

## THE BIRTH AND CHILDHOOD OF KRSNA

According to his mythology, Krsna first appeared on this earth 5000 years ago (Bhaktivedanta xii) and was considered to be an incarnation (*avatara*) of the Vedic god Visnu (Preciado-Solis 1). There are a number of ancient Hindu texts which are important sources for the mythology of Krsna, including the *Harivamsa* and the Puranas. In the *Harivamsa*, Krsna is portrayed to the greatest extent in heroic human colors as opposed to the *Visnu* and *Bhagavata Puranas* which places emphasis on his divinity (Sheth 43). At the request of Brahma, as described in the *Harivamsa*, the great god Visnu attends an assembly of the gods where he is informed that the demon Kalanemin was born again into the human form of the wicked King Kamsa, who is harassing people on earth. According to this myth, Kalanemin could only be destroyed by Visnu as the demon fears only him (Sheth 7). Deciding to kill Kamsa, Visnu disguises himself with his yogic power and descends into the house of Vasudeva (a former sage born again as a cowherd) and his two wives Devaki and Rohini (Sheth 8). There are slight variations between the *Harivamsa* and the *Visnu* and *Bhagavata Puranas* regarding the knowledge Kamsa receives from the sage Narada, but both agree that the evil king knows he will be killed by the eighth child of Devaki, his father's sister. In some versions Kamsa is informed the eighth child will be an incarnation of Visnu. In others, Kamsa already considers every child born of Devaki to be Visnu (Sheth 43). Since Kamsa plots to kill every child Devaki bears, Visnu made Devaki's first six born be the reborn demon sons of Kalanemin. The *Harivamsa* tells how Devaki's seventh child was extracted from her womb by the goddess Nidra, and transposed into the womb of Rohini. The seventh child born was called Sankarsana (Balarama), the brother and companion of Krsna in his future heroic exploits (Sheth 8).

Born as the eighth child of Devaki, Visnu is immediately interchanged at birth by Vasudeva with Nanda and Yasoda's (husband and wife who herded Kamsa's cattle [Sheth 8]) daughter who had been born at the same moment (Preciado-Solis 103). According to Vaisnava devotees, at that instant, there was in all directions an atmosphere of prosperity and peace as the planetary systems automatically adjusted for the auspicious birth of Krsna (Bhaktivedanta 23). The Puranas also describe the arduous journey of Vasudeva across the river (Jumna/Yamuna) to save his new baby from being destroyed by Kamsa, who had killed several of his other children. Leaving the prison where he and Devaki had been confined by the wicked king, Vasudeva placed the baby Krsna into a winnowing basket (*supa*), which he then carried on his head, and descended into the flooding river to cross to the opposite bank. The great snake deity Sesa is said to have traveled in front, driving away the heavy water with his many hoods. The *Bhagavata Purana* explains that Vasudeva crossed the river safely and reached the village of Gokula (Preciado-Solis 103). Once the babies are divinely interchanged, in the *Harivamsa* account, Kamsa then notices the baby girl beside Devaki and smashes her head against a stone. The daughter of Yasoda was actually a goddess, who rose up into the sky and took her divine form, terrifying Kamsa, and leading him to believe she is the one who will take his life. Oblivious to the exchange of baby Krsna, Nanda and Yasoda regard him as their own son and Krsna is raised as a humble cowherd (Sheth 8-9).

Another discrepancy between the *Harivamsa* and the Puranas is whether or not Vasudeva and Devaki are ignorant of Krsna's divinity. In the *Harivamsa*, Krsna's parents have no vision of his divine form, whereas in the Puranas they are blessed with such a vision. Krsna is then praised as the almighty Visnu, but out of a relentless fear of Kamsa, Vasudeva and Devaki request their

son to withdraw from his celestial form. With the greatest emphasis placed on his divinity, the Puranic texts make Krsna's identity as Visnu recognized by even King Kamsa (Sheth 44-45).

Certain textual variants portray Yasoda's daughter as the goddess Nidra (Sheth 8), Durga (Bhaktivedanta 32), or Katyayani (Preciado-Solis 55). In one account, when the goddess Katyayani rose up into the sky she announced to Kamsa that he killed Devaki's first six sons in vain as his real killer had already been born and was safe (Preciado-Solis 55). The terrified Kamsa, now aware that his evil plot had been a failure, began to plot once again the murder of Krsna and summoned his demonic allies to destroy the child at any cost (Preciado-Solis 55-56).

