and carvings on the *stupas* and *toranas*, but none of them even touched upon Krishna or the Hindu deities. Their focus was on the Buddha, the *Bodhisattvas* and on the *Jatakas*.

67. The Brahman Sunga dynasty that overthrew the Buddhist Mauryas and the next Brahman clan of Kanvas, that seized power from them, continued the Mauryan Buddhist style and thus preserved its forms and designs till the 1st century CE. If we go through all the three Magadhan dynasties, we can find no trace of Krishna, though Hindu deities had started appearing on the scene then. The Kushans of Central Asia, who held power in the northwestern part of India from the 1st to the 3rd centuries, remained essentially Buddhist and they patronised both the Gandhara and the Mathura styles. In fact SP Gupta stresses on the coexistence of the Gandhara and the Mathura schools in the context of Sanghol sculptures as this site was halfway between the two core zones (2003, 17). In the "transitional period" of Indian art between the Maurya-Sunga-Kanva dynasties and the Guptas, ie, between the 1st

and the early 4th centuries of the Current Era, we come across four main schools. We still have the later Indo-Greek Gandhara school in the north-west; there is the Mathura school in the north; we find the Amaravati school in the south-east of India and finally come to the Rock-cut caves mainly in Maharashtra, though some were also in Odisha and Bihar. The art of Gandhara consisted of free-standing figures and narrative reliefs carved out of schist stone while those of Mathura were in red sandstone. The later Amaravati structures and sculptures were in white marmoreal limestone but what we need to note in our search for Krishna in art is that all these styles had no image of him, as they were almost totally Buddhist.

68. There is a very interesting aspect of Kushan art that appeared a lot in the Mathura style on north India which was in terracotta, that was quite akin to Sunga terracottas. It is submitted here that at times, unless the terracotta sculptures were of a very refined level, as a medium it was more affordable for the non-aristocratic strata that lay below the powerful ruling, priestly or merchant castes. This meant that this form of art could well cover subjects that were closer to the

masses and were outside the "official' or mandated narrative. It is interesting to come across, both in the Sunga and Kushan terracottas, a preoccupation with females and their bodies; many love-making couples (*Mithuna*); quite a few erotic *Bacchanalian* scenes; all types of *yakshas* and *yakshis*; a lot unknown of representaions of common men or women; serpents and the *Naga* folk; many birds or animals and even an occasional Hindu deity of folk worship (Tripathi, 1984, chapter 2). Krishna is conspicuous everywhere by his absence, thereby denoting perhaps that he had not yet struck a chord at the level of the common people to warrant even a terracotta image.

69. The Mathura school was, however, the only one among the early three in Indian art to have several images of *Brahmanical* deities in this pre-Gupta transitional phase. During the first stage of Mathura sculptures, from the 1st century BCE to the early 4th century CE, we also come across representations of Hindu deities like Vishnu, Shiva, Parvati, Gaja-Lakshmi, Ganesha, Karttikeya, Surya, Brahma, Agni, Kuvera, Mahishamardini-Durga and so on. The point here is

that in these early Mathura images of Hindu deities carved in stone, Vishnu and Balarama are found in some noteworthy numbers, but Krishna is hardly seen in the collection of any museum that houses pre-Gupta art. There is a bit of an overlap, so some of these Hindu deities could actually belong to the opening years of the Gupta period and we must not forget that the Mathura school had a profusion of Buddhist and Jaina art as well. This style of art continued till well into the 10th century and the Kushan intervention was only one of its early components. The UNESCO document in this regard clarifies this by stating that "the art of Mathura both preceded and postdated Kushan art, over a total span of a thousand years, but the Mathura workshops were most active and productive during the rule of Kushan emperor Kanishka (and his two successors) in the 2nd and 3rd centuries, which represents the golden period of Mathura sculptures (Pugachenkova 1996, 361).

