

**GĪTA-GOVINDA IN THE ASSAM SCHOOL OF PAINTING**

# GĪTA-GOVINDA IN THE ASSAM SCHOOL OF PAINTING

- INTRODUCTIONS
- COLOUR AND MONOCHROME FACSIMILES OF THE PAINTINGS
- TEXT AND ASSAMESE METRICAL RENDERING by  
**Rāmanārayaṇa Kavirāja Chakravartī**
- ASSAM VERSION OF THE ORIGINAL TEXT OF THE SANSKRIT AṢṬAPADĪS
- ENGLISH RENDERING OF THE ASSAMESE TEXT
- DETAILED COMPARATIVE COMMENTARY ON THE PAINTINGS



**KAPILA VATSYAYAN  
MAHESWAR NEOG**

**1986  
PUBLICATION BOARD ASSAM**

Assam

# GĪTA-GOVINDA IN THE ASSAM SCHOOL OF PAINTING

with Critical Introductions

with detailed Art Commentary

with the Original Assamese Text in Facsimile, and its English Translation

with the Sanskrit Text of Aṣṭapadīs in Facsimile and Edited Form,

by **Kapila Vatsyayan** and **Maheswar Neog**

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## FOREWORD

There is quite a good number of illustrated manuscripts in Assam, of which very few — only two to be precise — have come to be printed — namely, the Bali-sattra *Ādi Daśam Bhāgavata* of Sankaradeva and Sukumar Barkath's *Hastividyārṇava* illuminated with paintings from the brush of the two artists, Dilbar and Dosai. Beyond these two books only a few miniatures have come out with other books and along other articles. Works on the practice of this art in Assam, again, are very near scratch and we can refer only to two publications so far — the tiny *Art of Painting in Assam* by Dr Maheswar Neog and *Eastern Indian Manuscript Painting* by Dr Rajatananda Dasgupta. Even in Assamese there are not many writings on the tradition of painting in the region. But there is quite a good number of illustrated manuscripts in collections like those in the Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, Assam, Guwahati; Kamarupa Anusandhana Samiti, Guwahati; the British Museum, London and in numerous Vaishnava establishments, called sattras, strewn all over the Brahmaputra valley as well as in private possession.

We are extremely grateful to the two well-known art scholars, Dr (Srimati) Kapila Vatsyayan and Professor Dr Maheswar Neog, for having prepared the text with general introductions and critical appraisal of the art work. They have exposed the subject lucidly and judiciously put forward their arguments in favour of an independent Assam school of painting. It is satisfying to feel with Dr Vatsyayan "that the Assamese school clearly exhibits a distinct identity which cannot be dismissed as a minor, not too vibrant offshoot of Rajasthani painting" and that "our manuscript is clear evidence of a distinct autonomous regional character unmistakable for its compositional norms, its stylistic techniques, its peculiar sense of line and its palette."

We are greatly thankful to the members of the Kamarupa Anusandhana Samiti for having allowed our two writers the use of the manuscript in their keeping and having permitted the Board to reproduce the pictures. The manuscript, of course, is sadly fragmentary with quite a number of folios missing. Dr Neog collected a few of these folios from private persons, to whom perhaps the Samiti lent them, and found two bright folios in the Gauhati University's Krishnakanta Handiqui Library, where they are still preserved. But the remaining aloe bark leaves could not be traced, and it is not known if the Samiti has any plan to restore these to their own possession.

Thanks are also due to the printers, Messrs Sreeguru Press, Guwahati, for having put in a good deal of diligence into this much prized publication of ours.

Guwahati  
17 November 1986

**Brindaban Goswami,**  
Education Minister, Assam, and  
Chairman, Publication Board Assam

## PREFACE

The present work is a collaboration of us two — one, MN, englishing . the early eighteenth century Assamese text with needful text-critical notes and editing the Assam version of the original aṣṭapadīs of Jayadeva, and the other, KV, providing the art commentary all through. One, KV, was making an all-India survey of the art world conjured up by the lyrical *Gīta-Govinda* tradition under the aegis of a Jawaharlal Nehru Fellowship; and the other, MN, sought slightly to be of help to the project by way of the English rendering and fragmentary notes on the miniatures illustrating the Assamese verses as well as the Sanskrit lyrics at the end. A welcome request came to them in that juncture from Publication Board Assam to prepare this art publication. And all that became the genesis of the book.

We are indeed very grateful to Kāmarūpa Anusandhāna Samiti and Gauhati University Krishnakanta Handiqui Library for the facilities they permitted us for the study and reproduction of this magnificent work of art on aloe bark folios and to the Publication Board for planning this sumptuous publication. Thank you's are also variously due to our many friends in New Delhi and Guwahati : Dr R.K.Sharma of the Education Ministry, India; Shri Bhaskar Barua and Shri Kamaleswar Bora, Education Commissioner of Assam by turn; Miss Premlata Puri of the Centre for Cultural Resources and Training, New Delhi; Shri C.P.Saikia, Shri Kumud Goswami, and Shri Bhuban Ch. Kalita of the Publication Board; Shri M.C.Das, President, Kāmarūpa Anusandhāna Samiti, Dr J.N.Bhuyan and Shri M.M.Lahkar of the Assam State Museum, Dr (Miss) Sulekha Chakravarti and Shri Bhaben Das. The printers, Sreeguru Press, deserve our special praise and thanks.

K V

M N



## INTRODUCTION A : MAHESWAR NEOG

1

Rāmanārāyaṇa Kavirāja Chakravartī's Assamese metrical version of the *Gīta-Govinda*, particularly as found preserved in an Aguru bark folio (sācipāt) manuscript, collected in 1912 by Hemchandra Goswami for the Assam Government and deposited in the Kāmarūpa Anusandhāna Samiti Library (Assam State Museum)<sup>1</sup>, and endowed as it is with miniature paintings, is significant in more ways than one. Rāmanārāyaṇa, who is better known by his sobriquet Kavirāja Chakravartī, is one of the major and representative poets of the post-Śankaradeva Āhom régime in Assam.

In his *Duṣyanta-carita-mālā* or *Śakuntalā* he introduces himself as King Rudrasimha's (1696-1714) teacher. He was a court-poet not only during Rudrasimha's reign; he was in office also during the days of the succeeding monarch, Śivasimha (1714-44). It is not known who bestowed on him the title of 'kavirāja-Chakravartī'; but that title appears to have been an ardent imitation of 'kavi-nṛpa-jayadeva' or 'jayadeva-kavirāja' as we find it in the *Gīta-Govinda*. He was probably likened, or he himself liked to compare himself, to Jayadeva as a poet.

It was Rudrasimha who directed the poet to render Jayadeva's lyrical kāvya into Assamese. Rāmanārāyaṇa, however, takes up and formally announces only the aṣṭapadīs one by one and gives us their content, while he leaves aside the narrative verses coming in between these lyrics. To add: the manuscript provides at the end the original Sanskrit text

of the bare aṣṭapadīs with the names of rāgas, which had already changed into their vernacular forms — Guñjarī for Gurjarī, Goṇḍagiri for Goṇḍakrī, Rāmagiri for Rāmakrī. It may be noted that while Rāmanārāyaṇa is generally faithful to the original Jayadeva with departures here and there, he leans on the "Rasikapriyā" commentary of King Kumbhakarṇa for his interpretation. It is to be noted that he was not aware of, and did not consult, the "Sāravatī-ṭikā" of Śukladhvaja of Koc Behār, as should perhaps be expected. Rāmanārāyaṇa's adaptation, even though done in the ordinary conventional payāra and dulaḍi (tripadī) metres of the decadent Vaiṣṇava poetry of his time, brings out much of the sense and beauty of Jayadeva's lines, sometimes as interpreted by Kumbhakarṇa, even though we could scarcely expect to find the sensitive poetry of Jayadeva singing through his rather monotonous versification, where we are almost at the point of losing the erotic mysticism of the original, not perhaps fitting in well with Assamese temperament. He renders well, however, many a line of poetry with beauty; the complicated imagery of the "samudita-madane" lyric (vv.179-ff) may be cited for example.

