

Krishna and the Gond Prophet Lingo: The Mythological Connections

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The Gond tribes of Central India are the largest ethnic tribe of India, numbering over 14 million people, concentrated primarily in the states of Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and the adjoining states.

The Gonds regard *Lingo* as their legendary hero, prophet, and teacher. He was the one who had organized them into clans, gave them their gods, rituals, ceremonies, dances, and music, and taught them farming, hunting, and fire making. His primary feat, however, was to release the Gonds from captivity in a cave, where they had been locked up by *Mahadev*.

There are many events in the legend of Lingo which are very similar to the childhood exploits of Krishna, when he was living in Vrindavan with the cowherds of Nanda's farm. It is possible that the ancestors of some of the Gonds were the *cowherds of Vrindavan*, who had later migrated to their present locations in Central India.

The legend of Lingo that I have discussed here is based on *R.V.Russell's* book *The Tribes and Castes of the Central Provinces of India* (1916)¹ and a poetic account of the Gond legend called *The Lay of Saint Lingo*², composed by a military officer named Captain James Forsyth. Both of them had sourced their information from the accounts of *Rev. Stephen Hislop*, the pioneer missionary who had worked amongst the Gonds and had obtained his information from a Gond *Pardhan* priest. I have drawn additional insights from Behram H. Mehta's book, *Gonds of the Central Indian Highlands*.

Overall, the Legend of Lingo reads like a typical tribal tale – simple, direct, unaffected by pretensions, and devoid of unnecessary sentiments, eulogies, or embellishments. The connections to Krishna's childhood exploits adds an additional dimension of interest to this intriguing saga.

Lingo and the Four Gond Brothers

The story goes that the Gonds, after being created by *Mahadev and Parvati*, conducted themselves in a disorderly manner, eating everything that came their way, and not paying any attention to cleanliness and hygiene.

Mahadev became upset. He enticed the Gonds into a cave in Mount Dhawalgiri (in the Himalayas near the source of the Yamuna River³), and shut them up in the cave by placing a large boulder at the mouth. His fierce bulldog *Basmasur* was tasked with guarding the entrance.

Four Gonds managed to escape from the cave. They fled away to a place called *Kachikopa Lohagarh*, (Iron Valley in the Red Hills) and lived there.

In the meantime, Parvati became distressed at not being able to perceive the familiar odor of her children and she fasted and prayed to *Bhagwan* (The maker and master of the universe) for a solution. Bhagwan, pleased with Parvati's devotion, sent *Narayan* (the Sun) with a message to Parvati, telling her that the Gonds will be given back.

Soon afterwards Lingo, the divine child, was born from a yellow Pahandi flower. His full name was *Pahandi* (from the Pahandi tree) *Kupar* (meaning "top-knot") *Lingo*. He was a perfect

child, with a diamond on his navel and a sandalwood mark on his forehead. During his infancy, Lingo played in a heap of yellow turmeric and slept on a swing.

Let us pause here of a bit, and explore some connections with Krishna, who wore yellow garments (*pitambar dhari*) and played on the swing in his infancy. A majority of the sculptures of the youthful Krishna, show him with a top-knot on his head, which accords with the title “Kupar” given to Lingo.

According to the Muria Gonds of Bastar, Lingo was not born from a yellow Pahandi flower. He “was one of seven children, and the youngest of them all.”⁴ Krishna, on the other hand, was the youngest of eight children of Vasudev and Devaki. The yellow Pahandi flower was associated with Lingo’s life in some way, just as the yellow Bakul flower is sacred to Krishna, for he used to play his flute sitting under a Bakul tree.

Historian Behram Mehta says that, as per the legends, Lingo was “brought up by a saint, and was given training worthy of one who was destined to be a prophet and leader...He was known as *satodhar* (saint) and *bhan* (devotee).”⁵ Interestingly, the earliest references to the name Krishna appear in the *Rig Veda*, where he is mentioned as a renowned *seer*. “Krishna-Devikaputra” appears in the *Chandogya Upanishad* as a student of Rishi *Ghora Angirasa*, who worshipped a deity manifested in the form of the sun.⁶



Figure 1: Dancing Baby Krishna. Jalakandeswarar Temple, Vellore, c.1550 CE. Source: Flickr.com / Vinayak Hegde



Figure 2: Infant Krishna holding a ball of butter. Orissa, c. 1800 CE, bronze. Museum Rietberg, Zurich. Public Domain.

