



Newsletter Archives

Playing with Krishna God as Child in Art and Mythology

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Buddha and Christ - Two Gods on the Path to Humanity

Article of the Month - December 2003

A beautiful young woman, in the full bloom of her femininity, once entered the residential premises of a provincial chief of cowherds. Dressed attractively, she appeared very comely, what with her raised hips, nicely swollen breasts, earrings, and the heavily scented flowers in her hair. The thin waist added in no small measure to her allure. Her smiling face captivated the hearts of everyone present and she found it easy to glide in to the innermost chambers where the chief's wife was resting along with her newborn infant son.



Approaching the adoring mother, she offered to suckle the young one from her own breasts. There was no question of refusing the request. The lady accepted the child into her open arms and held him to her bosom. The baby took one breast in his little hands and started sucking. Then a strange thing happened. From the look of a strange triumph, the woman's expression first transformed into one of surprise and shock and then into agony, and finally her features contorted into a mask of anguish and shrieks of pain escaped her lips. Her efforts to take away the breast from his soft grip were futile. Her cry was so intense that both sky and the earth reverberated with its echo. As the child pressed her breast extremely hard and sucked out her very life, she fell to the ground. With her arms and legs spread, she began to cry, "Oh, child, leave me, leave me!" Suddenly, as she entered the spasms of death, her beautiful appearance disappeared, revealing a monstrous personality beneath.

The above narrative describes a famous episode from the annals of Indian mythology. The little one is of course the beloved god Krishna, most popularly celebrated as a child deity. The lady in question is Putana, an ogress who had been assigned the job of killing him.

According to the Hindu belief, there are seven different kinds of women who have to be venerated as mothers:

- 1). The real mother.
- 2). The wife of a teacher.
- 3). The wife of a king.
- 4). The wife of a Brahmin.
- 5). The cow.
- 6). The woman who nurses.
- 7). Mother Earth.

Since Putana offered milk from her bosom to Krishna, she fell into the sixth category and was duly accepted by him as such. It remains another matter that she had smeared the tips of her breasts with poison. True to the Indian ideal, there is a deeper purpose to the above happening rather than a mere motive to annihilate a new born infant, who was perceived as a threat by the king of the land. According to the Brahmavaivarta Purana, in one of her earlier lives Putana was born as the princess Ratnamala. Having laid her eyes on the Vamana avatar (incarnation) of Vishnu, so enraptured was she by his

enchanting beauty that she wondered if he had been her son, how gratifying it would have been to suckle him. Now Krishna was a later incarnation of Vishnu too, and thus by offering himself up for suckling he fulfilled Putana's desire, which had remained unfulfilled for ages.

According to another text (Adi Purana), Putana, in one of her previous births, was the wife of an accomplished sage. A slave of physical desire, she once committed the sin of establishing physical relations with another male even though she was bound by the sacred ties of marriage. Her husband, when he came to know of her affair, cursed her to be reborn as an ugly ogress. On her pleading to lighten the sentence, the heart of the kindly sage melted and he prophesized that when Vishnu would incarnate on earth as Krishna he would extract the poison of her sin from her body. The Bhagwata Purana elaborates with devotional clarity: 'Putana, who was an ogress, was killed by the Lord. He had drunk of her breast and all her sins had been sucked out of her. She had become purified since she had touched the Lord and he had had touched her with his lips.'

An important parallel is drawn with the important festival of Shivaratri, which commemorates the occasion when Shiva consumed the poison generated from the cosmic ocean and thus saved the world. Similarly did Krishna suck out the poison from Putana's breasts and redeem the world. The festival of Holi celebrates Krishna's this very victory over Putana, and an effigy is ceremoniously burnt on the night before, replicating her funeral pyre.

Krishna's Dance over the Serpent

Within the river Yamuna there was a great lake, and in that lake the black and venomous serpent Kaliya used to live. Due to the poisonous vapors emanated by him, the surrounding area was so contaminated that no living being would dare venture near the place. The cattle after drinking the water fell sick, the trees around the pond dried up, and the birds were asphyxiated just by the fumes rising out of the water.