Rāmanārāyaṇa, we may add, has quite a few poetical works to his credit. He picks up the story of Duṣyanta and Śakuntalā from the Ādi-parva of the Mahābhārata in his *Duṣyanta-carita-mālā*, which is, unhappily for us, only very superficially influenced by Kālidāsa's great drama. The disproportionately intervening side romance, again of the nymph, Kāmakalā, interferes with the central interest of the story of Śakuntalā. The poet wrote this piece at the behests of King Śivasimha and his Nurjehān-like queen regnant, Phuleśvarī, under whose direction he wrote

1. The manuscript was lent to the Government's collection by Dharieswar Barua of Rangia Tahsil. It was deposited by Goswami in the Kāmarupā Anusandhāna Samiti Library. It is now being displayed by the Assam State Museum.

another long narrative, *Śaṅkhacūḍa-vadha*, with the story of Śaṅkhacūḍa's and Tulasī's love, culled from the *Brahma-vaivarta-purāṇa*. For Śivasimha and Queen Pramathesvarī Rāmanārāyaṇa made his short version of the "Kṛṣṇa-*janma-khaṇḍa*" of the same purāṇa. Kavirāja Chakravartī also made a number of songs, which unlike the bargīta and other lyrics of the earlier Vaiṣṇava poets, Śaṅkaradeva, Mādhavadeva and their immediate successors, have the erotic as the main element, which sentiment predominates also in the few kāvyas he wrote. In fact, the erotic ring is very much characteristic of this period of Assamese poetry; and that is perhaps why the *Gīta-Govinda* tradition found a niche in Assamese literature of the day, another version of it having been made by one Rāma Sarasvatī, under the patronage the Daraṅgī chief, Dharamanārāyaṇa (late 17th cent.), this, of course, with the impress of the "Sāravatī-ṭikā."

1. *Citra-bhāgavata*, with a Foreword by K.K. Handiqui, pub. Dutta-Baruah, Nalbari, 1949; review by Dr. Motichandra in *The Journal of the University of Gauhati*. Vol. V, pp. 156-ff. A few miniatures from the book was published in *The Art of Painting in Assam* by Maheswar Neog, Gauhati, 1959. There are two other illustrated *Bhāgavata* X (Ādi) manuscripts in the Assam State Museum, one (dated 1687/1765 A.D.) collected from Golaghat, the painter's name being Ruci Bāpu, and the other from Dakhinpāt-sattra (*Descriptive Catalogue of Assamese Manuscripts*, pp. 26-27; Rajatananda Dasgupta, *Eastern Indian Manuscript Painting*, Bombay, 1972, Colour Plates B, facing p. 48 and C, facing p. 80). Ruci Bāpu's figures have a marked dynamism; even his chariot is an improvement upon earlier ones. It is remarkable that the illustrated *Bhāgavata* manuscript, belonging to Sivendranarayan Dev Goswami Adhikar of the sattra bears the date 1461 Śaka/1539 A.D. Professor Handiqui in his Foreword expressed some doubt about the date; so did Karl Khandalwala (*Pahari Miniature Painting*, p. 8). From an examination of the original folio the figure 1461 seemed to me to have been inscribed later. Motichandra, to whom the folio was sent, assigned the manuscript to the end of the 17th or the early 18th century. Dasgupta, for his own reasons, confirms the originally available date. He finds the *Mahā-purāṇa* manuscript, dated 1540 A.D. from Palam near Delhi, stylistically close to the Assam illustrations (pp. 57-f).
2. Four of the miniatures have been reproduced on the cover and as frontispiece in the edition of the work by Maheswar Neog, Asam Sahitya Sabha, 1954, and in *The*

In Assam there are quite a few specimens of illuminated manuscripts, and among these may be counted the manuscript copies of the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa*, Book X, preserved in the Bāli-sattra, Nowgong (on old tulāpāt paper) utilised for the publication, *Citra-bhāgavata*<sup>1</sup>; *Lava-Kuśar Yuddha* in Kāmarūpa Anusandhāna Samiti Library (strangely enough, two near identical fragmentary copies)<sup>2</sup>, *Samudranārāyaṇar Vamśāvalī* or *Daraṅ-rāja-vamśāvalī* in the archives of the Darrang raj family;<sup>3</sup> *Vanamālīdevar Carita* of Ramākānta Dvija, illuminated by Vijay Khanikar;<sup>4</sup> Ramānanda Kāyastha's *Kumāraharāṇa* and an Assamese version of the *Adhyātma-rāmāyaṇa*<sup>5</sup> both in the Bāreghar-sattra in Sibsagar; Rāmanārāyaṇa Kavirāja Chakravartī's *Śaṅkhacūḍa-vadha* in the Assam Government Department of Historical and Aniquarian Studies;<sup>6</sup> the same poet's

1. *Art of Painting in Assam*. Dasgupta gives one colour plate (Pl. A, facing p. 16), 5 monochromes (Figs. 45-49, Pl. X), op. cit.
2. A few paintings have been reproduced in the edition of the work by Hemchandra Goswami, Calcutta, 1917. I saw the manuscript when Professor S.K. Bhuyan borrowed it from the owners for some time. The manuscript, looking like the autograph copy, ends abruptly in the midst of a verse.
3. The printed edition of the biography (Asam Sahitya-Sabha) reproduces a few pictures.
4. Keshada Mahanta, 'Sacitra Asamīyā Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇā', *Asam Sāhitya Sabhā Patrikā*, 1893 Śaka, pp. 85-89. The manuscript is dated 1688 Śaka/1766 A.D. and covers the Sundarakāṇḍa only. The artist is believed to be one Pūrṇakāmadeva, a mahanta of the sattra, which possesses another illuminated manuscript, *Balichalana*.
5. One painting showing the Jayantā and Kachāri chiefs paying their homage to the Āhom monarch, Rudrasimha, from this manuscript, dated 1726 A.D., has been placed in monochrome as frontispiece to the *Kachāri Buranji*, ed. by S.K. Bhuyan, Gauhati, 1936. The picture appears to be realistic, being perhaps contemporaneous. The unfortunately fragmentary manuscript possesses certain rare specimens of fine and tender workmanship. It must have contained many more miniatures of artistic beauty.

rendering of the *Gīta-Govinda* in Kāmarūpa Anusandhān Samiti Library, written and illuminated under the order of King Rudrasimha (1696-1714), with as many as five miniatures depicting this monarch's court<sup>1</sup>, Mādhava Kandali's *Rāmāyana*, Sundarakāṇḍa (1637 Śaka/1715 A.D.) in the K.A.S. Library; Mādhava Kandali's *Rāmāyana*, Laṅkākāṇḍa, executed during the reign of Kamaleśvārasimha (1791-1806)<sup>2</sup>, Ghanaśyāmkhārgharīyā Phukan's (1795-1880) *Kalki-purāna* in the K.A.S. Library, the big and copious illustrations extending up to the 118th folio of the manuscript with a total of 164 folios; AnantaĀcārya's *Ānanda-laharī*, a śākta work written during the reign of King Śivasimha (1714) and his queen, Pramathesvarī<sup>3</sup>; *Hastī-vidyārṇava*, a treatise on elephants based on Sanskrit gajaśāstras and local experience, compiled by Sukumār Barkāth in 1734 under the orders of King Śivasimha and

his queen, Ambikādevī, now in the D.H.A.S. in Gauhati<sup>4</sup>, Kavicandra Dvija's *Dharma-purāna* in the British Museum, a photostat copy of which has been obtained by the D.H.A.S. and transparencies taken by the Publication Board, Assam, the painter being one Vadha Ligorā<sup>5</sup>, who also did another magnificent work of painting, *Bhāgavata*, VI, of which only the last folio was recovered from Burma and is preserved in the Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, Assam. I came across an incomplete manuscript copy of Mādhava Kāndali's *Rāmāyana*, Laṅkākāṇḍa, written and painted on tulāpāt, then in the possession of U.C. Lekharu of Gauhati; a copy of Rāma Sarasvatī's *Mahābhārata*, Udyogaparva, the ornaments in which have been painted in real gold, in the family of Banshidhar Barua of Jorhat; Nityānanda Kāyastha's *Śrībhāgavatamat-sya-carita*, of which the wooden covers and some extra

1. Two pages from this *Gīta-Govinda* were reproduced in monochrome in *The Art of Painting in Assam* and 5 in *Eastern Indian Manuscript Painting* (Figs. 40-44, Plate IX).
2. This is noticed by Dasgupta, pp. 62, 64.
3. *Ānanda-lahari* like the *Hastīvidyārṇava* and *Śankhacūḍa-vadha* belongs to the reign of Śivasimha; but artistically the work is of inferior quality. The attempt at giving a front view of the goddess Bhavānī in a number of places brings unhappy results. The portraits of the King and the Queen (Bar-rajā) are also not of the standard of *Hastīvidyārṇava* (folios 63-65). The geographical features like the Jayasāgara tank (f. 62B), the Namdang and Dikhau rivers (f. 61A) have just a little local interest. The group of 6 heavenly nymphs (f. 18A) and the winged lion on a tree (f. 8) may attract our special attention. Dasgupta (Figs. 50-53, Plate XI) reproduces four miniatures from this work.