Let us return to the story. When Lingo was *nine years old*, he found the four Gond brothers who had escaped captivity and were living at *Kachikopa Lohagarh*. He became like their brother, and taught them how to cultivate rice, hunt animals, make a fire, and cook.

An old giant, who had seven daughters, was enchanted by the melodious sound of his fiddle, and offered all his daughters to Lingo in marriage. Lingo declined to marry, and instead married off the seven daughters to the four Gond brothers. In gratitude, the four Gond brothers said that they will hunt in the forest, while Lingo should *lie on a swing and be rocked by their seven wives*.

However, the seven wives developed amorous feelings for Lingo and tried to embrace him. Lingo resisted their advances and reproached them. Their vanity being hurt, the seven wives complained to the four Gond brothers that Lingo had behaved dishonorably with them.

The four Gond brothers became enraged by this deception. They took Lingo to a forest, and shot him to death with their arrows. Lingo, however, was **resurrected** from the dead by Kageshwar (Lord of Ravens) and Karto Subal, who stitched up his wounds, and sprinkled holy nectar over his body, thereby healing him.

There are a few interesting connections to Krishna's life which needs to be discussed here. As per the Gonds, Lingo was the god of dance and music; he played eighteen musical instruments and his call for a dance was irresistible.⁷ It was the enthralling music that Lingo had played on his fiddle, which made the old giant and his wife, along with their seven daughters, break out in a dance of ecstasy. Even now, the **Murias of Bastar begin their dances with an invocation to Lingo** – the first musician who taught the art of drumming to the tribal boys.



Figure 3: Gond painting of a Flute Player with blue skin and wearing a peacock plumes head-dress. Credit: Rajendra Shyam, Patangarh, MP, India

Lingo's musical ability is very similar to that of Krishna's. Krishna, too, used play mesmerizing tunes on his flute that induced the *gopis* of Vrindavan to forget their families and join the *ras lila* (dance of love). In the South Indian tradition, the idea of Krishna as a versatile and heroic dancer is deeply entrenched. A majority of the dances and songs of India have been inspired by Krishna's ras lila, just as the dances of the Muria Gonds have been inspired by Lingo.

In addition, the imagery of Lingo lying on a swing and rocked by the *seven wives* of the four Gond brothers is not unlike that of Krishna sitting on the swing with Radha, encircled by the *eight principal gopis* of Vrindavan. **The romantic feelings of the seven wives towards Lingo parallels the intense love that the gopis had for Krishna.**



Figure 4: Krishna playing the flute beneath a tree, surrounded by gopis. Chennakeshava Temple, Somnathpur. Wikimedia Commons / G41rn8 CC BY-SA 4.0



Figure 5: Krishna doing the pot dance. Pundarikaksha Temple, Tiruvellarai. Credit: T.Padmaja

