KṚṢṆA

Most Australian city-dwellers are familair with the Hare Kṛṣṇa chant. Members of the Kṛṣṇa Conciousness cult, with their shaved heads and saffron robes, sing it outside department stores in state capitals as they try to gather converts and raise money for their movement. Geoff Hughes, one of the ABC's Asian correspondents, was in North India recently, and dropped into Kṛṣṇa's birthplace at MATHURĀ, to see how it's done at the source...

I'm inside the courtyard of an ancient temple on its big day of the year--the birthday of Lord Kṛṣṇa. The place is so packed with pilgrims it's impossible to see the wall decorations or the shrine itself, where later in the day Kṛṣṇa's followers re-enact scenes from his life.

The people you can hear singing are sādhus*--holy men--and they've been at it for hours, sitting cross legged in the sun since before dawn. One of them is a European, dressed in a loin cloth. Earlier I tried to ask him about the ceremonies, but was told that he's on a vow never to say anything except the Kṛṣṇa chant. He's been here for more than two years, living as a* sādhu*, and no-one here seems to know what country he's from. Apart from him, it's a purely Indian affair, as it's been for centuries.*

Hundreds of families keep pouring in through the doors with offerings for Lord Kṛṣṇa, after leaving their shoes with caretakers outside. MATHURĀ's a crowded and desperately poor city, but most of the ordinary people throw a few cents into the middle of the sādhus*, to keep them going. The* sādhus *don't work, although some will teach if they're asked. It's estimated there are more than four million of them in India, but no one knows for sure.*

The ones here vary greatly in appearance. A couple of the older ones look remarkably like Australian aborigines--craggy faces and deep set eyes--especially with the white flour markings on their bodies. They're all thin, but some of the younger ones look as if they stepped out of some Biblical painting--flowing robes, hair down to their shoulders parted in the middle. No evidence of shaved heads like in Sydney.

To the Kṛṣṇa followers here, today's Christmas, but the way it's celebrated is a tremendous contrast to, say a Christian church service on Christmas Day. There's no sense of organisation, it's very much a group thing, and it's loud and colourful. No speeches. The celebrations go all day and into the night, processions, children dressed up to represent Kṛṣṇa and all the good and bad people he came into contact with, and candles being floated out across the river after dusk. It's not a tourist event, the police only let me through to the temple area because of my press pass.

Many Indians I've spoken to resent westerners trying to imitate or improvise on their religion. They say you need to be born into it to properly understand and feel it, and one popular film made in India "Hare Rama Hare Kṛṣṇa", dealt at length with the superficiality of westerners who mix drugs with religion, on trips to India and Nepal.

Who is this Kṛṣṇa so beloved of his devotees?

The Hindu religion approaches the ultimate Godhead in many forms and disguises. There is the ascetic god Śiva, usually thought of as wrapt in profound meditation in the snows of the Himālayas, but symbolized in the *liṅga*, the phallic emblem of fertility. Then there is Śiva's beautiful spouse, known by many names, among them Annapūrṇā, the giver of food, Pārvatī, the daughter of the mountain, Durgā, hard to approach, the slayer of demons, or Kālī, the black one, the personification of the fierce and destructive aspects of nature. And there is Viṣṇu, the benevolent preserver of the universe, who out of compassion for the world has already fully projected himself nine times into the cosmos in order to save it from destruction or to frustrate the forces of evil, the demons who are constantly striving to undo the work of creation and return the world to the primeval chaos from which it emerged at the beginning of this cycle of universal time. The eighth of these *avatāras* or incarnations of Viṣṇu was in the form of the hero Kṛṣṇa.

The simpler Hindus believe that Kṛṣṇa was a real human being in the form of whom the supreme god Viṣṇu came down into the world over five thousand years ago in order to destroy the wicked tyrant Kaṁsa, half demonic and half human, who with his demon henchmen was persecuting the righteous and preventing the worship of the gods. The full story of Kṛṣṇa's life, as it is told in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* and other texts of medieval India, is a very long one, full of incidents of all kinds, and here I can only summarize it. He was born in Mathurā, as the son of Vasudeva and his wife Devakī of the clan of the Yādavas. Vasudeva was the human brother of the half-demon tyrant Kaṁsa, and it had been prophesied that the eighth child of the couple would bring about Kaṁsa's death. Kaṁsa imprisoned the pair, with a view to killing the child as soon as he was born, but the god Viṣṇu , aided by lesser gods, frustrated the plans of the tyrant, and the baby escaped by supernatural means, and was brought up out of harm's way among the cowherds of Vṛndāvana, as the foster child of the village headman Nanda and his wife Yaśodā. With him was his loyal helper, his elder brother Balarāma, also an incarnation of Viṣṇu and likewise magically rescued from the clutches of the demon king.

