

## The *Harivamsa*

The *Harivamsa* is widely considered by most Hindus as an appendix to one of the most well known epics in Indian literature, the *Mahabharata*. As an appendix to the *Mahabharata* the *Harivamsa* is not one of the 18 *parvas* but is widely regarded by most scholars to be closer to a *purana*, a religious text (Winternitz 424). The origins of this appendix is not precisely known but it is apparent that it was a part of the *Mahabharata* by the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE because, “the poet Ashvaghosha quotes a couple of verses, attributing them to the Mahabharata, which are now only found in the *Harivamsa*” (Datta 1558). The *Harivamsa* is not known to have been created by one person but rather is the collection of many different authors as a “heaping up or very loose arranging, side by side of texts –legends, myths and hymns –which serve to glorify the god Visnu” (Winternitz 424). However, according to Sanskrit texts, it has been attributed to the sage Vyasa. The most likely reason that the *Harivamsa* is equated with the *Mahabharata* is because it is said that they had both been recited to Janamejaya, during the same ritual by Vaisampayana. While both these texts contain some of the same Brahmic legends and rituals, the vast majority of their content is different (Winternitz 425). While the *Harivamsa* has been regarded as an important source of information on the origin of Visnu’s incarnation Krsna, there has been speculation as to whether this text was derived from an earlier text and what its relationship is to the *Brahmapuranam*, another text that deals with the origins of Krsna (Ruben 115).

The composition of the *Harivamsa* is made up of 16,374 verses and divided into chapters called *adhyayas* (Datta 1558). The chapters are further divided into three books called the, *Harivamsaparvan*, the *Visnupurana* and the *Bhavisyaparvan*, with 55, 128, and 135 chapters respectively; each chapter deals with a distinct aspect surrounding the gods Visnu, Siva, and Krsna. The *Harivamsaparvan* means the “lineage of Hari”, Hari being another name for Visnu. Visnu is considered a preserver god who incarnates into avatars to keep and restore order in the cosmos. Visnu’s avatars have included a tortoise, boar, fish, man lion, dwarf, humans and finally it is said that Vishnu’s last avatar will be a white winged horse. Krsna is Visnu’s eighth incarnation (Jackson –Laufer 597). The *Harivamsaparvan* consists of a version of creation which Winternitz considers “confused” because of a haphazard collection of myths and legends. This book of the *Harivamsa* also follows the lineage leading up to the miraculous birth of Krsna (Winternitz 426). The *Harivamsaparvan* also contains great amount of hymns dedicated to Krsna; one can even consider this book as containing “...in a certain way the divine history of Krsna pervious to this stage” (Winternitz 426).

The second book, the *Vinsupurana* deals “almost exclusively with Krsna, the incarnation of the god Vishnu” (Winternitz 427). Winternitz outlines the importance of the second book of the *Harivamsa* to Krsna worshippers:

Where as the best and wisest among the Visnu-worshippers adore Krsna above all as the proclaimer of the pious teachings of the Bhagavad-Gita’s, it is the Krsna of legends as they are narrated in the Harivamsa and in the Puranas, who is worshipped and prayed to by the millions of the actual folk in India up to

the present day, sometimes as a supreme god, and sometimes esteemed as an ideal of perfect humanness (427).

In many cases it is this legendary Krsna that is adored rather than the Krsna in the *Mahabharata* that could be considered the “treacherous, hypocritical friend of the Pandavas” (Winternitz 1981: 427). The *Visnupurana* provides in-depth look at the mythology behind the birth and youth of Krsna. According the *Visnupurana*, Krsna was born of a surrogate mother because of a prophecy told to King Kamsa that he would be killed by the eighth son of Devaki, Krsna’s mother. Devaki was placed under continual watch until the first six of her sons were killed, however after Krishna was conceived he was secretly placed into another womb. Krsna was then raised in a community of cow herders and lived with them even as he started to display supernatural talents. An important chapter outlines how Krsna’s adoptive mother Yasoda had enough of the wild ways of the little Krishna and ties him to a mortar. The chapter then tells of the amazement of both Yasoda and the other cow herders as they see young Krsna laughing as he had pulled the mortar behind him and in the process took down two large trees, roots and all (Winternitz 428). A chapter in the second book tells of the first time that Krsna is recognized as the god Visnu. While arranging a festival to the god Indra, Krsna convinces the herdsmen to instead have a festival to honour the mountains. This makes Indra very angry and he begins to rain down on the cow herders. Krsna, however, holds up a mountain as an umbrella for his people causing Indra to realize that this was actually the god Visnu. Krsna then tells his herdsmen to not treat him as a god but treat him the same as any other herdsman (Winternitz 429). The second book then goes on to tell of all the adventures and battles of Krishna, as well

as battles between Visnu and Siva. The end of the *Visnuparana* contains hymns and songs to Krsna but also contains one other chapter that is seemingly unrelated and alludes to the *Kamasastra* as a “instructions in the form of conversations between Krishna’s wives and the sage Narada...of the ceremonies, celebrations and vows by means of which a wife can make her body pleasant to her husband”(Winternitz 431).

The third book, the *Bhavisyaparavan*, means “chapter of the future” as its first verses allude to the failure of Janamejaya’s horse ritual. This book of the *Harivamsa* also talks about the *age of Kali* that was to continue until the Visnu’s ninth incarnation as a white winged horse (Datta 1558). The *Bhavisyaparavan* goes onto include two more unrelated creation stories and then adds both hymns and stories surrounding the gods Vishnu and Siva. This last book of the *Harivamsa* contains a poem that relays the importance of both reading and reciting the *Mahabharata* and prescribes the “presents that should be given to those who read out each Paravan on completing the reading”(Winternitz 434-435). The book is finally ended by summarizing the *Harivamsa*.

The *Harivamsa* is an important text because it contains accounts of Krsna not found in any other literature. An example is a story found in chapter 52 of the *Visnupurana* where Krishna creates a pack of wolves from his body hair and these terrorize the cow herder people, in order to convince them that they must move. Krsna, being an incarnation of Visnu, the preserver god, justifies this action by bringing happiness and peace to these people (Lorenz 94). However, although the *Harivamsa* does contain writings on Krsna not found anywhere else there is evidence that the legend of Krsna does not come from this appendix but rather may

have originated from an earlier text. This is because the compiled nature of the *Harivamsa* has allowed for additions over time (Lorenz 2007: 97). It may be the case that the *Harivamsa* that is currently appended to the *Mahabharata* was actually created out of an original oral *Harivamsa*, because over time, the text was enlarged by additions and was matched in style to the *Mahabharata* (Ruben 124).

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### **Related Terms:**

Ashvaghosha

King Kamsa

*Brahmapuranam*

Krishna

Devaki

*Mahabharata*

*Horse ritual*

Narada

Indra

*Paravas*

Janamejaya

*Purana*

*Kamasashtra*

Siva

Vishnu

Vaisampayana

Vyasa

Yasoda

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[http://www.sanatansociety.org/hindu\\_gods\\_and\\_goddesses/vishnu.htm](http://www.sanatansociety.org/hindu_gods_and_goddesses/vishnu.htm)

Written by Danielle Dore (Spring 2009), who is solely responsible for its content.