ISSN: 2349-4654

*Naad-Nartan Journal of Dance & Music* Volume : 8, Issue-2, December 2020

# The adaptation of Gita govinda in the performing arts of Kerala

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*Paper recieved on : September 29, November 14, Accepted on November 20, 2020*

## Abstract

*The influence of Gīta Gōvinda, the immortal Mahākāvya written by the 12th century poet, Jayadēva, is not only met within the music and the theatrical artforms of Kerala like the Sōpāna Saṅgīta, Kūttu, Aṣṭapadiāṭṭam and Kṛṣṇanāṭṭam etc, but in the literary pursuits as well. Sōpāna Saṅgīta, the temple music of Kerala readily adopted the singing of the Aṣṭapadi-s in its Koṭṭipāḍi sēva and continues to render the same even in the present times. Many kāvya-s and other literary compositions sprang up on the model of this mahākāvya. A genre of literature called Aṣṭapadi-s in sanskrit and Bhāṣa aṣṭapadi-s in Malayalam (translations and original), like the one written by Rampurattu Varrier came into vogue. Āṭṭaprakārā-s(book on instructions on dance) for dance forms like Kṛiṣṇanāṭṭam, written by Rama Varma Tirumulappadu, also enriched the malayalam literary field . To say the least there is no traditional dance or musical form in Kerala which has not been influenced by the Mahākāvya. The objectives of writing this paper is to know about the tradition of sopana sangita in the temples of Kerala and adaption of Gita Govinda in sopana sangita. Secondary source of material has been used in this paper and personal interviewes of Prof. Leela Omchery as primary source.*

**Keywords –** Kūttu, *Sōpāna* Saṅgīta, *Koṭṭipāḍi sēva*, Bhāṣāṣṭapadi, Āṭṭaprakāra.

## Research Paper

Sri Gīta Gōvinda or songs of Krishna is the immortal love poem of the 12 th century poet musician, Jayadēva of Kenduli, Orissa. The Kāvya describes the *Madhura bhakti bhāva,* the sweet divine love, through the amorous dalliances of Radha and Krishna. The *Gīta* Gōvinda also called the *'śringāra Sāraswatham*[1] emphasizes the importance of *śringāra* and *rasa* in *Kāvya.* It is said that both Jayadēva and Padmāvati, his multifaceted dancer wife, went about singing and dancing the *Kāvya* in all its grandeur vide the verse *"Vāgdēvata Ćarita Ćitrita Ćitta Sadma : Padmāvatićaraṇa Ćāraṇa Ćakravartty."*[2] This exquisite *Driśya kāvya* which established itself as a stage art form was readily accepted by many for propagating religion. Saints and artists of the temples and theatres adopted it for propitiating gods or popularizing their mythological stories. Having gained popularity in its own place of origin, it entered many southern states, though in Kerala it found its most fertile soil.

It was brought to Kerala by the Vaiṣṇava religious singers of Bengal, who sang them, along with simple dances and abhinaya which they performed in the streets.The verse *"Yō Brindāvana Vāsino" of Prakriya Sarvasvam (poem* of Melappattur Narayana Bhattatiri, clearly states the melodious poem being sung by the Vaiṣṇava saints in the temple gatherings of Kerala.[3] The introduction of *Gīta* Gōvinda in the land of Kerala changed the singing and drumming style at the temple and in the elaboration of costume of the theatrical forms.

### The Sōpāna Saṅgīta- The temple music of Kerala

Considered to be the earliest musical tradition of the state, the *Sōpāna Saṅgīta* continues to linger in the Kerala temples as *Ālaya Sampradāya* and in traditional theatres, such as Kūthampalam, in Kathakali stage as Āṭṭa Sampradāya and in certain traditional communities as *Vīṭṭu Sampradāya, said prof. Leela Omchery.*[4] (Omchery, Leela, personal communication, July 1996). The music evolved from the *Bhadrakāḷi pāṭṭu* (songs in praise of goddess), that was sung from near the steps that led to the *Srikōvil* or the sanctum. Scholars opine that this music is a fine blend of vēdic, folk and tribal music of the region. Though the system is most ancient, the term *Sōpāna* came to denote itself only around the 8th century, when temples with *Vimāna, Gōpura, Srīkōvil, Sōpāna* etc. were built in Kerala. While *Sōpāna* denotes

