

“Bhānusingha Thākurer Podābolī”: A Study of Vaiṣṇava Aesthetics in Tagore’s Poetry

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Abstract | Rabindranath Tagore’s poems have been the subject of much analysis and discussion for their poetic beauty and philosophical strain. Enriched with metaphor and symbolic imagery, his poems express the experiences of the phenomenal and spiritual world with equal finesse. This same dexterity can be witnessed in “Bhānusingha Thākurer Podābolī,” his first published work as a poet. These poems follow the *padāvalī* style of poetry popularized by the *Vaiṣṇava* saints of medieval Bengal, where Rādhā is portrayed not as the divine consort of the God Kṛṣṇa, but as a lovesick woman suffering in the absence of her lover, Kṛṣṇa. The sensuality of the poems, however, do not compromise with her status as a devotee par excellence. Tagore’s portrayal of Rādhā is akin to the trend that began at least in the 1st century AD, when Rādhā became the muse of both sacred and secular artistic productions. In the sacred tradition, her stature rivals that of Kṛṣṇa’s, where her devotion served as a model for the founders of *Vaiṣṇava* sects in formulating their spiritual practices, while in the secular tradition, her pan-Indian popularity alongside Kṛṣṇa is reflected in the performative traditions where their sports in Vrindāvana have inspired music, dance, and the arts of different regions, as well as the popular culture of modern times. The *Vaiṣṇava* aesthetic theory, which bridges the gap between aesthetics of dramaturgy and religious practices, also owes its development to Rādhā. The present paper explores the development of Rādhā in both secular and religious literary traditions, with special reference to *Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism* of Bengal. The paper further attempts to study Rādhā as Tagore’s heroine which was influenced by *Vaiṣṇava* lyrics and themes, and popularised by poets in Bengal since the 12th century AD.

Keywords | Rabindranath Tagore, *Padāvalī*, Rādhā, Kṛṣṇa, Narrative poetry, Medieval Bengali poetry, Devotional literature, *Vaiṣṇava* aesthetic theory, *Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism*

Rabindranath Tagore was an Indian poet, novelist, playwright, and composer, whose talent and fame have transcended spatio-temporal boundaries. Written during the colonial era in Bengal, his works remain as popular in the 21st century, and his compositions appear ever-new even while being adapted to newer formats. His works echo the wisdom of the Vedic seers, the sacred sensuality of the medieval poets, and also pulsate with the spirit of renaissance that was blowing over Bengal during his time. Tagore's entry into this 'world of words' began with the publication of "Bhānusingha Thākurer Podābolī"¹ in 1877, at the mere age of 16, penned under his sobriquet, Bhānu Singha. Written in the *padāvalī*² format, the genre of lyric poetry used by the medieval Bengali *Vaiṣṇava* poets, this collection of poems depicts the misery of Rādhā, the consort of Kṛṣṇa and the muse of *Vaiṣṇava* devotional literature. The empathy Tagore shows towards Rādhā in these early poems is reflected in the treatment of women characters throughout his literary career.

Tagore derives inspiration from varied sources, chief among them are the medieval saints of India like Kabīr,³ the Bāuls,⁴ and particularly, *Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism*.⁵ In spite of differences in their theo-philosophical outlook, all three are similar to each other in many ways. By breaking all rules of puritanical propriety, they modified the practice of devotion that suited one and all. Their followers included people from all denominations and different religions, paving the path for a syncretic religious ambience to exist. They also share a common theme in poetry, that is, they visualize God as their beloved and the most intimate of their relations. For them, the fulfilment of love is in

¹Literally translated as "The Collection of Poems of the Sun-Lion."

²*Padāvalī* refers to a collection of poems, often associated with religious poems, mainly with the *Vaiṣṇava* poets of east India. An individual poem is called a *pada* and a collection of *pada* is called a *padāvalī*. The words *podābolī* and *padāvalī* are same. Since 'v' is pronounced as 'b' and 'a' as almost 'o' in Tagore's native language, Bengali, the difference between the two words is only phonetic.

³Kabīr was a 15th century saint-poet in medieval north India who was revered by people of all religions. He propounded on the *nirguna* aspect, that is, One, Absolute, formless, and attributeless, of God who was beyond any differentiation and distinction. He composed couplets based on moral, social, philosophical, and religious themes which remain popular to this day. He was the disciple of Swami Ramānanda.

⁴Bāuls are the itinerant singing saints of eastern India, particularly Bengal, belonging to a heterogenous group, comprising of *Vaiṣṇava* and Sufi concepts of devotion. They do not believe in any form of organized religion, offering their devotion to the god that dwells in the heart of man.

⁵*Vaiṣṇavism* is one of the major denominations of Hinduism, which worships Viṣṇu, one of the members of the Holy Trinity, and/or his incarnations. Bengal *Vaiṣṇavism*, also called *Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism*, is one of the major sects in *Vaiṣṇavism*, founded by the 15th century Bengali saint Śrī Chaitanya. Kṛṣṇa, the incarnation of Viṣṇu, is the major deity of the *Gauḍīyas*, along with his consort, Rādhā. However, followers of all sects of *Vaiṣṇavism* are called *Vaiṣṇavas*.

merging one’s consciousness with God through constant contemplation of his *līlās*.⁶ While Kabīr and the Bāuls dedicate their poems to the *nirguṇa*⁷ aspect, the *Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavas* worship Kṛṣṇa, the incarnation of Viṣṇu. For them, Rādhā, the consort of Kṛṣṇa, is the ideal lover and devotee. Just like the Bāuls and Kabīr, the idea of one Supreme Being pervading the entire creation appealed to Tagore. He was also highly impressed by the depiction of Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa love stories in *Vaiṣṇava* lyrics. Tagore’s songs often take the *Vaiṣṇava* route; for instance, the long-awaited arrival of the monsoon after the scorching summer reminds him of the pangs of separation felt by the *Gopīs* in the absence of Kṛṣṇa.⁸ In another of his songs, Tagore assumes the persona of a young maiden who has already fallen in love with Kṛṣṇa after hearing his flute, without ever having seen him.⁹ Even though such poems do not explicitly mention anyone by name, the references Tagore uses are all common to the *Gopī-Kṛṣṇa* episodes. In his songs, Tagore intertwines language, music, and *Vaiṣṇava* metaphors in a manner which, instead of restricting, rather enhances his creativity to merge devotion and poetic aesthetics that appeal to his readers.

In “Bhānusingha Thākurer Podābolī,” Tagore utilises *Vaiṣṇava* themes and tales that had been popular in Bengal from the time of Jayadeva’s *Gīta Govinda* (12th century AD). Jayadeva’s poems describe the erotic longing and union of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa by evoking devotional element in their love. The sensationalism that *Gīta Govinda* caused was quickly subsumed within the sacred and secular traditions, and was incorporated into temple performances, literature, and schools of painting as far as Rajasthan. Through poets, performers, and saints, Rādhā’s figure gradually rose to prominence. With the spread of Bhakti movement in medieval India, women devotees were given particular importance, and Rādhā served as a role model for the movement, directly and indirectly. Rādhā became a metaphor for power, love, devotion, and oneness of the deity and his devotee in the literature of medieval poets (Pande 70). Later poets of Bengal like Vidyāpati (14th century) and Chaṇḍīdāsa (15th century) carried forward the artistic legacy of Jayadeva and elaborated on the relationship of Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa which bordered on jealousy, separation, union, and surrender (Pattanaik 31).

