

## *Spiritual Holidays*

*By Urmila Devi Dasi*

HOLIDAYS! A break from routine, a special mark on the calendar, a day that can absorb a child's mind for weeks or more beforehand. Holidays connected with Lord Krsna help children become absorbed in pleasing Him. The calendar of the Hare Krsna movement overflows with days to celebrate. Major festivals commemorate the divine birth, or appearance, of Krsna and His incarnations. Other festivals celebrate Krsna's pastimes and the anniversaries of the appearance and passing of pure devotees of the Lord.

Unfortunately, we might neglect to take full advantage of the intense spiritual effect Krsna conscious holidays can have on a child's life. On minor festival days, the occasion may pass by unnoticed, or there may be only a scriptural reading geared to an adult audience. Adults may even plan events mostly for adults. Children come to the adult gathering, but they simply learn that a holiday means being bored, or running and playing wildly.

How can our children find the spiritual highlights of their lives in festivals?

**PLAYS:** Putting on a play about the holiday is exciting for children. They love rehearsing, dressing up, and getting on stage. And they love pleasing the adults, who enjoy the plays in spite of (and to some extent because of) the imperfections. Older children can spend many weeks striving for professional results. They can also write or adapt a script, buy costumes and make-up, create the soundtrack, and so on.

Children can also prepare a dramatic reading related to the holiday. Such readings require far less work for the adults directing the show, and absorb the children's minds almost as much as a full production.

**PROJECTS:** Every year at the Govardhana Puja festival, honoring Lord Krsna's lifting of Govardhana Hill, our students make a small hill of papier mache over wire and balloons. We paint it and decorate it with plants, streams, pools, plastic or clay animals, and so on. (We make the pools from mirrors and the streams from tinsel over tin foil). One year, to celebrate Rathayatra each student made his or her own cart from a shoe box and cardboard. We've also made dioramas inside boxes. A simple one- or two-day project: writing about the festival and then mounting and decorating the poem or essay.

**GAMES:** To celebrate the appearance of Lord Varaha, the Lord as a giant boar who lifted the earth with His tusks, the children play "stick the earth on Varaha's tusks." Some years we have groups of students make a picture of Varaha and the earth and then play the game with the best picture. Last year our grown daughter drew Varaha, and the students competed for the best earth drawing. Then, blindfolded, each of us tried to tape the earth as close as possible to the tips of the Lord's tusks. A simple prize awaited the winner.

**KIRTANAS:** Children love singing "Sita-Rama" on Lord Rama's appearance day, or whatever songs and prayers relate to the incarnation or event we are celebrating. Sometimes we make copies of a song in Devanagari, the original Sanskrit alphabet, to have the children practice their Sanskrit while they learn the prayer.

**STORIES:** What is more fun for a child than a story? But so often we adults just read, without expression or explanation, from a book written for adults. If we dramatize a little, have lively questions and answers, and concentrate on the story line, children will be entranced. Today we also have many Krsna conscious stories on audio and video tape.

**CHILDREN HELPING ADULTS:** Children can decorate the temple, help with cooking a feast, and do extra cleaning at home or at the temple. If they worship a Deity of the Lord, they can make Him a special flower garland or a new outfit, or decorate His altar with flowers. Older children can help in many ways at the temple.

**FASTING:** Fasting may not sound like fun for a child, but most children delight in performing some austerity for Krsna. Many festival days call for fasting, either until noon or the evening. I generally ask children under age seven to eat, even if they want to fast. I encourage children over ten to try the fast, and I have *prasadam* available if they can't stick to it. Children remember with fondness the first Janmastami they fasted until midnight.

**GENERAL MOOD:** We can find many more ways to include children in holidays. The real key is the mood of the adults. We need to remember that celebrating the glory of the Lord is for children too.

In the next issue, we'll look at celebrating secular holidays.

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