

KRISHNA *and* His Lost City

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The Heliodorus pillar in Besnagar

In search of historic Krishna

When did Krishna live? For centuries, Indians viewed him purely from the religious angle. Lord Krishna came to earth at end of the Dvaparyug -- and that was eons back. Ancient Indians' poor sense of history, so to speak, did not help much to put a precise age to the period Krishna belonged.

The foreigners tried to fill in the gaps. A view cropped up in the middle ages that Krishna belonged to post-Christ era. And that he was modelled after Christ. One P Georgi first propounded this theory in 1762 in Rome. "Krishnu is only a corruption of the name of the Saviour," he wrote. But as it turned out, he was wrong. The Krishna worship, empirical data and archaeological evidence show, was in vogue centuries before Christ.

During his sojourn in Emperor Chandragupta's Pataliputra in 3rd Century BC, Greek Ambassador Meghasthenes saw an India that was vivid and rich. His account *Indica* got lost, but some of its fragments survived thanks to reproduction by early Greek and Roman commentators. And lo, Krishna was mentioned in Greek terminology. The Sourasenoi (read Surasenas or Yadavas) worshipped Herakles (Krishna) in Methora (Mathura) by the river Yobares (Yamuna). Magasthenes also heard from Indians that 138 generations of kings had passed between Krishna and Chandragupta, working out to 3090 BC.

So far as the Indian records go, Krishna finds mention in *Chandogya Upanishad*, written before the time of Gautama Buddha (563-483 BC). Pushing back that date, Jain tradition makes Krishna a contemporary of Arishtanemi, the predecessor of Parsvanatha who flourished around 817 BC.

Archaeologically, the antiquity of Krishna is older than 113 BC at least. In 1877, Alexander Cunningham, the father of the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), came across a monolithic, free-standing column in Besnagar, Madhya Pradesh. Some years later it was ascertained with the help of ancient Brahmi inscription on it that this was a "Garuda-column of Vasudeva" (Visnu, Krishna) "the god of gods". It had been erected by Heliodorus, a worshipper of Visnu, who came to India as a Greek ambassador.

Numismatic evidence also backs the pre-Christian era antiquity of Krishna. Bronze coins of Indo-Greek ruler Agathocles (180-165 BC), excavated at Ai-Khanum in Afghanistan, show an image of Vasudeva, carrying the unmistakable chakra and conch shell.

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