In the religious sphere, the poetic themes of union, separation, and union in separation through contemplation became a characteristic feature of the religious sects that based their practices on devotion. Within these sects, Rādhā became the ideal devotee because of her singular love towards Kṛṣṇa. In *Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism*, especially, Chaitanya transformed Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa’s love affair as a symbol of man’s ascent towards god-realisation (Sen 16). In their enquiry, emulating Rādhā was both the process and the goal of every devotee. The spiritual practices of the *Gauḍīyas* resonated with the masses and were adopted by them promptly because of the freedom they offered and the more ‘people-friendly’ description of the non-duality of Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa legend. People

⁶*Līlā* is defined as the ‘divine sport’ or ‘divine play.’ It is often used in relation with the incarnation of Kṛṣṇa who grew up in a small village in North India called Vrindāvana, which is also called Vraja, hence the name Vraja-līlā is given to his pastimes in Vrindāvana.

⁷See footnote 3 for definition.

⁸In his poem, “Esho Shyamala Sundara,” he welcomes the onset of monsoons. Since the clouds and Kṛṣṇa are both dark, the word *Shyamala*, literally meaning dark, is used to refer to both Kṛṣṇa and the clouds.

⁹In the poem, “Ekhone Taare Chokhe Dekhini,” Tagore assumes the voice of a *gopī* who has fallen in love with Kṛṣṇa without having met him and is sharing ‘her’ experiences with a friend.

could connect with the themes of unsanctioned love, separation, and the fear of social taboo during clandestine meetings—emotions which were very human but could also be imposed on a devotee’s longing for deity. Thus, through engagement with devotional practices, the path of sensuality led to the blossoming of spirituality. In his *Podābolī*, Tagore fuses these philosophical themes of *Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism* with the empathy of *padāvalī* poets towards the rueful state of Rādhā during her separation from Kṛṣṇa. Tagore’s poems, however, were not sacred in character, that is, they were not written with any philosophical or devotional intent and were not meant to be used during *kīrtana*,¹⁰ although their use in religious gatherings was not prohibited. Since its publication, Tagore’s *Podābolī* has been used in music and dance performances, as well as movies in recent years. The present paper, therefore, aims to provide a narrative analysis of the poems in “Bhānusingha Thākurer Podābolī,” with reference to Rādhā as Tagore’s heroine. The paper further aims to explore the role of *Vaiṣṇava* literature in popularising Rādhā’s eminence in the legend of Kṛṣṇa and the influence *Vaiṣṇava* aesthetics had on Tagore’s poetry, particularly on his portrayal of Rādhā.

Rabindranath Tagore was born on 7th May 1861 in the famous Tagore family of Jorasanko, where art, religion, and philosophy were woven into daily life. Although Tagore practiced nearly every literary form, his primary mode is the lyric poetry, comprising of 4500 poems, of which almost 2200 are songs (Anisuzzaman 21). His collection of poems, *Gītānjālī*, earned him the Nobel Prize in literature in 1913, making him the first Indian to have received the honour.¹¹ Not bound to any particular literary movement or genre, his pen worked assiduously to give expression to every facet of life. His literature reflected the social, political, and cultural changes that India was going through during his time (Ghosh 3). The environment he grew up in cultivated an acute sensitivity towards the world in him, which was stabilized and directed by the philosophical moorings of Vedānta. His spirit grew in close association with nature, a relation whose intimacy is evident in most of Tagore’s works. Through his literature, he expanded the aesthetic sensibility of his audience, led their attention to important social issues, and imparted them with a depth of vision that was befitting his title, *Gurudev* (great teacher).

Influences of both Vedic and *Vaiṣṇava* trends of thoughts are conspicuous in Tagore’s poetry. Tagore’s spiritual inspiration was derived from the Vedas and diversified by the *Vaiṣṇava* dualism that maintains a distinction between human and the divine in order to show how they both realise each other (Ghosh 174; Chaudhuri 76). What manifested in Tagore was the perfect blend of India’s sublime Vedic tradition and the modern view that was gradually penetrating into the culture and society of Bengal (Thakur 73). The philosophical strain noticeable in many of Tagore’s poems, where he visualizes the Creator as the sovereign ruler of the universe, was the result of studying the Upaniṣads¹² since an early age. His poems have a hymnal quality, and like the Vedic seers, his poetry visualizes the presence of the divine in the harmony of all creation. He

¹⁰*Kīrtana* is a form of religious congregational singing common to Hinduism, but particularly important in *Vaiṣṇavism*.

¹¹Tagore was also the first non-European recipient of the Nobel Prize.

¹²Upaniṣads are the foundational texts of non-dualism which especially deal with metaphysics. These texts inspired later Indian philosophers like Shankarāchārya, Rāmānuja, and others in the formulation of both dualism and non-dualism.

worships the Lord of his life, his *Jīvan Devatā*, with an offering of songs. In most of his poems he calls out to this inner deity, is anguished by His absence, pines for Him, and accosts Him for not revealing Himself (Tagore “*Gītābitān*” 99).¹³ At the end of all his efforts, when Tagore realizes his eternal unity with his deity, he sees himself engulfed by This Universal Spirit, who makes Tagore’s existence fragrant with His divine presence (204).¹⁴ This ubiquitous presence marks a distinct feature of Tagore’s poetry where he ‘becomes’ the voice of all creation—in his exuberant celebration of the onset of monsoons, his ecstasy at the sight of spring, his nostalgic outpours on autumn evenings, and in his search for warmth on cold winter nights.¹⁵ Through his poetry, Tagore establishes a crucial link between the world of humans and nature, where “love is plotted against myth and classical poetry, nature and the cosmos” (Chaudhuri 53).

The devotional aesthetics evident in his poems is a blend of the philosophical vision of the Upaniṣads and the unrestrained expression of love of the *Vaiṣṇavas*, who assume the persona of the *gopīs*¹⁶ for union with their divine lover. Probably as a result of growing up in a traditional *Vaiṣṇava* environment, Tagore continued to be moved by Kṛṣṇa’s story all his life, not necessarily as a devotee but as a *rasika*, an aesthete, while being aware of the philosophical underpinnings of the myth (Bhattacharya 380). About his association with *Vaiṣṇava* lyrics, Tagore writes in “The Vision” that he came across a collection of *Vaiṣṇava* poems when he was very young. Through these poems he became aware that the poets were talking about “the supreme lover, whose touch we experience in all our relations of love” (379). He further suggests that the *Vaiṣṇava* religion carries the message of God’s love finding its finality in man’s love, that “the lover man, is the complement of the lover, God, in the internal love drama of existence” (380). With regards to *Vaiṣṇava* influence on Tagore, A.K. Coomaraswami states, “*Vaiṣṇava* art is correspondingly humanistic, and it is from this school of thought that the poetry of Rabindranath Tagore derives. In it are echoed the teachings of such prophets as Śrī Chaitanya and poets such as Jayadeva and Cāṇḍīdāsa, who sung of the religion of love” (qtd. in Thakur 84).

Tagore’s concept of aesthetics is also akin to the *Vaiṣṇava* concept of *rasa*, literally meaning “essence.” K.S. Ramaswami states, “Tagore has gone back to the past age of the great *Vaiṣṇava* movement and has affected a revolution in the realm of taste

¹³In his poem, “Aami bahu bāṣonāy,” Tagore expresses his regret for pining for material things, while his God carefully ‘removed’ these objects so that Tagore’s dedication to his God is bereft of any desires.

