

A Visual Narrative of Krishna Bhakti: Insights from the Artworks of Bikaner Havelis

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Abstract

This paper explores the visual narratives of Krishna Bhakti as depicted in the diverse artworks found in the Bikaner Havelis, renowned for their architectural and artistic splendor. Through an analysis of wall paintings, Jaalis, Tilework, and Poojaghar paintings, the study examines how various art forms and techniques convey the essence of Krishna's life and teachings. The paper delves into the artistic expressions of key episodes, the portrayal of emotions, and the significance of symbolism and iconography in these artworks. By analyzing these visual narratives, the study aims to provide insights into the deep-rooted Krishna Bhakti in the cultural and religious life of Bikaner, showcasing its profound influences on the region's artistic heritage.

Keywords: *Bikaner Havelis, Krishna Bhakti, Religious Art, Usta and Aala-Geela Art, Krishna Iconography, Wall Paintings, Jaalis, Tilework*

1. Introduction

The Havelis of Bikaner (Kochar & Quadri, 2010), a city steeped in history, stand as testaments to its rich architectural legacy. These opulent mansions, adorned with intricate carvings, vibrant colors, and exquisite artwork (Jain, 2004), offer a window into the lives and aesthetics of the region's elite (Glynn, 2001). A central theme woven through these artistic expressions is the profound devotion to Lord Krishna (Goetz, 1950), a key figure in Indian mythology and spirituality. This paper explores the visual narratives of Krishna Bhakti as depicted in the diverse artworks found in Bikaner Havelis, examining how various art forms convey the essence of Krishna's life and teachings, providing valuable insights into the cultural and religious values that shaped the artistic landscape of this region.

Founded by Rao Bika in 1488 (Ojha, 1939), Bikaner emerged as a prominent Rajput kingdom. Havelis served as residences for affluent merchants and nobles, reflecting the city's prosperity and social hierarchy. These Havelis, showcasing a blend of Rajput, Mughal, and European architectural influences, are characterized by intricate stonework and elaborate facades (Fig. 1 & 2). Their construction and decoration involved skilled artisans, contributing to the preservation of traditional crafts. Bikaner Havelis are major tourist attractions, contributing to the city's cultural tourism and economic development.

Krishna, as the eighth avatar of Vishnu, holds a significant place in Hinduism. His significance is depicted in major scriptures like the Mahabharata (Gopal, 2023) and the

Bhagavad Gita. Krishna has been a central figure in many Bhakti traditions, with various saints and poets dedicating their lives to his worship. Krishna Bhakti has had a profound impact on Indian art, music, dance, literature, and theater. This study investigates the visual narratives of Krishna Bhakti illustrated in the varied artworks of Bikaner Havelis, exploring how different artistic forms express the core aspects of Krishna's life and teachings, thus providing important insights into the cultural and religious values that influenced the region's artistic environment.

2. The Research Methodology (Kothari, 2004; Marczyk et al., 2005)

This research primarily relied on **observational fieldwork**, involving a thorough examination of various Havelis in Bikaner. The researcher meticulously documented the different artworks encountered, including wall paintings, Jaalis, Tilework, and Poojaghar paintings. **Photographic documentation** played a crucial role in capturing the intricate details and nuances of these artworks.

Analysis involved a careful study of the visual elements, including:

- **Iconography:** Identifying and analyzing the symbolic representations of Krishna, Radha, and other significant figures.
- **Color palettes:** Examining the use of colors and their potential symbolic meanings.
- **Composition and style:** Analyzing the artistic techniques and styles employed in the different artworks.
- **Narrative elements:** Deciphering the stories and episodes from Krishna's life depicted in the artworks.

This multi-faceted approach allowed for a comprehensive understanding of how Krishna Bhakti is visually expressed and culturally embedded within the artistic heritage of Bikaner Havelis.

3. Krishna Bhakti in Indian Culture

Krishna, a central figure in Hindu mythology, embodies a diverse range of human experiences, from divine playfulness to profound philosophical insights. The concept of Bhakti, or devotion, emphasizes love, surrender, and selfless service. This section explores the multifaceted dimensions of Krishna Bhakti within the broader context of Indian religious and cultural traditions.

Krishna's life, as narrated in the Bhagavad Gita and other scriptures, provides a rich tapestry of stories. Key episodes include his mischievous childhood, the Bhagavad Gita, and the Kurukshetra War, showcasing his divine nature, wisdom, and devotion to his devotees.

