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Published by Anonymous on Dec. 02, 1995

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Choodie Shivaram, Bangalore

I celebrated Sri Krishna Janmashtami this year in a unique way. Instead of going to one place, I went all over Bangalore for three days visiting a kaleidoscope of homes, temples and communities to see the varied ways the day is celebrated.

My first visit was to the Chinmaya Mission Krishna temple. Their day started with a Tulsi archana and a Vishnu homa and built up in power with bhajans and processions right up until midnight for the main arati. What impressed me most here was how much the youth were involved. They controlled the crowds--a tough job, usually assigned to police. They also distributed prasada and even managed a well-organized shoe stall--having fun coping with the avalanche of shoes. Giving youth responsibilities at festivals is kind of new in India, and very refreshing. I wish they had let me pitch in when I was little. Anyway, by midnight the crowds swelled to epic proportions.

My next stop was ISKCON Krishna temple, a new, massive complex. Vehicles were parked up to 5 kilometers away. Devotional music and "Hare Krishna" chants filled the air. Gold-covered Krishna and Radha, sparkling with jewels and flowers, were magnificent. Stilt walkers inside life-size dummies of various animals danced. This folk art form, called

keelu kudure, is dying out. ISKCON's program was so well organized, and with kids running about dressed up as Krishna or Radha it felt like a devafairyland.

The next day I went house-hopping, remembering my own childhood memories of going to a friend's house each year and seeing Krishna in a silver cradle with all varieties of fruits and tasty snacks suspended in a canopy above the idol strung with colored lights.

When I went into the Malleswaram locality where many Sri Vaishnavites reside, the atmosphere was brimming with excitement. Women were finessing rangolidesigns in front of their homes. Miniature footsteps, drawn in white, leading into each house, symbolized Krishna walking into their homes. The fragrance of jasmine, cut fruit and incense was everywhere. Ladies dressed in chic sariswaited for the village procession to arrive at their house so they could offer Him their hearts' worship.

I was blessed to feel again the innocent devotion of youth on this sacred day. Everywhere I went, I found joy and serenity as young and old alike celebrated the birth of their beloved Bala Krishna.