

## *Observing Secular Holidays*

*By Urmila Devi Dasi*

THE YEAR IS FULL of holidays and special events unrelated to spiritual life. Even in India, where Janmastami, the anniversary of Krsna's divine birth, is a general festival, many other days are dedicated to the country or some ordinary, materialistic person. Outside of India, festival days sometimes even focus on demonic beings such as witches. National holidays, and even religious festivals such as Christmas, are often occasions for diving into intoxication, illicit sex, and materialistic life in general.

If we wish to raise our children to be absorbed only in thoughts of Lord Krsna, how should we treat these secular holidays? One approach is, as far as possible, to ignore them. We can tell our children that although the preparations they see around them—sometimes for weeks before the holiday—are certainly attractive, we are interested only in celebrating the Lord's glories. Children can be satisfied and happy without getting into mundane festivities, especially if their year is full with one exciting devotional festival after another.

Adults often think, however, that because their children will hanker for what glitters all around them, the children must have at least a little of the outside celebration in order not to feel resentful or deprived. Perhaps the adults themselves feel there is something worthwhile in mundane events, or aren't fully satisfied in spiritual life. But sometimes even when a child's parents are fully convinced that observing devotional holidays is sufficient, avoiding materialistic celebrations is difficult. Nondevotee relatives, or even other devotees of Krsna, may want to pull one into the celebrations, and that influence may be hard to avoid.

A second approach, therefore, is to find a way of relating nondevotional celebrations to Krsna. For an originally religious holiday such as Christmas, it is relatively easy to have programs about the life and teachings of Lord Jesus. On Mother's Day, we can have our children honor their mothers, grandmothers, mother cow, and mother earth. Sometimes a policy of making special days Krsna conscious can lead to creative results. For example, one year on Halloween\* some of my high school girls dressed up as male devotees and went door to door selling Srila Prabhupada's books. We can take our children out to sing the Lord's names through the crowds that gather for national independence day and other such holidays. On one U.S. holiday (Thanksgiving), we used to take our students in Detroit to the local Hare Krishna Food for Life center to distribute free *prasadam*, food offered to Lord Krsna.

\* On Halloween night in the United States, children dress in costumes and go from house to house collecting candy and other treats.

If we decide to have our children celebrate mundane occasions in the same way as the materialists, we greatly risk raising children whose idea of happiness is materialistic. Holidays are the highlights of life, especially for children, who even at a young age note the number of weeks or days until their favorite festival. When these days involve simply sense enjoyment—which for a child can mean games, presents, fireworks, and special food—we indirectly teach that we are living for material pleasure.

Observing our children's birthdays poses a special problem. In the early days of the Hare Krsna movement, when Srila Prabhupada was present with us, we rarely, if ever, noted the birthdays of our members, including children. Gradually, however, birthday parties, especially for children, have become more and more common. Once I calculated that every year in the community where I lived we had three times as many birthday parties as devotional festivals. I noted that the children often had "birthday parties" as part of their play.

Should we eliminate birthday parties? That's probably impossible. We can, however, follow Srila Prabhupada's direction that a birthday is a time for charity and austerity. Our children can give gifts on their birthday, rather than receive them. Gatherings can be small and simple so as not to appear to compete with spiritual festivals. And when we invite a few friends for cake and ice cream, we can also read from scripture and chant together.

Our children should grow up convinced that the happiness of Krsna's devotees surpasses all the happiness of the material world—even a party.

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