¹⁴In his poem, “Ei Lobhinu Songo tobo,” Tagore describes, in an indirect way, his own experience of self-realisation—his eyes have been opened by radiance, while a gentle breeze has carried the fragrance of his Lord into his heart, that the touch of his Lord has breathed a new life into him; by doing so, Tagore feels, his Lord has made him live many lifetimes in this one life. The same idea is reflected in many of his songs and poems that are classified in the “Pūjā Paryā.” For Tagore’s poems, see *Gītābitān*. Sandip Book Centre, 2003; and for discussion on Tagore’s ideas on spirituality, see Tagore, Rabindranath. *The Religion of Man*. George Allen and Unwin Limited, 1922, pp. 93–98.

¹⁵His poem, *Aaj Jyotsnā rate*, portrays his pain of being lonely on a moonlit night; in *Sharat tomār arūn ālor Anjali*, Tagore describes the onset of winters. For details, see, “Prakriti Paryā.” *Gītābitān*. Sandip Book Centre, 2003.

¹⁶*Gopīs* are the cowherd women of Vrindāvana, a town located approximately 144 km. away from India’s capital, Delhi. It is the land associated with the legends of Kṛṣṇa and his childhood. According to *Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism*, the earthly Vrindāvana, also called Vraja, was created as a replica of the celestial Vrindāvana, the eternal abode of the divine couple Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa, where they live with their attendants, the *gopīs*.

by so going back to the age of beauty, freedom, love, and rapture. He has revived and re-kindled our sense of the wonder of things, our perception of the beauty and grace and love of God” (qtd. in Thakur 84). He gives the name *rasa sāhitya* (literature of the essence of emotions) to literature that results from the effort at expressing not his need but his *ānanda*, his bliss (Chattopadhyay 371–372). Tagore claims that if a person surrenders himself completely to the universal flow and sport (*līlā*) of expression (*prakāśa*), the need for expressing his joy will have an immediacy (Chattopadhyay 371–372). An artiste’s endeavour (*sādhanā*), hence, should be to make oneself the receptacle for the flow of this universal expression. This echoes the idea of the *Gauḍīya*s for whom the Absolute is of the nature of bliss and manifests itself in the aesthetic experience of *rasa* (Goswami 74), reaching its pinnacle in what Graham Schweig refers to as the “dance of divine love,” or *rāsa*¹⁷ (1). Like Tagore, *Gauḍīya* aesthetics also acknowledge the intricate relationship between emotions and *bhakti*,¹⁸ which they direct towards Kṛṣṇa, the source, object, and receiver of all *rasas*, who descends on earth to relish and soak his devotees in his divine *rasa*.

During the medieval times, Bengal, especially Navadvīpa (a town in the Indian state of West Bengal, the birthplace of Chaitanya Mahāprabhu), the headquarters of *Navya Nyāya*,¹⁹ was a sought-after seat of learning. As a result, *Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism* was nurtured by the greatest minds of medieval India, who made significant contribution to the growth of theology, aesthetics, and philosophy. The credit for the successful fusion of these three branches goes to the scholars and poets of the tradition, which attracted the hearts of the devotees and the minds of the intellectuals alike. The early *Gauḍīya* saints were renowned scholars of Sanskrit drama and scriptures, who wrote extensive commentaries and treatises on aesthetics and rhetorics, and utilised religious narratives as examples to formulate the theo-philosophy of the *Gauḍīya* school. The core idea of *rasa* as the essence of all artistic activity, propounded by Bharata in his *Nāṭyaśāstra*,²⁰ (Masson 1) was borrowed by rhetoricians like Rūpa Goswāmī of the *Gauḍīya* school, who applied this idea to gain an insight into the nature of religious experience, “the role of emotions in spiritual practice [and] the novel application of Sanskrit literary theory to devotion” (Lutjeharms 218). Bhoja’s (11th century) works on poetics, *Sarasvatī*

¹⁷*Rāsa līlā* or simply *rāsa* is the sport dance of love that Kṛṣṇa and his *gopīs* engaged in. The arrangement of the *rāsa-maṇḍala*, or the circle of *rāsa*, holds esoteric significance for the *Vaiṣṇavas*. It is believed to be the aim of all devotees to merge in union with Kṛṣṇa through the *rāsa*. The five chapters dealing with *rāsa līlā* in the Srimad Bhāgavatam are thus called the heart of Bhāgavatam by the scholars and saints of the *Vaiṣṇava* tradition.

¹⁸*Bhakti* here stands for devotion which transforms into *bhakti rasa*, or devotional *rasa*, due to their engagement with Kṛṣṇa.

¹⁹The Indian school of Neo-Logic, founded in the 13th century by Gangesha Upadhyaya, a philosopher from Mithila, and developed by Raghunatha Shiromani of Navadvīpa.

²⁰Bharata’s *Nāṭyaśāstra* lists eight permanent or dominant emotions (*sthāyī bhāva*), of which one or a combination of any of them is the main theme of an artistic activity. For these dominant emotions to have effect, a secondary set of emotions, which are the proper causes of these dominant emotions must be present. Bharata calls them *vibhāva* (excitant), *anubhāva* (ensuant), and *vyabhichārī* (transient) emotions. A combination of these three emotions gives rise to *rasa*.

According to Bharata, *vibhāvas* are two-fold: (a) *ālambana* (primary excitants), that is, the object on which the dominant emotion rests, (b) *uddīpana* (stimulating excitants) which includes scenery, moonlit night, etc. *Anubhāvas*, Bharata says, are the physical reactions to the dominant emotion, such as crying, laughing. The *vyabhichārī bhāvas* such as joy, envy, etc., further enhance the dominant emotion.

Kaṇṭhābharāṇa (Sarasvatī’s Necklace) and *Śṛīṃgāra Prakāśa* (Light of Passion), also profoundly influenced the authors of early *Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism* (218). The latter’s discussion on erotic love (*śṛīṃgāra*) was modified by Rūpa Goswāmī and other teachers at the school for developing *śṛīṃgāra*, the dominant emotion upon which *mādhurya bhakti* of Bengal *Vaiṣṇavism* rests. The *śṛīṃgāra rasa* expressed through *rati* in literature (term associated with human desires and love) was transformed by Goswāmī and other *Vaiṣṇava* rhetoricians into *madhurā rati* or divine love, the sentiment which transcends all mundane limitations to depict the ethereal love of Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa (Bhaduri 384).²¹

Following the exposition of *bhakti* in the *Śrīmad Bhāgavata Mahāpurāṇa*, the *Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavas* believe that man’s love for the divine takes five forms: of parent-child (*vātsalya*), friends (*sakhya*), servants (*dāsyā*), through tranquility (*śānta*), and as lovers (*mādhurya*) (Kumar 171; Bhaduri 390). Of these, *mādhurya* is believed to be the greatest form of love, as a devotee can achieve the highest spiritual state by going through enhanced pain and pleasure of a relationship not sanctioned by society, just like the relationship between Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa. In their practice of devotion, the *Vaiṣṇavas* follow the example of the *gopīs*, the unlettered cowherd women who sported with Kṛṣṇa in Vrindāvana. *Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavas* believe that love is intensified in the absence of the object of devotion, that is, Kṛṣṇa. For them, it is in this absence of Kṛṣṇa that their *madhurā bhakti*²² is transformed into *bhakti yoga* or *yoga* of devotion through their constant contemplation of Kṛṣṇa and his *līlās*. When the mind transcends this plane of contemplation, it is completely relished by the devotee as *rasa*. All the secondary emotions that supported this heightening of the dominant emotion are absorbed into the essence of love and enhance its experience with their unique flavour (Lutjeharms 219). This experience is effected mutually; the divine assumes human form and defines himself in human, and human perfects himself in its association with the divine. Kṛṣṇa here represents the divine, while his human counterpart in this relationship is Rādhā, his favourite *gopī*. Rādhā on her way to midnight tryst with Kṛṣṇa symbolises the human soul’s quest to reach its own perfection. Klostermaier hence observes that among all the religious traditions in India, “perhaps the most subtle and detailed system of gradual ascent to God by means of love has been developed in the Chaitanya school of *Vaiṣṇavism*” (qtd. in Schweig 97).