70. We have already come across a Mathura image at the Mathura (Curzon) museum, which has been identified by VS Agrawala as Balaramaand who stated that it belonged to the

2nd century BCE. Agrawala claimed that it was the first *Brahmanical* statue to be found and this could very well be true because we must remember that the crafting of images and idols of deities, that was generally scorned at by Europeans, was in fact a gift of the Greek intervention in India. This art had focused on the Buddha and connected divinities, so the Balarama of the Mathura Museum could really be the first Hindu sculpture found so far, at least where our subject of Krishna is concerned. We have also discussed a silver coin of an Indo-Greek ruler, Agathocles, of the same period that was found in Afghanistan which has Balarama on one side and Vasudeva-Krishna on the obverse side. We are essentially revisiting this part only to reiterate our observation that there is “no evidence of Krishna in sculpture or coinage or inscription before the Current Era began” (Amiet, 1973, XXVI).

71. Krishna does not appear to have broken free from either Vasudeva or Balarama, until we come across the Ekanamsa Group from 2nd century Gaya, Bihar (Banerjee, 1978, Pg xvi), which is more than three hundred years later. This Kushan sculpture places Krishna, Subhadra and Balarama

side by side as three distinct entities and it could be the prototype for the triad in the Jagannatha Mandir at Puri, that came up almost one and a half millennium later. The regional tradition of balancing Balarama and Krishna, as also accommodating a female deity, appears thus to have deep roots in the east. This solitary exception notwithstanding, Krishna is lost somewhere in this crowd of Hindu sculptures in Mathura of the 2nd century. It appears, therefore, that Krishna found his position in the sacred but exclusive Sanskrit literature of the Brahmans and Kshatriyas and some mention in the arts, only after the *Mahabharata*, the *Gita* and the *Harivamsa* reached their mature stage in the 4th century. But, as we have seen and shall see even more, it was not this senior and sagacious Krishna of the *Gita* who appeared in the sculptures and images of the 4th century.

72. We have a rough sculpture that is usually identified with Vasudeva carrying the new-born Krishna across the flooded Yamuna to Gokula and if this is correct, then this Kushana piece of 2nd century Mathura would indeed be one of the earliest ones on the Krishna legend. It would predate by

two centuries the official sacred text on Balagopla. As discussed earlier, there is every possibility that the oral tradition of Central Asian animal-herder tribes that entered India around that time may have captured the imagination the people even before the *Harivamsa* was finalised. We find this motif repeated later in another statue of the 5th century at Deogarh and in the Paharpur Temple of present day Bangladesh which is dated to the 8th century. The ‘flood’ also appears as a motif in western art and literature and so it is difficult to come to any conclusion about Vasudeva's feat in crossing the flooded Yamuna. This motif of homage to Vasudeva, the father, appears to be the only one as all other images that were sculpted thereafter celebrated the supernatural prowess of either Balakrishna his brother, Balarama.

73. Stella Kramrisch described the phase between the 4th and 8th centuries as the “mature period of Indian sculptures” and it is only then that we come across the first real specimens of Krishna's representation in art. "The Gupta style was the result of refining and idealising the features of the earlier styles

from which it derived" observed Auboyer (1979, 15) and "it survived by several centuries, the Gupta dynasty after which it was named". The Gupta sculptures of the late 4th and the 5th centuries CE have many red sandstone statuaries on the theme of Krishna's boyhood and bas reliefs of quite a few episodes from the life of this young Krishna. It is without doubt from this evidence that it was the delightful infant and prankster child Balagopala or Balakrishna who stole a march over the rather serious version of the senior Krishna depicted in the *Mahabharata* and the *Gita*. In the 1970s, P Banerjee of the National Museum had made a very comprehensive study and his *Life of Krishna in Indian Art* (National Museum, Delhi, 1978) is really a good guide to the evolution of the deity where art was concerned.

74. In this compendium, we find Bala-Krishna depicted from the 4th century onwards and the favourite motifs are the *Sakata-bhanga* or the upturning of the cart by Balagopala and the *Dadhi-manthana*, or the churning of curd for the infant deity, as well as several on the killing of a wide range of demons. We have sculptures depicting Balagopala's victory

over Dhenuka and the horse-demon Kesi, ie, *Dhenukasura-vadha* and *Kesi-vadha*. All these four early images that we have just mentioned above are from the Mandor Pilla in Rajasthan and are dated to the 4th or 5th centuries. They are seen in profusion elsewhere as well and we come across, for instance, on the *Sakata-Bhanga* pose in another Gupta sculpture at Deogarh, 5th century. The *Dadhi-manthana* may be seen in a fine specimen of Gupta sculpture kept at Varanasi in the Bharat Kala Bhavan. The art of the Gupta period is also marked in a similar image discovered at Paharpur, which is also of 4th-5th centuries. The National Museum Delhi has some great figures of Krishna stealing butter, Devaki handing Balagopala to Vasudeva and baby Krishna turning over the cart, but we hardly come across any sculpture depicting the grave sermon of *Partha-sarathi* on the battlefield of Kurukshetra, that symbolises the *Bhagavada Gita*.

