

Thirty Days In Krsna's Land by Lokanath Swami

In remote corners of Vrndavana, Pilgrims find little known places of Krsna's pastimes and get a clearer view Into their own hearts.

THE VRAJA Mandala Parikrama* is a walking pilgrimage throughout the land of Vraja, or Mathura, the district in North India where Lord Krsna appeared five thousand years ago. Devotees walk the entire parikrama path, stopping at the places where Krsna performed His pastimes. Vraja Mandala Parikrama can be considered pada-sevanam (serving Sri Krsna's lotus feet), one of the nine forms of devotional service.

Sri Caitanya Mahaprabhu

Within Mathura, the Yamuna River and the twelve forests of Vrndavana form the stage for the divine play of Radha and Krsna's transcendental pastimes. Lord Krsna presides over the seven forests on the Yamuna's western bank: Madhuvan, Talavan, Kumudavan, Bahulavan, Vrndavana, Kamyavan, Khadiravan. And Lord Balarama rules the five forests decorating the eastern bank: Bhadravan, Bhandiravan, Bilvavan, Lohavan, and Mahavan. These twelve beautiful forests are the most important places of pilgrimage.

Sri Caitanya Mahaprabhu, the Supreme Personality of Godhead Himself, set an example by touring Vrndavana's twelve forests. While Lord Caitanya was performing the parikrama, the residents said:

Who says He is a sannyasi? He is Krsna Himself appearing in this dress and form. Just see the proof. Different birds are all coming for His darsana [audience]. The cuckoos and parrots are happily addressing Him as Krsna, and the peacocks are dancing in jubilation. See the wonderful blooming of the

trees! O brother, just see the creepers showering flowers on this person, who is disguised as a sannyasi. The deer are coming near Him and staring undivertedly towards His face. All the cows are coming running from all sides with raised tails, and they also look at His face. By the tears of ecstasy falling from the eyes of these creatures, we can understand that they are meeting Him after a long period of time.

From the book Mathura Mandala Parikrama, based on Srila Narahari Cakravarti Thakura's Bhakti Ratnakara

The six Gosvamis and other associates of Lord Caitanya, as well as thousands of faithful in His line (Gaudiya Vaisnavas) throughout the centuries, have enthusiastically executed Vraja Mandala Parikrama, a blissful form of devotional service. In October 1932, Srila Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati, the spiritual master of His Divine Grace A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, led a group of more than a thousand disciples and other pilgrims on a month-long parikrama of the sacred places of Vrndavana. It was one of the largest parikramas ever seen in Vrndavana. Srila Prabhupada, then a married man living in Allahabad, traveled to Vrndavana intent on seeing Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati and hoping to join the parikrama party.

"I was not initiated at the time of the parikrama," Srila Prabhupada recalled, "but I had very good admiration for these Gaudiya Math people. They were very kind to me, so I thought, 'What are these people doing in this parikrama? Let me go.' So I met them at Kosi."

Today dozens of groups of devotees from different parts of India still perform the padayatra (walking festival) of Vraja Mandala to see and hear about the places of Krsna's pastimes. Every year during the month of Kartika (Oct.-Nov.), Krsna devotees taste the ecstasy of circumambulating Sri Vrndavana

Dhama. Besides being a wonderful way to see and serve Sri Krsna's transcendental land, Vraja Mandala Parikrama purifies one's consciousness.

Srila Rupa Gosvami has described Vraja: "I remember the Lord standing by the banks of the Yamuna River, so beautiful amid the kadamba trees, where many birds are chirping in the gardens. And these impressions are always giving me transcendental realization of beauty and bliss." Even non-devotees can feel the bliss described by Rupa Gosvami. The places in the eighty-four-square-mile district of Mathura and Vrndavana are so beautifully situated on the banks of the river Yamuna that anyone who goes there will never want to return to this material world.

Simple, Sacred Life

We rise before the sun and walk through hills and valleys, traveling deep into Vrndavana. Little remote villages dot our path. Village life is simple and austere, but the villagers are warm and generous. Whenever we stop they offer us fresh water, buttermilk, and steaming hot whole-wheat rotis (chapatis, or flatbreads).

As we cross cultivated fields, a team of oxen and a straw-laden donkey amble past rice paddies ornate with exotic birds. The sounds of the cuckoo bird, the mourning dove, and the Hare Krsna maha-mantra mingle together. Some devotees keep to the back of the kirtana party, silently chanting japa on their beads. The morning is calm, and the soft sandy path is gentle on our feet.

As we enter Madhuban, children bounce beside us, their eyes twinkling with glee. The kirtana reverberates off the mud walls and through the narrow lanes. The village brahmana greets us, a wise old man with happy eyes and stubbly beard. He sprinkles holy water on us. The cow-dung homes smell fresh and clean. In a spotless courtyard, children carrying bows and

arrows imitate Sita, Rama, Laksmana, and Hanuman. Villagers invite us into their homes for something to eat or drink.

While some devotees rest or read, others venture farther into the village to get a closer look at the life of the local residents (Vrajabasis). Some devotees take a refreshing bath in a pond, while others wash their laundry. Clustered around the village water pump, we watch the children dexterously fill their waterpots. It is a crowded scene. Suddenly, a teenage boy and his mother approach the well. The boy pushes his way through the crowd and takes hold of the pump handle. We think he's angry that we're using "his" pump. But with an infectious smile, he begins to pump water for everyone.