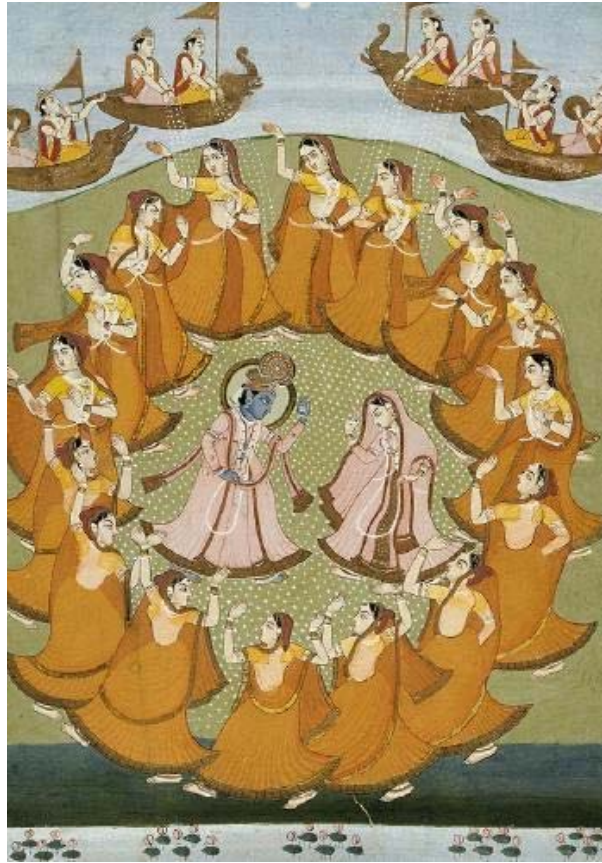


Figure 6: Krishna and Radha dancing the Rasa-lila with the gopis. Jaipur, 19th century watercolour. Public Domain.

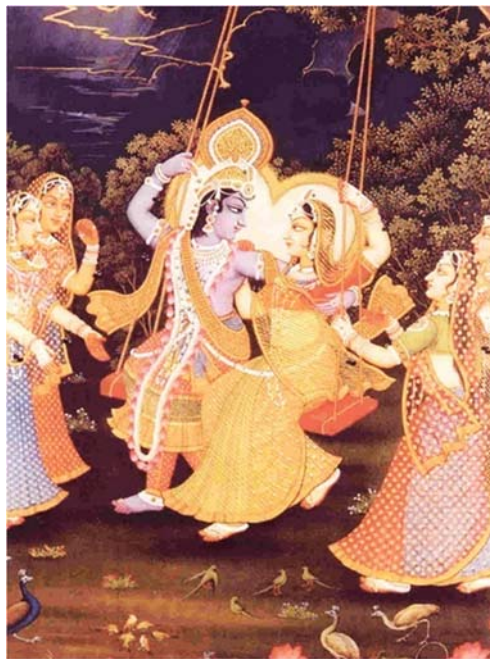


Figure 7: Krishna and Radha on a swing, surrounded by the gopis. Source: www.stephen-knapp.com

Later in life, Lingo married and had seven wives. As per the *Bhagvata Purana*, Krishna had eight principal wives (*ashtabharya*). The tradition of the *Ay-Velir* cowherd community of Southern India, who had migrated there from Dwaraka, indicates that Krishna had *seven wives*, who he had married after curbing the fury of seven bulls tended by them.⁸

In the Hindu texts, however, we do not find any account of Krishna's *death and resurrection*, although the fact that Lingo was shot to death by arrows is reminiscent of the manner in which Krishna eventually died – shot in the foot by an arrow released by a hunter. Was the death and resurrection of Krishna omitted from the Hindu texts, so as not to betray the mortality of the divine child?

We must remember that death and resurrection is a familiar motif in world mythology, the most well-known instance possibly being the death and resurrection of Christ. Many ancient cultures, including the Egyptians, believed that a person attains true enlightenment, and becomes a spiritual master, after he has been resurrected. In ancient China, a person who had recovered from a near-death experience was called upon to be a shaman, since such a person had already travelled to the underworld and returned to heal himself.

Lingo Releases the Gonds from Captivity

Lingo, after being resurrected, was saddened by the murderous acts of the four Gond brothers. He decided to go off in search of the sixteen score Gonds who had been imprisoned. After a long journey through the forests and mountains, he came upon the great sage *Kumait*, the Black Magician of immense age, who told him that the Gonds have been imprisoned in a cave in Mount Dhawalgiri by Mahadev.

Lingo then fasted, prayed, and performed severe penances on a bed of prickles for twelve long months, until Mahadev was shaken from his seat by the force of his devotion, and came down to meet him. Lingo prayed for the release of the sixteen score Gonds from Mahadev. Mahadev asked Lingo to make an offering in exchange: Lingo had to bring to him the young ones of the Black Bindo bird that dwelt by the shore of the Black Water (sea).

Now, the Black Bindo birds were quite something. They hunted large animals, including elephants, cracked open their skulls, and took out their brains to feed the little Bindo birds by the sea shore. When Lingo arrived at the brink of the Black Water (sea), he found that the parent Bindo birds were gone, while the little Bindos were wailing in their nest.