75. Banerjee's list depicts images of Krishna in Gupta style well after the Gupta dynasty had gone. Among the popular motifs found at Badami (c.600) in the Deccan are the *Yamal-arjuna* episode depicting the infant Krishna uprooting the twin

Arjuna trees, the *Dadhi-manthana* or churning of curd and the killing of the demoness Putana who had come to poison baby Krishna through her breast milk, ie, the *Putana-vadha*. Badami also has images showing Krishna killing the elephant Kuvalyapida, the demon Pralamba, the bull-demon Arishta and *Kesi-vadha*, the horse-demon, Kesi. We are reminded of Jan Gonda's amazement when he said, that "there seems to be no limit to his strength and power, no end to the number of his victories. The hero in his youthful energy.....slays terrible enemies, giants, demons and monsters sent to kill him." We will try to understand what these super heroics signify, a little later.

76. Let us stop for a while at the famous *Kaliya-damana* or *Kaliya-mardana* scene in early 7th century Badami, where Krishna subjugates the serpent, Naga Kaliya and dances on his hood. During the same period, i.e., between the 5th and 7th centuries, we have quite a few specimens of *Kaliya-mardana* that are spread as far apart as Mathura, Mamallapuram (Mahabalipuram), Bhubaneswar and even Nepal: a fact that was pointed out by Stella Kramrisch. We have been narrating

the sculptures one after the other, more like an accountant than as an interpreter. Let us take a few examples to understand some of the motifs to try to interpret what they signified rather to discuss how good was the art. When the pastoral folk settled down on the banks of the Yamuna on the borders of the wet, swampy Indo-Gangetic plains, they needed to come to terms with serpents.

77. The speakers of Indo-European language who occupied or came from from drier climes nurtured a deep-rooted hatred for the snake, as in those environs the percentage of poisonous snakes was indeed worrisom. The serpent was and is a metaphor for evil or for Satan and one was advised to kill snakes on sight, instead of taking chances. This cultural baggage had to be given up if they were to cohabit with more numerous breeds in the wet-lands of the Ganga-Yamuna basis, as most snakes were usually not dangerous unless they were attacked. Earlier, Indo-Aryan attitudes as evidenced in stories like the *Janmejaya Yagna* of the *Mahabharata*, where the entire snake dynasty was killed by fire, needed to be replaced by greater re-conciliation. *Kaliya Damana* represents mastery over

the situation, not outright slaughter. "The taming of the Naga has a deeper significance...,..(as) the Naga was the patron deity and perhaps aboriginal cult object of the place. The trampling down of Kaliya instead of killing indicates the obvious survival of the *Naga* cult" (Kosambi, 1962, 26). Once the wetlands and the natural habitats of reptiles were mastered, the new overlords had to start accepting the reality of coexisting with snakes and their associates in the swampy rice-lands of the Gangetic valley. The initial misgivings that existed with even the natives of these rice-lands that came out in the vilification of the Nagas or snake-people gave way to accommodation, as evidenced in legends like those of Ulupi and Vasuki. It then entered the religion of the mixed people of India and is seen in the hooded cobra that protects and comforts Vishnu/Narayan and other Hindu, Buddhist and Janina deities. Shiva has coils of snake around his neck and the snake moves freely in the sanctums of *Shakti*, Bhadrakali, Manasa and other Devi traditions.