the stony steps that lead to the sanctum sanctorum, *Saṅgīta* is the music rendered by the temple singers, who stand near the *Sōpāna* and sang devotional songs while beating the Iḍḍakya (a small hour glass shaped drum). It is mainly a dramatic music with a religious fervour of music of the ancient times, laying emphasizes only on those musical excellences which enhance the *bhāva*. There is however another interpretation to this term reflected in the singing pattern wherein the music ascends gradually in speed from its slowest to the fastest culminating into a crescendo which signifies the attainment of *Mōkṣa prāpti*, attainment of salvation through music.

The nāṭya line in the music of Kerala was a glorious combination of *Vaidīka* as well as the *laukika*, governed by the basic principles of *Tauryatrika* that denoted the harmonious blending of the Triad forms of Art viz. *Gīta* (Vocal), *Vādya* (instrumental music) and *Nṛtta/ nritya* (dramatic dance), mentioned in treatises of early Christian era like the Nāṭya Śāstra and Śilappadi*kkār*am and well defined in later texts like the Saṅgīta Ratnākara.[5] This music, however, receded to the background with the sudden spurt in the popularity of sacred music propagated by Saivite-s, who composed the *Tevāra-s* and the Vaiṣṇavite-s who composed the *Nālāyira Divya Prabandha*-s.

The mellifluous traditions of devotional music and its popularity in the southern states, including Kerala nourished the temple arts, especially its music. The *rāga-s*, *tālā-s*, songs and *Vādya*-s in Temple music developed with distinct expressions which were highly advanced, imaginative and sublime. The unique feature found in the songs whether rendered at the temple rituals, religious festivals, traditional theatres, the folk or even the popular is their being set to metres – *Ćhandōbaddha* with two important modes of rhythmic executions established in the ancient *Tāla paddhati*, the *Saśabdakriya* (sounded) and the *Niśśabdakriya* (silent). Needless to state that these tāla-s were in vogue much prior to the present day Sūlādi sapta tāḷa-s, where the beat and finger counts determine the variety in tāla-s.

Around the 8th century, with the building of large number of temples, the strength of the drummers (Mārār or *Koṭṭipāḍi sēvakkar*), dancers *(Kūtukkar*), Ćākkiār (male dancer), and the instrumentalists (*Vādyakkār*) increased considerably. This paved the way for a highly stylized and traditional system of temple music which was rendered by the musicians who stood near the stony steps that led to the temple sanctum and sang devotional songs as they drummed the Iḍḍakya. This stylized musical rendering of devotional songs came to be called as the *Sōpāna Saṅgīta* [6] or the music rendered on the *Sōpāna* (steps that led to the altar) and the offering called as *Koṭṭipāḍi sēva* (offering through singing to the accompaniment of instrumental music). The *Koṭṭipāḍi seva* is considered equal to Anantha (endless) *Yajñā*-s.[7]

## Gita G*ō*vinda in s*ōpāna Saṅgīta*

'It was from the 14th century onwards, that the music of Kerala experienced an added charm and appeal through the introduction of the Gīta Gōvinda, the Yogātmaka (spiritual) musical opera of the great poet, Jayadeva. It was brought to Kerala by the Vaiṣṇava religious singers of Bengal, who sang them with simple expressive dance movements, which they performed in the streets.

The language of Gīta Gōvinda was easily understood by the people of Kerala, who had basic knowledge of sanskrit and who's regional bhāṣa was sanskrit based. The style of Gīta Gōvinda was marked by soft, flowing syllabic patterns that charmed all lovers of poetry and music. The simplicity of its literary structure and easy flow of its prosody made it amenable to any singing style. The music of Kerala with its own indigenous rāga-s or melodies, moulded the kāvya to suit the nature of musical expressions that were vital to its regional art forms.