Time to Think

Most devotees who visit Vrndavana never experience Vraja like this. One devotee comments, **"If you don't walk, you miss ninety per cent of Vraja."** Normally in Vrndavana we tend to feel like transcendental tourists, catching buses to the holy places. But to see Vraja on foot allows one more time to think and to find one's real identity.

We visit Talavan forest, where Lord Balarama killed Dhenukasura. In the village of Etarsi, we visit the temple where breathtakingly beautiful deities of Balarama and His eternal consort, Revati, reside. A tala tree stands just inside the temple compound.

It is traditional to perform parikrama barefoot, and we try our best to follow the example of the saintly persons who have walked before us. Sometimes small thorns prick our feet, and we try to remember the austerities of Dhruva Maharaja, compared to which ours are insignificant. Vraja Mandala Parikrama strips one of all pretensions. We may have a big position in this world, but the thorns don't discriminate.

Before it gets too hot, we climb to the summit of Kedarnath Mountain. A stone staircase etched into the mountainside leads

us up 270 steps to a temple of Lord Siva. The temple is a natural cave, its overhang resembling the hoods of a multi-hooded snake. From atop the hill, we view the unique panoramic scene of the Vraja plains, stretched for about twenty kilometers all around us. As our gaze wanders out over the expanse of sacred land, we meditate on and hear about Krsna's Vrndavana pastimes.

Krsna's Footprints

In the early afternoon we take to tarred road on a seemingly endless walk to Caran Pahari. Here, Krsna would play His flute and melt the rocks with a touching melody. The rocks captured Krsna's footprints. We eagerly rush to see them and smear on our heads the dust from these fivethousand-year-old footprints. We pray that our stone like hearts may also melt in response to Krsna's call.

Where Krsna played His water sports and submerge ourselves in the Yamuna River, where He performed unlimited pastimes. We feel like we are following Him around Vraja. If we stay on His trail, we'll turn the last corner of material attachment and catch up with Him. On parikrama we get a glimpse of the mood of separation from Krsna as we wander through the forests of Vrndavana. Parikrama instills appreciation for devotional sentiments even within the heart of a neophyte devotee.

Finally we see the city of Mathura rise from the plains of Vraja like an ancient medieval kingdom. We've made it! One hundred sixty-eight miles in thirty days. A tremendous feeling of accomplishment and exhilaration rises in our hearts. Our Vraja Mandala Parikrama is almost over, and our walk on the path back to Godhead has shortened.

A tall bridge leads us across the Yamuna back to Mathura. The kirtana resounds through the crowded back streets of the city. We take our final bath at Vishram Ghat. Vraja Mandala Parikrama is a perfect test for one's spiritual health. In the

pure atmosphere of the Lord's land, our impurities stand out clearly, like black spots on a white sheet. Out here we see how far we have come in spiritual life and how far we have to go. Yet, this is encouraging; it increases our desire for purification, so that one day we may become qualified to reside eternally in Vrndavana. Lokanath Swami is the director of ISKCON Padayatras ("walking pilgrimages") worldwide and the author of the recently published book Kumbha: The Festival of Immortality. He has been coordinating Vraja Mandala Parikrama since 1987.

Replica of the Spiritual World

IN THE SPIRITUAL world of Vrndavana the buildings are made of touchstone, the cows are known as surabhi cows, givers of abundant milk, and the trees are known as wish-fulfilling trees, for they yield whatever one desires. In Vrndavana Krsna herds the surabhi cows, and He is worshipped by hundreds and thousands of gopis, cowherd girls, who are all goddesses of fortune. When Krsna descends to the material world, this same Vrndavana descends just as an entourage accompanies an important personage. Because when Krsna comes His land also comes, Vrnda-vana is not considered to exist in the material world. Therefore devotees take shelter of the Vrndavana in India, for it is considered to be a replica of the original Vrndavana. Introduction to Teachings of Lord Caitanya, by His Divine Grace A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada

Instructions from Sage Narada

Narada Says to Dhruva: "My dear boy, I therefore wish all good fortune for you. You should go to the bank of the Yamuna, where there is a virtuous forest named Madhuvana, and there be purified. Just by going there, one draws nearer to the Supreme Personality of Godhead, who always lives there." Srimad-Bhagavatam 4.8.42

Acquiring Spiritual Flavors In Vrndavana

SRILA BHAKTISIDDHANTA Sarasvati Thakura states that the business of the tongue is to gratify itself with the varieties of flavor, but by wandering in the twelve holy forests of Vraja-mandala (Vrndavana), one can be freed from the twelve flavors of material sense gratification. The five principal divisions of material relationships are neutral admiration, servitude, friendship, parental affection, and conjugal love; the seven subordinate features of material relationships are material humor, astonishment, chivalry, compassion, anger, dread, and ghastliness. Originally, these twelve rasas, or flavors of relationships, are exchanged between the Supreme Personality of Godhead and the living entity in the spiritual world; and by wandering in the twelve forests of Vrndavana one can respiritualize the twelve flavors of personal existence. Thus one will become a liberated soul, free from all material desires. If one artificially tries to give up sense gratification, especially that of the tongue, the attempt will fail, and in fact one's desire for sense gratification will increase as a result of artificial deprivation. Only by experiencing real, spiritual pleasure in relationship with Krsna can one give up material desires.