The child Kṛṣṇa seems only at times to have been aware of his divinity, and his foster parents themselves believed him to be their own child. But even in the cradle an access of divinity would come upon him from time to time, and he would slay demons or perform other wonderful deeds for the welfare of the cowherd community. Then Nanda, Yaśodā and the other villagers would suddenly realise that a god was dwelling in their midst, only to forget the fact again through the *māyā*, the delusive power of the supreme Godhead. This aspect of the legend permits a rich mythology of childish pranks. Kṛṣṇa is not only a wonder child, destroying demons and subduing serpents, or a priggish prodigy, teaching the cowherds what gods they ought and ought not worship. He is also a naughty little boy, stealing his foster mother's butter and sharing it among his playmates, reproached by her for eating dirt, telling her barefaced lies to get out of trouble. Like the other children of the village, as he grows older he helps to herd the cattle, first the calves and then the full grown cows. He organizes mock battles in the woods and figures as the ringleader of the boys of the village in their games and pranks.

It is not hard to understand why the cult of the divine child is so popular among the simpler Hindus. An image or picture of the child Kṛṣṇa, often depicted as a plump infant crawling on all fours, is to be found somewhere in nearly every Hindu home, and he satisfies in particular the deep maternal feelings of Indian womanhood. He is, indeed, the archetypal child, and in a sense every small child has inherited something of Kṛṣṇa's divinity. This may be one of the reasons why in India little children, as distinct from older ones, are fussed over, petted and spoilt as perhaps nowhere else in the world. In this respect the child Kṛṣṇa constrasts strikingly with the child Jesus, about whom, after his birth and his parents' departure for Egypt, the gospels are virtually silent, with the exception of the one story in Luke of his disputing with the learned doctors in the Temple. On the strength of this single incident, the stories of the apocryphal gospels, and the orthodox interpretation of the divinity of Christ, traditional Christian teaching has always emphasized the supernatural precocity and the exemplary behaviour of the child Jesus. No Christian of earlier generations could ever imagine the divine child raiding his mother's larder and then telling her lies about it to avoid a beating.

Even more important than the child Kṛṣṇa in the religious life of India is Kṛṣṇa as an adolescent and young man. According to the story the cowherd boy grew to become such a handsome youth and played so entrancingly on his flute that all the women of Vṛndāvana fell in love with him. It is in this connection that the most famous legends about Kṛṣṇa are told. Once, as he was walking along the bank of the Yamunā, Kṛṣṇa came across the women of the village bathing in a quiet backwater of the sacred river. They had undressed and their clothes were lying on the bank under the trees. So Kṛṣṇa gathered them together into a bundle and climbed a tall tree with them. Before the women could get back their

clothes he made each of them appear before him stark naked. Some Hindu theologians found difficulty with this story, and in the standard accounts Kṛṣṇa preaches them a sermon on the evils of nude bathing, which is an insult to the water god Varuṇa, and all the women promise never to commit such improprieties again. But the mystical implications are obvious. The soul must appear naked before God. That this is the real message of the story is clear from the promise that Kṛṣṇa made to the cowherd women as he handed them back their clothes. To compensate for the trick he had played on them, he would later dance the round danced called *rāsa* with them in the full moon of autumn. The season of autumn came around and, when the moon was full, Kṛṣṇa by his magic power created a glorious palace and dancing floor on the river's bank. Then he played his flute and every woman in the village heard it and left her home under the spell of the entrancing music. Husbands and parents made no difference, and they could do nothing to stop them. Even when one husband resorted to extreme measures, and killed his wife rather than let her go, her spirit followed the sound of the flute, and she was the first to join Kṛṣṇa.

In the older descriptions of the *rāsa līlā* and of Kṛṣṇa's love-making with the *gopīs* or milkmaids in the light of the autumn moon the religious symbolism is quite clear. The wonderful marble terrace which Kṛṣṇa magically brings into being on the banks of the Yamunā represents heaven. The humble herdswomen change their shabby everyday clothes for marvellous silken garments and costly jewellery, as in the Book of Revelation the righteous in heaven are given shining new robes. Kṛṣṇa multiplies himself, so that each woman feels that he is dancing with her alone, as God, in his infinity, bestows the whole of his love on every individual worshipper, and each shares fully in communion with him. Each woman begins to imagine that she is the divine lover's special favourite, and as a result of their pride he vanishes suddenly. He takes with him only one girl, Rādhā, who is particularly devoted to him, and the two make love together alone; but soon she too is overcome with pride and imagines that she can arbitrarily compel him to do her bidding. When she asks him to carry her on his back, she also is left alone for God only helps them who help themselves. The desolation of the women at the disappearance of their lover represents "the dark night of the soul" of the Spanish mystics. The women find mutual comfort in their loneliness by telling one another the great deeds of their lover, a symbol of the gathering of devotees to listen to religious discourses and sing hymns.