The popular theme centring around the immortal love story of Radha Krishna attracted even the sanctum of Kerala temples which till then, lacked compositions replete with madhura bhakti bhava, that depicted the Nāyaka - nāyika relationship between the Lord and the devotee. This was in contrast to the then existing practise of devotion steeped in dry spiritualism and ritualistic practises. The singing of Gīta Gōvinda aṣṭapadi-s became an integral part of the Koṭṭipāḍi seva, which originally included few devotional songs and verses like the Tyāni-s (dhyana śloka-s), Nāmāvali-s and Akkita-s (in praise of God or a Guru), rendered along with Ālatti, a tala bound, long drawn out ālāpana, concluding with a mangaḷam. The Tyāni-s were strictly bound by the time theory of raga-s required to support rituals conducted during different hour of the day. The Tyāni-s included raga-s decked in melody that enhanced the bhakti bhava like Nāṭa, Bhupāḷam, Déśākṣi, Naḷatta, Malahari, Samanta malahari, Antari etc. The aṣṭapadi-s were rendered both at the sanctum and outside the sanctum in temple stage performances. The rāga-s chosen for

rendering the pada-s at the sanctum were selective as compared to those rendered at the temple stage. While former was to please the deity, the latter was to please the Rasika-s. Some of the raga-s commonly adopted for aṣṭapadi-s, rendered at the sanctum as well as in the temple stage include rāga -s like Indāḷam, Bhupāḷam, Puranīru, Mukhāri, Vasanta, Ānandabhairavi, Kambhoji, Kedaragoula, Madhyamāvati, set to tāḷa-s like Triputa (7beats), Ćempaḍa (4 beats), Pańćāri etc. These rāgas-s differ from those found in the original aṣṭapadi-s of Gīta Gōvinda. E.g the first aṣṭapadi 'Pralaya payodhi jale' set to Māḷava rāga- is often rendered as a rāgamālika in the Koṭṭipāḍi seva. Likewise, the 19th aṣṭapadi' vadasi yadi kinćidapi', 10th sarga, set to Déśavarāḍi rāga is generally rendered in rāga Mukhari. The 3rd aṣṭapadi 'Laḷitalavanka lata pariśīlana' is however sung in the rāga Vasanta, same as composed by Jayadeva. The Koṭṭipāḍi seva also included akkitta-s that eulogised Jayadeva. The aṣṭapadi-s inspired the origin of compositions like Śivāṣṭapadi-s and Rāmāṣṭapadi-s, decked in melody and moving moods, with eight padā-s in praise of Shiva and Rama respectively. The Bhāṣa aṣṭapadi of Ramapurattu Warrier in manipravāḷam (Sanskrit and Malayalam) mirrors the Gīta Gōvinda in all its poetic content and essence. E.g the Bhāṣāṣṭapadi sloka.

***'Hey sakhi radhe śṛṇu me vaćanam,***
***Hā sakhi yā tava sādam,***
***Hari virahōdita védana vénḍa***
***pariharicīduvan khédam***

is in spirit the 10th aṣṭapadi in the pańćama sarga of Gita Govinda 'Vahati Malaya samīre'. No specific raga-s are allotted to these sloka-s and neither do they adhere to the ones given in the original text.

### *Gīta Gōvinda in the driśkya kala-s of Kerala Kūthu and Kūḍiāṭṭam*

There were many reasons for the ready acceptability of Gīta Gōvinda in Kerala. Besides the Kūthu and Kūḍiāṭṭam which were restricted to the elite, there were hardly any dance or music styles for entertaining the common man. People in general were longing for a new form of dance and music, other than the existing Prabandha kūthu (dance),[8] that failed to delight their minds, with narratives in Sanskrit presented through complex gestural techniques. Kūḍiāṭṭam, though included stories like Subhadra Dhananjayam that expressed śṛńgāra bhāva, set to raga-s like 'Artan'(specially chosen for depicting śṛńgāra bhāva), the expressions in the portrayal of love were heavily restrained. The myriad love expressions contained in the Gīta Gōvinda aṣṭapadi-s, captivated the hearts of both the ordinary and the elite class, who wholeheartedly accepted the Mahakavya. The popularity of Gīta Gōvinda rich in bhava and the dramatic theme that could be well explored through dance, drama and music, attracted the attention of the Ćākkiār-s who till then were familiar only with the traditions of Kūthu. Though Kūthu was a highly developed art form it lacked the Madhura bhakti bhāva, inherent in Gīta Gōvinda. The Ćākkiār to attract and popularize his art amongst common man, adopted Gīta Gōvinda and after modifying it to suit the requirement of the stage, presented it under a new name the Aṣṭapadiāṭṭam,[9] which was in essence, combination of certain techniques of Uparūpakā-s, in terms of Kūdiāṭṭam and the original music and dance of the Aṣṭapadi-s of Gīta Gōvinda. The Aṣṭapadiāṭṭam with 8 ćaraṇa-s, besides dhruva (pallavi) and antara (anupallavi), strictly abided to the time theory of the rāga-s and tāla-s. Aṣṭapadiāṭṭam excluded Ćenḍa (percussion drum used to portray vigorous movements adopted for male actors in Kathakali) from the orchestra that consisted of Iḍḍakya (an hour glass shaped drum suitable for delicate movements, used for female characters in kathakali), Kuzhal (flute), Tutti (resembles snake charmer's pipe) and Śankha.

