

JANMASHTAMI: DIFFICULTIES ON KRISHNA'S BIRTHDAY

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(English Version)

Krishna is definitely a fascinating subject for numerous scholars, whether religious or atheist, but he troubles historians the most. Contrary to normal belief, Krishna is not mentioned in the Vedas, and with great difficulty, we find his first undisputed mention as a character only in the *Chhandogya Upanishada* of the seventh century BC. He is also cited in the later *Taittiriya Aranyaka*, but there is no reference to his birth-legend. This makes its entry more than a thousand years later, in the *Vishnu Purana* and the *Hari- Vamsa* of the 3rd or 4th centuries of the Christian Era.

In between, we do get some stray references in a few sacred narratives, but Krishna was certainly not portrayed as the 'great god' that he became in later tradition. *Janmashtami* is not mentioned as a popular celebration and Krishna himself is completely overshadowed for several centuries by Vasudeva and Balarama-Sankarsana. They were more powerful deities and Krishna was only their junior coalition partner till the 4th century AD, i.e., the Gupta period. Only after the *Mahabharata* and the Gita came out in their final shape, did Krishna emerge more prominently as the supreme Vaishnava challenge to rival Shivaism, and he then subsumed both Vasudeva and Balarama into his own legend. We have a lot of evidence in Gupta and post-Gupta sculpture portraying the miraculous deeds of the divine child. They valorise him as the mascot of the new settled pastoral civilisation that arose on the banks of the Yamuna. Eminent scholars like DD Kosambi and Jan Gonda motifs "view Krishna holding Govardhana Hill" over his head to protect his people against torrential as victory of the god of darker people over *Indra*, the omnipotent god of wandering animal-grazing 'Aryan' tribes.

Even so, we do not have sufficient proof that *Janmashtami* was celebrated on such a grand scale and it is my submission that this fervour would start another millennium later. Surdas, Meera and Bhakti poets played a great role in the 15th-16th centuries to portray Balagopala as a playful loveable little god. The Shaivas had

brought out the baby Balaganesha who found instant popularity, therefore Vaishnavas required their own cuddling infant god; Balakrishna . Radha, incidentally, was nowhere around the scene, she came in only after the Bhagavata Purana was composed many centuries later. She appeared in full form only after when Jayadeva romanticised the divine couple and Vidyapati, Chandidas, Chaitanya, Surdas, Sankardeva and others popularised lyrical romantic poems.

Let us return to the 4th century texts that mention Bala-gopala and we may note with interest that this is around the same time when several tribes from western and central Asia had started settling in India. They included the pastoral Abhiras, Gujjars and even Hunas, who took to India's sacred traditions, but they also held on to their own stock of colourful tales. Some scholars like RG Bhandarkar and Sumanta Banerjee seriously felt that the Bala-Krishna legend came from the Abhiras in this 'cultural exchange'. The fact that there were some shared features, however, gave rise to a raging controversy in the colonial period. It was stoked in 1874 when Albrecht Weber published his book, "An Investigation into the Origin of the Festival of Krsna Janmastami". His logic was that, like Jesus Christ, Krishna was sent by God to save the world and that both divinities were born in dreadful circumstances. Jesus came to this world in a shabby stable that he shared with the other animals and Krishna was born in a cold jail room. Both were among pastoral people: as Jesus was looked after by sheep herders and Krishna was with the keepers of cows. Christ was hounded by cruel king Herod who wanted to kill him instantly, just as Krishna was chased by the blood-thirsty tyrant Kamsa.

Religious texts were quoted profusely, as happens on such occasions, and later scholars like James Kennedy and Nicholas Macnicol are convinced that *Janmashtami* originated from Christian tales. In 1895, Edward Hopkins declared that the entire miraculous story of the birth of Krishna was taken from the Bible, while Steven Rosen claimed that the whole "Hindu system of avataras or divine incarnations was borrowed from the conception of Christ's incarnation". Lorinser stated emphatically that "the Bhagavad Gita was simply an expurgated New Testament".

Poor Krishna! He had to tackle not only *Putana*, the demoness and Kamsa his terrible uncle, but he now had also these foreign scholars, to deal with just because he happened to be born under such a star ! Earlier, Vedic *devas* could afford heavenly or mysterious origins that are beyond our reach, but after Buddhism proved so popular with definite but divine tales of the birth of their heroes, the new attractive brand of Hindu deities also needed similar birth legends. Characters in the *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata* and *Puranas* were thus born on this humble earth, but came, of course, with super-hit stories of astounding miracles. This may explain why a date had to be found, even if it is unsettled, as in the case of Gautama Buddha. Even after two thousand years of research and argument, the exact date and year of the birth of Jesus Christ remain unresolved, between the nights of 24th of December to the 6th of January. Religion is a matter of faith and ritual as well as a lot of festivity, not on exactitude. Besides, in the past centuries, people were hardly bothered about birth certificates, like schools insist nowadays.

The *Ashatami* of the *Krishna-paksha* of *Bhadrapada* is normally too drenched for any open air fun, but despite this, countless people brave the rains and visit temples. On *Janmashatami*, millions throng them all over India. Mathura, Vrindavan, Dwarka, Puri, Nabadwip, Guruvayoor, Udupi, Kanchipuram, Imphal and other Vaishnava strongholds like the *Naam-ghars* of Assam. Often, *Raas Lilas* depicting the dalliances of a mischievous youthful Krishna are considered the best way to welcome his birth, which is putting the cart before the horse. In many parts of India, devotees observe day-long fasts and recite from religious texts as they celebrate Krishna's birth at midnight; with *prasad* and savouries. Tamils draw figures of Balakrishna's tiny steps walking into their dwellings, in the same way that Bengalis draw *Alpona*, designs on the floor showing steps Lakshmi the path to their homes, though frankly, she hardly appears to notice them.

On this *Gokul-ashtami* day, Maharashtrians organise contests for youthful 'Govindas', to climb precariously on the shoulders of friends, who are balanced in three or even four or five tiers, with each group on the layer below, to form tall human pyramids. The successful contesting group that manages to reach its 'Govinda'-boy to shatter the curd-filled earthen pots that are strung up really quite

high. Tamils also have this athletic tradition called *Uriadi* and these highly skilled gymnastic displays is so not for piety but for fun and to win lots of prize money. One only wishes that if Indian men may actually manage to win an Olympic gold medal, which seems to evade them, despite young Krishnas infinite blessings, if only such a game actually features in the next Olympic Games.