4. Paintings from the *Hastīvidyārṇava* in the possession of the Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, Assam, at Gauhati, were reproduced in *The Art of Painting in Assam* from blocks prepared under the care of Dr S.K. Bhuyan, the then Director of the Department, later Vice-Chancellor, Gauhati University, for a brochure, *Assam Elephants*, by Bishnuram Medhi, the then Chief Minister of Assam (later Governor of Madras), which brochure was published on the occasion of the presentation of the elephant, Udayagiri (since dead), to the President of India. The paintings of this work have now been reproduced in colour and monochrome in *Hastīvidyārṇava*, a recent publication of Publication Board, Assam. Another elaborate painted prose manuscript on elephantology is preserved in the Āniāti-sattra, Majuli.
5. Dasgupta reproduces one folio as his frontispice, op. cit.

folios are furnished with paintings of several of the ten incarnations of Viṣṇu and other figures like Ananta, Hayagrīva and Brahmā<sup>1</sup>; and *Tīrtha-Kaumudī*, (1686 A.D.) recovered from Mangaldai and preserved in the Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies<sup>2</sup>.

The *Kīrtana-ghosā*, the most popular book and one of the most significant works of Śaṅkaradeva, has found quite a number of illustrating artists for its manuscript copies now to be found in different parts of the country<sup>3</sup>. In the Kāmarūpa Anusandhāna Samiti collection there is a sācipāt Assamese *Bhāgavata*, III (1704 Śaka), the miniatures in which are distinguished by the absence of colour in the background.<sup>4</sup> Other painted *Bhāgavata* works are the *Anādipātana* of Śaṅkaradeva (1686)<sup>5</sup> in the Anusandhāna Samiti collection, which, while conforming to those of the conventions of Assam painting, presents certain startling aspects making one feel like standing face to face

before works of modern art. There are two illuminated manuscripts of *Ajāmilopākhyāna* of the same saint — one from the Burkā-sattra now in the Assam Painting Museum at Tezpur<sup>6</sup> and one preserved in the Dakhinpatsattra<sup>7</sup>. It is very interesting that even a drama like *Pārijāta-haraṇa* of Śaṅkaradeva was taken up for illustration in a manuscript (1758 Śaka), now preserved in the Aibhetisattra, Nowgong. The miniatures in this work may perhaps hold before us the history of costume and decor in ankiyā bhāonās. Even the verse *Bhagavad-gītā* of Govinda Miśra came to be marginally illuminated with various figures<sup>8</sup>.

A somewhat unenlightened view that it was improper to attempt portraits of Śaṅkaradeva and other saints is sometimes put forward even today, although there have been earlier such attempts, as in the *Vanamāṭidevar Carita*, noticed above, and on the obverse of the first folio of *Guru-carita-kathā*, collected by Banikanta Kakati and

1. Nityānanda Kāyastha, mahanta of the Māyāmarā-sattra, 1644-50, was killed in strange circumstances under the orders, implicit or explicit, of the then Ahom king. The paintings seem to have been the work of Jayānandadeva, Satrādhikāra of the Dinjay-sattra (1857-78), as mentioned in Chidānandadeva's life of Anirudhadeva and other Māyāmarīyā Goswamis (Tinsukia, 1933, p. 157). There is a good number of book covers and boxes embellished with paintings to be found in various parts of Assam.
2. This work purports to describe Mathurā, Gokula and Vṛindāvana, taking up in the first instance the holy places of Kāmarūpa and Jayantā. Two initial miniatures depict the Rājās of Kāmarūpa (with the peculiar head-dress shaping into a big bun-like formation at the back) and of Jayantā, with their attendants. It is, however, not possible to identify these monarchs as they are not named. The work in its paintings has quite some striking features, but one perhaps would have to ultimately agree that it "has a primitive look about it and almost verges on folk art" That way it should be found refreshing among all its conventionalities. Dasgupta reproduces two pictures in monochrome from this manuscript (Figs. 67/Pl. XVI 70/XVIII). Narayan Das gives one picture from this work in his *Puraṇi Asamar Cītrakalā*, Tezpur, 1979, fig. 11A)

3. Out of these Narayan Das notices the *Rāngali Kīrtana* of the Mādhava-Ātā-sattra (Pūb-thariyā in Nowgong), other manuscripts in the Kāthbāpu-sattra (Karangā in Sibsagar), the Śri-Śri-Isvara-hātī-sattra (Suwalkuchi in Kamrup), in the new Burkā-sattra (Kamrup) and in the Madhupur-sattra (Cooch-Behar, West Bengal) (*Puraṇi-Asamar Cītrakalā*, p. 9). Das gives in black-and-white specimens of the last work.
4. Dasgupta considers this as a characteristic of what he apportions as Tāi-Āhom school of painting to be found in Buddhist texts (Assam and Arunachal) and sees too much of the Mongoloid dragon with "staring and angry" eyes and prominent jaws in the Kāliya-sarpa (Fig. 39) of this manuscript (pp. 56-f). He reproduces one plate (Pl. 1 opp. p. 16), which depicts a peculiar head-dress for King Parīksit and his attendant bearing the flat ārowān sun-shade of Āhom kings.
5. Dasgupta, op.cit., pp. 66-f., Figs. 59-62 (Pl. XIII-XIV)
6. Narayan Das, op.cit., p. 9; Figs. 1-4.
7. R.M. Nath, *Background of Assamese Culture*, Jorhat, 1959, Plate XXXV.
8. Dasgupta reproduces half a page from this manuscript, dated 1878 A.D., in the possession of Harendramohan Majumdar, Rampur, Kamrup.

deposited in the Manuscript Section of Gauhati University Library.<sup>1</sup> A sketch of Śaṅkaradeva, Mādhavadeva and another bhakta was reproduced on the cover of Kakati's *Śaṅkara Deva* (Madras, 1921) from an old manuscript of Ramānanda Dvija's guru-carita in the Kāmarūpa Anusandhāna Samiti collection<sup>2</sup> and as frontispiece to Durgadhar Barkataki's edition of Bhūṣaṇa Dvija's *Mahāpuruṣa Śaṅkaradeva* (Jorhat, 1925). Speaking generally about illustrated manuscripts in Assam, Dr S.K. Bhuyan writes, "The skill of a painter was generally requisitioned to decorate the labours of penmanship. The scribe was sometimes a painter himself; and if not, a regular painter supplemented the work of the transcriber by sketching appropriate pictures on spaces left blank for the purpose. . . . The formulas of the colours, which are so fast, have now been practically forgotten. Pictures of Śaṅkaradeva sitting in a Śikṣhāmudrā posture and surrounded by his apostles are met with occasionally in his biographies"<sup>3</sup>.

1. Dasgupta gives an appraisal of this picture as "a great leap forward in portrait painting" (pp.63-f).
2. Maheswar Neog, compiled and ed., *Patralekhā*, Jorhat, p.232, where Professor Kakati in a communication to Lakshminath Bezbaroa highly eulogises the sketch as coming near the style of Indian paintings, being revived by Abanindranath Tagore.
3. 'A note on Assamese manuscripts', prefixed to *Descriptive Catalogue of Assamese Manuscripts*, p. XVII.
4. Latā-kaṭā illumination is often used in *Nāmaghoṣā* manuscripts, a few verses of which are called latā-kaṭā ghoṣā, and compared to chiselled floral designs on doors, etc. (*Guru-Charita-Kathā*, art. 651). Some of the marginal illustrations to a

### 3

Illustrations generally occupy spaces left by the scribe for the purpose; but when one or more copies have to be prepared from an already existing illuminated manuscript, the miniature paintings generally come first to be followed by the work of the scribe. This is seen from the two half-finished manuscript copies of the *Lava-Kuśar Yuddha* in the K.A.S. Library. Manuscripts with illuminated margins are known as latā-kaṭā puthi.<sup>4</sup> The painters belonged to a class of people known as khanikars, and the scribes were called likhaks or lekhaks. In the Āhom régime there was a whole khel or guild of khanikars, including Muslims, some perhaps new-come, under a Khanikar Baruā. A khanikar might be an illiterate person; but he could all the same copy paintings as well as writings. The khanikars also made idols and masks for the theatrical performances; and the word pratimā came to be applied indiscriminately to both idols and paintings. The khanikars made simhāsanas

manuscript of faery-tale romance, *Chāhāparī-upākhyāna*, are reproduced in panels of the printed cover design of this work, edited by Maheswar Neog, Gauhati 1958, and of the same author's *Asamīyā Premaḡāthā*, Gauhati 1958. *Chāhāparī-upākhyāna* is not a latā-kāṭā puthi, strictly speaking, because, beside the floral decoration and geometrical designs we have significant figures of nymphs, ships and other architectural details even on the margin of the folios. At Hajo I saw Rāmacandra Barpātra's *Yoginī-tantra* (a metrical adaptation of the tantra's account of the Hayagrīva-Mādhava temple) with much fine marginal illumination. Among other manuscripts with illuminated margin may be mentioned also the Skt. *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* in the Karchung-sattra (see below); the *Bhakti-ratnāvalī* and a verse *Bhāgavata* (Āuniāti-sattra) and Bholanath Dvija's *Śalya-parva* (D.H.A.S.), etc.