In the chapters 10, 15-17 of the Bhagvata-Purana, there is an account of how Krishna as Kaliya-damana ("he who subdues the cobra") forced the serpent demon into submission:

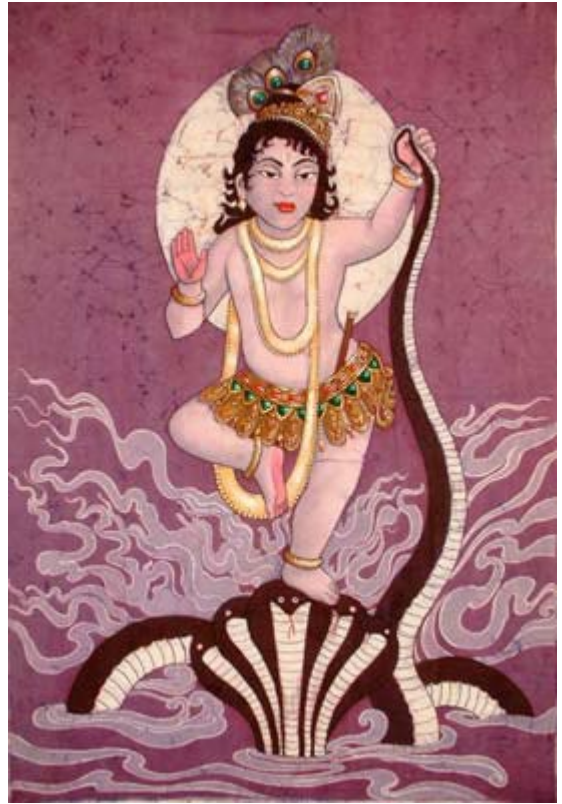
'Krishna, the adventurous seven year old, came to this dangerous place and curiously peered into the depths. He brooded, "I shall vanquish this king of serpents and release the inhabitants of the country from their continual dread.



The boy then girded his loins, made his way up a tree, and jumped with great leap into the depths. Swimming about like a great strong elephant, he made a tumultuous sound which rattled Kaliya. Understanding it to be an attack upon himself, the mighty serpent immediately charged towards Krishna. For over two hours Krishna remained in the grip of the serpent, but then he freed himself and began to expand his body. When the serpent tried to hold on to Krishna, he felt an enormous strain, on account of which his coils slackened, and he had to loosen his hold. Grabbing the opportunity, Krishna pounced upon him as does Garuda swoop upon a snake. He leaped high into the sky and, landing on Kaliya's outspread hoods, began to dance.

By rhythmically stamping his feet on the serpent's heads he trampled Kaliya into submission. The waters of the pool lashed against the shore to provide the music and the waves kept pace with the beat. Finally, under the relentless pounding of Krishna's feet, Kaliya, gravely wounded, accepted defeat.'

The manner in which Krishna subdues Kaliya has a fascinating quality about it. The dance to victory, the effortless rhythm of the Almighty's pace of creation and destruction, the ease, the grace, the sheer play in the manifestations of the Lord's will, to which wind and water provide enchanted accompaniment, are beautifully brought out in the narrative. Indeed, this is the first inkling in textual material of Krishna as 'natwar' (the dancer).



Figuratively, the image of Krishna dancing over the serpent is a motif symbolizing the inverted tree of life with the outstretched hoods signifying its roots. Such a tree is mentioned in the Bhagvad Gita (15.1) "The universe (or human body) may be compared to an eternal tree that has its origin (or root) in the Supreme Being and its branches below in the cosmos. The Vedic hymns are the leaves of this tree. One who understands this tree is a knower of the Vedas."

The human body, a microcosmic universe or world, may be also compared to a beginningless and endless tree. Karma is the seed; the countless desires are its roots; five basic elements are its main branches; and the ten organs of perception and action are its sub-branches. Three modes of material nature (goodness, passion and ignorance) provide the nourishment, and sense pleasures are its sprouts. This is the terrestrial tree of life.

Thus, while the earthly tree derives its sustenance from the material world, the heavenly tree of life, the knowledge of which is the goal all the spiritual quest, subsists on the nourishment it derives from the sacred realm. By putting the spotlight on Kaliya's outreaching hoods, Krishna provided a potent motif signifying the restoration of cosmic order in the world. Indeed, this is the reason why Lord Vishnu incarnates himself periodically.

There is no ready experience in this world of such a tree. Nevertheless it can be perceived. It can be found for example beside a reservoir of water. We can see that the trees on the bank reflect upon the water with their branches down and roots up. In other words, the tree of this material world is only a reflection of the heavenly tree. Thus is our earthly sojourn but a reflection of our heavenly lives.

Additionally, Kaliya's name is derived from 'kala,' the word for time in Sanskrit, making this a dance of victory over time and death as well, or in other words, the triumph of the eternal over the transient.



Another endearing and simple image, with profound philosophical consequences, is that of the baby Krishna sucking his toe, lying on a banyan leaf. On a first glimpse, such a composition presents no extraordinary significance. It is just an ordinary adorable infant. But lo, when it is observed that the leaf, on which lies Krishna, is floating on a turbulent sea, do we realize that there is much more here than that meets the eye.