78. Another interesting pose is the one in which the child Krishna lifts Mount Govardhana and uses it as an umbrella to

protect his people against the torrential rains unleashed by Indra. We have already discussed this in the context of literature and seen how the *Govardhana* motif actually symbolises his victory over the mighty Vedic god, Indra. It signifies the arrival of Krishna as the mascot of settled pastoralism which was a step ahead of the usual itinerant pastoral model. This makes it easier to understand the multiplicity of images on this Govardhana motif like the Gupta sculpture of the 6th century from Deogarh (Uttar Pradesh) in the ASI collection of *Krishna Lifting Mountain Govardhana*. We may recall our argument that all Krishna sculptures focused only on the life of young lad rather than on the adult, and they were primarily on his superhuman exploits. Similar reliefs are seen in buff sandstone in the 7th century and two such images have been pointed out by Chakrabarty (2006, 23). These were located at Mathura proper and at *Jatipara* near the actual Govardhana Mountain. We are reminded of Mahabalipuram in Tamil Nadu and the massive bas relief statue of Krishna lifting Govardhana that also belonged to the same period.

79. It is interesting to find two massive sculptures of Krishna in his *Govardhana* pose that stand out prominently in the Phnon-Da temples of the Ankur-Borei district of southern Cambodia. Checking on the claim of John Guy of the Metropolitan Museum of New York that, “Northern Indian treatments of this (Krishna) subject from the Gupta Period (ca.320-550) are rare”, we do find that it is so, if we are comparing numbers crafted only during the specific reign of the Guptas. According to Guy, the "Phnon-Da sculptures evolved from a long standing local tradition which by the 7th century had surfaced any Indian proto-types that were remembered”. There is another Krishna *Govardhana* at Phnom-Penh, which has been acquired by the Cleveland Museum and further reinforces Guy’s view (2014, 146-148). One could risk the interpretation that this motif was a symbol of settled pastoral life, or even settled semi-agricultural civilisation and could have been celebrating the success of new-found prosperity thereof.

80. During this same period of the 6th or 7th century, we see many sculptures of Balakrishna at Pattadakal, which like Badami is also in the northern Deccan. These are the ladies of

Braj churning curd, i.e, the *Dadhi-manthana* motif. We also get other works on popular motifs of episodes like *Sakata-bhanga, Yamalarjuna, Arishta-vadha, Putana-vadha* and *Kuvalyapida-vadha*. The novel ones are the *Bakasura-vadha* or the killing of the cane demon, and *Dhenuka-vadha*, i.e, the killing of the demon Dhenuka by Balarama. We can go endlessly on this topic of how many Gupta style images of Balakrishna have been found after the reign of the Guptas had ended and how many of these have been discovered in the south, at Badami, Pattadakal and Mamallapuram. What we need to understand is that not a single sculpture represents Krishna as he appeared in the official brahmanical version even many centuries after their compositions had been completed.

81. All the sculptures relate to the popular imagery of Krishna as super-human child and they also narrate the prowess of this infant or child Krishna in killing every possible enemy who came in the form of an *asura* or demon. A little closer examination of the creatures that were eliminated would reveal animals like horse, the elephant, the snake, serpent, crane, the bull and so on which could actually reflect the

anxiety of a pastoral group as it battled against the untamed original inhabitants of their new settlements. Elephants intrude into villages and towns even now if their original habitat is disturbed and cause panic all around, while the wild bull has always been a menace, which accounts for the emergence of bull-taming as a dangerous but lingering sport among the brave. These episodes may have be recounted tales from a tribe's past struggles to bring nature and the wild under control and many a pioneering human settlement had to battle against such forces. But not every episode can be interpreted in this manner because the tales of the prowess of the little Krishna are obviously laced with such spice as would attract the masses, like and the upturning of the cart, the uprooting of two Arjuna trees and so on. *Putanavadh*a has been interpreted as a victory of babies against killer post-natal diseases that killed so many and there are literally hundreds of folk stories all over India about the death coming in the form of a witch or a demoness to harm or kill new born children.

82. The fine specimens of Gupta sculptures on the subject of Krishna also signify large budgets that point to higher-class

patronage, as stone was more expensive as a medium and required better-paid artisans who had to work on each project for a long time. Sculptures in stone thus testify to some degree of affordability and affluence of the patron who financed it, unlike clay or terracotta images that could be created through local or lesser resources. Where Hindu images were concerned, this may have meant that rulers or wealthy merchants supported their creation, as traders' guilds did not matter here as they did under Buddhism. Nor was the community or the *Sangha* so powerful. This may further indicate that the patron of the art was either extending support to the official discourse But the child Krishna did not appear to be at the centre of the Brahmanical discourse where sacred texts were concerned, as much as the warrior-philosopher Krishna, so it could have meant that the patrons of these graven works were catering to popular tastes or desires. It may be good to maintain a distinction between what the people loved, imagined and upheld and what the ruling groups projected or propagated. The art on Krishna is thus an interesting theatre of contending desires and tastes, where the popular scored over the didactic.