(holy pedestals), puthi-ṭhagās (book-rests), gachās (lamp-stands), etc., from wood and painted them generally with vermilion and yellow arsenic.

Strips of barks of the sāci or Aguru tree (*acquilaria agalocha*) were used in Assam for the purpose of manuscripts, nowhere else this material being so used. There was an elaborate process for making ready the strips for writing and painting. "A tree is selected of about 15 to 16 years growth and 30 or 35 inches in girth, measured about 4 feet from the ground. From this the bark is removed in strips, from 6 to 18 feet long, and from 3 to 27 inches in breadth. These strips are rolled up separately with the inner or white part of the bark outwards, and the outer or green part inside, and are dried in the sun for several days. They are then rubbed by hand on a board, or some other hard substance, so as to facilitate the removal of the outer or scaly portion of the bark. After this, they are exposed to the dew for one night. Next morning the outer layer of the bark (*nikari*) is carefully removed, and the bark proper is cut into pieces of a convenient size, 9 to 27 inches long and 3 to 18 inches broad. These are put into cold water for about an hour, and the alkali is extracted, after which the surface is scraped smooth with a knife. They are then dried in the sun for half an hour, and when perfectly dry, are rubbed with a piece of burnt brick. A paste prepared from *mātimāh* (*Phaseolus radiatus*) is next rubbed in, and the bark dyed yellow by means of yellow arsenic. This is followed again by sun-drying, after which the strips are rubbed as smooth as marble. The process is now complete, and the strips are ready for use." It may be added that sāci trees abounded in Dakhinkol, the part of the country south of the Brahmaputra. As the *Harṣacarita* has mentioned it, 'volumes of fine writing with leaves made from aloe

1. E.A. Gait., *A History of Assam*. appendix D, p. 375.

bark and of the hue of the pink cucumber', 'carved boxes of panels for painting, with brushes and gourds attached' and 'gold-painted bamboo cages' for birds were among the presents from the Kāmarūpa king, Bhāskarvarman, to Emperor Harṣavardhana Śīlāditya of Northern India.

Another material on which writings and paintings were done is *tulāpāt*, which has ginned cotton as its chief ingredient. The Tenth Book of the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa*, from which the *Citra-bhāgavata* has been compiled, was written and painted on this sort of stuff. The prose-biography, *Guru-carita-kathā*, describes how the artist-saint, Śaṅkaradeva, painted on *tulāpāt* scenes of 'seven Vaikuṅṭhas' or Celestial Worlds for the theatrical performance of *Cihna-yātrā*. On another occasion he painted on *tulāpāt* with vermilion and yellow arsenic the picture of an elephant, and pasted it on a wooden book-case, to be presented to his patron king, Naranārāyaṇa.<sup>1</sup> Among the Shāns of Assam's north-east is the method of preparing paper from a pulp made out of crushed mulberry plant. We do not, however, notice here their characteristic style of painting.

Black ink used for writing and painting was of a very fast colour, and was as deep as Chinese black; it is also water-proof, and does not easily fade even after long exposure. The main ingredient of this ink is *śilikhā* (*Terminalia citrina*). A few fruits of this variety are kept under water in an earthen bowl for a few days. The bowl is then exposed to dew for a few nights with a non-porous basin below it. The water which turns black by this time percolates through the earthen bowl and drops into the non-porous basin as very fine and deep black ink. Some people add iron or iron sulphate, and others put in the blood of a variety of fish known as *kuciyā*.

1. *Guru-carita-kathā*, ed. Maheswar Neog, arts. 74,340

Other materials used in painting are indigo, yellow ochre (gerumāṭi), heṅgul (vermilion), hāitāl (yellow arsenic), and lamp-black. These materials could easily give the basic colours and even a few composite ones. The use of a crude variety of chalk (dhal) sometimes in the preparation of the painting surface in many cases accounts for the decay of the colour of, and sometimes, the paintings themselves.

4

The *Bhāgavata-purāṇa*, the main scripture of the different schools of Vaiṣṇavism, whether in original, annotated or translated form, came in for illumination in different regions of India. A manuscript copy of the purāṇa, furnished with Saṁnyāsī Śrīdhara's commentary was prepared in 1705 Saṁbat/1648 A.D. at Udaipur in Rajputana by a scribe named Bhaṭāraka Jaśavanta. It was profusely illustrated and is now preserved in Government Manuscripts Library at the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, Poona, which possesses another finely illuminated manuscript in Persian, giving a prose summary of the purāṇa. The Persian manuscript is dated 1909 Saṁbat/1853 A.D. Another manuscript of the original Sanskrit purāṇa was prepared with profuse illustrations for Rājā Pratāpsīṁha of Jaipur (1779-1803) by an artist, enjoying his munificence. The most absorbing part of the whole purāṇa, namely, Book X, found special favour with artists; reference has been made to two illustrated manuscripts of this Book; one being a Gujarati verse rendering by the poet, Bhālaṇa (early 16th century), with 17th century miniatures, and the other with notes in Old Gujarati, written in Jodhpur in 1667 Saṁbat/1611 A.D.

1. P.K. Gode, *The New Indian Aniquary*. Vol. I, No. 4, pp.294 ff. There is a manuscript, *Bhagavata-purāṇa* furnished with Śrīdhara Sṅamī's commentary, which has illuminated margins, in the Karchung-sattra, Nowgong, Assam.

and illuminated with 200 miniatures.<sup>1</sup>

In Assam Vaiṣṇavism inspired its adherents to make poetry, drama, music and, last but not the least, painting. Śaṅkaradeva, the great leader of this movement in this part of the country, was a painter besides being a poet, dramatist and musician of no mean degree. He had scenes of Kṛṣṇa's early life in Vṛndāvana woven into a sheet of cloth 180 feet long with a caption for each miniature. Nothing, however, has come down to us in the shape of specimens to show how the art of painting was practised in the days of Śaṅkaradeva himself.

The manuscript copy of Śaṅkaradeva's *Bhāgavata-purāṇa*, Book X, found in the Bāli-sattra, may be considered as one of the earliest specimens of illuminated manuscripts in Assam. The technique and finish of the work exhibit Rājput-Mughal influences, although here and there local conventions are naturally to be expected inasmuch as practices in Assam amounted to an independent school.<sup>2</sup> In his Foreword to *Citra-bhāgavata* Professor K.K. Handiqui has drawn special attention to the maneless Indian lion, so common in old Assamese painting and architecture, and methan (Assamese bison). The animals and birds are done in the pictures in a clear and sympathetic manner. At points they are realistic too. There is some amount of convention and stylisation, which, of course, count for a limitation on the art. The figures are mostly in profile. Sometimes the face part is profiled and silhouetted against the deep background while the body stands frontally. Physiology is not much heeded to, and physiognomy scarcely shines bright; individualisation is not the aim attempted at by the painter's brush. The unusual figures of

2. I would not like to subscribe to dubbing the Assam school as a "provincial Moghul school" as the writer of *Eastern Indian Manuscript Painting* does (Preface) even though it imbibed Rajput-Mughal features, perhaps more so in the Court circle of

Kāliya and his wives, Garuḍa, etc., are ingeniously managed, and remind one of these rôles in bhāonā, a Vaiṣṇava play in making. There is a rhythm in the scenes of musical and dance performances of Gandharvas, Vidyādhara and Apsaras. Attempts at symmetry are evident. Movements of groups are dynamically depicted. The head-dress of the male figures, popularly known in some circles as moglāi ṭupī, is in the style of Rājput-Mughal paintings. Landscape or any other background of the action except a uniformly dark monochrome is scarcely or never attempted, and perspective seems to be a thing unknown to the painter, the third dimension being nowhere in evidence. Successive scenes are flatly brought on the same plane of monochrome background (usually vermilion, but sometimes brown, grey or rich blue) of arched panels like those in celluloid ribbons of cinematograph — without anything to mark out one from another.<sup>1</sup> The representations of pouring rain water, rivers and lakes are of a conventional and unrealistic type but are all the same very effective. Mountains look like cross sections of them as in a geological diagram. Chariots (ratha) are not happy in that they look like a low flat stool with small slabs of wheels at the bottom and a flag-post at the front. Even though the faces of human and human-like figures do not express thought, each figure in its totality brings out the desired effect; and when a whole series is gone over, a little bit of narration is complete.