The legend behind such a conception is recounted in the Markandeya Purana:

'Before the beginning, there was an end: the end of the old era. . . Black clouds obstructed the sun and hurled lightning in every direction. Unrelenting rains lashed the ground. The seven rivers began to swell and the four oceans started to overflow. Waves as high as mountains drowned the earth. This was pralaya, the final dissolution of the world, before its regeneration. The sole witness to this deluge was Manu, the primordial man.

Suddenly, amongst all the confusion, Manu noticed a banyan leaf floating on the ocean, tossed by the waves. On this unlikely raft lay a chubby and adorable child, suckling his right toe, unperturbed by the calamity that had befallen the world. It was Krishna as Balaji, the newborn cosmic child.

The infant's heavenly smile negated the brutality of the pralaya (cosmic deluge). His compassionate glance reassured Manu that life would go on, convincing him that the world never ends, but only changes.

The infant then sucked Manu into his body. Inside Manu saw the entire universe and all that had been consumed by the deluge - the skies, the seas, the earth, gods, demons, humans, animals and plants. Manu thus realized that the child was none other than the cosmic man (Narayana) who had withdrawn the world into himself. Chanting the blessed name of Narayana, Manu became one with his savior and awaited rebirth in the new world. Thus was the whole manifested world consumed by Lord Vishnu, only to be recreated.

Relevant to our purpose here is the fact that Krishna is sucking his toe even while he is contemplating the creation of the world. Almost satirical in tone, it pokes fun at the serious strivings we indulge in to achieve our goals. As says Deepak Chopra: "Nature's intelligence functions with effortless ease and abandoned carefreeness. If you observe nature at work, you will see that least effort is expended. Grass doesn't try to grow, it just grows. Fish don't try to swim, they just swim. Flowers don't try to bloom, they bloom. Bird's don't try to fly, they fly. This is their intrinsic nature. The earth doesn't spin on its own axis; it is the nature of earth to spin with dizzying speed and to hurtle through space. It is the nature of the sun to shine. It is the nature of the stars to glitter and sparkle. And it is human nature to make our dreams manifest into physical form, easily and effortlessly." Lao Tzu sums it up beautifully: "An integral being knows without going, sees without looking, and accomplishes without doing."

A child naturally exhibits an unconcerned transcendental aloofness from the world, which is similar to

God's utter self-absorption and self-delight. God as an infant does not govern the world from a majestic throne, but makes the world his playground and even while enjoying himself maintains the cosmic order. A child too seeks only to amuse himself, expressing his essential nature in every action.

The theophany of the child god also reveals that as an infant and a child, Krishna is approachable, and can be doted upon and coddled. He can be approached with the intimacy with which a parent approaches a child. Such a god invites man to dispense with cumbersome formality and come to him openly, delighting in him intimately. The adorable, beautiful babe, so beloved all over, does not demand servitude and pomp. His simplicity, charm, and infant spontaneity, invite an affectionate and tender response.

According to David Kinsley: "For the divine to become embodied as a child is eminently suitable, for they behave in similar ways. Each belongs to a joyous realm of energetic and erratic activity that is pointless but not insignificant; aimless, but imaginative and rich, and therefore creative. In play, the mind can go wild; the imagination is set free to conjure and conquer. With the world of necessity left behind, the imagination takes over, eagerly populating a world that knows no limit whatsoever. So it is with the play of children, and so it is with the activity of the gods."



In the Harivansha Purana, Krishna's play is said to be "like the fire in the cremation ground," leaping and flickering, erratic and vigorous. The brash and indomitable spirit of the young Krishna makes the world around him sparkle with aliveness. His youthful play lights up the world like a blazing fire illuminates the darkness. The playful actions of Krishna burst forth to tumble and romp like the wind in the trees, unpredictable and free. We have here a description of the other realm where things are as they are meant to be, where life goes on joyously and unhampered, where no thought is given, or need be given, to the future, where life is lived to the fullest every moment. Krishna's playful realm is a description of the heavenly world of gods which is ever fresh, instinctive, and intuitional.

Conclusion:

Krishna removes the poison of evil from this world while he joyously feeds on a mother's bosom. Similarly, he restores the cosmic order, symbolized by the inverted tree of life, while dancing, and if that were not enough, he creates the world while sucking on his toe. These activities can easily be observed in any ordinary infant. Thus is it rightly observed: "The smallest children are nearest to God, as the smallest planets are nearest the sun" (Richter). Wordsworth put it eloquently when he said: "Heaven lies about us in our infancy." Indeed, all other incarnations of god that descended on earth illustrate the divine aspect of the human personality, but Krishna's incarnation represents the human dimension of the divine.

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This article by Nitin Kumar
Editor
<http://www.exoticindia.com>

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