

Krsnashtami

Krsnashtami, also known as Krsna Janma Ashtami celebrates the date on which Krsna (as an avatar of Visnu) was born. In the Hindu religion, Krsna is said to be Visnu in human form, thus Krishna is not only revered as an avatar (of Visnu), but is claimed to be equal to Visnu in god form (Leslie 100). Krsna's birth takes place in the Dwapara Yog at the exact moment the moon enters Rohini (Constellation of five stars) on the eighth day of Shravan. It is celebrated over a two day period by devotees of Visnu. Krishna's birth is considered one of the holiest days in the Hindu religion, particularly by Vaishnavas, who devote most of their faith to Visnu and his avatars.

On Krsnashtami, *vratas* (vows) are performed by devotees to honour the birth of Krsna. Devotees are encouraged to undertake a partial *sor*, a complete state of fasting. Devotees in a partial state of fasting are allowed to consume a single meal of milk and fruits. When in a fast, the devotee is restricted from having any source of food and drink (including water) for twenty four hours. Different sects control their fast according to their specific calculation and interpretation of time. There is contention between the sects on whether to begin the *vratas* before or after midnight.

Vrata (vow) is intimately related with *bhakti* (devotion) as it is a form of *Bhakti* practices. On Krsnashtami, a mother would perform a *vrata* with the intentions of giving Krishna her full attention and devotion, in return for blessings (good health for her child). On Krsnashtami, devotees can recite mantras from the *Agnipurana* such as "Grant me children, grant me wealth, long life, good health and progeny, and grant me righteousness, pleasure, and marital felicity, heaven and liberation" (Mukherji 75).

A substantial narrative of Krishna's myth is found in the *Bhagavad Purana*, although other stories have also been found in the *Brahma Vaivarta Purana* and *Hari Vamsa*. The story is important as it reveals the roots of why Krsna is worshipped in different forms (baby, child and man). The story also offers clues as to why Hindu woman use this celebration to perform *vrata*.

In the city of Mathura (in northern India), before the birth of Krsna, Kansa the king of Mathura had already planned for the murder of Krsna. As Kansa drove the chariot of his newlywed sister Devaki, he heard an ethereal voice from the heavens warning him that Devaki's eighth child will bring him to his end. This prophecy urged Kansa to kill Devaki through instinct (thinking that by doing so, he could avoid the prophecy from happening) but was quickly interrupted by Devaki's husband, Vasudeva. Vasudeva offered Kansa all his children in return for Devaki's life. Years passed as Devaki was about to have her eighth child, Vasudeva also heard a voice from the heavens telling him that the eighth child will be the incarnation of Visnu. The voice also stated that through every action he took to save this child, he would be divinely favoured (Mukherji 102). At midnight of that day, the baby was born. Directly out of Devaki's womb, his dark skin tone (generally portrayed by blue skin) led him to receive the name Krsna (translated to as "black"). The kingdom was placed under a *yoga-nidra* (hypnotic spell induced by a supernatural force), enabling Vasudeva to easily sneak Krsna out of the kingdom. Vasudeva knew in a neighbouring palace, the daughter of Nanda was born at the exact time of Krsna's birth. Vasudeva immediately took Krsna in his arms and swiftly crossed the river Yamuna (which attempted to grab Krsna into her arms) to Nanda's house in Gokul. Vasudeva silently replaced the baby (Nanda's daughter) with Krsna while

Yasodha (the mother of Nanda's daughter) was asleep, returning to Mathura with no time to waste. The sound of a baby weeping woke up the royal guards not too soon after Vasudeva had put the baby into Devaki's arms. The guards wasted no time in sending this news to Kansa, who quickly disposed of the child by throwing her at a stone slab. In Kansa's mind, the prophecy had been fulfilled. The same voice he heard years ago from the heavens cursed Kansa for being so cruel and selfish and also announced that the baby he sought to kill was still alive. Little did Kansa know that the baby that he had thrown at the stone slab was in fact Yogamaya (the goddess of Illusion). Yogamaya had taken the form of an infant for the sole purpose of saving Krsna's life. Kansa then ordered his army to look for a young infant with a dark skin tone and an abnormally handsome appearance. When found, he was to be executed on the spot. Krsna grew up safely in the care of Nanda. Krsna assumed revenge by killing Kansa in his own palace.

On Krsnashtami, devotees worship Krsna in different forms based on the different stages of his life. Krsna can be regarded as a baby (often depicted in a wooden cradle); as a child (Bala-Krsna); King of Gujarat; counsellor of Arjuna. In his child form, Krsna is portrayed as a naughty child with incredible love for *ghee* (butter). His divine powers consist of tremendous strength and wit, described in short stories of his childhood. Devotees on the day of celebration will carry out a pilgrimage to Dwarka (Gujarat) which was said to be where Krsna was king. In India there is a clear distinction among Krsna's different forms (age). Faithful devotees generally prefer Krsna as a child over his older counterpart as they believe praying to him in child form is a broader path of devotional love (Mukherji 108). Mothers in particular favour Krsna as a child as it not only shows devotional love but also maternal love. Devotees conceive that Krsna in his manhood is

portrayed more of an aid to Arjuna than a spiritual medium. Evidence of this hierarchy can be found in Vaisnava temples where Krsna is depicted as a child (rather than man).

During this *vrata*, orthodox devotee may also devote a fraction of their time to worshipping Krsna as an infant. Singing and music is common during this time. Offerings of milk and sweets are given to Krsna (as mentioned before, Krsna had a love for dairy products). Children may be given vast amounts of sweets as an act of worship. Births (male) that take place on the asterism of Rohini (Mukherji 110) may herald a superstitious Hindu to believe that the child's uncle may be subjected to danger (or death).

Among Vaishnavas, Krsnashtami is considered one most sacred celebration. For woman, Krsnashtami is an opportunity to perform a *vrata* to one of the most revered figures in the Hindu religion.

Reference and Further Recommended Reading

- Mukherji, A. C. (1989) *Hindu Fasts and Feasts*. India: Vintage Books
Leslie, Julia (1992) *Roles and Rituals for Hindu Women*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Pvt. Ltd.
Sarma, Deepak (2008) *Hinduism a Reader*. India: Blackwell Publishing

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Noteworthy Websites Related to the Topic

<http://www.krishnajanmashtami.com/when-janmashtami.html>

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Krishna_Janmashtami

http://www.iskconny.com/newsletters/August_2009.pdf

<http://www.mahavidya.ca/women-in-hinduism/hindu-vratas/>

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