Dr Motichandra, commenting upon the work, and

paintings. We do not have any early history of Assam painting prior to the 16th century. Basil Gray finds "heirs of the medieval Pāla tradition in Nepal and Assam." Referring to the Bhāgavata paintings of Assam, he says : "They clearly look back to the Buddhist manuscripts of the Pāla period, which are organised in the same way with figures in architectural niches" ('The Development of Painting in India in the 16th Century', *Marg*, Bombay, Vol.VI, No. 3, 1953, p.20). Professor S.K. Chatterji also refers to these early eastern traditions in relation to the Assam school.

assigning it to the late 17th or early 18th century, says : "The comparatively late date of the manuscript, however, does not detract from the artistic and aesthetic merits of the illustrations. In figure drawing a certain degree of angularity is perceptible. The eyes are usually fish-shaped, the eyebrows are arched, the nose is pointed and the forehead is sloping and wide. The waist is usually narrow. These conventions speak of ancient tradition. . . . The costume of men usually consists of dhoti, dupāttā and turban and in some cases jāmāh and women wear sārī and bodice. The pattern of their texture throws light on the textile patterns in the 17th century Assam. The turban bound with sash became common by the middle of the 18th century. . . .

"Aesthetically speaking, however, the *Bhāgavata* paintings are of great interest. There is no attempt at distinguishing planes, and the story is told in a simple and dramatic way. Ample use of mudrās is made, and Sri Krishna's exploits are represented with great force. In the treatment of the demons as well the painters have tried to lay stress on their supernatural character and strength. The pastoral scenes are depicted with utmost naivety without overcrowding the composition. The true characteristic of the incidents are brought out in full force. The animals though treated conventionally form a part and parcel of the scenes and add to their charm. The painter was a great colourist and the use of deep reds, blues and yellows stands testimony to his great colour sense.

1. Basil Gray calls the arched panels 'architectural niches'. Referring to the *Bhāgavata* miniatures, he writes : "They show the figures in silhouette, the faces always in profile, against a strong red background and beneath carved arches" (loc. cit).

“The dancing and music scenes are full of charm and have been beautifully handled by the artist. In short, the lyrical draughtsmanship, simple composition, dramatic narration, and splendid colours give the Bhāgavata illustrations a charm which distinguish them from similar Bhāgavata paintings from Udaipur and elsewhere.”

It is evident that these *Bhāgavata* paintings were done in some Vaiṣṇava sattrā of Assam, most probably in the Bālisattrā, where the original manuscript was discovered. Painting was thus practised in the sattras, where Vaiṣṇava monks lived cloistered in seclusive groups with their abbots. It was generally considered to be an act of piety to copy out old religious works on sācipāt or tulāpāt. If the pious copyist had the knack, he would insert miniature paintings from page to page illustrative of the text, or if he could afford, he would utilise the services of a khanikar. The rich sattras had their own khānikars. A religious school of painting thus grew up in Assam.

In some sattras the visitor's eye would even to-day catch with pleasure the sight of rural paintings and wood-carvings of some beauty and with folk-art elements in them. These paintings done on door panels and jambs were to be seen in the houses, particularly in the domestic temples of nobles and rich men also at one time. This branch of the art reminds one of the old practice of painting wooden panels in places like Bishnupur in Bengal. The Barpetā-sattrā prayer-house (kīrtana-ghar), which has since been demolished, was decorated with many beautifully engraved and painted wooden panels, depicting scenes from religious works.<sup>1</sup> Paintings were also provided on

1. For a photographic reproduction of one of these panels see R.M. Nath, *The Background of Assamese Culture*, plate XXXVII.

2. The Assam State Museum at Gauhati has acquired and preserves a richly

wooden posts and beams, book-rests and raised trays (śarāi), and pleasure-boats.<sup>2</sup> Poor specimens of attempts at frescoes on the body of old brick buildings were also to be seen; but most of these have decayed away.

Reference has already been made to, and instances cited of, paintings on book-cases. The art and skill of painter (khanikar) were also utilised for the preparation of masks (mukhā) for the Vaiṣṇava dramas. In the books on astrology and divination the scribes very often attempted to embellish their diagrams with an ample display of pigments.

## 5

The Āhom and Koc kings of the 17th and 18th centuries seem to have emulated the example of the Mughal and other royal patrons of art in other parts of India. The *Samudranārāyaṇar Vamśāvalī* or *Daraṅg-rāja-vamśāvalī* of Sūryakhari Daivajña (1806 ?) is a historical work in verse dealing with the rule of the Koc kings of Kāmarūpa, which was written and illustrated at the Court of the Daraṅgī chief (Mangaldai). The *Daraṅg-rāja-vamśāvalī* illustrations had necessarily to depict contemporary life; but these are to a great degree conventional, pointing to its affiliation to the religious branch of Assamese painting rather than to the secular. The war-ships, battles and other like subjects are treated in this work with remarkable effect and beauty.<sup>3</sup> A verse rendering of Book VIII of the *Bhāgavata* was copied and illuminated during Samudranārāyaṇa or Krishnanārāyaṇa's régime. It was under the patronage of the Āhom kings that the beautiful paintings in such works as the *Hastī-vidyārṇava*, *Śaṅkha-cūḍa-vadha*, *Gīta-Govinda* and *Lava-Kuśar-Yuddha* were execu-

decorated pleasure-boat. There are also painted carvings, collected from the Kamalābārī-sattrā.

3. Dasgupta considers the paintings as being “in the degenerate style of Gargaon” (the Āhom Court). “The paintings lack depth and are not true to life.” (p.14)

ted. A new and secular branch of the art of painting thus seems to have been established in Eastern Assam under the Āhoms. Its basis, of course, was the traditional religious painting, with new infiltrations of Mughal influence. The earlier style, as Dr S.K. Chatterji says, is "simpler, more vigorous and more sincere, and have a stately epic character about them." He then says about the new style : "The 18th century style shows a happy blending of the basic Eastern Indian style of religious miniatures found in Orissa, Bengal and Assam, with the more sophisticated Mogul and Rajasthani and possibly also Kangra art of the west. Here it is lyrical and romantic and the old epic vigour, even *rudesse*, is substituted by a poetic grace and beauty and frank pleasure in the simple and joyous expression of life with its colour and movement and pageantry." Professor Chatterji also finds in the later style "typical scenes of the *joie de vivre* which characterise all society not suffering from the complexities and problems of an exacting age like ours".<sup>1</sup> The art of painting now acquired a sophistication and subtle style of a variety of sensitive colours in place of the older simplicity and bold splash of pigments (in the language of A.K. Coomaraswamy, "soft colouring, treatment of the drapery, as well as the general tendency to indicate modelling"); but some of the chief conventions like arched panels, basket pattern of display of water, stylisation in hand and body poses, etc., persisted.<sup>2</sup> I would rather say that there was no hiatus between the religious (Sattriyā) branch of painting and the

Court (secular) branch. Professor Chatterji also thinks that "Assamese miniatures appear to show two distinct styles" (Mark only "appears to show."). The special traits of art works found in the metropolitan circle are the achievements of a few individual artists rather than of a whole group. That is why the critic is found prone to ascribe works of art done in the capital also to the religious branch. It appears that Āhom royal patronage to painters continued till the hectic days of King Kamaleśvarasimha (1790-1806), when the *Laṅkākaṇḍa Rāmāyana* was done with some clear characteristics.<sup>3</sup>

By far the most remarkable work of the secular branch of painting is the *Hastī-vidyārṇava*, the artists being two lekhaks (artist-copyists), Dilbar and Doṣāy.<sup>4</sup> "The folios are profusely illustrated with illuminated paintings of superior skill and workmanship, representing various types of elephants and scenes from the Āhom Royal Court. Some of the pictures are of great artistic and historic value, as they depict how the Āhom kings used to hold their Courts and how the game of falconry was played in the presence of the kings and how an Āhom king rode an elephant in a procession. The pictures are in water colour and a large number of them are gold-plated; they have beautifully preserved their colours and the lustre of the gold, in spite of age and rough handling."<sup>5</sup>

Many new happy features appear in the secular branch of painting which would recall the beauty of Rajasthani or Mughal painting. The happiest of them perhaps are pers-

1. *The Place of Assam in the History and Civilisation of India*, Gauhati, 1955, pp.57, 58.
2. See Dasgupta, p. 62.
3. Dasgupta, pp.62, 64; monochrome plate 54