To make these complex concepts a part of the religious and cultural life of the masses, the bulk of *Vaiṣṇava* lyrics in Bengal were not written in vernacular or Sanskrit, but in an artificial literary language developed by the poets in the 15th–16th century, called Brajabuli, which was a mixture of Maithili, Bengali, Hindi, and Brajbhasha (Sen 1). From Bengal, Brajabuli spread to Odisha, Asom,²³ and some other parts of India. Here also it was primarily used to compose *Vaiṣṇava* lyrics. The mixture of regional languages made the vocabulary of Brajabuli expansive. The unique feature of *Vaiṣṇava* poems composed in Brajabuli was the use of localized language and symbols, along with the expressions of classical Sanskrit, which made these poems popular. With the works of poets like

²¹According to Rūpa Goswāmī, the dominant emotion of devotion is *kṛṣṇaviṣaya rati* or love towards Kṛṣṇa.

²²Another name for *mādhurya bhakti* or devotion based on romantic love.

²³India’s north-eastern state of Assam is also called Asom in the local language, that is, Assamese. Assam was officially renamed to Asom in 2006. However, both the names are interchangeably used.

Śākar Mallik, Persian words also came to be used in the composition of *padāvalīs*. Kṛṣṇa's *Vraja-līlā* (his sports in Vrindāvana) forms a major portion of these poems.

Padas (*pada* is an individual poem in a *padāvalī*) belong to the genre of poetry. The *padāvalī* poets took up episodes from Kṛṣṇa's life and narrated a scene from a *līlā* which read like a story with a proper beginning, middle, and end. The content of the *padas* have a rhetorical, argumentative, and emotional sequence (Roy 6). They are mostly either written as a dialogue between two *gopīs* about their experiences, a conversation between the *gopīs* and Rādhā, or a narrative where *gopīs* are empathizing with Rādhā. However, not all the poets followed this sequence. The *padas* are usually 12–14 lines in length. The story beginning in one poem may thus be divided into many *padas* to give a collection of similar poems a thematic structure. The *padas* were composed with the intention of being sung. Composing them in proper metre was as such imperative. The metres generally used for the composition of *padas* were *marahatta*, *chaupāī* (quatrain), *charchari*, *dohā* (both are couplets, but use a set number of syllables in every line), and *payār* (6–8 syllables per line).²⁴ The *padas* are typically performed with the accompaniment of cymbals and *khol*, a two-sided drum commonly used in Bengal, Odisha, Asom, and Manipur during *kīrtanas*. They are used in composing odes to Kṛṣṇa and saints.

The *padāvalī* writers took many themes from the *gopīs* and Kṛṣṇa episodes and infused the narrative with “poetic beauty, a passionate intensity and a spiritual meaning” (Ghosh 57). Almost 8000 such poems are attributed to the medieval *Vaiṣṇava* poets of Bengal.²⁵ These lyrics were instrumental in bringing *gopīs*' devotion in the direct experience of people. Another important feature of Brajabuli is that the words mostly end with vowel sounds. This made it easier for the lyrics to be composed as a song that could be used during congregational singing or *kīrtana* (Roy 14). Since singular devotion to Kṛṣṇa is the aim of human life according to the *Gauḍīyas*, *padāvalīs* and *kīrtanas* became their medium to engage with people belonging to all sections of the society. Due to the popularity of the *padāvalīs*, *Vaiṣṇava* themes gradually came to be used to compose folk songs, especially in Bengal, where they became a regular feature of fairs and festivals but could also be sung at any time during the day as a form of *smaraṇa bhakti*.²⁶

With regards to their historicity, available literary evidence suggests that *Vaiṣṇava* lyric poetry was written by poets serving in the courts of medieval Bengal at various posts. Even though the *padāvalī* genre was adopted by the *Vaiṣṇava* poets, the oldest Brajabuli poem in Bengal is attributed to Yashoraj Khan, a court officer, who

²⁴For details, see Bhattacharya, Tarapada. *Chhanda-tattva O Chhandobibartan*. Calcutta University, 1971.

²⁵J. C. Ghosh has broadly classified *Vaiṣṇava* *padas* under four heads:

1. Poems dedicated to Kṛṣṇa's incarnations.
2. Poems that depict the sports of Kṛṣṇa with his friends when herding cattle or of Chaitanya with his playmates.
3. Poems which deal with the childhood of Kṛṣṇa and Chaitanya.
4. Poems which treat the love of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa (19).

Of these, poems dealing with the fourth category form the bulk of the compositions.

²⁶According to Prahlāda in the *Śrīmad Bhāgavata* (VII.5.23), devotion can be practiced in nine forms referred to as *navdhā bhakti*—*śravaṇa* (hearing the holy narratives of God), *kīrtana* (singing), *smaraṇa* (remembering the narratives and deeds of God), *pāda sevnam* (service), *archana* (worship), *vandana* (singing His eulogies), *dāsyā* (service), *sakhya* (friendship), and *ātma nivedana* (surrender one's own self).

wrote a poem dedicated to Sultan Hussain Shah, the king of Bengal, sometime between 1493–1519 AD. The oldest, datable narrative poem related to Kṛṣṇa in Bengal is *Shri Kṛṣṇavijaya* of Maladhar Basu (15th century), who was given the sobriquet Gunaraj Khan by Sultan Ruknuddin Shah (Sen 1–2). Another narrative poem, *Kṛṣṇamangal*, was written by Yashoraj Khan. However, no manuscript of the said poem is available. As *Vaiṣṇavism* rose in significance starting from the 13th–14th century, Brajabuli was used to compose *Vaiṣṇava* lyrics. Sen notes that lyric poetry based on Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa was greatly influenced by Bengal *Vaiṣṇavism* and continued to grow under Chaitanya, his followers, and later scholars of the tradition, whose works are counted amongst the best on poetics and *Vaiṣṇava* lyric poetry (11–12). Poets like Chaṇḍīdāsa, Govindadāsa, Narottamadāsa, and others carried forward the glorious literature towards even greater heights. According to J.C. Ghosh, the allegory and symbolism found in the *padas* give them an “essential unreality of a romantic-spiritual arcadia” (57). These poems, Dimock notes, are not limited only to the *Vaiṣṇava* sect, “but are the valued property of all Bengalis” (xi).