83. Distinct elements of the Krishna legend may have emerged from folk stories or from existing beliefs that were later juxtaposed with the official discourse that were further popularised through sculpture, poetry, song or dance. Masses all over the world love tales of superhuman feats and the fact that most sculptures depict this shows the popular demands of the time. Scenes that would be popular later, like Yashodha cuddling the baby or the young cowherd playing the flute while tending to cattle, do not appear to be dominating the sculpture of this period.The noteworthy point is that Krishna had finally found his way to the visual arts at long last, some twelve hundred years after his first mention in Vedic literature. He was now on his own in the visual arts not as a senior warrior, statesman or philosopher but in his infant or young version. Besides, the fact that we do come across so many sculptures of Balagopala and Balakrishna should not mislead us, for we may note that even in this form, Krishna's images constitute but a small percentage of the total finds. Truly speaking, there were so many other gods who towered over the landscape of sculpture in the first millennium. This can be proved by even a

non-expert if one takes a walk through museum galleries or just examines their accession catalogues, as it is impossible to conduct a popularity census of divinities.

84. But what about rock-cut sculpture or cave paintings? Cave paintings and their accompanying reliefs that flourished in ancient India do not appear to have taken cognisance of Krishna, either as a boy or as an adult. It is understandable that the magnificent Buddhist cave art of Ajanta or Bagh ignored Brahmanical deities, by and large. The Jain caves of Tamil Nadu like the 2nd century Sittanavasai or the 8th century Armamala did likewise but it is interesting that even the Hindu structures at Ellora have nothing on Krishna. This is strange as they were created between the 5th and 8th centuries, mainly after the Gupta period had popularised the boyhood of Krishna. At this stage of Indian art, it is difficult to segregate the specific topic of paintings or the cave paintings and cave sculpture as there were many stone relief art works that were painted over in the past. Ellora carvings are often mistaken for being only *Shaivaite*, because the towering Kailasa temple is the central attraction. But the fact is that there are all three religions at

Ellora and thus we have the Hindu, the Buddhist and the Jaina groups. In the first type, we have *Vaishnava* deities, including the *Dashavataras* and the legendary Ananda Coomaraswamy had considered the depiction of Vishnu as Narasimha at Ellora to be one of the finest he had seen.

85. While still on the subject of cave-based depictions, we find that it were really the Pallavas of Tamil country who saved the day for Krishna. It is only in the Krishna reliefs at Mahabalipuram that are dated to the late 7th and 8th centuries that we find Krishna in full form, lifting the Govardhana mount (Blurton 1992, 135) and frolicking with *gopis*. What is extremely interesting is that *gopis* appear in these 7th century stone reliefs, because where texts are concerned, they come in droves mainly after the 9th century *Bhagavata Purana* appears. Here, we must recall our argument about Tamil devotional poetry and the very visible presence of *gopi*-type women well before the *Bhagavata*. Jayadeva's *Gita Govinda* actually brought the Radha-Krishna duo in vibrant colours in poetry and in the performing arts, but where visual art was concerned, the incidents in the last half of Book 10 and Book 11 of the

Bhagavata Purana provided more inspiration. Similarly, the story of Krishna's life as the ruler of Mathura following the death of King Kamsa, were largely ignored as subjects for visual art in favour of later post 12th century texts relating to Krishna the lover. The most vibrant periods of Indian artistic expressions like the Mathura and Gupta styles have comparatively so little of Krishna, but we see that once Radha appeared through the *Bhagavata Purana* and subsequent Sanskrit, Hindi and vernacular literature, her the romantic tales of dalliance gripped public imagination after the 13th century. This was heightened in the 15th and 16th centuries after the *Bhakti* movement flourished and verses and songs relating to Radha-Krishna made their presence felt. But the best of paintings on Krishna were just about to arrive with the miniatures.