Krishna Bhakti manifests in various forms, including Shraddha (faith), Prem (love), Seva (service), Dhyana (meditation), and Kirtan (chanting) (Bhattacharya, 2016; Bhushan, 2022). The specific form of Bhakti may vary from individual to individual.

Krishna's various forms, such as Child Krishna, Cowherd Krishna, Warrior Krishna, and Philosopher Krishna, hold profound significance in Indian art and culture (Banerjees, 1978; Bhattacharya, 1996). They provide a rich tapestry of imagery and symbolism that have deeply influenced Indian art (Zimmer, 1992), literature, music, dance, and other cultural

expressions (Zaveri, 2018). These diverse forms offer a framework for exploring various aspects of human experience (Nelson, 2007).

4. Art Forms and Techniques in Bikaner Havelis

The Havelis of Bikaner showcase a rich tapestry of artistic expressions, including wall paintings, Jaalis, and Tilework. This section delves into the diverse art forms and techniques employed in their creation.

4.1 Wall Paintings (Zaveri, 2018)

Wall paintings in Bikaner Havelis (Sharma, 2005) feature prominent styles like Usta (bold colors, decorative motifs) (Pareek & Sonia Rani, 2023) and Aala-Geela (wet plaster technique, delicate brushwork). Color palettes and symbolism play a crucial role, with vibrant hues and symbolic motifs conveying religious and cultural meanings.

4.2 Jaalis

Jaalis serve both functional and aesthetic purposes, providing ventilation, light control, privacy, and security. They are intricate works of art that add a layer of visual richness to the Havelis. Recurring themes in Jaali depictions of Krishna include his association with pastoral life and the "tribhanga" pose.

4.3 Tilework

Tilework in Bikaner Havelis involves intricate techniques and materials. The use of multiple tiles to create larger narratives, such as the Krishna Ras Leela, demonstrates the artistic ingenuity of the craftsmen.

4.4 Poojaghars

Poojaghars, the dedicated prayer rooms, offer a glimpse into the religious and spiritual beliefs of the inhabitants. They often feature depictions of Krishna, other Hindu deities (Ambalal, 1987), and Jain Tirthankars. These spaces reflect the personal and intimate nature of religious devotion.

5. Visual Narrative of Krishna Bhakti

Beyond mere decoration, the artworks within Bikaner Havelis serve as visual narratives, eloquently conveying the essence of Krishna Bhakti. These narratives extend beyond simple depictions of Krishna; they explore key episodes from his life, capture the spectrum of emotions associated with devotion, and effectively utilize symbolism and iconography to convey profound spiritual meanings (Kramrisch, 1954). This section delves into these visual narratives, analyzing how the artists have creatively interpreted and presented Krishna's life and teachings through the medium of art.

Fig. 3: Painting depicting Vasudev carrying newborn Krishna across the Yamuna River

Overall Impression:

The painting effectively captures the dramatic and poignant scene of Vasudev's perilous journey to save his son. The dark and stormy atmosphere, coupled with the intimate portrayal of Vasudev and the infant Krishna, creates a sense of tension and urgency.

Key Elements and Analysis:

- **Central Figures: Vasudev and Krishna:** Vasudev is depicted carrying the infant Krishna, who is nestled safely within a cradle. The tender expression on Vasudev's face conveys his deep love and concern for his son.
- **Sheshnaag's Protection:** The presence of Sheshnaag forming a protective canopy over Krishna is a striking visual element. It highlights the divine intervention and protection that ensured Krishna's safety.
- **Stormy Atmosphere:** The dark, stormy sky with swirling clouds creates a sense of urgency and danger. The turbulent waters of the Yamuna River further emphasize the perilous nature of Vasudev's journey.
- **Architectural Elements:** The inclusion of buildings and architectural elements in the background provides context and suggests the urban setting of Mathura.
- **Color Palette:** The use of muted colors like dark blues, greens, and grays creates a somber and dramatic atmosphere, reflecting the seriousness of the situation.

Interpretation:

This painting tells a powerful story of parental love, divine protection, and the triumph of good over evil. It captures the essence of the Puranic narrative, highlighting the courage and determination of Vasudev in protecting his son from the wrath of King Kansa. The inclusion of Sheshnaag's protective presence emphasizes the divine intervention that ensured Krishna's survival.