In the *madhurā bhakti* of the *gopīs*, portrayed in the *padāvalī* literature, the lovers, especially Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa go through the following stages: *purvarāga* (advent of love by hearing or seeing before the actual meeting), *dautya* (communication through intermediaries), *abhisāra* (tryst), *sambhoga* (union), *viraha* (separation), and *bhāva milana* (reunion in spirit) (Ghosh 60). The dominant theme of the *padāvalī* literature is *viraha* or separation. The idea of *abhisāra* (midnight tryst) is also another important theme in *Vaiṣṇava* poetry. In spite of their status as common women, the *gopīs* have become the epitome of *bhakti* due to their unparalleled love and devotion for Kṛṣṇa. The *Śrīmad Bhāgavatam* gives details of the *gopīs*’ devotion where they contemplate on Kṛṣṇa and his *līlās* while being engaged in their household duties (10.44.15).²⁷ Although on the surface the *gopīs* seem to look upon Kṛṣṇa as their lover, their conversations with him during the *rāsa*²⁸ reveal that they were not unaware of him being the Supreme Lord. This is proven by the *gopīs*’ exhortation of Kṛṣṇa at the beginning of the *rāsa* and in *Gopī Geet* where they refer to him as the supreme soul that pervades the entire creation.²⁹ In fact, their supremacy as the greatest of his devotees was recognized by Kṛṣṇa himself. This is evinced by the fact that he sent Uddhava, his cousin, to Vraja to gain practical

²⁷“*ya dohane āvahane mathanopalepa prenkhenkhanar bhārudi toṣana marjanādaṁ/ gāyanti chaiva manuraktādi yoasrau kaṇṭhyo dhanya vrajastriya urukrama chittayānā//*.” (“Hail the *gopīs* who sing the *līlās* of Kṛṣṇa while milking the cows, or engaged in other works, and through this contemplative meditation have imprisoned the Lord of Lords within the enclosure of their heart.”) Translated by author from the original Sanskrit version of *Śrīmad Bhāgavata Mahāpurāṇa*.

²⁸They were lectured by Kṛṣṇa to go back to their husbands, that they should not be in the forest at midnight. At this, the *gopīs* feel hurt and ask him, since they have left their homes for him, what should their future course of action be now? Instead of seeking to unite with him, should they go back to their earthly husbands and live a limited life? By seeking Kṛṣṇa, they are seeking eternity, then why is he forcing them to bondage? Kṛṣṇa is pleased with their answer and then fulfils their wish by engaging in *rāsa-līlā* (*Srīmad Bhāgavatam* X.29.31–41).

²⁹*Srīmad Bhāgavatam*, X.30.1–19 is called the *Gopī Geet*, the Song of the *Gopīs*, which they sing after Kṛṣṇa leaves them during the *rāsa*. In verse 4 of the song, that is, X.30.4, the *gopīs* say that they know of Kṛṣṇa’s identity. He is not just the son of Nanda and Yashoda who sports in Vrindāvana, but is the friend of Brahmā, the creator. Kṛṣṇa, they say, is the Supreme Soul who has incarnated in the family of the Sātvatas for the benefit of the world.

experience of devotion from the *gopīs*.³⁰ Furthermore, *Nārada Bhakti Sūtra*, the authoritative instruction manual on the practice of devotion, also directs people to emulate the *gopīs* if they want to inculcate Kṛṣṇa *bhakti* in their lives (Bhuteshananda 21).³¹ Joseph T. O’Connell suggests that the devotional ethics of the *Gauḍīyas*, which are based on a “dynamic, inter-personal” and “intensely emotional” relationship between Kṛṣṇa and His devotees are integral to the “collective philosophical-cum-theological system” and the devotional way of life that the followers of Chaitanya aspired to live (174). Thus, by making the *gopīs*, especially Rādhā, their role models, the *Gauḍīya* saints revolutionised the practice of religion, and brought the terse philosophy of non-dualism as well as the dualistic mode of worship³² within the grasp of common man.

The first indication of Rādhā’s story is found in the *Śrīmad Bhāgavata*, the hagiography of Kṛṣṇa, where her name is both concealed and revealed. Her name and significance in the life of Kṛṣṇa is both veiled and revealed in the *rāsa līlā* episode where she is referred to as the ‘special *gopī*’ with whom Kṛṣṇa disappears leaving the other maidens during the *rāsa līlā* (Schweig 19). While her personal name is never exclusively mentioned in the text, Śukadeva, the narrator of the *Srimad Bhāgavatam*, ‘reveals’ her name through the cryptic term *ārādhitā*, which contain the first letters of Rādhā’s name (*ā-rādh-ita*) meaning both “the worshipped” and “the resplendent” (148). In her primordial form, she is Kṛṣṇa’s *āhlāadini śakti*, his power, who exists eternally in inseparable union with Him. She is the stream of devotion that links the devotee with Kṛṣṇa. In her mortal form, she represents the quest of the individual to be with the Supreme Being. Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa are at the same time the source, receiver, and ‘experiencer’ of *rasa*. Enjoyment elementarily implies a relationship between the object and the subject, the enjoyer and the enjoyed, and this duality manifests itself in the aesthetic experience or *rasa* as *rāsa* (Goswami 75). Thus, Rādhā, the *āhlāadini śakti*, is of the nature of pure bliss and also leads others to experience this bliss (75). If Kṛṣṇa is *raseshvara*,³³ Rādhā is *raseshvari*.³⁴ She is the *āśraya*, the support, without whose blessings even Kṛṣṇa cannot perform *rāsa*. Therefore, the *Gauḍīya* tradition accords a high status to Rādhā. Her singular devotion towards Kṛṣṇa is the essence of *Gauḍīya* philosophy and emulating her *madhu-sneha* (honey-like affection) is the goal of every devotee. She is an important figure in the legend of Kṛṣṇa. She rivals him in fame and prominence as a major deity of the *Vaiṣṇavas*.

Rādhā’s exalted position in the tradition is evidenced by the statement of Srīla Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī Thākura (the spiritual guru Srīla Prabhupāda),³⁵ “a devotee of

³⁰“*Bhagavati Uttamashloke bhavatibhiranuttumā/ bhaktih pravartita dishtya munināmapī durlabha/*” (*Śrīmad Bhāgavata Mahāpurāṇa* X.47.25). Uddhava praises the *gopīs* in this shloka for their devotion to Kṛṣṇa which he says, cannot be rivalled even by the greatest of the sages. (Translation by the author)

³¹“*Yathā vrajagopīkanam*” (“emulate the *gopīs* in your devotion”). Translated by the author.

³²In the religious practices inspired by dualist philosophy propounded by Madhvāchārya in the 13th century, the deity and the devotee are, for functional purposes, believed to be different from each other, and as such a hierarchical relationship exists between them. This is in contradiction to the non-dualist philosophy of Ādi Śāṅkara, who expounded the unity of the individual being and the Supreme Being. For details on the Bhakti Schools of Vedānta and Non-dualism, see Sheridan’s *The Advaitic Theism of the Bhagavata Purana*.

³³The Lord of Rasa

³⁴The Goddess of Rasa

³⁵The founder of the International Society for Kṛṣṇa Consciousness, ISKCON.

Viṣṇu is a *Vaiṣṇava*, a devotee of Kṛṣṇa is a *Kāṛṣṇa*, and a devotee of Sri Rādhā is a *Gauḍīya* [...] we are *śuddha śāktas* [pure worshippers of the divine feminine]. We are concerned with Kṛṣṇa because our mistress Rādhārāṇī has connection with him” (qtd. in Rosen 56). Rādhā is a frequently mentioned figure in Indian literature, at least from the time of Hala’s *Sattasai*,³⁶ an anthology of almost 700 poems compiled by the Sātavahana king Hāla (Vaudeville 2). However, her status as the beloved of Kṛṣṇa was firmly established after the composition of Jayadeva’s *Gīta Govinda*. *Gīta Govinda* was instrumental in instituting and legitimizing Rādhā’s supremacy in *Vaiṣṇavism* (Paranjape 106). Yet, “the lack of any textual references to Rādhā in the *Mahābhārata*, and the only indirect allusions in the *Srimad Bhāgavatam*, establish that the rebellious figure of Rādhā was born of the ahistorical collective consciousness of religion and culture. She was born of the need to establish a direct emotional and mystical relationship, a sensual, tactile, immersive connect, with the sacred” (Gokhale 9).

