

Krishna Janmashtami



Krishna Janmashtami कृष्ण जन्माष्टमी *kṛṣṇa janmāṣṭami*), also known as *Krishnashtami*, *Saatam Aatham*, *Gokulashtami*, *Ashtami Rohini*, *Srikrishna Jayanti*, *Sree Jayanti* or sometimes merely as *Janmashtami*, is an annual commemoration of the birth of Krishna, the eighth avatar of Vishnu.

The festival is celebrated on the eighth day (Ashtami) day of the dark fortnight of the month of Bhadra (August-September) in the Hindu calendar. *Rasa lila*, dramatic enactments of the life of Krishna, are a special feature in regions of Mathura and Vrindavan, and regions following Vaishnavism in Manipur. While the *Rasa lila* re-creates the flirtatious aspects of Krishna's youthful days, the *Dahi Handi* celebrate God's playful and mischievous side, where teams of young men form human pyramids to reach a high-hanging pot of butter and break it. This tradition, also known as *uriadi*, is a major event in Tamil Nadu on Gokulashtami.

Birth (Mythology)

Krishna was the eighth son of Devaki and Vasudeva. Based on scriptural details and astrological calculations the date of Krishna's birth, known as **Janmashtami**, is 19 July 3228 BCE and departed on 3102 BCE. Krishna belonged to the Vrishni clan of Yadavas from Mathura, and was the eighth son born to the princess Devaki, and her husband Vasudeva.

Mathura (in present day Mathura district, Uttar Pradesh) was the capital of the Yadavas, to which Krishna's parents Vasudeva and Devaki belonged. King Kansa, Devaki's brother, had ascended the throne by imprisoning his father, King Ugrasena. Afraid of a prophecy that predicted his death at the hands of Devaki's eighth son, Kansa had the couple locked into a prison cell. After Kansa killed the first six children, and Devaki's apparent miscarriage of the seventh (which was actually a secret transfer of the infant to Rohini as Balarama), Krishna was born.

Since Vasudeva knew Krishna's life was in danger, Krishna was secretly taken out of the prison cell to be raised by his foster parents, Yasoda and Nanda, in Gokula (in present day Mathura district). Two of his other siblings also survived, Balarama (Devaki's seventh child, transferred to the womb of Rohini, Vasudeva's first wife) and Subhadra (daughter of Vasudeva and Rohini, born much later than Balarama and Krishna).

Celebrations

Hindus celebrate Janmashtami by fasting and staying up until midnight, the time when Krishna is believed to have been born. Images of Krishna's infancy are placed in swings and cradles in temples and homes. At midnight devotees gather around for devotional songs, dance and exchange gifts. Some temples also conduct reading of the Hindu religious scripture Bhagavad Gita.



Govinda Pathaks forming human tower to break the Dahi handi



Jay Bharat Seva Sangh forming human tower to break the Dahi handi in Dadar.

Maharashtra

See also: Govinda sport

Janmaashtami/ Gokulashtami, popularly known in Mumbai and Pune as *Dahi Handi*, is celebrated with enormous zeal and enthusiasm. The *handi* is a clay pot filled with buttermilk that is positioned at a convenient height prior to the event. The topmost person on the human pyramid tries to break the *handi* by hitting it with a blunt object. Mostly *nariyal* (coconut) is preferred being a sign of purity, truth etc. in Hinduism. When that happens the buttermilk is spilled over the entire group, symbolizing their achievement through unity. *Handis* are set up around the city, and groups of youngsters, called *Govinda Pathaks*, travel around in trucks trying to break as many *handis* as possible during the day.

Many such *Govinda Pathaks* compete with each other, especially for the *handis* that dole out hefty rewards. The event, in recent times, has gathered a political flavor, and it is common for political parties and rich community groups to offer prizes amounting to *lakhs* of rupees.

Some of the most famous *handis* are at Dadar, Lower Parel, Worli, Mazgaon, Lalbaug, Thane and Babu Genu, Mandai in Pune.

Cash and gifts are offered for *Govinda* troops to participate; for over 4,000 *handis* in Mumbai, 2,000 *Govinda* troops compete for the prizes.



Rasa Lila in Manipuri dance style.

Manipur

Janmaashtami, popularly known in Manipur as *Krishna Janma*, is a significant festival celebrated at two temples in Imphal, the capital city of Manipur. The first festival is at the Govindaji temple and the second is at the International Society for Krishna Consciousness temple. Devotees of Lord Krishna gather mostly at the ISKCON temple.

Northern and Eastern India

Places in Uttar Pradesh associated with Krishna's childhood such as, Mathura, Gokul and Vrindavan attract visitors from all over India, who go there to participate in the festival celebrations. People in the city of Dwarka in Gujarat, where Krishna is believed to have established his Kingdom, celebrate the festival by visiting the Dwarkadhish temple. In Jammu, kite flying is an important part of the celebration on his day.

In the eastern state of Orissa, in the region around Puri and in Nabadwip, West Bengal people celebrate Janmashtami by fasting and worship till midnight. Purana Pravachana from the Bhagavata Purana are recited from the 10th Skandha. This section deals with pastimes of Lord Krishna. The next day is called **Nanda Utsav** or the joyous celebration of Krishna's foster parents Nanda and Yashoda. On this day, people break their fast and offer various cooked sweets during the early hours.

Karnataka and Tamil Nadu

Among the brahmins residing in these two states, Iyengars, Smarthas and Madhvas make elaborate preparations for the festival. The idol of Lord Krishna is placed in a decorated *mantapa*. *Bhakshanam*, that are specially prepared for the festival, are offered to Lord Krishna along with fruits and are considered to be his favourites. In some parts of Karnataka, *chakli*, *avalakki* and *bellada panaka* are prepared especially for the festival. Hand made *avalakki* is prepared in memory of Krishna's friend Sudhama. Legend has it that Sudhama had once offered *avalakki* to Krishna, as it was considered to be one of his favourite snacks. *Gamaka vachana* and other devotional activities are held in the evening.



An image of Bala Krishna displayed during Janmashtami celebrations at a Swaminarayan Temple in London

Among Vadakalai Iyengar brahmins - the *Pancaratra* tradition is followed by Shri Ahobila Mutt, *Munitraya* tradition by Srirangam Srimadh Andavan Ashramam along with some other acharya purusha families, and the *Mannar* tradition is followed by Sri Parakala Mutt. It is named after one Mannar Svami of unknown date who is the first extant authority arguing for this calculation. The Thenkalai iyengars adhere to the *Vaikhanasa* tradition.

Outside India

Krishna Janmashtami is considered as Appearance of Lord Krishna, and the first ever elected government official in the world to issue Proclamations for celebrating Janmashtami is credited as Janet Napolitano

Street Plays

Every year for the past few years, several thousand teams of youth perform street plays on occasion of Janmashtami worldwide. These are youth inspired by Pandurang Shastri Athavale, of the Swadhyay Pariwar, to take the message of Krishna. Parallel to the work that Lord Krishna has done by spreading positive, strong values and thoughts in society, these youth want to take the powerful thoughts of the Gita in society through the medium of a play around the week of Janmashtami.