4. S.K. Bhuyan thought Dilbar was a Muslim (*Annals of Delhi Badshahate*, Intro).
5. H.C. Goswami, *Descriptive Catalogue of Assamese Manuscript*, p. 65

pective and portraiture.<sup>1</sup> These are particularly in evidence in the *Hastī-vidyārṇava*. Landscapes with green and undulating plains and blue hills now come to be depicted. Trees are not merely decorative, but look like real ones. A river coming down a hill with fish swimming in its water (f.138) and hills shining against the blue sky with patches of clouds (f.106) are rather skilfully depicted. The artists give evidence of their interest in contemporary life and paint actual scenes from Court life — the king with his queen in durbār, royal procession, musical and dance performance, and wrestling. The flowing robes and glittering ornaments attract special attention. With merely fine lines and no 'shading' the textile presents a wavy surface so as to bring out in effect the living shape of the physique it covers. Ladies' hair is dressed in coiffeur. Of great interest are the Āhom priests who come in connection with the mantras and rituals, and the different animals like the lion, camel, black pig, etc., and birds like the duck, owl, vulture, etc., insects and reptiles and fish generally required for medicinal or ritualistic purposes. The *Hastī-vidyārṇava* furnishes portraits of the author, Sukumār Barkāth, the painters, Dilbar and Doṣāy, and the royal patrons, Śivasimha and Ambikādevī, along with the nobility. It goes so far as to give pictures of the eight rulers of the eight earthly quarters, who hear the glory and reputation of King Śivasimha. One of these rulers looks verily like an European. A Burmese (Māntarā) king is also portrayed. The

painters take advantage of the various descriptions of different types of elephants to bring in their royal patron again and again.

The closing folio of a manuscript copy of the Assamese version of the sixth Book of the *Bhāgavata-purāna*, with very fine and bright illuminations belong to this period, was recovered from Burma, whereto it was carried away by evacuees or prisoners of war during the Burmese occupation of the land in the third decade of the last century, and is preserved in the D.H.A.S. This also gives a fine picture of contemporary Court life and culture of music. Kavirāja Chakravartī's *Gīta-Govinda* in the K.A.S. Library also depicts some scenes representing the Court of King Rudrasimha, "but they bear no comparison with the court scenes of the Āhom kings in the *Hastī-vidyārṇava*." The *Śaṅkhacūḍa-vadha* (D.H.A.S.) is another work of this period, and presents beautiful illustrations and fine calligraphy. It contains pictures, besides those depicting the mythological subject-matter, of contemporary life : King Gadādharaśimha with his Court pundits (f.120); King Rudrasimha with a person playing on the pakhāwaj; a tank and a temple; the latter king with the Jayantā and Kachāri chiefs, the three ministers of State, the Phukans and other warriors (f.121). Lovers and love scenes have been painted with sensitive touches of sentiment and with very fine strokes of the brush. The two fragmentary copies of *Lava-Kuśar Yuddha* (K.A.S.) were obtained from Mahindri Devi of the late Āhom rāj family, and it is very likely that the paintings here were actually done within the Āhom Court circle. This is a remarkable work in that there is an attempt at individualisation of human figures, both male and female, which stand distinct from one another. The flat treatment, the so-called Mughal type of head-gear, the decorative rather than real trees representing a forest, the

1. Of the beautiful portraits of the time special mention might be made of those of King Śivasimha and Queen Ambikā Devī, which have been reproduced in Professor S.K. Bhuyan's *Tungkhungia Buranji*: "these have all the quality of the Delhi miniature portraits on ivory of kings and queens and noblemen of the Mogul Court, and yet the portrait of the dignified Ahom king and the beautiful Ahom queen with her hair done in a loose knot and wearing an embroidered scarf of golden *Mugā* silk is quite a little gem (the King is dressed in the conventional North Indian court costume — the so-called Mogul dress of the century" (S.K. Chatterji, *The Place of Assam in the History and Civilisation of India*, p.56)

unrealistic low-seated chariot, the telling action of the human body in the battle-field, the lovely but conventional animals : these are some of the characteristics which can be marked in the few paintings reproduced in my edition of the book, *The Art of Painting in Assam and Eastern Indian Manuscript Painting*. It is probable that these illuminations were done in the time of Rudrasimha (1696-1714 A.D.) or Śivasimha (1714-1744 A.D.), in whose Court the art of painting greatly flourished.<sup>1</sup>

It is to be marked that the costumes, head-gears, etc., in many of these paintings, reviewed above, particularly in those of the religious school, are conventional and stylised, artistic and artificial, rather than realistic. Exhibiting influences of Rājput-Mughal paintings, they do not reflect much of the style of dresses in real use in their own days. Glimpses of real ways of dressing are thus rare. In such paintings as those of the *Hastī-vidyārṇava*, however, things come nearer real practice and usage. In the meantime, mainly through the zeal and initiative of King Rudrasimha, who sent out emissaries to collect specimens of costumes of royal personages and nobles of North India, and made a conscious attempt to introduce reforms in prevailing costumes in spite of the resistance offered by his Ministers of State, some items of traditional dresses underwent a change especially in the capital, and veered towards North Indian styles.<sup>2</sup> The head-dress known popularly but not realistically as *moglāi ṭupī*, referred to above, seems to have been such an innovation, although the same is in

The lying down position (*śayāna*) of men and animals dead in the war-field is practically incorrect (*The Art*, etc., fig. 25) and the Lion and buffalo (Dasgupta, Plate 2, opposite p. 16) are unreal. The figure of the maneless lion, which animal the painter never saw, is conventional; but it is not explicable why he could not draw a buffalo.

2. S.K. Bhuyan, *Tungkhungia Buranji*, Oxford University Press, p. 32.

evidence in the illuminations of Vaiṣṇava poetical works because perhaps this item of dress was not so much Mughal in its origins. Whether this item of dress, found in use also in the Vaiṣṇava circle especially by the *Sūtradhāra* of the medieval theatre alongside of a simpler white *pāgri*, shaped like an ellipsoid, was introduced by Śaṅkaradeva, the father of the medieval drama in Assam, from the art and practice of the Hindustan of his day, or came as an import into real practice in the wake of Rudrasimha's reformatory activities, is a question which would require some investigation. Vijay Khanikar's paintings in the biographical work, *Vanamālīdevar Carita*, are remarkable as representing some customary forms of dress in religious and court circles.

## 6

In the Aguru bark manuscript of the *Gīta-Govinda* of Rāmānārayaṇa in the Kāmarūpa Anusandhāna Samiti Library, out of the total of 62 (if not 63) folios (each folio measuring 41 cm × 12 cm), the following folios are found missing : Nos. 2, 27, 31, 34, 46 and 49, folios 14 and 41 being in the Manuscript Section of the Gauhati University Central Library. The manuscript, among other such works, was collected by the Government of Assam through Pandit Hemchandra Goswami, who was employed in a manuscript gathering project, and was later kept in deposit in the Samiti Library. The owner was Dhaireswar Barua of Rangiya Tahsil.

The Samiti manuscript copy is generally dependable with its old system of Assamese orthography and a number of occasional slips from place to place. There are quite a few examples of *parablepsia* or *lipography*, leaving gaps which will be hard to fill up in the absence of a second manuscript copy of the work. The footnote on the matter of Folio 43A may be seen. The examples of substitution of

one word for another are quite many; cedalara for chedanara, v.43; raramane for raṅgamane 45; muni for suni 71; gr̥he for gīte 76; karibāhā for kariboho 82; deha for geha 127; bhajilo for bhajiyō 131; mahāmani for mahāmānī or abhimanī 138; āna for sakhi 142; aṅkura for aṅkuśa 144; aṅgaka for aṅgata 144; karaya for balaya 183; sama for mana 215; bhaya for bhava 233; rattaramana for ratnasamāna 244; saksāka for śayyāka 253; kapavati for rūpavati 259; birahīra for bistara (vistara) 296. There are one or two examples of dittography with repetition of the same matter, as in v.66, perhaps done by the scribe. There are a few obscure or mistaken words hard to interpret; icita 223; sethata (=sīthita; sīthī=sītha=sīmanta - ?). The half-line, jinibā jānā parāne 117, does not come out with its meaning. The appearance of the name of Jayadeva's village, Kindubilva as Bindu-bindu (v. 102) is intriguing and may just be an example of the copyist's ignorance or carelessness. Other textual remarks go with the footnotes. We will have noted the confusion that the verses, numbered 263-64 and appearing on f.43A, create due to a misplacing.