Hardy, in his book *Viraha Bhakti: The Early History of Kṛṣṇa Devotion*, notes that the *Gopī* episode is treated differently in the epic, secular, and *purāṇic* traditions (19). While the epic tradition restricts itself to the lovemaking between the *gopīs* and Kṛṣṇa, the *purāṇic* tradition ignores Rādhā and the earthlier aspects of the *gopī* story. However, the *Purāṇas* introduce the *rāsa* dance and the theme of the final separation of the *gopīs* and Kṛṣṇa. The secular poetic tradition, meanwhile, portrays Kṛṣṇa’s love sports in Vrindāvana in a more human and earthly manner. With the use of allegory and other poetic devices the poets describe Rādhā’s sorrow poignantly. Especially the poets of *padāvalī* literature give the *gopīs* an opportunity to express their grief and uninhibited anger against Kṛṣṇa’s apparent ignorance of their plight. The poets identify Kṛṣṇa as the Supreme Lord, but they do not forgive him for his ‘mistreatment’ of the *gopīs*, especially Rādhā. They believe that the clever Kṛṣṇa had beguiled the innocent Rādhā through his handsome features and suave manners. His flute was another culprit whose seductive ‘call’ the *gopīs* could never ignore. The *gopīs* spent all their days thinking of him, and when he came back home in the evening after grazing cows, they came up with excuses to meet him. Their pastimes together are described in great detail in the *padas*, verging on the sensuous, which might confuse an uninitiated reader regarding their usage in devotional practices. But the *Gauḍīyas* did not see any difference between the carnal and the spiritual. For the poets especially, Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa were a pair of rustic and unsophisticated human lovers. This portrayal was necessary because the human mind tends to understand everything based on its own experiences in the phenomenal world. By depicting the divine couple in human terms, the poets brought the love of Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa into the experience of common men and women, whom they could relate with. This was the great contribution of the *Vaiṣṇava* lyrics to both religion and arts—for the devotees, the lyrics were a tool for worship; for the artists and poets, the lyrics were an ocean of inspiration that inspired their creativity.

Tagore is one such poet, who was inspired by the *Vaiṣṇava* lyrics which he emulated in his very first collection of poems and continued to utilise in many of his later

³⁶It is an anthology of poems that was collected from regional sources and compiled by the Sātavāhana King Hāla in the 1st century AD, where Kṛṣṇa is always depicted with one *gopī* who appears to be his favourite amongst all the others. In her regional variations, her name maybe different; however, the stories have a common theme and plot development that was used in later works like *Gīta Govinda* of Jayadeva, the *padāvalī* literature of Bengal and the poems of North Indian saint poets like Sūrdās.

creations. Tagore's portrayal of Rādhā was the result of his long association with *Vaiṣṇavism*, especially *Vaiṣṇava* literature. A distinguishing feature of Tagore's works is that they explore, on the one hand, the "formative relations between immediate and particular experiences of social organisation, and a larger philosophical understanding," on the other (Bannerji 240). This understanding applies especially to his heroines. The female characters in Tagore's novels (Dāmini in *Chaturamga*, Bimalā in *Ghare Bāire*, and others) risk their social respect, family ties, and also their safety in pursuit of their desires (Bannerji 245). The archetype of such a heroine is Rādhā for whom Kṛṣṇa is supreme, and no bondage of either society or family could stop her from uniting with her beloved. Unlike the *Vaiṣṇava* lyrics, however, the poems in Tagore's "Bhānusingha Thākurer Podābolī" were not written with the purpose of enhancing *rāganugā bhakti*³⁷ but are considered to belong to the genre of *padāvalī* due to their thematic treatment of the Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa legend, the metres used, and the style of their composition. In their poetic beauty they rival the poems of seasoned authors. The poems are a dialogue between Rādhā and her confidante Bhānu, a persona assumed by the poet himself. This confidante figure is a regular in *padāvalī* literature, often portrayed as an older lady. For example, in *Śrī Kṛṣṇa Kīrtana* of Chandīdāsa (1380 AD), we find mention of an old woman, *baḍāi* (old mother) who acts as an intermediary between Kṛṣṇa and Rādhā. At times of pleasure, she helps in arranging midnight trysts between Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa, while during their separation, she consoles and cares for Rādhā so that she can bear the pain borne of their separation.

The love portrayed in Tagore's poems is predominantly emotional than sensual. They present the innocence of both—the teenager poet, that is, Rabindranath, and his protagonist, Rādhā. According to Stewart and Twichell, the charm of the poems in Bhānusingha's *Podābolī* lies in the fact that they are woven around the "physical and emotional landscape of devotion" (14). Just like other texts, Tagore's poems also suggest that Rādhā was the favourite *gopī* of Kṛṣṇa (Stewart and Twichell 10). It is her utmost and unselfish love and devotion for Kṛṣṇa that attracts him towards her. For Tagore, Rādhā is symbolic of intense human emotions, an exemplar of what the poet calls the "religion of man" (O'Connell 151). This dynamics between the divine and the human is perfectly captured by the *Gaudīyas* and is applauded by Tagore himself. In his talk titled *Samanjasya* in Shantiniketan, Tagore says, "'the amazing courage and candour' with which *Vaiṣṇava* spirituality proposes the idea that 'God has bound himself to the living being (*jīva*)': that is the 'supreme glory' upon which the latter's existence rests" (qtd. in Bhattacharya 380).

The story of Bhānusingha's poems begins with Rādhā visiting the *nikunja*³⁸ in the absence of Kṛṣṇa, to relive their joyous moments. These were the groves where Kṛṣṇa and Rādhā would have their secret rendezvous in the past. The groves provided both privacy and anonymity; by shielding the lovers, the groves also became their secret-keepers. Tagore makes abundant use of symbolic imagery to both contrast and corroborate her feelings. Though monsoon is used to portray the separation of lovers in

³⁷*Rāgānugā bhakti* is defined, by Jīva Goswami in his *Bhakti Rasāmṛta Sindhu* (1.2.6), as the desire to worship Kṛṣṇa in the way the people of Vṛndāvana worshipped Him when He was in Vraja. This worship took the form of a personal relationship with God.

³⁸Groves in Vrindāvana where Kṛṣṇa and Rādhā meet during their midnight tryst.

classical Indian poetics, Tagore uses spring’s bounty and youth to express the opposite mood in these poems, that is, Rādhā’s pining for Kṛṣṇa. In the poem 1, “basanta āulo re,” the poet presents us with a view of the onset of spring, contrasting it with Rādhā’s sorrow: flowers have blossomed in the groves, yet the fresh lotus-like face of Rādhā presents a dreary sight. All of nature seems to be enjoying her sorrow. Tagore presents Rādhā’s lament in the following words:

Spring at last! The Amuyas flare
Half-opened, trembling with bees. A river of shadow flows through the grove...
Am I not a flame in his eyes? ...
Even the bee-opened flowers mock me:
“Where is your lover, Rādhā?
Does he sleep with you?
On this scented night of spring?” (Stewart and Twichell 22)³⁹

The groves which had once witnessed the love of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa are now devoid of such pleasure. In the first four poems, (according to the sequence of poems published in the *Gītābitān*), Rādhā is represented as the *virahotkaṇṭhita nāyikā*,⁴⁰ the heroine suffering from pangs of separation. The *ālambana*, the source of her sorrow is Kṛṣṇa, who has long gone to Mathurā and has not returned since. Her sorrow is intensified by the melody of Kṛṣṇa’s flute or its echo in the “plaintive cry of the bird or by a myriad of any other reminder” (Stewart and Twichell 12).