Fig. 4: The Aala-Geela painting depicting Krishna defeating the serpent Kalia

Overall Impression:

The painting vividly captures the drama and dynamism of the Kalia Daman episode. The use of Aala-Geela technique, with its characteristic wet-on-wet application of pigments, creates a sense of movement and fluidity in the artwork. The vibrant colors and the expressive depiction of figures contribute to the overall impact of the scene.

Key Elements and Analysis:

- **Central Figure: Krishna:** Krishna is depicted standing triumphantly on the serpent Kalia, his foot firmly planted on the serpent's head. His posture exudes confidence and divine power.
- **The Serpent Kalia:** The serpent is depicted with multiple heads, each contorted in pain and fear. The scale and ferocity of the serpent emphasize the magnitude of Krishna's feat.

- **The Gopis:** The Gopis are depicted in the background, watching the scene with a mixture of fear and awe. Their expressions convey the drama and tension of the moment.
- **Natural Setting:** The lush green background with trees and a river creates a sense of the natural setting where the episode took place. The water is depicted with flowing lines, suggesting movement and dynamism.
- **Aala-Geela Technique:** The wet-on-wet technique of Aala-Geela creates a unique blending of colors and a luminous effect, enhancing the visual impact of the artwork. The subtle gradations and delicate brushwork further contribute to the overall aesthetic appeal.
- **Color Palette:** The use of vibrant colors like green, blue, and yellow add to the dynamism and energy of the scene. Green is associated with nature and fertility, while blue represents tranquility and the divine.

Interpretation:

This painting is a powerful visual narrative of Krishna's divine power and his protection of his devotees. It conveys the drama and excitement of the Kalia Daman episode, highlighting Krishna's courage, strength, and compassion. The use of Aala-Geela technique enhances the visual impact of the scene, creating a dynamic and engaging artwork that captures the essence of this important episode from Krishna's life.

Fig. 5: Painting of Krishna holding the Govardhan Hill on his finger

Overall Impression:

The painting presents a powerful image of Krishna's divine power and his protection of his devotees. The use of vibrant colors and the dynamic pose of Krishna create a sense of drama and movement.

Key Elements and Analysis:

- **Central Figure: Krishna:** Krishna is depicted in a dynamic pose, holding the Govardhan Hill aloft with one finger. His posture exudes confidence and divine power.
- **Govardhan Hill:** The Hill is depicted as a massive rock formation, towering over the landscape. Its scale emphasizes the magnitude of Krishna's feat.
- **Missing Villagers:** The absence of villagers beneath the hill doesn't necessarily negate the painting's significance.
 - **Symbolic Representation:** The painting may be primarily intended as a symbolic representation of the event rather than a literal depiction. The focus may be on showcasing Krishna's divine power and his protective role, rather than depicting the specific details of the event.
 - **Artistic License:** Artists often take artistic liberties in their depictions, focusing on the key elements and conveying the essence of the story rather than adhering to strict realism.
- **Color Palette:** The use of vibrant colors adds to the dynamism and energy of the scene. The green of the hills and the blue of the sky create a sense of the natural setting.

- **Framing:** The ornate frame with floral motifs adds a touch of elegance and sophistication to the artwork.

Interpretation:

This painting serves as a powerful visual representation of Krishna's divine power and his protection of his devotees. The absence of villagers beneath the hill may be a deliberate artistic choice, emphasizing the symbolic significance of the event rather than focusing on the literal details. The artwork conveys the essence of the Govardhan Leela, highlighting Krishna's divine power and his compassion for his devotees.

Fig. 6: Painting of Radha and Krishna by Usta Artist

Overall Impression:

The artwork presents a visually striking and opulent depiction of Radha and Krishna. The use of gold foil adds a layer of luxury and reverence to the painting, highlighting the divine nature of the couple. The bold colors and strong outlines characteristic of Usta art create a dynamic and impactful composition.