The first demon to attempt to kill baby Krsna was by the bird-demoness Putana, similarly depicted in both the Puranas and the *Harivamsa*. According to the majority of scriptures, Putana disguised herself as a beautiful woman and entered the house of mother Yasoda in the middle of the night (Bhaktivedanta 43-44). The demoness took baby Krsna onto her lap and pushed her poisonous nipple into his mouth for him to suckle. Putana was immediately killed as Krsna sucked the milk-poison, as well the life air, from her (Bhaktivedanta 45).

Referred to as the Miraculous Child by his followers, Krsna killed many more monsters while he was a mere child (Preciado-Solis 67). The *Bhagavata Purana* describes an episode in which Yasoda leaves baby Krsna, just a month old, sleeping under a cart while she journeys to the river. Left feeling thirsty and hungry, the child began crying, thrashing his arms and kicking the cart with such force it tipped over and broke numerous pots and pans. The Purana accounts explain that there was a supernatural being involved. Specifically in the *Balacarita* (an ancient Hindu text), the supernatural being is a demon called Sakata, who had taken the form of the cart and had been crushed with a single kick (Preciado-Solis 67-68).

A second episode of Krsna's childhood is described as the Yamalarjuna incident. There are numerous depictions of the episode; however all variations agree that it was due to a number of pranks by Krsna which lead Yasoda to tie him to a mortar (Preciado-Solis 69). This was an attempt to keep him from wandering, but with his power, the young Krsna uprooted two trees known as *yamala arjuna* (Bhaktivedanta 177) by hauling the mortar in between them (Sheth 11). The texts either depict this incident as an account of a young boy's extraordinary strength or as a marvel achieved by a young god. Krsna's most devoted followers perceive the two trees as supernatural beings, specifically the demons Yamala and Arjuna (Preciado-Solis 69).

In another myth told in the *Harivamsa*, one day while playing with Sankarsana, Krsna came across the river Yamuna. The waters and the surrounding area were polluted by venom from the powerful serpent-king Kaliya. In order to render the water pure for the use of cowherds, Krsna decided to subdue the five-hooded monster. When he jumped into the lake, Krsna was immediately engulfed by the serpent's hoods, which strove to render him immobile. An angry Sankarsana shouted advice to his brother Krsna to restrain Kaliya. The young god snatched a hold of the serpent's middle hood, danced upon it and thus subdued the evil monster. Kaliya was then expelled to the ocean and the waters of Yamuna were purified (Sheth 11-13).

Before his childhood comes to an end, Krsna is depicted as vanquishing many other demons. Krsna ripped apart the beaks of the demon Bakasura and threw the evil Vatsasura into a tree (Bhaktivedanta 177-178). The demon Arista, taking the form of a bull, was killed by Krsna with the beast's own left horn. Also, the carnivorous horse-demon Kesin could not escape being slain (Sheth 14-15).

During the latter part of Krsna's childhood, the *Harivamsa* tells how King Kamsa was informed by the sage Narada that Vasudeva had interchanged Yasoda's and Devaki's babies at

birth. Learning of Krsna's valiant deeds, Kamsa suspects his divinity and fears that Krsna is the one who will destroy him. Fabricating another plot to murder Krsna, Kamsa ordered Nanda and his family to Mathura to participate in a bow-festival. Upon entering the arena, Krsna slew a charging elephant and, unable to resist a challenge, slew two formidable wrestlers, Canura and Tosala. Furious from seeing these victories and the cheering audience, Kamsa ordered Krsna and Sankarsana to be banished. He also ordered Nanda to be chained, Vasudeva to be murdered, and the entirety of the cowherd's wealth to be seized (Sheth 17). Hearing Kamsa speak in such a way, Krsna leaped over the high guards and seized the evil king with great force. The crown was knocked off Kamsa's head and he was dragged from his throne into the wrestling arena. Straddling his chest, Krsna began to strike Kamsa repeatedly and the evil king was finally slain (Bhaktivedanta 277-278).

## **REFERENCES AND FURTHER RECOMMENDED READING**

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<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Krishna>

<http://www.harekrsna.com/>

<http://vedabase.net/k/krsna>

<http://www.geocities.com/jayakesava2001/>  
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