



ISSN 2455-7544
www.daathvoyagejournal.com

Daath Voyage : An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English

**A Peer Reviewed, Refereed, Indexed & Open Access
Vol.10/No.2 June 2025**

Editor: Dr. Saikat Banerjee



www.daathvoyagejournal.com

: An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English
(A Peer Reviewed, Refereed, Indexed & Open Access Journal)

ISSN 2455-7544

Vol.10/No.2, June, 2025

The Eternal Melody: Exploring the Metaphoric Significance of Krishna's Flute in Select Bhakti Poetry

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Received- 20/05/2025, Revised-06/06/2025, Accepted-19/06/2025, Published-30/06/2025.

Abstract: Lord Krishna, the eighth incarnation of Lord Vishnu, is a prominent figure in Hindu Mythology. He is depicted with a blue skin, a peacock feather on his head and a flute in his hand. Krishna's flute, a powerful symbol of divine music and spiritual transcendence, has, for centuries, resonated at the heart of Indian literature. This paper will carefully examine the wealthy symbolism within select Bhakti poetry that Krishna's flute possesses. The flute's representation sees an initial analysis in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, which is seminal in articulating the devotional ethos of 'Krishnaism'. It contains the celebrated *Veṇu-gīta* (10.21), that offers a vivid portrayal of the flute as an instrument of both seduction and purification. Jayadeva's *Gīta Govinda*, another key work in which the flute plays an important role in the divine seduction and the portrayal of emotional states in Radha and Krishna's love, is explored further in the paper. The discussion then shifts to the perspectives of prominent Bhakti poets such as Surdas and Mirabai in which Krishna's flute emerges as a siren call that urges all devotees to experience a profound internal shift toward divine love. The subsequent section engages with modern and colonial interpretations, where figures like Rabindranath Tagore and Sarojini Naidu rework the symbolism of the flute. In the final analytical section, the paper considers the continuing relevance of Krishna's flute in art, music, and cinema. The concluding segment suggests how future researchers might fruitfully explore other dimensions of the symbol, reaffirming its potential to inspire both academic inquiry and creative expression.

Keywords: Krishna, flute, instrument, symbol, metaphor.

Introduction

Krishna's flute stands as a symbol infused with intense layers of meaning that traverse the realms of mythology, devotional passion, and artistic expression. In classical Sanskrit texts such as the *Mahabharata* and the *Brahma-saṁhitā*, the sound of Krishna's flute is portrayed as a cosmic melody that not only captivates

the senses of his devotees but also serves as an allegory for the majestic interplay of creation and dissolution. The flute, in its very essence, captures the yearning that defines the human quest for transcendence. This yearning is vividly articulated in the impassioned verses of Bhakti poets, who, through their lyrical compositions, elevate Krishna's divine melody to a metaphor for the transformative power of love and surrender. However, the symbolic representation of Krishna's flute is not confined to the boundaries of ancient myth or devotional poetry. Its evolution can also be traced through the modern and colonial reworkings of Indian art and literature, often reimagining the flute as a source of inner awakening and cultural nostalgia. By bridging traditional narratives with modern sensibilities, contemporary scholars can re-examine its role as both a historical artifact and a living symbol of spiritual and artistic motivation.

Krishna's flute in *Veṇu-gīta*

Veṇu-gīta or "The Song of the Flute" is a specific passage in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* that meticulously captures the response of the *gopīs* upon hearing the divine melody of Krishna's flute. The flute's music is described as being so alluring that it captivates nature itself – the rivers cease to flow, the deer stand mesmerized, and even the cows forget their calves.

In Vrindavan, when Krishna standing in his graceful *tri-bhanga-lalita* pose plays the flute, all animate and in-animate objects become unmindful of their bodies and bodily connections. The enchanting melody does not remain restricted to the limits of the forest of Vrindavan but spread from house to house in the land of Braj. When the young maidens of Braj hear the sound of the flute, an intense desire to meet with Krishna arouses in their hearts. In a secluded place, the maidens describe to their intimate companions the beauty of Krishna, his qualities and the powerful influence of his flute which is evident in the following lines:

*tad vraja-striya asrutya
venu-gitam smarodayam
kascit paroksam krsnasya
sva-sakhibhyo 'nvavarnayan*

The *gopīs* also express with an intense yearning to attain the flute's great fortune. They think that the flute, made of bamboo, might have performed some sort of pious activities in its previous births in order to taste the nectar of Krishna's lips which rightfully belongs to the *gopīs*:

*gopyah kim acarad ayam kusalam sma venur
damodaradhara-sudham api gopikanam*

The *gopīs* express their desire to take birth as a bamboo tree in order to become a 'venu' and remain on Krishna's lips forever as he always revels with the flute in great delight.