86. We need, however, to cover some other art expressions in which Krishna appeared before we come seriously to miniature paintings. The Chola bronzes of the period between the 9th and the 13th centuries occupy an important segment of Indian art and there is literally a flood of materials on the

subject. Since they are mostly art books and our objective is so different, let us make two quick reviews of some recent works. R Nagaswamy's *Masterpieces of Chola Art* was brought out on the occasion of millennium of the ascent of Raja Raja Chola in 2011 displaying the best of bronzes but it does not a single sculpture of Krishna. In his other book (Nagaswamy 2006) there are a couple of photographs of dancing *Balagopala*, but then there are as many of the dancing *Sambandar*, the most prominent Nayanar saint of the *Shaiva Bhakti* movement, in the same undistinguishable pose. Even Kannan's *Chola Bronzes* (2003) hardly displays any specimen of Krishna in his various forms. The point is not that *Balagopala* and *Balakrishna* were not available at all in Chola bronzes till the 10th-11th centuries but that their number was certainly not predominant at the early stage. Krishna did take a long time to emerge as the most popular subject of the different arts.

87. Let us come to smaller paintings, as distinct from rock frescos in caves or painted carvings are concerned. The early miniature paintings started appearing only in the 9th or the 10th century from Buddhist Pala Bengal though Daljeet, who

was in charge of the Miniature Paintings Gallery of the National Museum, places the first miniatures to around the 7th-8th century (2006, 15). “India’s glorious tradition of mural and fresco paintings was its prime inspiration and source”, she says and the centres that housed these paintings were mostly Buddhist monasteries and Jain temples. They took up the task of illustrating manuscripts and we may just race through the early stages of miniatures as they have do not bear on the subject that we pursue. We can assume that these were financed by well-off classes, either for social status or for religious merit, or for both. Among the early Buddhist miniatures, we have exquisite ones illustrations from the 10th century *Prajnaparamita* text that stand out even today, as do the 11th-12th century *Pancharaksha*. During the Sultanate period, there were also Muslim works like the *Laura-Chanda* by Maulana Daud and the *Shahnama* and *Hamzanama* that were of excellent quality. Incidentally, the Sufi romance, *Laur-Chanda,* produced in the middle of 14th century is an interesting example of how a Hindu ballad was converted by a Muslim into a popular Avadhi love story, with a strong Persian element

coming into the style and content of the paintings. And then, we have the Jaina miniatures like the Mandu *Kalpa-Sutras* celebrating their divinities but these are relevant to us in a very limited context, i.e., to draw the line up to the point where Krishna arrived in regal splendour.

88. Among the early 'Hindu ones' where we can locate Krishna the first we come across are the *Balagopalastuti* folios of the mid-15th century. "These paintings represent the transitional phase from the earlier Jaina art and they still have their large protruding eyes and sharp pointed noses, but it is clear that this time art is moving to the next *Chaura-Panchasika* stage" (Daljeet and Jain, 2008, 47). Harsha Dehejia is of the opinion that the prosperity that trade brought to Gujarat, Malwa and Rajasthan in the 14th and 15th centuries prompted Jaina and Hindu merchants to finance illustrated manuscripts (2002, 72). Hindus and Jainas had commissioned their early religious manuscripts and miniatures only on palm or other dried leaves as they considered Muslim paper or *kagaz* 'impure'. The interesting point here is that *kagaz* was finally accepted during this century for these sacred books and

illustrations. Another development was that the Muslim painters and styles seemed to be more acceptable and in the 15th century, the Muslim court at Malwa was in touch with Persia. This brought Persian artists and their manuscripts to this kingdom, which opened up the vision of the hitherto-insular miniature painters of India. Typical Jaina miniatures were then refined with the Persian borders and stylistic inputs, and we see Central Asian horses being profusely painted on the borders of these Jaina miniatures.