At this time, *Bhawarnag* the horrid serpent, born in the ocean's cavern, came forth from the Black Waters to devour the little Bindo birds. He appeared, trunk-like from the waters, with fearful jaws exposed, having a hood of vast dimensions over his dreadful visage. Lingo immediately shot off a number of arrows, cutting up the serpent into seven pieces. *He jumped into the water, seized the hood of the serpent and dashed it against a boulder, knocking out its brain.* Using the headpiece of the serpent as a pillow, Lingo then went off to sleep.

When the Bindo birds returned, they realized that Lingo had saved their little ones from the horrid serpent and asked him how they could repay the favor. Lingo said that he had to take the little Bindo birds to Mahadev, to which the paternal Bindo bird assented.

The massive bird took all of them on his back - the small Bindo birds on one side and Lingo on the other side - and spreading his mighty wings he soared into the air and alighted safely on Dhawalgiri in half a day. When Mahadev saw the Bindo birds, he relented. Removing the mighty stone guarding the dark cave, he set the Gonds free.

Lingo, then, took the Gonds into a forest, and founded a town called *Narbhum* which grew and prospered. He named the Gond tribes, divided them into clans, established the clan gods

and symbols, and prescribed the rituals, offerings, and ceremonies for their worship. He formulated the rules of marriage and exogamy, and then he vanished from their midst.

To someone, familiar with the story of Krishna, it will be difficult to miss the resemblance between the killing of the serpent *Bhawarnag* by Lingo, and that of the black serpent *Kaliya* by Krishna. As per the Puranic accounts, Kaliya was a massive, venomous, multi-hooded, snake which had entered the blue waters of the Yamuna. Its poisonous fumes killed the birds, plants, and trees of the region. Krishna had jumped on the hoods of the serpent, smashing its heads, until the severely wounded serpent agreed to return back to the ocean. In both cases the *hoods of the serpent were smashed by the hero*, but while Lingo had killed the serpent, Krishna had let the wounded serpent go.



Figure 8: Krishna dancing on the Kaliya serpent. Chola bronze. National Museum of India, New Delhi. Source: Wikimedia Commons / Miya.m CC BY-SA 3



Figure 9: Krishna Subduing Kaliya, Ban Phluang, Thailand, 1050-1066 AD. Source: Wikimedia Commons / Michael Gunther CC BY-SA 4.0

Another interesting connection is with respect to the Bindo bird. Lingo had befriended the paternal Bindo bird, and rode on him all the way from the sea-shore to the Dhawalgiri Mountain (Himalayas) in order to free the captive Gonds. Krishna, too, rode on a massive bird called *Garuda*. There is a story in the *Bhagavata Purana* of the demon king Narakasura, who had abducted and enslaved sixteen thousand women. Krishna, riding on Garuda, attacked the fortress of Narakasura, killed him in combat, and freed all the women.



Figure 10: Garuda carrying Krishna and Balarama. Source: Oxford Digital Library CC BY 4.0

The Puranic accounts talk of a great enmity between Garuda and the serpent Kaliya. The serpent Kaliya used to live on the Ramanaka Island in the ocean, but due to his constant enmity

and fighting with Garuda he had entered the Yamuna River. In the Gond legend, too, this enmity is apparent between the serpent Bhawarnag and the Bindo bird. The serpent Bhawarnag had devoured the young Bindo birds seven times in the past, and this was the eighth time that he was attempting to do so.

Another event had transpired in Krishna's life in Vrindavan, which, perhaps, bears the closest resemblance to the Legend of Lingo. Once, the cowherd boys of Nanda's farm were playing a game of cops and robbers, when a demon called *Vyomasura* ("the demon who flies in the sky") disguised himself as a cowherd boy. *He abducted the other boys one by one, hid them in a cave in a mountain, and blocked the entrance with a huge rock!* Only four or five boys remained - just like the four Gond brothers who had escaped from Mahadeva's cave in Dhawalgiri.