The *Veṇu-gīta* also captures the reaction of the peacocks and other birds, the cows, the rivers, the wives of the demigods upon hearing the melody of the flute. The peacocks take the flute's notes as the thunder of the clouds, and becoming intoxicated, begin to dance. Hearing the sound of the flute, the birds of the forest sit quietly on the branches of trees keeping their eyes half-closed like 'munis' and embrace the melody. When the wives of the demigods see Krishna and hear the melody of his enchanting flute, they become enraptured by the force of the Cupid. The flowers binding their braided hair fall out, their saris slip from their waists, and they fall unconscious into the laps of their husbands.

It is the inherent characteristic and natural phenomena of rivers to flow towards the sea but upon hearing the sound of the flute, they stop flowing, defying the laws of nature. When the cows hear the notes of the flute, it seems that a powerful stream of nectar is flowing directly into their ears. They immediately stop grazing and turn their ears towards the sound, standing still as if in a picture. Even the clouds become saturated with affection for Krishna and cover the whole sky, forming an umbrella to protect him from the scorching heat.

The flute's irresistible call leaves the *gopīs* in a state of dilemma. On one hand, being wives from respectable families, the *gopīs* cannot meet Krishna and on the other hand, the enchanting allure of the flute's notes makes them wanting to leave their households and run to the forest of Vrindavan just to get a glimpse of Krishna. Eventually, the study of Krishna's flute within the horizon of *Veṇu-gīta* not only enriches our understanding of the intricate interplay between art and emotion but also illuminates the profound spiritual dimensions inherent in the act of listening.

Krishna's flute in *Gīta Govinda*

Sri Jayadeva Goswami's *Gīta Govinda* is an influential twelfth-century masterpiece that intricately blends lyrical poetry with devotional zeal, celebrating the divine love of Lord Krishna and Radha. Central to this *magnum opus* is the flute of Krishna that acts as both a literal instrument and a symbolic vehicle for expressing themes of divine love and the soul's yearning for union with the divine.

After killing Dantavakra, Krishna returned to Braj to soothe the *gopīs* from their pain of separation from him. He engaged himself in amorous amusements with the *gopīs*, enrapturing them in the mellifluous notes of his flute. The sound of the flute made their jewelled tiaras whirl and their elegant floral decorations fall. When Radha saw Krishna enjoying affectionate exchanges with the young maidens, she became offended and hid herself. Soon she started feeling distressed as she could not bear the pangs of separation from Krishna. The enchanting melody of the flute made her mind unsteady:

sancarad-adhara-sudhd-madhura-dhvani-mukharita-mohana-vamsam

valita-drg-ancala-cancala-mauli-kapola-vilola-vatamsam

rase harim iha vihita-vildsam

smarati mano mama kṛta-parihdsam

Suddenly, the absence of Radha strikes Krishna as memories of their autumnal dance awakens in his heart. He starts looking for Radha but failed to find her which leaves him in a state of despair. Radha's intimate companion informs Krishna that Radha is suffering from the pain of their separation, sometimes crying and sometimes disowning all sufferings by being embraced by a momentary vision. When Krishna finally meets Radha, she turns him away by stating that he might have been engaged in an amorous pastime with some other woman and hence, neglected her.

Krishna observed that Radha will not abandon her obstinacy despite his determined endeavors and chooses to take help from his envoy, the flute, whose fluttering notes would surely dispel Radha's reluctance. He began to play his flute, the sound of which is the greatest mystical incantation, endowed with the six effective methods for accomplishing one's objectives ('mohanatva', 'vasikaranatva', 'stambhatva', 'dkarsanatva', 'uccdtanatva', and 'mdranatva').

In the musical interplay described by Jayadeva, the audible notes serve as a metaphor for the transient nature of earthly pleasures while silences that follow evoke the aching void of absence – a duality that mirrors the human condition and underscores the relentless link between pain and pleasure, loss and reunion. Radha's response to the flute is both intensely personal and archetypically universal. Her longing becomes a metaphor for the soul's eternal quest for a transcendent union with the divine that is as stirring as it is ineffable. The flute's melody, as rendered in Jayadeva's *Gīta Govinda*, offers a compelling exploration of the myriad dimensions of love, embodying the eternal dance between separation and union, seduction and salvation.

Krishna's flute in the works of Surdas and Mirabai

The Bhakti movement was a significant spiritual and social reform movement in medieval India, primarily within Hinduism, that prioritized personal devotion to God. It promoted a more accessible and unbiased approach to spirituality, making it possible for individuals from all walks of life to connect with the divine. Two of the most notable figures of this movement are Surdas and Mirabai, who, through their remarkable lyrical compositions, unveiled their affection for Lord Krishna.