The orthography of the Sanskrit text of the songs at the end is not at all happy. The names of rāgas here correspond to the current forms of this region.

I do not believe that this manuscript was the autograph or original copy. It may not have been done in the capital, because particularly the paintings conform more to the general Assam school rather than to the special Court style of Garhgāon, where Vadha Lagirā, Dilbar, Doṣāy and other Court painters laboured. The Court scenes that we have here may just indicate that the paintings were done in the metropolitan atmosphere, the verses themselves being made under the direct orders of Mahārājā Rudrasīmha : but the poet had apparently no access to the copyist khanikar's studio — to judge from the mistakes in

the Assamese and Sanskrit text and the picture captions.

7

I think I do not have much to add about the miniature paintings contained in the manuscript; Dr Vatsyayan's Introduction B and critical appraisal running through the second panel of the main body of the present work place this art-work on comparative grounds, the differences as well as comparabilities with particularly *Gīta-Govinda* paintings from elsewhere in India being pointed out from time to time. The independent features so noticed will go a long way to establish the khanikars of Assam as artists of a distinct school of painting.

The painter in our case — we have to take note — does not seem to be concerned at all with, or aware of, the Sanskrit original; and even about his grasp of the Assamese lines of Kavirāja Chakravartī we have serious doubts as in the captions of some of his figures (supposing these captions were put by him) he is off the track; and sometimes even coordination between the poet and him is lost, while some of the captions put below the figures indeed are so unsophisticatedly misleading — nibhṛta and nikuñja (F.51A), vilapati and hasati (42A-B), vasati (54B), etc.

As in other illustrated manuscripts of this region we have here too the method of dividing the painting space into arched panels, sometimes even a tree working as a divider. These panels frame each an independent miniature with a monochrome background — vermilion, brick-red, green or other, and above this over the few panels the longish space again is done in monochrome, forming really a part more of the frame of the panels than of the background itself; but in quite a few folios wreath-like clouds, twinkling stars and the moon beam into this space (24A), reclaiming it as a part of the background; the divider trees, with perhaps birds atop, do also sometimes encroach upon this area. While there is no suggestion of

natural scenery, the decorative and stylised foliage serve always an artistic purpose, sometimes even responding emotionally to the obtaining situation. The personification of clouds (30A), which remind us of the *Bhāgavata* clouds, fits well into the poetic imagery of the lines. The Yamunā naturally comes in for representation in quite a number of places; even though it is a mannerism to do this repeatedly in a little boxed space with the pattern of basket weaving, the khanikar breaks the monotony by changing the pattern from place to place. Two swans on the water sometimes facing each other (15A, 33B) and sometimes looking away from each other (24B) are made symbolic of the disposition of the two divine lovers to each other. There are a few other birds and swarms of black-bees (sometimes quite oversize ones as in F.11B) but no lovely animals are seen here as we find them in the *Bhāgavata* paintings. The human figures are all done in clear profile even to a degree of mannerism and stylisation; but they are, generally speaking, happy objects. There is no abortive attempt at the front view of faces as in the *Ānanda-laharī* miniatures. The music scenes have their cadence and Rudrasimha Svargadeva's court-scene (55A) is of singular interest, being of much historical value as a rare contemporary picture of such metropolitan scene. The repetitive figures of Jayadeva and personified forms of the rāgas Guñjarī, Karnāṭa, Bhairavī, Vasanta, Varāḍi, Vibhāsa and Rāmagiri

and the appearance of Padmāvati, Jayadeva's wife, help keep up the narrative interest even without much individualising variation in the drawing. The Jayadevas and the Padmāvatis do not rise to the level of portraiture — as not even Rudrasimha in the court-scene. There is nothing of the charm of North Indian rāgamāla paintings in the personified figures of the rāgas. They do not even individualize or have any mooring in the rāga-dhyānas in Śubhaṅkara's *Saṅgīta-dāmodara* or elsewhere. Some notable properties here are: the spiked coronet (comparable to mukūṭs we find in local sculptural figures and aṅkīya bhāonā); the raised trays — śarāi (21A, 58A) and baṭā (25A); the low, flat and decorated stool called tāmuli pīrā (25A, 35B), gachā or chandelier (25A), vīnā (comparable to Manipuri penā), the fiddled ṭokāri (19B), women's mekheḷā or lahaṅgā and other objects in the court-scene. All these would perhaps endorse Mrs Vatsyayan's regret: 'Judging the pictorial achievements of this order it is clear that critics have unjustifiably neglected this important school of miniature painting, which cannot be dismissed as a stereotyped sub-school, derivative and unoriginal in character' (p.85).

27 May 1979

## INTRODUCTION B : KAPILA VATSYAYAN

From an analysis of the folios of this manuscript, both the translation and the paintings, it will perhaps be self-evident that the *Gīta-Govinda* manuscript based on Kavirāja Chakravartī Rāmanārāyaṇa's Assamese version is an important landmark in the history of both Assamese literature and painting style. It is also clear that it is a valuable piece of evidence for the study of the spread of the *Gīta-Govinda* tradition in different parts of India.

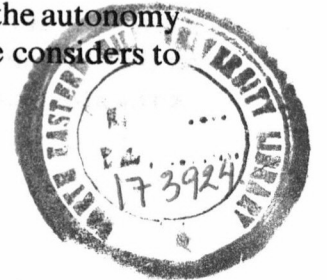
Dr Neog in his introduction has already pointed at the fact that Rāmanārāyaṇa bases his translation on Kumbha's version of the *Gīta-Govinda*. A further scrutiny of both his translation and the Sanskrit verses on folios 47 to 62 reveals that Rāmanārāyaṇa also makes significant departures from the text. It is significant to note that the seventeen verses which are attributed to Kumbha are not included in the Sanskrit verses in the latter folios. From that it would appear that possibly the Kavirāja was familiar with an earlier *Gīta-Govinda* text which was prevalent in the eastern part of India and obtainable in the first dated manuscript of the *Gīta-Govinda* found in Newari characters (15th century).<sup>1</sup> Also Rāmanārāyaṇa and the painter appear to be familiar with the musical traditions prevalent in Rajasthan and elsewhere because the rāgas are almost all identical with Kumbha's "Rasikapriyā" commentary. What is true of the rāgas, however, not true of the tālas because here there is a large measure of divergence. Obviously, this divergence may have been influenced by an active singing tradition of the text of the *Gīta-Govinda*. Perhaps a further closer comparison with contemporary texts on

music and dance in Assam and elsewhere in the east may reveal whether Rāmanārāyaṇa was following the living traditions of North-Eastern India and other texts of Northern and Western India. It is also clear that the Kavirāja does not seem to have been familiar with the Orissan versions, although many Orissan versions, both translations and imitations of the *Gīta-Govinda*, had been composed by the seventeenth century. A full account of these is being undertaken by me elsewhere. Rāmanārāyaṇa also does not base his translation on Rāma Saraswatī's Assamese version.

Judging from the above, it would be possible to conclude that the *Gīta-Govinda* tradition exhibits a criss-cross pattern of mutual influence of different versions. In most regions it appears that although a translation or a regional version became popular, concurrently there was the near standard text (without the seventeen stanzas), which was almost universally popular. Also invariably the patron's influence was evident in the addition of a few verses which help to establish the provenance and date. This particular manuscript would have to be placed between 1694-1714 A.D. on account of the inconvertible reference to Rudrasimhadeva. This deduction is also supported by the stylistic characteristic of the illustrations of the manuscript.

Our concern of course is equally with the relationship of the text and the paintings. Our analysis in the following pages will have perhaps shown that the painter is much faithfully following the text, as he is asserting the autonomy of his medium by carefully selecting what he considers to

1. See Barbara S. Miller, *Love Song of Dark Lord*, introduction.



be of value for his pictorial purpose. We have attempted to identify the manner in which the painter is stimulated by the literary piece, not merely thematically but through the verbal imagery of the full prabandha, a single verse or a line or even a phrase, or a mere word. This method is a near universal phenomenon in all styles of Indian miniature painting, particularly in the Rajasthani sub-schools. It is evident also in the Pahari schools and the Orissa schools. Scholars have so far paid great attention to purely stylistic details, the iconography, the conventions and motifs of these schools. This is valid; but we believe that the specific understanding of the text by the painter was integral to his visual perception and manifestation. It is thus not enough to identify the theme, or the text in relation to a miniature painting. For a fuller understanding and appreciation of the pictorial qualities it is essential to be familiar with the exact textual base of the painter. The inter-relationship of the two media is not on the plane of a general theme being interpreted, but it is a precise line or word which constitutes the governing principles of the pictorial composition. Our study of the several *Gīta-Govinda* manuscripts of many schools and styles of Indian painting has revealed that the metaphors, similes of the poetic line are part and parcel not only of the painter's aesthetic sensibility but also of the formal aspect of the painting. Occasionally the painter departs by design; at other times understanding is inadequate. When he departs, he can and does take imaginative leaps within his medium when his understanding is inadequate he is restricted and limited. In the latter event he consequently becomes conventional and stereotyped within a given mannered style of his pictorial school. A comparison of the particular verses of the *Gīta-Govinda* in the Assamese version and the Sanskrit will have amply borne this out. The analogy is that of the rendering of a

rāga and tāla based on a poetic line in Indian music. The musician takes a poetic line as an invariable : he adopts a rāga as a central axis, and thereafter he interprets according to his particular genius. Within the rāga and the particular gharānā he can be imaginatively creative or merely conventionally repetitive. This principle also holds good in the sphere of abhinaya in Indian dance. Indian miniature painter adopts analogous techniques and has to be perhaps seen somewhat anew within this larger frame of reference of the Indian arts.