Key Elements and Analysis:

- **Central Figures: Radha and Krishna:** Radha and Krishna are depicted in an intimate embrace, their figures rendered with a sense of grace and fluidity. Krishna plays his flute, while Radha gazes upon him with devotion and love.
- **Gold Foil:** The use of gold foil to highlight certain elements, such as Krishna's crown, Radha's jewelry, and the halo around their heads, adds a sense of opulence and reverence. Gold is traditionally associated with divinity and royalty in Indian culture.
- **Color Palette:** The use of vibrant colors like red, yellow, and green is characteristic of Usta art. Red, in particular, is associated with passion, energy, and auspiciousness, adding to the overall sense of intensity and devotion in the artwork.
- **Composition:** The use of a circular frame and the symmetrical arrangement of the figures create a sense of balance and harmony. The upward gaze of the couple suggests a spiritual connection and a yearning for the divine.
- **Usta Style:** The bold outlines, flat areas of color, and emphasis on decorative elements are all characteristic of Usta art. This style is well-suited for conveying the vibrant and dynamic nature of the Radha-Krishna theme.

Interpretation:

This artwork offers a visual celebration of divine love and devotion. The use of gold foil elevates the depiction, emphasizing the sacredness and spiritual significance of the couple. The vibrant colors and dynamic composition create a visually striking and emotionally resonant image that captures the essence of Krishna Bhakti.

Fig. 7: Painting depicting Krishna with Radha and a cow

Overall Impression:

The painting presents a serene and idyllic scene of Krishna and Radha amidst nature. The lush green background, the presence of the cow, and the intimate embrace of the divine couple create a sense of tranquility and harmony.

Key Elements and Analysis:

- **Central Figures: Krishna and Radha:** Krishna and Radha are depicted in an intimate embrace, their figures rendered with grace and fluidity. Krishna plays his flute, while Radha gazes upon him with devotion and love.
- **Natural Setting:** The lush green background with trees, a river, and a moonlit sky creates a sense of the idyllic pastoral setting of Vrindavan. The presence of the cow further emphasizes the connection to nature.
- **Cow:** The inclusion of the cow adds to the idyllic pastoral setting and symbolizes abundance and nourishment.
- **Color Palette:** The use of muted colors like green, blue, and yellow creates a sense of tranquility and harmony. The vibrant colors of Krishna and Radha's attire add a touch of vibrancy to the scene.
- **Composition:** The composition is balanced and harmonious, with the figures of Krishna and Radha placed centrally against the backdrop of the natural landscape.

Interpretation:

This painting captures the essence of Krishna and Radha's divine love within the idyllic setting of Vrindavan. The presence of the cow and the lush natural surroundings emphasize their connection to nature and the simple joys of pastoral life. The painting conveys a sense of peace, tranquility, and spiritual bliss, inviting viewers to connect with the divine through the enchanting image of the divine couple.

Fig. 8: The Jaali work depicting Krishna playing the flute with a cow nearby

Overall Impression:

The Jaali work presents a visually appealing and intricate design. The repetition of the motif creates a sense of rhythm and continuity, adding to the overall aesthetic appeal. The use of a warm, earthy tone for the stone enhances the natural feel of the design.

Key Elements and Analysis:

- **Central Motif: Krishna and Cow:** The central motif of Krishna playing the flute with a cow beside him is a strong visual representation of his association with pastoral life and his divine playfulness in Vrindavan.
- **Repetition:** The repetition of this motif creates a sense of rhythm and continuity, adding visual interest and emphasizing the importance of this theme.
- **Architectural Integration:** The Jaali work is seamlessly integrated into the architectural design of the Haveli, serving both functional and aesthetic purposes. It allows for ventilation and light while adding a layer of visual richness to the facade.
- **Material and Technique:** The use of stone for this Jaali work reflects the traditional building materials and craftsmanship prevalent in Bikaner. The intricate carving demonstrates the skill and artistry of the craftsmen who created it.

Interpretation:

This Jaali work serves as a visual representation of Krishna's divine playfulness and his connection to nature. The repetition of the motif emphasizes the importance of this theme within the context of Krishna Bhakti. The integration of this artistic element into the architectural design of the Haveli demonstrates the seamless blending of art and architecture that is characteristic of Bikaner's architectural heritage.

Fig. 9: Radha and Krishna within the living room of a Haveli**Overall Impression:**

The artwork presents a serene and intimate portrayal of Radha and Krishna. The use of a simple, yet elegant frame enhances the focus on the divine couple. The colors, though limited, are carefully chosen to evoke a sense of tranquility and devotion.