Much later literature about the Kṛṣṇa legend, however, goes a great deal further than this, and the religious symbolism is lost in descriptions of romantic longing. In a society with very strict taboos on all extramarital sex, where a man might rarely see the face of a pretty woman outside his family circle, the story of Kṛṣṇa and Rādhā was Hindu India's greatest source of vicarious wish-fulfilment, compensating for lives which, if rarely completely sexless, were commonly unromantic and often

thoroughly unsatisfactory from the emotional point of view. Thus Mira Bai, a 15th century princess of Mewār in Rājasthān, was left a widow after a few years of a happy marriage. She became a devotee of Kṛṣṇa and as a result composed some of the most beautiful religious poetry of the period in India. Much of this is unexceptionable hymnody of the Hindu devotional type, but some verses can hardly be recognised as religious at all by one who does not know the convention:

'The handsome deceiver entrances me,
He teases me in the market, as I walk down
the road,
I cannot tell what he is wanting,
But his body is so lovely and his eyes are
like lotuses,
And when he looks at me I'm happy, when he
smiles
I'm filled with joy.

There he is grazing the cows, down by the
Yamunā, playing a lovely tune on his flute!
Mira gives herself to him wholly, body, soul
and wealth,
as she clasps his feet.'

Other poets were even less restrained and utilized the Kṛṣṇa legend for what, to the westerner, seems purely secular erotic verse. Thus from a very famous series of Kṛṣṇaite lyrics, the twelfth century *Gītagovinda* of Jayadeva:

'On that marvellous morning, her lord's
heart was stricken with the arrows of love,
which hit him in the eye
Arrows from her breasts, scratched by his nails,
her bloodshot sleepless eyes, her lips dyed
red with kisses. . .
Then suddenly she put one hand over her naked
breasts, and one over her thighs to hide them,
and looked embarrassed.'

This little extract, charming as it is, can hardly be said to evoke religious emotion, and it is very unlikely that this was the poets' purpose. In fact Kṛṣṇa is the focus of some of the most romantic and erotic literature of India, as well as of the most deeply mystical.

The great exploits of Kṛṣṇa in his later life do not play such a big part in popular Hinduism as do those of his childhood and youth. Ultimately he killed his demon uncle Kaṁsa in single combat and ascended the throne of Mathurā. But the divine king was far less successful than the divine lover, for his enemies pressed him hard, and in the end he was compelled to migrate with all his followers to Dvarakā in Gujarāt, where he built a new city and kingdom. Meanwhile he had performed heroic deeds in

almost every part of India, and had married over 16,000 wives, all of whom he loved and made happy. His former companions, the cowherds of Vṛndāvanan, were virtually forgotten. When his friends the five Pāṇḍava brothers went to war with their cousins to regain their rightful heritage he joined them as their adviser and helper, though he took no part in the actual fighting. It is in this context that he is said to have composed the *Bhagavad Gītā*, and to have revealed to the hero Arjuna his real identity, as the incarnation of Viṣṇu.

This great religious poem, ascribed to Kṛṣṇa, but in fact composed or compiled by an anonymous author a century or two before the beginning of our era, is nowadays perhaps the most imporant religious text of India, and for that reason its significance in the traditional forms of religion is often exaggerated. Rather incongruously sandwiched between the narratives of the great epic, the *Mahābhārata*, the *Bhagavad Gītā* was for many centuries read only by the learned and educated in most parts of India,* until from the last century onwards a series of teachers used it as a basis of reform and as a rallying point for resurgent nationalism. Even now, when the *Bhagavad Gītā* had been translated into all the languages of India and literacy is growing, it is still Kṛṣṇa the divine child and Kṛṣṇa the great lover who appeal to the mass of ordinary Hindus, rather than Kṛṣṇa the hero and teacher.

The end of Kṛṣṇa, according to the legend, was truly tragic. He returned to Dvarakā after the war to find fearful portents besetting the city and incipient strife among his henchmen. In his absence they had taken to strong drink and a series of drunken brawls led to virtual civil war, which Kṛṣṇa was powerless to prevent, for all his divinity. His son Pradyumna was killed before his very eyes, and soon the Yādavas had almost exterminated one another. Of Kṛṣṇa's closest associates only his loyal brother Balarāma and his charioteer Dāruka remained. The three left the doomed city, which was soon overwhelmed by the sea, and retired to the forest. Here Balarāma died in his sleep. Kṛṣṇa, wandering alone, was seen in the distance by a hunter, who mistook him for a deer. The hunter wounded him in the heel, which, like the heel of Achilles, was his one vulnerable spot, and he died. The work of Viṣṇu in incarnate form had come to an end.