Krishna soon realized the trick being played by Vyomasura (whose name is phonetically similar to *Basmasura*, the fierce dog of Mahadeva, who guarded the entrance to the cave in Dhawalgiri). He killed the demon, found the cave where the cowherd boys were hidden, removed the rock guarding the entrance, and saved his friends from suffocation.

Undoubtedly, there is considerable overlap between the Legend of Lingo and the childhood exploits of Lord Krishna when he was living in Vrindavan with the cowherd boys and girls. *It is likely that these uncommon tales relate to same heroic individual*, who has been celebrated and worshipped as a savior god and teacher all over India for centuries. While in the Hindu texts there are many disjointed tales of Krishna's childhood, in the Gond version a number of heroic deeds have been woven together in an epic, rambling, adventure.

We can postulate that the ancestors of some of the Gond tribals may have been the cowherd boys and girls of Vrindavana, where Krishna spent his childhood years, and their memory of their heroic prophet *Pahandi Kupar Lingo* is simply another version of Krishna's extraordinary childhood stories.

The Gonds regard Lingo as a hero who had come into their midst for a short while as a savior and teacher, and once his work was done he disappeared from their midst. This accords with Krishna's story, for although Krishna had spent his childhood years with the cowherds of Vrindavan, he was ultimately a Yadava prince, and when the time was at hand, he left for Mathura to fulfill his life's mission.

The Religious and Cultural Connections

In addition to the correlations between the childhood adventures of Krishna and Lingo, there are a few cultural clues which reveal the commonality of their identity.

Behram H. Mehta writes in the book, *Gonds of the Central Indian Highlands*, that according to the anthropologist and tribal activist Verrier Elwin,

"The **main shrine of Lingo is at Semurgaon**...Under a spacious roof lies the Anga of Lingo *suspended on a swing*, and sheltered by a great secrecy of *peacock feathers*. At the four corners of the swing are branches of the same feathers, and at the Anga's side is Lingo's *jiwa* or soul, a piece of iron, like a ploughshare, wrapped in grass."⁹

The description of Lingo's shrine given by Verrier Elwin is similar to the manner in which Indians still worship the baby Krishna, by placing his idol on a *swing*, decorated with *peacock feathers*.



Figure 11: A shrine of Lingo, at the outskirts of the village Remawand. The shrine, housing his statue carved from wood, rests on a palanquin, which is suspended from a swing. Source: flickr.com / Collin Key



Figure 12: Baby Krishna on a swing decorated with peacocks. Credit: Kriti Creations

During their festivities, the Maria Gonds of Bastar place a wooden statue of Lingo on his Anga (shrine in the form of a palanquin) decorated with peacock feathers, swing it around, and carry it through their village. Similar palanquin processions take place throughout India to celebrate different festivities associated with Krishna. For instance, during the *Dol Purnima* (Holi) festival in many parts of Eastern India, the idols of Krishna and Radha are placed on a decorated palanquin and carried to each house in the village in procession, led by the village drummers, pipers, and singers. The celebration culminates in a swing festival for the deities, when they are placed on a swing and rocked, to the accompaniment of devotional music.¹⁰



Source: www.thinkingparticle.com

Palanquin Procession of Lingo

A Palanquin decorated with peacock feathers, containing the statue of Lingo, being swung by devotees during Bastar Dussehra.



Source: www.odishasuntimes.com

Palanquin Procession of Krishna

Decorated palanquins, containing the idols of Krishna and Radha, carried by devotees during Dol Purnima led by village pipers, drummers and singers.

www.bibhudevemisra.com

Figure 13: Palanquin Processions of Lingo and Krishna

The women of the Gond and the Baiga tribes (the Baiga are another Dravidian tribe living in the same regions as the Gonds) have a custom of sporting elaborate tattoos on their bodies. **Right in their center of their forehead, many Gond and Baiga women sport a “v” or “u” mark with a dot in the center** – the exact sign that Vaishnavas (i.e. Krishna devotees) apply on their foreheads with sandalwood paste, known as a *Vaishnava tilak*. Given everything else we have discussed so far, this sign on the forehead suggests an association with Krishna-centric worship.