The changes introduced were in the form of costume, drumming, singing to selected ragas which were indigenous to the region with a local flavour adopted from the art of the common folk. The hand gestures and the dance techniques adopted in the Kerala theatre art forms exerted a great influence in preparing an acting manual (āṭaprakāram) for Gīta Gōvinda. The Kūḍiāṭṭam however continued with its Sanskrit plays set to raga-s, the traditional tunes or (swarikkal), which resembled the swarita-s of the vedic chanting with no musical excellences.

The Mahākāvya became very popular with every class of the society in Kerala, both as a form of singing and dancing. The literary and the poetic structure of the kavya blended easily with the indigenous music of the region. The Koṭṭpāḍi sevakkar-s adopted it in their daily services at the temples and sang them to the accompaniment of Iḍḍakya, Elattāḷa and Śankha, while the traditional theatrical groups at the temples presented it as dance drama, the Aṣṭapadiāṭṭam . It is believed that the king, Mānavēda who was a regular visitor to these performances at Guruvāyūr, got inspired by the same and wrote the Kṛṣṇanāṭṭam,[10] on the same pattern, adopting not only, its form, style, language and content but also, its music, dance, abhinaya and other techniques.

## The adherence to the concept of eight in Kṛṣṇanāṭṭam

Kṛṣṇanāṭṭam, a temple art form of Kerala is based on 'Krishna Giti', a kavya of Sanskrit sloka-s and padam-s, composed by Manaveda, the Zamorin of Calicut in 1654. The Zamorin was so charmed by the Gīta Gōvinda that he insisted it to be recited daily at the Guruvayoor temple. The 'Krishna Gīti' though based on the story of Krishna as found in Srimad Bhagavatam, Harivamsa and Mahabharata, the metrical setup of music reflects the influence of Gīta Gōvinda kāvya. [11] The play includes eight episodes like Avatāram, Kāliya-mardanam, RāsakriḍaKamsavadham, Swayamvaram, Banayuddham, Vividhavadham, Swargarohana.[12] which are set to songs, dancing and enactment, spread over eight days with each performance lasting for eight hours. The traditional brass lamp consists of eight wicks. Eight nāzhi (measure) oil is used for the performance. Each day eight paṇam (coins) would be spent as stage expenditure and so on and so forth.

In due course, Kṛṣṇanāṭṭam, paved the way for Rāmanāṭṭam and Kathakali. The concept of eight was adopted not only in Kṛṣṇanāṭṭam but also in text of Rāmanāṭṭam which had eight sections.[13]

