

CONSENT OF A WOMAN

Through her rendition of Jayadev's 'Gita Govinda' in Kathak, GURU PALI CHANDRA showcases essential life lessons — of respecting others, seeking consent, and expressing oneself freely, writes MONA MEHTA

A simple, relatable, love story — that is what Jayadev's *Gita Govinda* is. Spread over 12 *sargas*, chapters, and 24 *prabandhas*, sections, this Sanskrit text tells us the story of Radha and Krishn's love, set on the banks of River Yamuna. One of the reasons why Krishn is known as *Jagat Guru*, guru of the world, is that each moment of his life is a teaching. It is apparent even in this 12th century text.

"By way of Radha and Krishn's love story, the *Gita Govinda* illustrates that love does not mean just being together. It means understanding, trusting, and believing in each other. And most importantly, empowering each other," says Guru Pali Chandra, the Zurich-based Kathak exponent from Lucknow gharana, who along with her team has rendered the entire *Gita Govinda* for posterity. The text that's long inspired literature, music, paintings, and has been performed in Odissi and Mohiniyattam, is now presented in Kathak.

The love story that is erotic at one level, leads us to the sacred, offerings many life lessons on the way. The union of Radha and Krishn is a symbol of the love and marriage of *jivatama* with *Paramatma*. "I chose to perform the *Gita Govinda* because

it talks about universal emotions of love, pain of separation, longing, and reunion. There are many *prabandhas* that tell you how to process your pain," says Chandra.

Many of us faced loss and grief during the Covid-19 pandemic. Chandra found that the *Gita Govinda* was a good antidote to draw everyone out of it.

"Reading this text, I realised that pain has to be lived; it has to be processed. You cannot evade it. The *Gita Govinda* teaches us that when we are separated from our loved ones, we need not dwell on who is not with us, instead focus on the time we had with them, and will have. There will be a time when you have everything and a time when you have nothing, or some of it is missing. How do you handle it — that balance of body, mind, and soul is every easily understood by this text," says Chandra, citing two *ashtapadis*, verses, to illustrate this: *Pashyati dishi dishi* and *Radhika tava viraha Kesava*.

One of the most important lessons that this Bhakti Movement text has in store for us, though, is that of respecting women. "In Prabandha 23, we see that Krishn and Radha meet. He wants to hold her in his arms, make love to her, but he does not do that. He asks for her permission. We see here an element of consent. He is asking whether he can hold her hand, whether he can hold her in his arms.

We teach our children good touch, bad touch; we also need to teach them about consent," says Chandra.

Something more empowering is revealed to us further in Prabandha 24, in which Jayadev tells us how Radha expresses herself to Krishn after being united in love:

'...fasten over my loins a girdle, / Bind my masses of hair with a beautiful garland, and place many bracelets upon my hands and jewelled anklets upon my feet. / And so, he who wore the yellow garments did as she told him'.

"Here Radha asks Krishn to dress her, adorn her like a goddess. Not to forget her. It is done very lovingly, respectfully, and Krishn, the ultimate human, the ultimate god, surrenders to her. This shows us that no matter what, a woman is not something to be objectified. And that she has every right, in fact, she should feel empowered to say what she likes and loves. How many women today can actually say, dress me like this, treat me like that, specifically post love making? And the power to say that comes to Radha from Krishn," says Chandra.

Supported by *Natyasutra* — Invis team, all *prabandhas* of the *Gita Govinda* have been performed, filmed in the tropical forests of Kerala and especially designed sets, and launched online. Art connoisseurs, dance schools, teachers and students can watch, download, learn and perform. "The whole idea is that the coming generations can remember and appreciate the true idea of love and harmony," says Chandra. ■



GURU PALI CHANDRA
IN 'GITA GOVINDA'



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