89. Returning to the subject of Krishna, we see that Hindu paintings from the 15th century focused mainly on the themes that were set out in the 10th chapter of *Bhagavata Purana* though they also covered other secular themes like the *Vasanta Vilasa* and *Chaura-Panchashika.* One of the oldest folios from the *Vasanta Vilasa,* which is dated to 1451, is on display at Freer Gallery of the Smithsonian Museum in Washington and it indicates that Hindu miniatures and paintings had also reached a mature stage by then. The perfection in the artistic style had been arrived through the experience gained earlier in *Chaura-Panchashika* and other

traditions, including pre-Mughal Persian ones encouraged the later profusion of Krishna-related miniatures in western India. Numerous paintings and folios from the *Balagopalastuti*, *Bhagavata Purana* and *Gita Govinda* were commissioned and BN Goswami has drawn our attention recently to several splendid pre-Mughal miniatures from Palam and the regions near to Delhi. This is one full century before the Mughal ateliers bedazzled all other art forms but Krishna appeared to have arrived in 15th century miniatures as the divine lover. His love stories with Radha were certainly the preferred and popular subject.

90. The more interesting point here is that if *Vaishnava* art on the Krishna theme started making its presence felt in north and west India from the middle of the 15th century, it actually means that art did not wait for texts to determine the discourse. The major *Bhakti* texts arrived in full strength with their captivating repertoire of lyrics and songs in the 16th century. If so, what influenced these courts and artists even before the five great personalities of the *Bhakti* movement could spread their messages? It is obvious that older texts like

the trusty *Bhagavata* played an important role but we have Gujarat and Rajasthan miniatures based on the 14th century south Indian poet Bilvamangala's *Balagopalastuti*. We can, thus, distinguish two separate prime dates for the peak where cultural expressions relating to Krishna are concerned, the first being the mid-15th century for his appearance in the visual arts and second is the mid-16th century for Surdas and the multi-faceted campaign at the mass level by singers and preachers. The *Bhagavata Purana* and the *Gita Govinda* appeared to have reached the upper strata soon enough, who financed these miniatures and manuscripts relating to Krishna, while the masses would have to wait for another hundred years more to hear the lyrics of Krishna in Mirabai's songs and Surdas's verses. Since this period is a little before Vallabacharya and the *Ashtachap* Kavis could come in and "marry off" this highly visible loving couple, one wonders whether the 15th century painters, their patrons and their connoisseurs viewed Radha-Krishna as lovers or as dutifully married.

91. But then let us move to the next and important phase of Indian paintings, i.e., the Mughal Atelier, which was set up by

Humayun in 1555 when he returned from Persia with some of the finest painters like Mir Sayyid Ali of Tabriz. After Humayun's untimely death, Akbar nursed these ateliers and encouraged the creation of the monumental *Hamzanama* and *Razmnama* in true Indo-Persian style. This left the first signatures of Mughal painting, which was certainly of a higher standard than earlier attempts on these very same topic and titles had been. The Mughal school, of course, depended on various regional centres of paintings, especially in North India but scholars like Dehejia are quite critical. They say that "Mughal artists could draw pretty faces, but did not understand the nuances and moods of the beautiful emotion of love, which was left to the later Hindu inspired paintings of the Rajput courts" (Dahejia 2002, 82). We, thus, come to the main and last part of this story from the middle of the 16th century, outstanding miniatures. Parallel to the Mughal ateliers, we come across the distinct Deccan schools of paintings of the same century, namely those of Ahmadnagar, Bijapur and Golconda. The patrons and painters of both Mughal and the Deccan kingdoms were, however, not fixated on any particular

theme and did cover a fair number of subjects. Their portrayal of the episodes of Radha and Krishna further established the fame of the duo, signifying thereby the widespread acceptance of their romantic liaison..

92. But, all said and done, it was ultimately the Rajput courts of the small principalities in the west that came out with the real artistic interpretations of *sringara rasa, madhurya, viraha* and the finer feelings associated with the story of Radha and Krishna. This genre of Rajput paintings was taken up in right earnest by Mewar in the 16th Century, i.e., before the Mughal ateliers, and this kingdom inculcated the finest tradition of Mughal ateliers with local expressions that highlighted no eroticism but some of the most subtle moods of Radha-Krishna. Rajput art soon moved to other kingdoms and made its presence felt in India in the 17th and 18th centuries,, along with Mughal and Deccani paintings. They were not only on Radha-Krishna but on other subjects like Dhola-Maru. Our interest is more in the extremely sensitive portrayals of *Krishna Shrinagar* (Krishna of love), *Prema Rasa* (Sufi stories of love), *Shringar Kavya* (the poems of love), *Shangar and Sringar*