## *Gīta* Gōvinda in Naṅgiār Kūthu

The Nangiar kuthu is said to have been introduced around 9th CE by Kulashekhara Perumal while redesigning the existing Kuḍiāṭṭam. The dance form primarily centres around the theme 'Sri Krishna Caritam' with episodes like Kṛṣṇāvatāram, Kāliya mardana, Kamsavadhana which reveal the Vaiṣṇava influence in the art form. 'The influence of Gīta Gōvinda in Naṅgiār Kūthu is evident in the 'Rasakrida 'section which follows the episode 'Govardhanodharna'. The Aṣṭapadi sloka-s 'Atraantare ca -----candana bindu rindu' 7th sarga, sloka 1, sloka 'atha kathamapi----saabhyasuyam', 8th sarga, 1st sloka, sloka 'snigdhe yat parushasi----yaatana', 9th sarga, 10th sloka, sloka' atraantare masrana rosha ------ vaca', 10th sarga, 1st sloka, have all been incorporated into the text of Srikrishna caritam in Naṅgiār Kūthu[14] These Aṣṭapadi-s are set to raga-s or swarikkal which is indigenous to the musical setup in Naṅgiār Kūthu. These include raga-s like danam, antaree, tarkkan, aartan. The Nāyaka -Nāyika relationship is predominantly met within the 'rāsakrīda' section giving ample scope for the dancer to depict the śṛngāra rasa through the madhura bhakti bhāva. The Naṅgiār-s, performed Aṣṭapadi as a 'bali'(a ritualistic offering), both at the sanctum as well as at the āṭa śribali maṇḍapam (temple stage near the sanctum) often spelt as āṭa tūvēli maṇḍapam.[15]

### Invocatory dedication in Kathakali

Kathakali owes its origin to many art forms of Kerala which are reflected even today in its technique, costume, repertoire and presentation. The religious themes based on Purana-s and Epics adopted from Kūḍiāṭṭam, the satires from Ćākkiār Kūthu, the costume and makeup of Kṛṣṇanāṭṭam and Rāmanāṭṭam, all have to a great extant contributed to the development of Kathakali into a highly stylised theatrical dance form. The influence of Gīta Gōvinda is found evident in the invocatory dedication through the Jayadeva Aṣṭapadi 'manjutara kunja tala keli sadane, which is performed even today as the opening invocation before the start of the Kathakali play. Even though the repertoire of Kathakali, in the present times, has developed beyond its religious themes, the Gīta Gōvinda Aṣṭapadi continues to be rendered before the start of every play, irrespective of the chosen theme.

## Aṣṭapadi in Mohiniāṭṭam

Mōhiniāṭṭam during the revival period in 1930, did not include Aṣṭapadi in its repertoire, though the musical form existed in the female temple dance forms in the earlier times. One reason could be that this dance form was shaped and structured in the Travancore courts as a solo dance form, which had a repertoire that could not be based purely on a single storyline. Aṣṭapadiāṭṭam and Kṛṣṇanāṭṭam on the other hand were mainly a theatrical group performance, better suited for depicting the love story of Gīta Gōvinda. Moreover Mōhiniāṭṭam, which till then lacked a proper structure and repertoire, was structured and propagated by the Travancore Kings, with a well-designed mārgam (repertoire) with śringāra kāvya-s that were mainly composed by them. The language was either malayālam or maṇipravāḷam (blend of malayālam and sanskrit) which was easily understood by the people of the region. With the growing popularity of Karnatak music in the state, the Travancore Maharaja-s adopted the new system of music for their compositions which enhanced the melodic virtuosity. The Jayadeva's aṣṭapadi-s depicting the aṣṭanāyika-s, the eight kinds of nayika-s, was naturally embraced by Mōhiniāṭṭam, a śringāra pradhāna nritya. The aṣṭapadis are now an integral part of the Mōhiniāṭṭam repertoire.

## Conclusion

Even after many centuries, Sōpāna Saṅgīta, the temple music of Kerala and the various kathā nritya kala's like

Kṛṇanāṭṭam and Kathakali retain the various traits and techniques of Gīta Gōvinda, which inspired the origin of dance forms like the Aṣṭapadiāṭṭam and Kṛṣṇanāṭṭam. Not much information is available on Aṣṭapadiāṭṭam which paved the way for Kṛsṇanāttam. The latter being kept in closed orthodoxy within the Kerala temple precincts, there is little deviations from its earlier form and style which is a fine blend of Gīta Gōvinda with the regional traits. Kathakali eulogises this Gīti Kāvya through its Pada, "Manjutara Kunćarita" of Jayadēva rendered as a Mēḷapada, before the actual story starts. The overwhelming popularity of the Karṇāṭak music which grew to its present shape and status, after rejecting the nritya element, is very different from the vocal expression of these dances. In short, one can easily say that there is no and cannot be any, traditional music and dance in Kerala, which does not acknowledge the influence of Gīta Gōvinda. Also, there cannot be any worthwhile study of the great Gīta Kāvya without listening to and seeing the traditional music and dances in the temples of Kerala.

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