Surdas was a sixteenth-century blind Hindu poet and devotional singer who is known for his adherence to Lord Krishna. Written in *Braj- bhāṣā*, Surdas' most notable work *Sur Sagar* ("Ocean of Melody") celebrates Krishna's *lila*, starting from his birth to his union with Radha and the ecstatic devotion of the *gopīs*. According to Surdas, the flute's melody is not simply an auditory pleasure but is permeated with a metaphysical quality that calls forth the hidden depths of the human soul, inviting it to transcend the mundane and embrace a state of rapturous surrender to the divine. In one of his compositions, Surdas writes:

*That flute—its mouth soaks in lip-sap so pure,
That even the six-season's penances taste of it by right.*

In these lines, Surdas imagines that the flute, pressed against Krishna's lips, is literally consuming the nectar of divine breath. The melody of the flute is so sweet that even the penances practiced through the six seasons feels flavorless compared to a single note of the flute. In another of his compositions, Surdas paints Radha as the perfect musician commanding Krishna's own flute. He asserts that the flute at Radha's lips become the conduit of such a transformative power that even Krishna – master of all – loses his poise:

*Whenever she brings the flute to her lips,
Shyam—with lotus-petal eyes—drowns in melody down to finger- and hair-tips.
His speech grows halting and askew, as he lingers, craving her embrace.*

Mirabai, another influential figure of the Bhakti movement, is widely known for her devotion to Lord Krishna for which she even left her royal status. Her affection for Lord Krishna was disapproved by her in-laws and reportedly subjected her to ostracism. Her poetry, officially written in *Braj- bhāṣā*, explore themes of love, surrender and divine union. For Mirabai, the sound of Krishna's flute is charged with almost mystical efficacy, weaving an intricate tapestry of longing and fulfillment. It is as if every vibration of the instrument serves as an invitation to relinquish ego, to dissolve the barriers between the temporal and the eternal, and to experience the sublime union of soul and deity:

*The sound of the flute, O sister, is madness.
I thought that nothing that was not God could hold me,
But hearing that sound, I lose mind and body,
My heart wholly caught in the net.*

Mirabai's passionate reflections underscore the idea that the flute's music is both an emollient and a beacon – an emollient that soothes the weary heart with its celestial harmonies and a beacon that illuminates the path to ultimate truth and oneness with Krishna.

As Surdas and Mirabai intertwine their poetic imaginations, the flute emerges as a symbol of irresistible attraction. It is a reminder that true devotion is not the product of rational calculation but of an emotional surrender that defies the confines of ordinary experience.

Krishna's flute in modern and colonial engagements

The evolution of Krishna's flute from a purely Bhakti symbol to a broader metaphor for existential yearning, signifies a critical shift in the way religious and cultural symbols are incorporated within modern literature. Rabindranath Tagore's reimagining of Krishna's flute is infused with an optimism that seeks to reconcile the ancient with the modern, suggesting that true artistic expression is capable of transcending historical and geographical boundaries. In contrast, Sarojini Naidu's nuanced references to the flute highlight

a sense of ambivalence – a bittersweet recognition of loss and displacement coupled with a resilient yearning for cultural revival.

Known as the “Bard of Bengal”, Rabindranath Tagore is known for reshaping Bengali literature and music as well as Indian art with contextual modernism in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Tagore’s poetic songs are viewed as spiritual and volatile. His *Gitanjali* (or “Song Offerings”) offers a vivid portrayal of his devotional nature while also narrating a conflict between the desire for material possessions and spiritual longing. The flute, as envisioned in Tagore’s *Gitanjali*, becomes a source of inspiration for the poet. Tagore uses the flute as a metaphor for the divine breath or inspiration that flows through him, creating the songs of *Gitanjali*:

This little flute of a reed thou hast carried over hills and dales, and hast breathed through it melodies eternally new.

At the immortal touch of thy hands my little heart loses its limits in joy and gives birth to utterance ineffable.

In these lines, Tagore imagines the flute not as an inert bamboo but as God’s personal vessel that He carries everywhere – across “hills and dales” – to pour out endlessly fresh life and song. The flute’s “eternally new” melodies mirror the boundless generosity of the Divine, who empties and fills the human heart again and again. “At the immortal touch of thy hands”, the poet’s heart “loses its limits”, showing how the flute bridges God’s hand and the devotee’s speech, transforming inner experience into “utterance ineffable”. Tagore hears the flute’s melody as a summons to engage in artistic creation where poetry itself becomes an act of devotion.