(adornment and love), *Nayikas and Nayakas* (the heroes and heroines of love), *Raagmaala* (the music of love), *Prem Kathas* (the stories of love), *Barah-masa* (the seasons of love), *Sakhis and Sakhas* (messengers of love) and so on (Dehejia 2002). Other Rajput schools that soon flourished were those of the Jodhpur, Bikaner, Kishangarh, Bundi, Kotah, Jaipur or Dhundhar, Uniyara and Alwar. These in turn, influenced other schools in central India like the Malwar, Orchha and Raghogarh.

93. In a way the climax would come from the *Pahari* paintings of the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries, which covered most major Hindu deities and legends including Durga and Kali, which was quite rare elsewhere. The Pahari schools like Basholi made their mark with the *Rasamanjari* tradition and several parallel schools also sprang up in Chhamba, Guler, Mandi and Kangra. This is, of course, a very cursory recapitulation, but our point has been made, i.e., Krishna had found popular acceptance by the 15th century in pre-Mughal north and west where there was a lot of art devoted, of course, to several other Hindu deities as well. Many paintings and performances were based on the musical lyrics of the great masters of

Vaishnava faith mentioned earlier, but when medieval art languished elsewhere, the Pahari schools carried on till well in the modern industial phase of Indian history.

94. Like the Pahari miniatures that came in after the watershed point in the mid-16th century, we have another interesting facet of the success of the Krishna cult. And this was the remarkable growth of temple-making activity which started in 17th and 18th centuries. These simple structures that were decorated with exquisite terracotta art were quite visible in a large number of temples dedicated and is useful to us for the purpose of locating Krishna in art. These temples and related sculptures came up only after the Radha-Krishna legend had been firmly rooted and after Chaitanya and his disciples had scored their success. We have already touched upon the *Sattariyas* of Assam and it is well known that the Jagannath temple of Puri, where Krishna, Balaram, Balabadhra and Subhadra are worshipped, had made its presence felt by the middle of the 12th century. Bengal, however, embarked upon its growth of such temple-making activities for Radha-Krishna in vernacular architectural style, modelled on the local

huts, mainly in the western part of Bengal. These were known as *Jor-Bangla Ek-chala*, *Do-chala* and other indigenous terms (Mitter, 2001, 96).Some of the best specimens are the Shyam-Raya temple of Bishnupur, Krishna Chandra temple of Kalna and so on. The surpluses that the newly-emerging rentier classes of Hindus appeared to be amassing, as feudal lords under the Mughals and in the post-Mughal period combined with earnings from mercantilism were spent on this act of piety, i.e., of building temples from the late 16 century onwards (McCutchion 1972, Sanyal 1977, Michell 1983)

95. This journey has been long and winding and the entire purpose of this paper has been to delineate the twists and turns through which this major deity of India reached 'superstar' status. It is also to dispel pre-conceived notions that this splendour that accompanies Krishna in the visual and performing arts at present (where we find only Shiva to be some sort of a rival) was always there, right from the Vedic period. The factual position is that Krishna took 700 to 800 years to first emerge as an independent deity, and then he

took another half a century and more to find some amount of expression only in sculpture and, of course, in sacred literature. We have seen how his popularity in the visual arts, which brought him closer to the people than did sacred literature, went up once his child version or Balakrishna entered the stage. We have also seen that this has reached a crescendo after Radha joined him via the *Bhagavata Purana* and the poems of Jaydeva-Vidyapati-Chandidas. We feel that if time-based studies are made on the development of each major deity in India, we would all gain from the point of history and also gain clarity about when exactly he/she appeared and what was the period of the real blossoming, instead of assuming that the glory that we see now always existed. We may end with a plea and a hope for more scientific and multi-disciplinary studies to establish the clear and, if need be, the brutal truth. This does not, however, preclude the faithful from pursuing their own devotion or seek to disturb their beliefs. All it does is to clarify, contextualise and explain hard facts about religious phenomena, that are often pushed away in a fit of religious passion.

23209 words

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