It is hard to explain the story of the last days of Kṛṣṇa, which contains features found nowhere else in Indian tradition, but very reminiscent of European mythology and legend. In any case this part of the myth has had little impact on the popular cult of Kṛṣṇa, where the stress lies on the divine child and the great lover. It is Kṛṣṇa's birthday which is celebrated as a great popular festival, not the anniversary of the return of the incarnate god to heaven.

* Mahārashtra forms an exception to this generalisation thanks to the early Marāthī expanded paraphrase of the *Bhagavad Gītā* of Jñāneśvara. This was known and loved by a wide section of the masses.

The Kṛṣṇa cult, we should remember, despite the erotic character of parts of the legend, is on the whole a puritanical one. The layman and laywoman are not encouraged to imitate the amorous adventures of Kṛṣṇa and the milkmaids, though in the 19th century there was an unpleasant scandal concerning the leaders of the Vallabhacari sect who, as Kṛṣṇa's representatives on earth, claimed the same rights over their women devotees as the incarnate god had done. Though the Hindu brought up in a Kṛṣṇaite home learns stories of Kṛṣṇa's amorous exploits from his infancy, he is also taught that what is valid for a god is not legitimate for ordinary mortals, and the mystical symbolism of the stories is constantly impressed upon him. The traditional Kṛṣṇaite maintains the same rigid attitude to uninhibited sexual behaviour as do all other orthodox Hindu sects, and the Kṛṣṇa cult has been hardly affected by the sexual mysticism of the *Tantras*, which has recently aroused considerable interest in the West. Generally the Kṛṣṇaite is a strict vegetarian, and though the story of Kṛṣṇa's last days has made no very great impression on the popular culture, it is used to bring home the evils of strong drink and the orthodox Kṛṣṇaite rigidly avoids it.

The founder of the Hare Kṛṣṇa movement, Swami Prabhupāda, is a teacher of the Caitanya school, a sect which is particularly widespread in Bengal and Eastern India. It was founded in the early 16th century by a teacher of the same name, Caitanya, who emphasized the joy of faith in Kṛṣṇa and brotherly love to all men and animals. Its followers repeat the name of Kṛṣṇa in song, and perform ritual dances as their main form of worship. In the streets of Calcutta one can still see *kīrtana* taking place. A group of devotees, including people of all castes and classes, but mostly lower middle class types, will set up a temporary shrine on a vacant building lot or wherever they are not likely to block the traffic; it will be brightly lighted, and adorned with pictures and images of Kṛṣṇa, flags and flowers. A drummer will beat the rhythm, and the worshippers will start singing, repeating the names and epithets of Kṛṣṇa to a simple melody. Soon the religious temperature will rise, and one or two worshippers will start dancing with upraised arms, followed by the others. The whole atmosphere is charged with an intense joy, which affects even the sympathetic foreign visitor looking on. Sometimes the joy spills over into the street, and a small procession of happy devotees dances along the pavement. And often the *kīrtana* is kept up by relays of worshippers for days on end.

The worshippers at the Caitanya *kīrtana,* by the way, differ from their counterparts in the Hare Kṛṣṇa movement in that they are not expected to wear any special garb, or to submit to any kind of tonsure, in order to take part. Nearly all the male devotees have normally cut hair and most of them nowadays wear shirts and trousers.

Whatever we may think of the theological basis of the Kṛṣṇa cult, there can be no doubt about the psychological value of the *kīrtana* as a means of relieving tension and worry. This is fully evident in the faces

of those who take part in it, and it may be this which has led to the rapid development of the Hare Kṛṣṇa movement in the West.

The most immediately striking feature of Kṛṣṇaism, in fact, is that it is a happy religion. Other forms of Hinduism may have their dark aspects, such as rigorous self-mortification, animal sacrifice, and sacred orgies. In the past, however, some branches of Hinduism have encouraged the upper castes to treat the lower as somewhat less than human. Of all the many sects of Hinduism those which centre the worship on Kṛṣṇa have the cleanest hands in this respect.

Now Kṛṣṇa is beginning to make an impact on people of the European cultural tradition. The more philosophical aspects of Hinduism have been slowly affecting western thought since near the end of the 18th century when the *Bhagavad Gītā* was first translated. Now, for the first time since the days of the Roman Empire, an Asian popular religious cult is being practised openly in the streets of western cities. Whether the Hare Kṛṣṇa people gain in strength and numbers over the years or remain a very small and eccentric minority, or indeed whether their movement survives or disappears, it is an important sign of the times, not to be dismissed as a mere aberration of harmless young cranks. Western interest in Indian religion has spread from exalted mysticism and philosophy, from the esoteric and mysterious, to the simple faith of the masses. And to one who knows a little about Kṛṣṇa, the interest which some young westerners have been taking in him in recent years is not really surprising, in a world where psychological insecurity and dissatisfaction are so common. 'If you love me', Kṛṣṇa says to the milkmaids, 'Come and dance and sing with me'.

Australian National University

A.L. Basham