Figure 14: The Vaishnava tilaks on Gond and Baiga women

The cultural correlations are as compelling as the mythological ones, and provide more support in favor of the argument that Lingo and Krishna are one and the same.

The Migration Hypothesis

Both Lingo and Krishna were gods of music and dance, irresistible to women. In their childhood they liked to play on the swing, had their hair tied up in a top-knot, and were associated with the yellow colored flower. They had accomplished many heroic tasks - killing an enormous serpent, befriending and riding a giant bird, rescuing imprisoned friends from a mountain cave where they had been locked up – which are very similar in their details.

In the present day, Lingo and Krishna are worshipped by placing their images on a swing decorated with peacock feathers. During festive occasions, their statues are placed on a palanquin, and carried around the village. Quite surprisingly, Gond and Baiga women sport tattoos resembling the “Vaishnava tilaks” on their foreheads.

Overall, there is ample justification to suggest that Lingo and Krishna are the same personality. The ancestors of some of the Gonds may have been the cowherds of Nanda’s farm in Vrindavana, where Krishna spent his childhood years.

The *Harivamsa* describes Nanda and his clan as an *Abhira* (also called *Ahir*, *Ahar*, *Ayar*) tribe of cattle-husbanding nomads, who moved from place to place to find fertile territory for grazing their herds. According to R.G. Bhandarkar, the Abhiras occupied the land between Mathura and Dwaraka in Northwestern India. They were related to the Yadava dynasty of Krishna, and worshipped Krishna as their leader and preceptor. Although primarily pastoral cattle-herders, they took pride in their martial abilities.

The historical evidence indicates that the Abhira clans had migrated to Saurashtra and Maharashtra by the beginning of the Christian era, and ruled over vast areas. The Ahirs also moved into Central India, where they established kingdoms, and became absorbed into the

Gond tribes. R.V.Russell writes in *The Tribes and Castes of the Central Provinces of India*, that:

“In the Central Provinces the Ahirs are largely recruited from the Gonds and other tribes. In Chanda the Gowaris are admittedly descended from the unions of Gonds and Ahirs, and one of their subcastes, the Gond—Gowaris, are often classed as Gonds. Again, the Kaonra Ahirs of Mandla are descended from the unions of Ahirs either with the Gonds or Kawars, and many of them are probably pure Gonds.”¹¹

The migration of the Ahirs to Central India, and their assimilation into the Gond population, provides the historical context for the spread of the Legend of Lingo.

In Southern India, the Ahirs were known as the Ayar cowherd community, also called Ay-Velirs or Velirs, who ruled in different parts of the ancient Tamil country, and regarded Krishna as their family deity. The Tamil Sangam tradition, as well as multiple copper-plate charters and inscriptions of the Tamil kings, testify that the Ay-Velirs were descendants of the Yadava dynasty of Krishna and had migrated southwards from Dwaraka.

M. Srinivasa Iyengar estimates the date of migration of the Ay-Velirs to South India at around 1000 BCE.¹² This coincides with the collapse of the Late Harappan phase of the Indus Valley Civilization at around 1000 BCE, although the migrations could have started even earlier at around 1900 BCE, during the initial collapse.

Thus, the nomadic Abhira cowherd community, known variously as the Ahirs and Ayars, played an important role in taking Krishna lore to different corners of India, including the hilly and forested tribal belts. The traditional accounts indicate that even the worship of Lord Jagannatha at Puri has its origins amongst the tribal *Savaras*, whose king Viswvasu worshiped an image called “Nila Madhava”. At times, this has created the impression that Krishna may be a tribal deity. But that is not the right assessment. Since Lord Krishna had spent the early part of his life amongst the pastoral Abhiras, and the second half of his life as a Yadava king, his teachings and achievements have touched every segment of society.

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⁵ Behram H. Mehta, *Gonds of the Central Indian Highlands: A Study of the Dynamics of Gond Society* (Concept, 1984) 367.

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¹⁰ Dola Purnima: Odisha celebrates the festival of colours with Lord Jagannath, Odisha Sun Times, March 1, 2018, <http://odishasuntimes.com/dola-purnima-odisha-celebrates-the-festival-of-colours-with-lord-jagannath/>

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