Key Elements and Analysis:

- **Central Figures: Radha and Krishna:** Radha and Krishna are depicted in a close embrace, emphasizing their divine love and intimate connection. Krishna plays his flute, creating a sense of enchantment and spiritual bliss.
- **Color Palette:** The use of muted colors like green, blue, and pink creates a calming and serene atmosphere. Green symbolizes nature and harmony, while blue represents tranquility and the divine. Pink is associated with love, compassion, and devotion.
- **Framing:** The simple yet elegant frame around the artwork draws attention to the central figures. The use of arches and floral motifs adds a touch of elegance and sophistication.
- **Cultural Context:** The fact that this artwork is located in the living room of a family suggests that it was likely an important part of their daily lives. It may have served as a source of inspiration, a reminder of their faith, and a focal point for family prayers or meditation.

Interpretation:

This artwork serves as a visual representation of the deep devotion to Krishna and Radha within the community. It reflects the importance of divine love and spiritual connection in their lives. The placement of this artwork in the living room suggests that it was an integral part of their daily lives, reminding them of their faith and inspiring them to cultivate a deeper connection with the divine.

Fig. 10: Krishna's Ras Leela**Overall Impression:**

The artwork presents a vibrant and dynamic scene of Krishna's Rasa Leela. The use of multiple tiles allows for a broader canvas, enabling the artist to capture the movement, energy, and sheer scale of this divine dance. The colors are vivid and the figures are rendered with a sense of motion and grace.

Key Elements and Analysis:

- **Central Figure: Krishna:** Krishna is at the center of the composition. He is depicted playing his flute, his presence captivating the Gopis.
- **The Gopis:** The surrounding figures are the Gopis, lost in ecstasy as they dance with Krishna. Their flowing garments, dynamic poses, and expressive gestures convey the joy and spiritual rapture of the Rasa Leela.
- **Natural Setting:** The lush green background with trees, a river, and birds suggests the idyllic setting of Vrindavan, where the Rasa Leela is believed to have taken place. This natural backdrop adds to the sense of enchantment and divine playfulness.
- **Color Palette:** The use of vibrant colors like reds, yellows, and greens adds to the festive and celebratory atmosphere of the scene. These colors have symbolic meanings, with red representing passion and yellow symbolizing joy and prosperity.
- **Composition:** The arrangement of figures suggests a sense of movement and energy. The Gopis are depicted surrounding Krishna, creating a dynamic and visually engaging composition.

Tilework Technique:

- **Multiple Tiles:** The use of multiple tiles to create this large-scale composition is a testament to the skill and ingenuity of the artisans. It demonstrates their ability to plan and execute a complex design across multiple surfaces.

Interpretation:

This artwork not only depicts the Rasa Leela but also conveys the emotional and spiritual significance of this divine event. It captures the joy, ecstasy, and spiritual rapture experienced by the Gopis as they dance with Krishna. The vibrant colors and dynamic composition further enhance the visual impact of this captivating scene.

Fig. 11: Young and Charming Krishna**Overall Impression:**

The painting presents a captivating image of Krishna, emphasizing his divine beauty and charm. The artist has skillfully captured the innocence and playfulness of the child while also conveying a sense of divinity and majesty. The use of rich colors and intricate details creates a visually striking and emotionally resonant image.

Key Elements and Analysis:

- **Central Figure: Krishna:** Krishna is depicted as a young child, adorned with exquisite jewelry and a peacock feather crown. His eyes are large and expressive, conveying a sense of innocence and charm. He is playing the flute, a symbol of his divine music and the enchanting power of his love.
- **Jewelry and Ornaments:** The elaborate jewelry, including necklaces, bracelets, and anklets, adds to Krishna's divine persona. The use of precious stones and gems suggests his royal status and divine beauty.
- **Peacock Feather:** The peacock feather adorning Krishna's crown is a significant symbol in Krishna Bhakti. It represents beauty, grace, and the divine.

- **Bird:** The presence of a parrot perched on Krishna's hand adds a playful touch to the image and further emphasizes his connection with nature.
- **Color Palette:** The use of rich colors like gold, red, and blue creates a visually stunning effect. Gold is associated with divinity and royalty, while red represents passion and energy.

Interpretation:

This painting captures the essence of Krishna as the divine child, "Mohan," meaning "enchanter." His captivating beauty, playful demeanor, and divine music are all beautifully portrayed in the artwork. The image evokes feelings of devotion, love, and wonder, inviting viewers to connect with the divine through the enchanting image of the young Krishna.