The spring breeze once soothing to the senses, now billow with the grief of Rādhā; the whole universe is celebrating the coming of spring while Rādhā is drowned in self-pity. In the poem 2, titled “sunala sunala bālikā” (literally translated as “Listen, listen O Girl!”), Tagore uses the analogy of ‘night’ referring to it with the feminine form *yāmini*, whose existence is illumined by the presence of her ‘husband,’ the moon,⁴¹ while there lies Rādhā, who is ‘widowed’ in the absence of her beloved. The opening verses of the said poem depict her yearning thus:

You innocent one, So careless with your lapful of red flowers
Eyes searching the moonless woods
For his eyes looking back
Not there tonight. No sound but the bees rummaging through the

³⁹All translations of “Bhānusingha Thākurer Podābolī” are taken from Stewart and Twichell’s *The Lover of God*, unless mentioned otherwise.

The original quote in Bengali is as follows: “Basanta aaulo re! / Madhukara gun gun, amuyā manjari / Kānana chhāulo re.../ Kahi re o priya, kahi so priyatama, / Hridi basanta so Mādhā?” (“Bhanusingha Thakurer Podaboli” 519).

⁴⁰In classical Indian dramaturgy, heroines have been classified into 9 types: 1) *virahotkaṇṭhita*, the heroine who is suffering because of separation from her beloved; 2) *vasakasajjā*, the heroine who is decorating herself in anticipation of meeting with her lover; 3) *svādhinabhartrikā*, the woman who has her man entrapped in her charms; 4) *kalahantāḍita*, woman who is restlessness on account of her lover’s absence due to her jealousy; 5) *khandita*, the enraged woman on account of her lover having left her for another woman; 6) *vipralabdha*, the deceived heroine, whose lover has not come to her; 7) *proshitabhartrikā*, woman whose husband is away; 9) *abhisārikā*, woman on her way for a secret rendezvous. For details, see Sen’s *A History of Brajabuli Literature*.

⁴¹In Indian poetics, moon is often referred to as the lord of night, or the lord of stars.

Twilight, whispering, you startle like a deer, Rādhā.⁴² (Stewart and Twichell 23)

In poems 1–7, Tagore borrows and enhances the aesthetic and eulogic treatment of *viraha* or separation from medieval *Vaiṣṇava* literature, which influenced and marked a unique aspect of the poems in Bhānusingha's *Podābolī*. *Viraha* is expressed in many of Tagore's poems, where he explores the pleasurable pain that *viraha* offers to both, lovers and devotees. Both separation and union are essential moments in Tagore's spiritual love-quest. Perhaps due to his introduction to Bengali *Vaiṣṇava* lyrics at a young age, the idea of *viraha* had a profound effect on his writing. Having been associated with *Vaiṣṇavism* since childhood, he inherited both the devotional and poetic brilliance of the *Vaiṣṇavas*. As Bhānusingha, his heart reaches out to Rādhā whose sorrow is heart-wrenching. But, in sympathising with Rādhā, he does not forget that Kṛṣṇa loves her equally and reciprocates her yearning. Kṛṣṇa makes a rather late entry in the poems, but his longing for Rādhā is as intense as hers. From the beginning of the poem, the audience is introduced to Rādhā's pain, whereas Kṛṣṇa's yearning can only be inferred. After leaving Vrindāvana, he becomes the prince of Mathurā. However, in spite of his engagements at Mathurā, he comes to Vraja in the middle of the night to meet Rādhā. He knows about her sorrow but cannot meet her as freely as he used to when he lived in Vrindāvana. But Tagore does not include Kṛṣṇa's perspective perhaps due to two reasons. Firstly, the legend of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa is known to most Indians and Tagore may have felt it unnecessary to repeat it in his poems. Second, the theme of the poems is in consonance with the *padāvalī* literature. That is why Tagore brings Kṛṣṇa to Rādhā in the middle of the narrative so that they can be united, even if for a brief while. Kṛṣṇa's joy after meeting Rādhā is palpable. Rādhā is nervous, and so is Kṛṣṇa. When Kṛṣṇa comes to meet her, Rādhā's joy knows no bounds. Yet, she is bashful. It is her beloved that has come to meet her at midnight, but her sorrow stops her. She thinks it is only her imagination, but Bhānu convinces her to meet him. Their union is due, and this *abhisāra*, this tryst is about to be over. The night which was pricking her until now is again delightful. She expresses her joy:

When we're together, nights like this delight me
But when the clouds come down between us
And thrash around so rudely in the trees, then I fear, Lord,
Imagining your breath-taking words
Lost out there among the swords of lightning.⁴³ (Stewart and Twichell 36)

The pain borne of *viraha* is now replaced with *śṛīṅgāra*. In describing her anticipation Tagore says:

There's thirst in Rādhā's eyes,
Longing sown the pathway, seeing nothing,
Thirst in her fingers stringing flowers,
She tosses the garland aside, whispering: Listen, friend, can you hear it?

⁴²The original quote in Bengali is as follows: "Sunala sunala bālikā, rākha kusuma mālikā / Kunja kunja heranu sakhi / Śyāmachandra nāhi re / Dulai kusumamunjarī, bhrāmara firai gunjari / Alasa yamuna bahayi jāy Lalita geet gāhi re" ("Bhānusingha Thākurer Podābolī" 519).

⁴³The original quote in Bengali is as follows: "Bārada barakhana, nīrada garjana / Bijuli chamkan ghor / Upekhayi kaichhe, aau tu kunje / Niti niti Mādhava mor / Ghana ghana Chapala chamkay jab pahu / Bajar paat jab hoy" ("Bhānusingha Thākurer Podābolī" 523).

Kālā’s flute pierces the forest’s under-dark, and the Yamunā’s.⁴⁴ (30)

In poem 8, titled “gahana kusuma kunja mājhe” (literally translated as “in the deep flower groves”), Rādhā and Bhānu both hear Kṛṣṇa’s flute coming from the deep groves. Bhānu asks Rādhā to prepare herself to meet her Kṛṣṇa. Rādhā, who found the night and stars chiding her for being alone at night, now finds the moon pouring ambrosia. Rādhā’s joy is evident when she sees Kṛṣṇa whose radiant face seems to shame even the beauty of the moon. Tagore’s Bhānu calls out to Rādhā:

Draped in fine blue
Your heart overflowing with love
Carrying a soft smile in your doe-like eyes
Come, come to the kunja⁴⁵

After Kṛṣṇa’s arrival, Rādhā forgets her sorrow and wants to relive the past memories with him. But Kṛṣṇa remains elusive, or so it seems. In these poems, Tagore’s Rādhā is an innocent girl who apparently has not yet learned the art of seduction. She entertains his antics for a while and then gives up. Her failed attempt at coquetry amuses Kṛṣṇa and he yields. She has surrendered herself to Kṛṣṇa, yet he still does not seem interested in staying with her for long, or so Rādhā, as well as the readers are made to believe. He keeps talking about his impending return to Mathurā. Even when together, Rādhā is scared to lose him again. Tagore juxtaposes this agony of Rādhā against the indifference of Kṛṣṇa in the concluding poems (Kumar 174). Separation is an ancient theme in Sanskrit drama, and the ideal lover is exemplified by a woman, who is often left behind by the hero. In the case of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa, this separation at the phenomenal level is only aimed at increasing the devotion of Rādhā, as ultimately there cannot be any separation between the two. Kṛṣṇa is present within Rādhā as her Self, and externally as the support of the world she lives in (Sheridan 114). But keeping with the theme of *padāvalī* literature, that is, union in separation, Tagore gives preference to Rādhā’s pain over Kṛṣṇa’s.

