

# The Krishna Legend: An Introduction

By Stephanie Kao

The life of Krishna illustrates the development of a divine and complex being. The intricate web of stories that comprises Krishna's life incorporates the historical development of his legend—one that was passed down through oral tradition, and then elaborated upon and recorded in sacred texts during a period exceeding a millennium.

Consistent throughout Hindu tradition and teachings is Krishna's accessibility as a personal god. His divine life mirrors that of a mortal, exhibiting many of the same joys and dilemmas associated with the transition from childhood to maturity. Although Krishna's fundamental religious teachings remain the same—illuminating the path of devotion to the Supreme Spirit—the means by which he conveys this wisdom adapts to illustrate the evolution of his human existence.

Krishna's legend begins in northern India. His birth takes place in the city of Mathura, which is ruled by a family of warrior caste. Mathura, a contemporary Indian city, is found on the western side of the Yamuna River, once adjacent to the ancient forests of Vrindavana (Brindaban). On the eastern side was a pastoral region inhabited by cowherds. To the north was the neighboring kingdom of Kurukshetra (contested between descendents of the Bharata dynasty).

Krishna's lifestory may be separated into four broad periods: childhood, youth, adulthood, and mature life. Krishna's childhood is marked by the following events: preordained divine birth; birth to a noble family, but raised by lower caste foster-parents to escape persecution by his uncle, the demon king Kamsa; first years spent in areas outlying the city with his brother Balarama; and defeat of demons sent by his uncle Kamsa who has ordered the slaughter of all male children. During Krishna's youth, he engages in romantic dalliances with the cowherd girls (*gopis*); establishes supremacy over certain ancient gods; and slays Kamsa in an epic battle set in the city of Mathura. Following the defeat of Kamsa, Krishna publicly acknowledges his noble birth, renounces his life as a cowherd, and assumes the duties appropriate to his princely position. Thereafter, Krishna embarks on many heroic adventures that define his adult life. He reinstates the rightful king to the throne of Mathura; defends the city against military attacks by a neighboring kingdom; moves all the inhabitants of Mathura to the city of Dvaraka (on the western seacoast of India) to escape siege from a foreign invader; and marries numerous wives and sires children. Delivering the great sermon known as *Bhagavad Gita* (a text within the Hindu epic the *Mahabharata*) can be viewed as the defining moment of his mature life. The *Mahabharata* records a catastrophic war between two branches of the Bharata family, the Pandavas and the Kauravas. Krishna is compelled to participate both as prince of a neighboring kingdom and relative to the Pandavas. Here, Krishna is not a physical participant in battle, but rather serves as counselor to Arjuna, one of the Pandava brothers and central figure. This last phase concludes with Krishna's return to Dvaraka where he decides his earthly mission has been fulfilled; and in accordance with prophecy, Krishna retires from earthly existence.

Encapsulated within each of these lifestory categories are collections of tales that reveal the development of Krishna's sacred nature. In the following thematic sections, the life of Krishna is observed both through legend and through religious art from India.