Sarojini Naidu, or the “Nightingale of India”, was an impactful figure in the history of India. Apart from being a political leader and freedom fighter, her contribution to Indian literature is celebrated even today. One of her poems, *The Flute Player of Brindaban*, explore the themes of love, beauty, and the divine in the context of Lord Krishna and his flute. Naidu employs the flute as a vigorous symbol that arouse images of a bygone era rich in indigenous cultural traditions and spiritual depth, while also lamenting the dissonance wrought by colonial modernity:

*Still must I like a homeless bird
Wander, forsaking all
The earthly loves and worldly lures
That held my life in thrall,
'And follow, follow, answering
Thy magical flute-call.*

In these lines, Naidu expresses her desire to forsake all mundane connections that controls her life and wants to follow the mesmerizing call of the flute. She wanders like a homeless bird and wants to follow the flute's melody which would eventually lead her to Krishna. The flute, as envisioned in Naidu's poem, can be interpreted as a symbol of India's lost spiritual and cultural unity, which had been disrupted by British imperialism. By invoking Krishna's flute, Naidu counters colonial narratives of India as static or backward, instead showing that a living, sensorial tradition (embodied in the flute's call) can both inspire personal liberation and underpin the broader struggle for self-rule.

Far from being confined to its original function as a marker of devotional sentiment, the flute emerges as a diverse emblem that encapsulates the profound tensions inherent in the human search for meaning. Tagore secularizes the flute's call, turning it into a voice of creative impulse while Naidu interprets it as the call for awakening of national consciousness, a call to remember India's heritage and reclaim its lost identity.

The Continuing Relevance of Krishna's Flute

Krishna's flute, soaked in mythological glory and infused with transcendent musicality, resonates across diverse artistic mediums as a symbol of the ineffable call of the divine and the constant human yearning for transcendence. It continues to live as a vibrant metaphor, bridging ancient spiritual traditions with modern existential quests.

Cinema, particularly Indian filmmaking, has embraced Krishna's flute as an auditory emblem of transformation and inner awakening. Filmmakers have employed its resonant notes to underscore pivotal moments of emotional and philosophical revelation. Satyajit Ray, in his film *Apur Sansar*, has incorporated the flute as a means of temporary escape from the weariness of everyday life. Apu, the film's protagonist,

finds solace in playing his flute after the loss of his wife, Aparna, allowing him to find happiness and meaning in his life again. The flute also represents Apu's artistic side and his desire to create and express himself.

Music, both classical and contemporary, continues to be deeply influenced by Krishna's flute, preserving its significance as a symbol of divine beauty and longing. Indian classical music, particularly in Hindustani and Carnatic traditions, often employs the *bansuri* to evoke Krishna's presence. Pandit Hariprasad Chaurasia, renowned for his unique style and innovative techniques in flute playing, have expanded the expressive possibilities of the instrument. Modern fusion artists like Anoushka Shankar have embraced the symbolism inherent in Krishna's flute by merging traditional Indian *ragas* with contemporary orchestration. Bollywood and popular music have incorporated the flute as a recurring motif, using the melody to evoke nostalgia, love, and spiritual introspection.

Lord Krishna playing his flute is one of the most beloved themes in Indian art, frequently depicted in statues and paintings. The sight of Krishna with his flute represents love and devotion, capturing the essence of divine music that touches the heart. Artist Kishore Roy, known for his paintings of Lord Krishna, has portrayed the "Blue God" in various moods. In one of his paintings, Krishna is acknowledging the effect of his flute on the *gopīs* while in another, Krishna is lost in the music of love he himself has set tune to.

Such artistic endeavors highlight how the flute, a mythological symbol rooted in ancient Indian scriptures, can transcend its boundary and establish itself as a living metaphor in the contemporary world.

Conclusion

As modern audiences increasingly seek narratives that bridge the gap between historical mythos and contemporary existential challenges, the flute emerges as a powerful metaphor that encapsulates the dualities of human experience – joy and sorrow, silence and sound, the ephemeral and the eternal. The flute's multifaceted symbolism continues to inspire a plethora of creative works that negotiate the tension between the material and the metaphysical, thereby reinforcing the central thesis that this ancient instrument is far more than a mere musical tool.

The symbolic layers of Krishna's flute extend beyond national boundaries, offering fertile ground for comparative studies that could further illuminate its role across different religious and cultural traditions. For

instance, parallels may be drawn with the use of musical instruments in Sufi poetry such as the “reed” which embodies the divine voice calling the lover towards annihilation of the self and eternal union. Additionally, investigations into the flute’s depictions in tombs of pharaohs could provide insights of its importance in the afterlife.

As a timeless metaphor, Krishna’s flute is far more than a pastoral instrument. It speaks to the universal human experience of yearning, whether for love, beauty, or a connection to the infinite. In an era marked by rapid technological change and shifting cultural paradigms, Krishna’s flute remains an eternal call – one that resonates beyond time, space, and cultural boundaries, inviting all who hear it into the profound mystery of existence.

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