And finally then, there is the question of placing the achievements of this *Gīta-Govinda* pictorially within the purely stylistic developments of Indian miniature painting generally and the Assamese or late Eastern school more particularly.

A general observation which has been made in respect of the post-sixteenth century Assamese or Eastern schools is that of a derivative quality of these schools. Scholars have spoken of both Orissan and Assamese schools of painting as minor offshoots with a singular absence of variety and stylistic development. Pictorially, critics have not found too much to commend them despite the appreciation which has been showered on both the *Chitra-Bhāgavata* and the monumental illustrated treatise of the *Hastīvidyārṇava* in Assam and several illustrated palm-leaf manuscripts from Orissa.

In contrast to these views, Dr Maheswar Neog, Dr Rajatananda Das Gupta and some others have tried to establish a chronology of development of the Assamese school of painting. Others including Rawson, Barret and Gray have attempted to do this in respect of Orissa. We shall take the problem of Orissa elsewhere again with the central concern with the *Gīta-Govinda* manuscripts; here it is only necessary to say that the Assamese school clearly

manifests a distinct identity which cannot be dismissed as a minor, not too vibrant offshoot of Rajasthani painting. While some influences of Bikaner are undeniable in eighteenth century as in the *Hastīvidyārṇava*, our manuscript is a clear evidence of a distinct autonomous regional character, unmistakable for its compositional norms, its stylistic techniques, its peculiar sense of line and its palette. Our analysis of the particular folios will have shown that space is divided into sections by a variety of ways, but there is no attempt at establishing a background or a foreground. In this respect the school shares the characteristic features of Indian miniature painting where there is a minimal sense of optical perspective. However, the method of dividing space and arranging the composition is neither Western India or Rajasthani (i.e., early Mewar, or Malwa). We do not come across an organisational pattern of marginal areas or the surface broken up into self-contained units vertically arranged. The painters of the sixteenth century in the *Chaurapañcāśikā* group (Prince of Wales *Gītā-Govinda*) or the *Gītā-Govinda* manuscripts of the Northern Gurajat school (in the City Palace Museum, Jaipur) or the N.C. Mehta *Gītā-Govinda* or the Kankorali *Gītā-Govinda* had all used trees as dividers. In all these schools there is one large tree in the centre of the picture with blossoming branches under which different pictorial situations are contained. The Assamese school utilizes this device with a staggering variety. Despite the first impression of some repetitiveness a closer look reveals that no two trees are alike, and they are spaced unequally on the surface of the painting. A clear distinction is made between outdoor large trees, small bushes, rich blossoms, sparsely branched trees and stylised indoor plants. None of these either in compositional outline or in details are derivative in quality. Indeed except for the late seventeenth century from

Mewar (Udaipur Rajasthan Research Institute) in none of the other *Gītā-Govinda* sets of the Western Indian or the various sub-schools of Rajasthani painting do we come across such a purposive use of natural flora and fauna both on the thematic and the formal level. Several folios of the Assamese *Gītā-Govinda* manifest a rare sensitivity in the treatment of trees and foliage within a style which on other levels has a narrow range.

While the *Hastīvidyārṇava* exhibits architectural features which recall some Rajasthani features, the *Gītā-Govinda* manuscript is remarkable for its strict adherence to Assamese architectural features. The stylised arches, the canopies, the roofs are all characteristically regional and distinctive. The inspiration for these was unmistakably Assamese architecture and sculpture, and not Rajasthani architectural features. This is as true of the broad outlines of the architectural feature of indoor scenes, as the detailed delineation of ritualistic objects like the śarāi tray, the particular stools and a host of other accessories, which can be seen in practically every single folio of the manuscript.

Further the conventional motifs of showing the sky and the waters, the swans, the lotus and the waves are stylised, mannered; but they are not derivative in this formal element. Many schools of Western India and the sub-schools of Rajasthani painting do use a curvilinear double line for clouds, but the symmetrical arches which may or may not indicate clouds and the sky-line are distinctive to the Assamese school. Also, in not a single folio, do we see cranes flying across the sky — a conventional motif of most schools which appears to have become increasingly popular on account of the use of the image as a similar device for describing the white garland on Kṛṣṇa's dark body. The Assamese *Gītā-Govinda* makes no use of

the motif, although there would have been an obvious temptation to do so had the painter been familiar with this treatment in the paintings from Rajasthan. From the days of the Lodhi school, the *Bhāgavata-purāna* of the *Chaura-pañcāśikā* group to the Jaur *Gīta-Govinda* of Mewar (dated 1594 A.D.), to some examples of Mewari *Gīta-Govinda* illustrations of the seventeenth century the waters of the Yamunā is depicted diagonally across the painting surface. In this *Gīta-Govinda* a peculiar stylisation takes place which is distinctive to the Assamese school. As we have pointed out several times, the sea or the Yamunā is invariably shown in a rectangular frame. With a change of mood the lines of the waves, the curvilinear design change and so do the colours, their shades and tonality. This motif is consistently used; but it is invariably an integral part of the total composition. Besides it is always related to the verbal imagery and has a great emotive significance. It is only in a few rare instances that it serves a pure decorative purpose.

Lastly, there is the figure drawing. In this sphere the only common feature between this *Gīta-Govinda* and others from Rajasthan is the consistent use of the profile. It must be mentioned that although the profile is consistently used in the *Chitra-Bhāgavata* and the *Gīta-Govinda*, it is not a characteristic feature of the figure drawing of the *Hastīvidyārṇava* and other miniatures from Assam of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The affinity with the seventeenth century Rajasthani school cannot be extended beyond this feature. The figures of the Assamese *Gīta-Govinda* are tall and erect with no use of curves and lines. Arms and hands are used with sensitivity and there is a great emphasis on the fingers and hand gestures. A little tilt of the head, a twist or turn communicates particular

emotions, but the range is not large. Facial features are rather limited and there is a lack of variety in most folios. However, the painter does succeed in communicating a change of mood by the stance or the posture or the position of the arms and hands. In short, he depends on the movement of the entire body rather than the face alone or expressing different sentiments and moods, we have had occasion to point this out in the case of many folios. There is a large variety in sitting postures. Rādhā sits in different ways in different folios and this is indicative of her mood. So does Kṛṣṇa, particularly in the folios, where he is sitting on the throne, or a stool. Kṛṣṇa is also seen dancing in a number of dance movements, most of them variations of the *ūrdhvajānu*. These are full of vivacity and movement and none of them are wooden.

Rādhā and her sakhīs wear costumes, which are unmistakably Assamese resembling the *mekhelā* and *cheleṅ* rather than the *sāri*. There is a fair range of prints and designs, and the veiled head of Rādhā is used with great effect. Characteristic also is the figure of Kāmadeva who appears in many folios, darting his arrows across the surface of the painting. He is invariably crowned in the Āhom royal fashion. Sometimes he is seated royally on a throne. The turbaned and non-turbaned figures of Jayadeva and rāgas like Varāḍi and Vibhāsa are the pictorial counterpart of Sattriyā dancing and the so-called *Moglaī topī* is typical. Significantly, however, we do not come across the *chogā* of the Assamese dance-drama. The palette of these artists is limited but distinctive. The particular brick-red background is unknown to other schools. The spectacular use of vermilion, red and orange is also refreshingly new. There is a remarkable use of shades of blue, sea green and green for the Yamunā. A careful use of pink and red for

the lotus lends a vividness to the painting. The palette again is not derivative in character.

The above brief enumeration of the conclusion, which

one can draw from my detailed analysis, will perhaps convince us of the overall significance and aesthetically satisfying quality of this set of the *Gīta-Govinda*.