Fig. 12: Usta art painting depicting Krishna with cows

Overall Impression:

The painting presents a serene and idyllic scene of Krishna interacting with his beloved cows. The use of bold colors and strong outlines, characteristic of Usta art, creates a visually striking and impactful composition. The depiction of Krishna with the cows highlights his connection to nature and his role as the protector of all beings.

Key Elements and Analysis:

- **Central Figure: Krishna:** Krishna is depicted standing amidst the cows, his posture suggesting a sense of calm and serenity. He is playing his flute, enchanting the cows with his divine music.
- **Cows:** The painting features multiple cows, each rendered with attention to detail. Their gentle expressions and relaxed postures convey a sense of peace and tranquility.
- **Natural Setting:** The lush green background with trees and a river creates a sense of the idyllic pastoral setting of Vrindavan. The natural surroundings enhance the overall serenity of the scene.
- **Usta Art Style:** The bold outlines, flat areas of color, and emphasis on decorative elements are all characteristic of Usta art. This style is well-suited for conveying the vibrant and dynamic nature of the scene.
- **Color Palette:** The use of vibrant colors like green, yellow, and brown add to the visual appeal of the painting. Green symbolizes nature and fertility, while brown represents the earth and stability.

Interpretation:

This painting captures a tender and intimate moment between Krishna and his beloved cows. It highlights his connection to nature and his role as the protector of all beings. The serene and idyllic setting evokes a sense of peace and tranquility, reminding viewers of the importance of harmony with nature.

6. Conclusion

The Havelis of Bikaner stand as eloquent testaments to the profound influence of Krishna Bhakti on the region's artistic and cultural heritage. Through a meticulous analysis of wall

paintings, Jaalis, tilework, and Poojaghar paintings, this paper has explored how these artworks serve as visual narratives, conveying the essence of Krishna's life, teachings, and the diverse forms of devotion. The analysis reveals a rich tapestry of artistic expressions, ranging from vibrant depictions of key episodes like Kalia Daman and Rasa Leela to the subtle symbolism embedded within intricate Jaali designs and the heartfelt expressions of devotion found in Poojaghar paintings.

The study highlights the significance of Krishna Bhakti in shaping the artistic sensibilities of the region, demonstrating how the artists of Bikaner creatively interpreted and presented Krishna's life and teachings through a diverse range of media and techniques. The findings underscore the importance of preserving these artistic treasures, not only for their aesthetic value but also for their invaluable contribution to our understanding of the cultural, religious, and spiritual life of Bikaner and its people.

Further research could explore the evolution of Krishna Bhakti themes in Bikaner art over time, investigate the influence of regional and stylistic variations within the Havelis, and examine the impact of external influences on the artistic expressions of Krishna Bhakti in this region. By continuing to delve into the rich artistic legacy of Bikaner, we can gain a deeper appreciation for the enduring power of Krishna Bhakti and its profound impact on Indian art and culture.

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Visuals Of Bikaner Havelis



Fig. 1 : Bhairondan Kothari Haveli
(Source : <https://www.flickr.com>)



Fig. 2 : Chunni Lal Kothari Haveli
(Source : Self)

Visuals Of Krishna Bhakti in Bikaner Havelis



Fig. 3 : Vasudev Carrying Krishna to Gokul
(Source : Self)



Fig. 4 : Kalia Daman
(Source : Self)

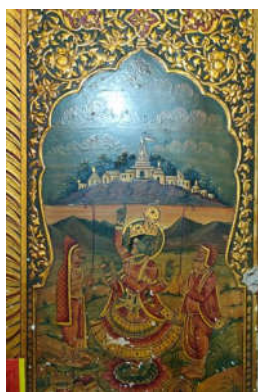


Fig. 5 : Krishna Lifting Govardhan Hill
(Source : Self)



Fig. 6 : Radha-Krishna in Usta Art
(Source : Self)

Visuals Of Krishna Bhakti in Bikaner Havelis



Fig. 7 : Krishna with Radha & Cow
(Source : Self)



Fig. 8 : Krishna in Jaaliwork
(Source : Self)



Fig. 9 : Krishna with Radha
(Source : Self)



Fig. 10 : Krishna in Rasa Leela
(Source :Self)



Fig 11: Krishna in Poojaghar
(Source : Self)



Fig. 12: Krishna Playing Flute before Cows
(Source : Self)