An artistic ode to Bengali language

Victoria Memorial Hall in Kolkata exhibits 18th-century copy of Gita Govinda

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Victoria Memorial Hall in Kolkata has put on display one of its oldest manuscripts, a handwritten 18th-century copy of Gita Govinda, to mark the International Mother Language Day on Thursday.

The manuscripts, composed by poet Jayadeva, is being exhibited as object of the month at the Prince Hall.

Emphasising on the relevance and topicality of the manuscripts, Jayanta Sengupta, secretary and curator of the museum, said that though the language of the text is Sanskrit, the script is in Bengali, marking a departure from Devanagari.

“Like many medieval texts, Gita Govinda was translated for centuries. These manuscripts were copied by hand in beautiful handwriting much before the advent of the printing press. This is the earliest Bengali manuscript in our collection,” Mr. Sengupta said.

The work, comprising of two folios, depicts two situations. In one manuscript, the image shows Lord Krishna with another Gopi as a heart-broken Radha sits on the sidelines. In another folio, Radha can be seen having a tiff with Lord Krishna.

The poem, an important text of the Bhakti Movement, depicts the relationship between Lord Krishna and his consort Radha.

Mr. Sengupta pointed out that the text and illustrations go together in many manuscripts of the Bhakti period. This feature is also seen in some Arabic texts, which are among the museum’s collections.

“The form of imagery in the illustrated texts is very similar to the Bengal Pat Paintings and the Bengal School of Art, which evolved a century after the manuscripts were written,” he added.

The two manuscripts of Gita Govinda, on display at the Victoria Memorial Hall.