Towards the end of the poems, Kṛṣṇa returns to Mathurā. Rādhā is angry but cannot bring herself to hate him. Her entire being breathes his existence. She is heartbroken, yet she awaits his return. Tagore closes his collection of poems with Rādhā’s pitiful state etched in the heart of Bhānu and the readers. In the poem, “sakhi re-pirīt bujhbe ke” (“O Friend, who will understand this love?”), Rādhā expresses her grief at having to separate from her lover. She accosts her friends who are slandering Kṛṣṇa, and defends him and her love thus,

I have asked you, my friends,
Not to revile him...
I know that men from the town slander my Dark Lord’s name.

⁴⁴The original quote in Bengali is as follows: “Triṣṭa nayāne, bana-pathe pane / Nirakhe byākula bālā / Dekh nā pāwe gāthe bana phoola mālā / Sahasā Rādhā chāhala sachakita / Dūre khepala mālā. / Kahala sajani suna, bāṣari bāje / Kunje aaula Kālā” (“Bhānusingha Thākurer Podābolī” 521).

⁴⁵Translation by author. The original quote in Bengali is as follows: “Pinaha chāru neela vāsa / Hridaya praṇaya kusuma rāśā / Harina netre bimala hāsa / Kunja ban me aao lo” (“Bhānusingha Thākurer Podābolī” 521).

They know nothing of love.⁴⁶ (Stewart and Twichell 45)

At the end of the poem “sakhi re pirīt bujhbe ke,” Tagore, as Bhānu, says,

Now you understand my own heart,
Which bore long ago the fire that sears you.
Flames still flare up, in both body and mind.⁴⁷ (Stewart and Twichell 45)

Should the audience berate Kṛṣṇa, or should they accept that Kṛṣṇa has to fulfil the purpose of his life, for which he has to leave Vrindāvana; Tagore leaves it to his audience to decide. In the true *Vaiṣṇava* spirit, he upholds the dignity of Rādhā, as a devotee, and as a lover, who is ready to sacrifice her most precious asset for the benefit of the world. As the divine couple who reside in the celestial realm, however, the *Gauḍīyas* believe that Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa will forever remain united in spirit or *bhāva milana*, and no sorrow can ever touch them. At the end of Bhānu’s narrative, the reader gets a glimpse of the reconciliation between the poet Tagore and the aesthete Tagore, both of whom are inspired by *Vaiṣṇava* lyrics. Tagore comes to terms with the eternal wait that the lover and the devotee have to go through if they want to unite with their beloved and cross over to the realm of love where all distinctions of the phenomenal world cease to exist. The poetic style adopted by Tagore in *Bhānusingher Podābolī* is reminiscent of the style of the medieval *Vaiṣṇava* poets, who used the experiences and relationships of the mortal world and imposed them on the relationship of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa. For the saint-poets of *Gauḍīya* school, Rādhā holds an eminent position. Her devotional practices and feelings are to be emulated by the devotee to be able to unite with Kṛṣṇa, who finds pleasure in remaining elusive. Tagore’s *podābolī* poems also reflect the same themes. While the intention of the *Vaiṣṇava* poets in composing their poems was to enhance the devotional fervour of their poems, Tagore’s poetry was not intended towards forwarding a seeker’s spiritual practices. Tagore merely borrowed his plot from Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa’s love sport to compose poems about a couple that go through various stages of love. Describing his religious affiliation, in the book *The Religion of Man*, Tagore insists that his religion is a poet’s religion, and all that he ‘feels’ comes from his vision and not knowledge (107). In his conversations with Einstein,⁴⁸ Tagore says, “My religion is in the reconciliation of the Super-personal Man, the Universal human spirit, in my own individual being” (225). This same realisation of the self, or the individual as being in indivisible union with the Ultimate Being, or Kṛṣṇa of *Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism*, is the underlying theme of Tagore’s *podābolī*, as well as many of his later poems.

This realisation also echoes the aim of *Gauḍīya* philosophy in which, Rādhā, symbolic of the individual being, is in constant companionship with Kṛṣṇa and they are lovingly infused into one form (Rosen 49). While devotional practices had gradually gained prominence over the course of time, it was due to Chaitanya’s efforts that emulating Rādhā’s singular love towards Kṛṣṇa became a standard, “making her unique brand of burning devotion peculiar to the *Gauḍīya* tradition” (56). Since Bengal was the

⁴⁶The original quote in Bengali is as follows: “Sakhilo, brindāban ko durujan mānukha / Pirīta nāhika jāṇe / Brithāi nindā kāha rāṭāyata / Hamār Shyāmaka nāma” (“Bhānusingha Thākurer Podābolī” 524).

⁴⁷The original quote in Bengali is as follows: “Kahe Bhānu ab bujhbe nā sakhi / Kohi marama ko baat / Birale Shyāmaka kahiyo bedana / Bakkhe rākhayi math” (“Bhānusingha Thākurer Podābolī” 524).

⁴⁸Conversation between Tagore and Einstein at the latter’s Kaputh residence on July 14, 1930.

birthplace of *Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism*, it influenced the socio-cultural and religious life of the people, especially in the sphere of literature, where saint-poets composed poems in honour of Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa which added the force required to establish the nascent sect of Chaitanya. Belonging to a traditional family of *Vaiṣṇavas*, Tagore was naturally attracted to *Vaiṣṇava* aesthetics. In Bhānusingha’s *Podābolī*, Tagore utilises themes common to *Vaiṣṇava* lyrics, and like the *Gauḍīyas*, his empathy is directed towards Rādhā, not as a devotee par excellence, but as the quintessential heroine of Indian dramaturgy. Tagore’s Rādhā, unlike the *Gauḍīyas*, is not pining for Kṛṣṇa who is the Supreme Lord of the Universe, but her lover Kṛṣṇa who has left for Mathurā and has not come even once to visit her. Tagore’s Rādhā is a naïve young girl who does not know how to use coquetry to charm her lover. In her heart she knows and has accepted her fate, and so has Bhānu. In the poem, “hum sakhi dārid nārī” (“I am a pitiful woman”), Rādhā says,

Unlucky, star-crossed birth.
I long only to sit within the shadow,
Of his flute and taste from afar his dark smile
Rādhā is the Dark Lord’s Mistress!
May her pleasure be endless!
But it’s grief that’s endless, a river of unseen tears.⁴⁹ (Stewart and Twichell 46–47)

This state of separation and union in separation through contemplation is the aim of the *Gauḍīyas*’ spiritual practices. Tagore keeps the theme of *padāvalī* literature intact by introducing stages of *viraha*, *abhisāra*, and *bhāva milana* after separation, within the purview of poetic aesthetics, so that the reconciliation he seeks between the aesthete and the devotee, rather than being contradictory, can enhance the aesthetic experience of the poems that is soaked in the spiritual nectar of divine love, and expressed in the language of man.



⁴⁹From the poem, “sakhi hum dārid nārī.” Translation by Stewart and Twichell. The original quote in Bengali is as follows: “Janama abhāgī, upekṣita hum / Bahut nāhi kari āās / Dūra thāki hum rūpa heraibe / Dūre śunaiba bāśi / Dūra dūra rahi sukhe nirīkṣiba / Shyāmaka mohana hāsi / Shyāma preyasī Rādhā! Sakhilo / Thāk sukhe chiradina!” (“Bhānusingha Thākurer Podābolī” 524).

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